Latter-day Screens

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There are probably a lot of you who don’t get why there’s such a knee-jerk revulsion toward polygamy in the modern world. After all, if anyone can marry whom they choose, what’s wrong with a bunch of women choosing to marry the same dude, or vice-versa? The problem is that, in the real world, it hasn’t worked out that way. You’ll notice you never hear about one woman marrying four guys—in polygamist cultures it’s all about males collecting lots of wives, usually in a way that gives the females very little say in the matter.

—Anonymous, “5 Things I Learned as a Mormon Polygamist Wife”

When I’d awoken that morning, I was a fourteen-year-old girl hoping for the miracle of divine intervention; my prayers, however, had gone unanswered. With no other choice, I’d submitted to the will of our prophet and had married my nineteen-year-old first cousin. As a member of the Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), I’d been raised to believe that marriages were arranged through a revelation from God, and that these revelations were delivered through our prophet, who was the Lord’s mouthpiece on earth. As a faithful follower, I’d embraced this principle and believed in it wholeheartedly, never imagining that at fourteen, a revelation would be made about me.

—Elissa Wall, Stolen Innocence

In chapter 3, I discuss media that stake out a claim for what modern plural families themselves term progressive polygamy. Progressive polygamists look “just like us”: they live in the suburbs, wear jewelry, makeup, and stylish clothes, work in nine-to-five jobs or own their own businesses, hope to send their kids to college, encourage free speech in their families, and use celebrity and visibility
as a means of achieving social justice. They stake out a place in the world rather than apart from it. These sorts of narratives depict polygamy as a forward-looking alternative family arrangement predicated on love and free choice and, as such, the quintessence of flexibility, individualism, and egalitarianism.

While progressive polygamy stories like *Big Love* and *Sister Wives* operate under a code of faith-based polygamy that functions as a benevolent democratic order of caring and consent, the mediascape is equally filled with sinister and queer versions of polygamy. In these iterations of more patriarchal fundamentalist Mormon plural marriages, the morality terms are stark: mediated Mormonism preaches that polygamy is rife with charismatic and abusive patriarchs, who are the epitome of wickedness and excess. Their victims, both male and female, are called brainwashed, the women and girls often depicted as cowering and submissive and the boys and men complicit henchmen in the prophet’s nefarious abuses of power.¹

In *Gaga Feminism*, J. Jack Halberstam lays out the rather startling claim that “American audiences can more easily accommodate narratives of Mormon polygamy than they can conceive of a continuum of artificial-reproduction narratives that include pregnant men and lesbian mums” (2012, 52). And while Halberstam may certainly be right that pregnant men and lesbian mothers are their own media hornet’s nest in U.S. television and film culture (*The Kids Are All Right* [2010] and *Junior* [1994] notwithstanding), we should be careful about accepting too quickly a claim of easy accommodation when it comes to Mormon polygamy stories. For indeed, as I argue in this chapter, while fundamentalist polygamy stories might look easily palatable, the sheer number and seemingly incessant repetition of these narratives suggest that there is something in the fascinations they offer and fears they encourage that a larger culture struggles to metabolize.

As I argue throughout this book, Mormonism (in both its mainstream and fundamentalist forms) functions as a historical and contemporary symbolic portal into conversations about belief, meaning, identity, and values, as coalesced around gender and sexuality. Plural marriage in the modern moment tells us something very specific about gender norms and identity, as well as their complex embedded relationship to media. This chapter thus evaluates the cultural work performed by mediated patriarchal polygamy, a work that often includes using the devices of “polygamy-visibility” to instill both the knowledge and the vocabulary necessary to recognize and talk about abuse, exploitation, manipulation, and coercion. To see these dynamics in operation, I turn to narratives of victimization and rescue in two reality shows, *Escaping Polygamy* and *Escaping the Prophet*, and then reflect on the
scare rhetoric that surrounds the FLDS polygamist Warren Jeffs. I conclude the chapter by considering the original, and simultaneously most obscure and most famous, American polygamists Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. Throughout, I demonstrate how gender justice resides in the eye of the evil hurricane of mediated patriarchal polygamy, largely through the discursive critiques and counternarratives it inspires.

**Polygamy-Visibility**

Because bigamy is an illegal and socially unacceptable practice in the United States, most adherents of polygamy live their lives in secret, hidden behind heavy drapes and cloistered within closed communities, many of which are located in remote and sparsely populated areas of the Western United States, such as the stark canyon lands of southern Utah and northern Arizona. As with their mainstream Mormon forebears who sought refuge in the arid Salt Lake Basin, geographical seclusion offers a thin assurance of protection. Yet, prior to 1998, the FLDS base of operations was in Salt Lake City, home of the mainstream LDS Church and a bustling metropolis in its own right. The FLDS were thus hidden in plain sight. As Elissa Wall puts it in her memoir *Stolen Innocence*, “What helped families like ours stay under the radar in Salt Lake was the fact that our numbers were few and we were all scattered throughout the Salt Lake Valley. At the time [1990s], there were about ninety FLDS families residing in the area, and if we had all lived together in the same location our way of life may have drawn more attention and brought repercussion from the state government” (Wall and Pulitzer 2012, 11). In advance of the new millennium, the Prophet Rulon Jeffs told his followers the world would end. When it didn’t, Uncle Rulon called for the end of the world again in 2002 prior to the Salt Lake City Olympics. To prepare for Armageddon, the FLDS were instructed that they must leave their houses and belongings behind, often sometimes literally fleeing in the night. They converged on Short Creek, the polygamous border town that is one part Hilldale, Utah, and the other part Colorado City, Arizona.

Given that staying under the radar has been a critical survival strategy for the FLDS, it is remarkable that the mediascape is so saturated with stories of polygamy, particularly in news programs, documentaries, and reality television shows that invite FLDS people to allow cameras, reporters, and producers into their compounds. It is not just these genres of the real that are fascinated with polygamy, however. Media are capacious in their reach—from vanity press memoirs to Penguin-produced novels, from reality television
programming to independent documentaries, from blogs to Twitter to Facebook and back again to print. In the past ten years, viewers might partake of a veritable feast of this more patriarchal strain of polygamy-focused programming available on mainstream television and internet streaming platforms such as Hulu, Netflix, Amazon, and network websites. These include made-for-TV movies such as *The 19th Wife* (Lifetime, 2010) and *Outlaw Prophet: Warren Jeffs* (Lifetime, 2014); feature films and documentaries such as *Sons of Perdition* (2010), *Follow the Prophet* (2009), *Banking on Heaven* (2005), and *Prophet's Prey* (2015); and other reality television fare such as *Polygamy USA* (National Geographic Channel, 2013–), *Breaking the Faith* (TLC, 2013), *Escaping Polygamy* (Lifetime, 2014–), and *Escaping the Prophet* (TLC, 2013).

Print media are also filled with patriarchal polygamy stories, particularly those that detail escape. We might thus say that patriarchal polygamy is conspicuous to the point of overdetermination, and the aggregated effect of polygamy-visibility has been to make the terms of exploitation and abuse discernible categories.

A few examples evidence this claim. Rebecca Musser, who escaped from the FLDS compound in 2004, played a pivotal role in bringing down its abusive leader, Warren Jeffs. In addition to her memoir, she now travels the country as a celebrity human rights activist, particularly through her Red Flags Program, which “teaches people to recognize and avoid manipulation” (Musser 2014). These messages are predicated on the lessons she learned within Mormon fundamentalism, but her exhortations are addressed to a much broader audience. Her objective is to teach vulnerable subjects how to recognize, name, and avoid their own victimization. As I discuss in chapter 5, Elizabeth Smart—famously abducted in 2002 by a man who considered himself a latter-day prophet—similarly works today as a motivational speaker, activist, and ABC News correspondent, educating people about the need for vigilance in relation to sexual violence. For both the ex-fundamentalist Mormon Musser and the present mainstream Mormon Smart, the broader cultures of Mormonism provide the backdrop that make their social justice initiatives resonate for others.

A telling series of passages in the independent documentary *Prophet’s Prey* equally demonstrates how representation of the FLDS renders the outlines of abuse visible. Several scenes in the documentary feature local law enforcement officers and reporters in remote areas of Colorado, South Dakota, and Texas, all stunned and outraged when the FLDS bought major tracts of land and set up ancillary encampments near their towns. It was largely the media-attention-trailing antipolygamy crusader Flora Jessop that alerted
the town to the presence of polygamists in their midst. “Who is Flora Jessop and why is she coming to Eldorado?” asked the small-town newspaper the *Eldorado Success*. Television news outlets from San Antonio flew their traffic helicopters over the newly emerging compounds, taking aerial photographs that revealed a “secret construction project.” Local station WOAI confirmed that a “polygamy cult run by Warren Jeffs” was moving to Texas, raising fears about sexual predators who act in anti-American ways, an invasion from within. Other news accounts likened Jeffs and his followers to the American Taliban.³

Now, obviously, sexual violation is not a crime of national otherness; incest, rape, and other forms of sexual assault can be fully domestic violations. But these xenophobic, and one might argue Islamophobic, fears illustrate that Mormonism, particularly fundamentalist Mormonism, is often put in the position of symbolic foreigner, dangerously opposed to democratic norms of consent and due process. In many respects, reactions to these fears have helped forge American identity. As Nancy Cott argues in *Public Vows*, the Mormon threat in the antebellum period was a direct cause for a new coalescing of the value of monogamy as the “law of social life” (2002, 105). In 1856, Abraham Lincoln called slavery and polygamy the “twin relics of barbarism.” Twenty-first-century media coalescing around Warren Jeffs make clear the unimaginable—one of Lincoln’s barbaric relics is alive and well and moving across America’s sparsely populated heartland. Given that the FLDS considers people of color to be cursed and so do not target them for conversion, the fear implicit in these concerns is obviously racialized as a kind of white panic: White people beware! Polygamists are coming for you! Media surveillance is thus discursively positioned as a racialized protective defense against the anti-Americaness of this most American of religions.

Freedom of religion and self-sovereignty are American credos, but if polygamy stands as the antithesis of American ideals, it is largely due to the fact that consent is the putative rule of law in this land of the free and home of the brave. The power dynamics of polygamy operate through what is often branded brainwashing, thus dissolving the American right to choose one’s faith. In the fixation on mind control, obedience, and a chattel system that “pass[es] out young women like candy” (Musser and Cook 2014, 23), the large archive of mediated patriarchal polygamy fosters a broader conversation on the values of individualism, free choice, and liberty. In so doing, these texts call into question the tipping point between religious extremism and cultism, between personal conscience and groupthink, between freedom and confinement, between enlightenment and false consciousness,
between gender privilege and gender discrimination. *Prophet’s Prey* again makes these terms clear, using the voice of FLDS prophet Warren Jeffs to insist that his followers “keep sweet,” which is to say that they eschew personal emotional responses or intellectual critiques and instead follow obediently in all things (Berg 2015). Says Jeffs in voice-over: “You can tell right now if you are passing the test. If you are keeping sweet no matter what, you are a person ready to give up your own will and just obey the priesthood over you.” Foregoing personal liberties in the name of an all-powerful leader is a most un-American idea. It is precisely because the polygamous patriarch robs his subjects of their democratic function, which is to say the exercise of free will and personal sovereignty, that he is so easily vilified in these mediated accounts.

*Sisterhood Is Powerful*

A tip leads Andrea and Shanell to a young mother inside the cult who wants to make an escape with her daughter, but after the girls arrange the rescue mission, they unfortunately learn the effects brainwashing can have on a family.—“Best Bets on TV” on *Escaping Polygamy*

“Flora,” he said, “I want to thank you. If you didn’t keep kickin’ the crap out of everybody involved in this, we wouldn’t be sitting here [in court for Warren Jeffs’s trial]!”

I had to laugh at that. It was true. I kept pushing and pushing, annoying the hell out of everyone. I just didn’t want Warren to get away with this anymore.—Flora Jessop and Paul Brown, *Church of Lies*

Given its emphasis on male privilege, conservative gender codes, implicit whiteness, and systemic corruption, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints might not be the place most people would go first to discover progressivism of any sort, much less that related to feminism and queer empowerment. Considering that the primary tenet on which the FLDS Church stakes its heavenly claim is patriarchal polygyny—or the marriage of one man to several women and their living together in an extended exclusively heterosexual family relation where the man (or more precisely an alpha male prophet and an oligarchy of subordinated male elites) exerts supreme authority over women, girls, and boys—gender justice is all the more elusive. Indeed, in all of its many portrayals, polygamy stands as the height of patriarchal abuse, its male leader covering the baseness of his twin needs for sex and power by the callow appropriation of God’s voice and the willful exploitation of his followers’ fears. Those trapped in fundamentalist polygamy
are white and Western, the diegetic ideographies of Western mountainscapes and the desert’s blinding light—the glow of Mormon country—reinforcing the all-Americanness of those brainwashed by fundamentalist cults. Flora Jessop doesn’t mince words: “No sympathy for the devil” (Jessop and Brown 2010, 255).

People held within the Church of Lies, as Jessop terms the FLDS, must be persuaded to leave, sometimes forcibly so. Escape is both literal and figurative. There are no fences confining believers inside most compounds—they might come and go—but there is a strong emotional hold on compound residents, emphasized by a generalized feeling of dread and resignation. Reduced education and an extremely inward-looking cohesive culture make it further difficult for compound residents to flee, as do the lifelong instructions they have received that the outside world is evil and intent on harming God’s chosen, the FLDS. The heavy emotional affect of fear and dread is often perpetuated in mediated accounts by images of lurking compound police, called the God Squad, who patrol the grounds in their dark-windowed SUVs, surveilling in the name of the prophet. Surveillance is not a weak metaphor in this context but a very real and highly technological business. In the documentary Prophet’s Prey, the sect’s former security officer (now excommunicated) speaks of keeping track of the FLDS flock through an elaborate system of pressure-sensitive mats, concealed cameras, and electronically rigged doors that can measure comings and goings. Save for cell phones, worldly media are banned in the FLDS culture; yet the compound is a highly mediated space.4

In both sociological and mediated depictions, fundamentalist persons speak of feeling like ontological misfits, so different from the Gentile and mainstream Mormon world that there is nowhere that they might go, no outside to which they might flee. Yet these narratives are about escape, and so flee they must. Leaving consequently requires not only the reassurance but the assistance of others—helpers on the inside, safe houses on the outside—a whole coterie of underground networks devoted to a version of justice that can challenge the patriarchal dividends of hegemony and oppression. Patriarchal polygamy stories are thus made to function as an objective correlative, in that they are both the thing itself and a symbolic referent removed from the object that performs a separate, but distinct, cultural work.

Janet Bennion’s ethnographic work among fundamentalist polygamous women has set forth the rather bold argument that plural marriage can be not only good for women but empowering for them as well. In Women of Principle she records the experiences of mainstream Mormon female con-
verts to the Apostolic United Brethren order of Utah, finding that many women were attracted to polygamy because of the socioeconomic and social support it offers (Bennion 1998). Plural marriage allows these women to replace a rather difficult life in the mainstream Mormon Church, where their status as divorcees, single mothers, widows, and unmarriageables limits access to good men and the economic and spiritual affirmation that comes from a community of worship. In Polygamy in Primetime, Bennion (2012) finds that some fundamentalist Mormon women experience more individual satisfaction within the dynamics of a polygamous family than they could in conventional LDS marriages. This result may be a greater commentary on the perils of marriage and the restricting gender norms of the mainstream Mormon Church than on the benefits of polygamy, but I leave that to my reader to decide.

In terms of the insistent amalgamation of mediated polygamy tales presently available to media consumers, I would agree that polygamy fosters feminism. But not, as Bennion argues, because it offers women a place of (limited) hope, (promised) status, and (deferred) value within an otherwise male-dominated order. Indeed, countless popular accounts of fundamentalist polygamy depict it as evil, corrupt, and systemically abusive and disempowering to women and other subordinated peoples (like children and/or marginalized men). But here I want to be clear: Bennion and I are approaching this topic from very different scholarly angles—she is an ethnographer, often an autoethnographer, working with people to learn from their stories; I am a media and gender scholar interested in the investments and distortions those stories elucidate. As I have mentioned throughout this book—but it bears repeating—I am not so much interested in the FLDS as history or sociology. Rather, I’m taken with LDS and FLDS Mormonism as a recognizable image and an intelligible concept, and thus as both a meme and an analytic. Clear to me is that in their depiction of male excess, these stories often function as self-making devices for women.

While there are many fictionalized accounts of abusive prophetic patriarchs, these figures of evil and excess are typically so one-dimensional that they become predictable and largely indistinguishable. As such, it is not the ego-driven cardboard cutout leader but those traumatized by his autocratic power that have stories to tell and interiorities to share. Indeed, polygamy could well be called a sensational platform that gives its victims a story worth selling, a foothold in a competitive media market eager to showcase compelling lives of extremes. Rather than making this claim as an indictment on the “if it bleeds, it leads” and commercial nature of infotainment
or the lowest-common-denominator critique of reality television, I see the complex modalities of media as offering an array of possibilities for silenced and abused women and men to find that most feminist of treasures: voice. As Ruth, one of the subjects of *Escaping the Prophet*, remembers, one thing got her through the abuse: the promise to herself, “I’m gonna write my story, and I’m going to tell my story, and someday there’s going to be people who care.”

Given this, I want to focus in this section on the feminist politics at the heart of two reality television shows dedicated to liberating women and children from the harms of patriarchal polygamy, *Escaping the Prophet* (tLC), which, as I have mentioned, features Flora Jessop as the heroine who frees those trapped without a voice in Warren Jeffs’s Colorado City, and *Escaping Polygamy* (Lifetime), a program that, in its own self-description, “focuses on the dramatic work of three sisters who escaped from the polygamous cult known as the Kingston clan as young women and now help other young men, women and children escape, preferring to face hell than spend another day inside” (figures 4.1 and 4.2; Crawford 2009, 2014).

In terms of setup, the shows are remarkably similar. Both fall within the generic label of reality television with embedded fictional diegetic features, a function that often makes fans extremely angry on posting boards, since the blending of real and re-created events blurs the veracity of documentary for them. This very critique—that truth isn’t factual as presented on reality television polygamy programs—has led others to credit negative blog posts as the work of the FLDS, since, bloggers argue, fundamentalists are incapable of thinking in more flexible terms about the nature of truth. In either case, what is striking for my purposes is how much these epistemological fissures between fundamentalist beliefs and mainstream representations are so fully on display for the lurker like me.

Both *Escaping the Prophet* and *Escaping Polygamy* feature a female heroine (or heroic triumvirate) forged in the fires of personal suffering and abuse, which in turn functions as a compelling claim to ethical responsibility. The women have fled to an outside from which they can and must help others escape to freedom. Taken together, both shows evince a strong feminist ethos of care that suggests one pays for freedom through activism on behalf of those who are still captive. It’s a version of feminism that reinforces the heroic and oversimplified rescue narrative, where the positions of victims and saviors are clear and motivations for rescue are unsullied.

Both shows also detail the specifics of FLDS abuses. For those in Colorado City, these include marking a woman’s body through antiquated dress
FIGS. 4.1–4.2 Escaping the Prophet and Escaping Polygamy.
and never-cut hair (so that she might wash her husband’s feet with her long tresses in the afterlife), the Joy Book (a catalog of eligible, young, single teenage girls), marriage typically against one’s will to much older men and/or blood relatives, the mandate to keep sweet, and an arbitrary rule culture that, under Warren Jeffs, increasingly included such things as not wearing red, not allowing children to play with toys or to own bikes or pets, not fraternizing with the outside world, and not allowing sexual congress between husbands and wives (only a small cadre of fifteen men were permitted to sire children). Indeed, it is precisely due to Jeffs’s unwavering control over his followers’ behavior and beliefs that the news show 20/20 considered the FLDS “highly dangerous” (Rorbach 2012). The Salt Lake City Kingston Group, the polygamous sect in the crosshairs of Escaping Polygamy, seems progressive by contrast. People within the order do not live in isolated compounds but are fully integrated into larger urban spaces, primarily across the Mountain West, in cities such as Salt Lake City, Utah. As in the mainstream church, codes of modesty are important, but women are not forced to wear the prairie dresses and holy hair that mark members of the FLDS community. As Jessica, one of the heroines of Escaping Polygamy, notes, “We blend in and look like everyone else,” camouflaged by normalcy.

Like their split-apart fundamentalist cousins, the Kingston group has a strict top-down code of conduct that limits education for children, forces early marriage, expects multiple children, and considers wives to be the property of husbands. For each sect, mediated Mormonism suggests personhood is at grave risk. “I’m a Person, and I Deserve More,” reads the headline on Broadly, a news blog engaged with women’s rights that exactly gets at the heart of polygamy-visibility and its cry for gendered social justice (Oswaks 2016).

Yet differences between the programs are starkly illustrative of limitations for feminism within television culture. The women of Escaping Polygamy are all in their early twenties, with doelike eyes and bright futures ahead of them. Their sisterhood is a literal circumstance of bloodline and genetics, the math of one man, fourteen wives, and hundreds of children, more than the women can easily calculate. The structuring logic of the show is defused in form, working to downplay stridency or even expertise on the part of the trio. As one example, explanatory intertitles emerge on the screen when the audience needs background or history, rather than the women themselves providing necessary context. This editing decision offsets their authority, vesting it in the structure of the show rather than in them. They are nice girls, not know-it-alls.
Another device of the show that undercuts the women’s authority has to do with the identity of the victims. While polygamy creates an extended network of blood relations, the women of Escaping Polygamy claim a personal and familial relation to the captive needing saving in any given week—my sister, my cousin, my mother. The name of the program notwithstanding, these editorial choices reinforce a notion that the sisters of Escaping Polygamy are working to eradicate a circumstance, not a system. They are depicted as reluctant revolutionaries, committed not to toppling the institution of polygamy itself but to freeing their sisters and cousins still caught behind the invisible walls. Theirs is a temporary call to arms that will be over once their sisters have chosen freedom.5

As in most circumstances where deep family and religious socialization confront personal values, “choice” is a debatable term. For instance, one of the key members of the Escaping Polygamy team, Jessica, works hard in Season 1 to free her sister, Rachel, from the Kingston group. By Season 2, Rachel is having second thoughts, as she entertains the possibility of going back to the order. Both sides use emotional coercion. The order promises Rachel that she might marry the man she loves; Jessica tells Rachel how much she had hoped Rachel would be a model for Jessica’s children, who have now grown to love her and will greatly miss her if she goes back to the order. I’m not saying here that either side’s strategy is nefarious or necessarily unfairly manipulative, but both complicate a notion of choice that suggests an agent might freely evaluate options and agentively make decisions. John Donne told us long ago, “No man is an island,” and in the complicated familial terrain of fundamentalist polygamy where bloodlines and sister bonds overlap by the dozen, free choice is more of a convenient fiction than a reality.

As I’ve noted, Flora Jessop also pushes on the same ethical issues of free choice, since her premise is that people within polygamy have been brainwashed and can therefore not be counted on to think clearly for themselves.6 In this, Escaping the Prophet positions the forty-nine-year-old Flora Jessop as a kick-ass feminist savior—willing to knock down doors, fight legal systems, and eradicate a system that is “twisted and rotten.” Jessop is joined by her aunt and Brandon Jeffs, who also fled the compound in his teens, but both play secondary helper roles to Jessop’s revolutionary presence. This is clearly Flora Jessop’s show—shot after shot reinforces the authority of her point of view by continual scenes of her stern-faced plotting on the telephone or sitting behind the wheel of her SUV as she outmaneuvers the God Squad. Her guiding descriptions in voice-over narration provide explanations to the viewer about the history and codes of belief that unite the FLDS.
She is an unquestioned authority, the guiding force of the moral imperative staged by a reality show. Dramatic flashbacks she narrates of her own experience reenact the sexual abuse and domination she experienced at the hands of her father and other adult males within the FLDS compound, abuse made salient through dramatizations of her own story. A muffled conversation with Brandon renders systemic oppression with startling clarity, a line I only caught because their mumbled expression was given subtitles: “Who hasn’t been raped up there?” Flora says to Brandon as they chat in the kitchen, sexual violation here a horrifying everyday reality.

Since fleeing the FLDS clutches herself, Flora Jessop has been a media darling. Six months after her escape, she appeared on 60 Minutes and has continued to use media in her war against the prophet. She is outspoken on exposing the evils, the corruptions, and the systemic abuses of polygamy, and she has marshaled the full extent of her story to target the FLDS. In addition to the reality show, Jessop has demonstrated remarkable media savvy, through her published memoir Church of Lies (Jessop and Brown 2010) and an active social media presence on Facebook, Twitter, and the Child Protection Project website. Indeed, the project’s URL is emblazoned across the back of Jessop’s SUV, which serves as a mobile command post and extraction vehicle on Escaping the Prophet.

In 2005, the Arizona Republic described her role in an extraction of two girls from the FLDS in terms suited to a media folk hero (think Dirty Harry): “Flora Jessop roared into Hurricane, Utah, at the wheel of a white Suburban wearing tight blue jeans, boots and a studded black leather jacket, a 9 mm pistol strapped to her hip, another pistol in her hand and three television reporters in tow” (Crawford 2009). The feature continues: “When Flora swept in the house with the television crew, Fawn thought she looked like superwoman. Flora said if they left with her, there would be no turning back. She would do whatever she could to protect them, starting with the television cameras. If authorities tried to send them back to Colorado City, the world would be watching.” Jessop herself reinforces this Dirty Harry trope of vigilante justice: “If you are hurting children, expect to be my target. Because you’re going to be in my sights. And I’m coming after you next.”

As illustrated by these descriptions and frequent shots of Jessop surveilling the landscape from the front seat of her SUV or scanning the desert landscape with the aid of her enormous binoculars, she uses visibility as a weapon and publicity as a form of justice (figure 4.3). In these vignettes, Jessop both directs looking and is the subject (rather than the object) of the
mediated gaze. As much as the men she fights, Jessop herself signifies as a charismatic object of attention, a celebrity figure. This, in turn, has led to the largest critique against Jessop: she demands the same degree of obedience to her will and fealty to her commands as the forces she fights, and she’s doing it not for the sake of the women and children she frees but for the benefit of her own publicity-hungry ego. Given this criticism, the reality show she heads makes perfect sense, for it allows her to be both political revolutionary and glorified egomaniac in one. And really, what’s wrong with that? Why not use celebrity to effect change? What thus makes less sense is the fact that *Escaping the Prophet* was canceled by TLC in 2015, after only six episodes. The reasons for cancellation have not been made public and are thus are not entirely clear, since the ratings were healthy, and we do not seem to have reached an ebb in a public fascination with polygamy and its many complications (as of this writing in 2019, *Sister Wives* and *Escaping Polygamy* are in ongoing production).

I use the case of the mighty Flora Jessop to consider a different possibility—that it was not only the FLDS but a larger media culture that found Jessop too big for her too-tight britches. The authoritative, politicized, and in-your-face defiance that Jessop evinces does not fit well in a telegenic culture that prefers its polygamists to be friendly and its crusaders to be cute. If the sisters of *Escaping Polygamy* are twenty-year-old (and fecund) freedom fighters with husbands and children, Jessop is depicted in terms that reinforce her age—

![Flora Jessop surveilling for threats.](image)
as ornery, wrinkled, wizened, and old-fashioned: the second-wave feminist put out to pasture. In a larger culture uncomfortable with feminist stridency, particularly when manifested by older women who demand to be in charge and hold a referendum for change, it's no wonder that Flora Jessop has had to move on to a new mediated format. But cancellation notwithstanding, her will to endure lives on.

So you may be wondering, given this reading, how I can argue that mediated Mormonism opens a window to feminist-friendly discourses if these examples are not always so feminist friendly? These shows, which rely on the notion of abusive patriarchal figures and their heroic counters, reinforce the analytical and cultural heft that feminism as a system both recognizes and understands. Issues of voice, visibility, desire, seeing and being seen, power and fighting the power—these are all well-traveled roads in feminist theory. In turn, discursive reactions to mediated Mormon polygamy necessarily draw on the vocabulary of feminism to talk about and for social justice. Even if these programs’ representational codes can be complicated or contradictory in their understandings of feminism, they keep the idiom of feminism and progressive gender politics front and center.

Warren Jeffs: Patriarch, Prophet, Pedophile

What is it about this man that would allow him to so completely dominate the lives of thousands of people? He didn’t have the appearance of a maniacal prophet, didn’t sound like one either. His droning voice and gangly appearance were more likely to bring to mind a nerdy middle-school teacher than an all-powerful tyrant. . . . Not one of his personal traits could be considered remotely charismatic. He is, nevertheless, a man who exudes an almost mystical power over his more than ten thousand FLDS followers, most of whom would do literally anything he commanded them.—Sam Brower, Prophet’s Prey

Given this discussion on the role of feminist agents of rescue and their complicated gendered implications with respect to visibility, empowerment, and free will, what happens if we move from mediated accounts of the crusaders who fight polygamy to equally mediated depictions of the perpetrators who sustain it? In the contemporary context, there is no polygamous prophet more notorious than Warren Jeffs, leader of the FLDS. In many respects, Jeffs has given a face to patriarchal polygamy, and he is often the reason more progressive polygamists cite for needing to change the brand of polygamy by suggesting it can be loving rather than abusive. As I discuss throughout this book, several incidents have put Mormonism on the many composite
screens of the twenty-first century. Of them all, it is arguably Warren Steed Jeffs who has most galvanized attention and continues to serve as the personification of fundamentalist polygamist culture, in turn fostering his own wave of mediated Mormonism.

Scores of books and films discuss Warren Jeffs and his megalomania, so I won’t belabor those biographical and historical details here except to offer an abbreviated story: after the death of his father, Rulon Jeffs, in 2002, Warren became, some argue through self-appointing rather than divine anointing, the president/prophet and absolute leader of the FLDS, a group that traces its bloodline and divine authority back to church founder Joseph Smith and before him to Jesus. Following in the footsteps of his patriarch father, who reportedly had seventy-five wives and sixty-five children, Warren amassed between seventy and eighty-seven wives and roughly sixty children by the time of his arrest in 2006. That arrest played on the front lines of international media outlets, heightened by Jeffs’s status as a fugitive. Between May and August 2006, Jeffs was coupled with Osama bin Laden as the top two targets on the FBI’s ten most wanted list: in 2008, while he was behind bars, federal agents invaded Jeffs’s Yearning for Zion (YFZ) compound in Eldorado, Texas, an event that brought the world’s media to the gates of Jeffs’s dusty compound. As of this writing, Jeffs is serving a sentence of life plus twenty years for two counts of sexual assault of underage girls, but he continues to govern the FLDS flock from prison through taped sermons and revelatory transmissions that he communicates through visitors to him at the penitentiary.

While Uncle Warren ruled his followers with absolute authority, that unbending and often irrational grip was in many ways his undoing. In an already restrictive culture, he removed many of the joys of FLDS life, including community socials, music, toys, pets, and all forms of media. He also got greedy, taking most of his father’s former wives for his own, which violates church rules, and eagerly marrying younger and younger girls, who were more tractable and could be “worked with” (“Court Releases” 2011). Jeffs also raped young children (reportedly between the ages of five and seven), including his nephews Clayne, Brent, and Brandon Jeffs, among countless others. The unquestioned obedience that is often part of the polygamous life offers limitless opportunities for prophets to prey on the weak, since children do as they are told, and evidence of sex crimes often goes unnoticed in large families. To this point, Brent Jeffs writes in Lost Boy that after Warren Jeffs raped him the first time (when Brent was five years old), “My feelings of shame were confirmed when no one even noticed there was anything wrong with
me. I just went home after class and changed my clothes. In the chaos of my household, the squeaky wheels got the oil. If you weren’t complaining or causing trouble, you weren’t very visible. . . . It was the only way such a large family could function. The physical evidence of Warren’s crimes left in my soiled and bloodstained underwear simply disappeared into our massive laundry pile” (Jeffs and Szalavitz 2009, 68).

In the mediation that addresses both mainstream and fundamentalist Mormonism, a common theme of obedience and submission underscores the wrongs perpetrated by adult men. This position of absolute obedience to a single man presents a true dilemma within mediated Mormonism, since one of the major F/LDS principles is, and always has been, free will. Just as Joseph Smith established the “One True Church” by retreating to a grove of trees, asking God for direction, and then creating that church himself, members now are asked to feel their proof of the church’s validity. The significance of testimony underscores an epistemology of affect: I know what is real because I feel what is real. Unlike old-world religions that demand a leap of faith into a void outside the self, the American Mormon tradition vests authority in individual affective confidence. If you do not feel a personal testimony, the logic goes, you will forfeit this opportunity for earthly happiness and eternal salvation. As is probably obvious, this is also assuredly an epistemology of emotional coercion. Personal conviction, a feeling of belief, is critical, but as countless memoirs suggest, young Mormons (both mainstream and fundamentalist) are carefully taught to discipline their interiorities—from thoughts, to desires, to feelings—so that they conform to church mandates, including the unwavering authority of the father/prophet figure who galvanizes the faith as a personal guarantor of divinity. To doubt the father is to undermine one’s own salvation as well as that of others. In Season 2 of Escaping Polygamy, for instance, the sisters work on behalf of Rachel Jeffs, daughter of Warren Jeffs. Rachel explains that she was sexually abused by Jeffs as a young girl, and he and others pressured her to keep silent so as not to cause a faith crisis in the community that would undo people’s testimony. In the mainstream church, Martha Beck (2006) speaks of a similar pressure about her father’s abuse of her and the cultural demands for silence in the mainstream church. Indeed, according to web searches, Beck’s siblings still will not speak to her following her accounts of incest in her memoir (Lythgoe 2005).

It probably comes as no surprise that sex is critical to the power matrix asserted by the prophet within fundamentalist polygamy. In these stories
and by all news accounts, Warren Jeffs considers sexual activity to be his divine right, even while denying sexual expression to the majority of his followers. Brent Jeffs recalls that adolescents within the FLDS community were warned to have no contact with one another.

Basically Warren’s version of sex education: you should want death rather than sex outside marriage or a “wrong” marriage that wasn’t arranged by him or his father. He kept on about this, always emphasizing obedience and not questioning the leaders. Every Bible story became a tale of how the obedient were blessed and the disobedient were cursed, no matter how much twisting it took to make the story fit the moral. Even thinking about a girl was a “great sin”—and God had killed people for it, he preached, giving what he said were biblical and Book of Mormon examples. (Jeffs and Szalavitz 2009, 102)

In turn, Jeffs determined that many of the male patriarchs in the community were unworthy largely because they did not support him without question. He banished these apostates and redistributed the remaining wives and children to other, more loyal men in the community, in effect restricting sexual relations to a small cadre of fifteen male loyalists.

In the FLDS temple built at the now notorious Yearning for Zion Ranch near Eldorado, Texas, many on social media speculated that the white platform bed found during the government’s 2008 raid on the compound was intended for the purpose of spectacularized sex—in other words, a stage where Jeffs would have had ritualized sex with new brides, many of them underage girls, while adults watched from chairs positioned around the room (see figure 4.4; West 2008). Writing for the San Antonio Express-News, Karisa King reports, “In the thousands of pages of what he termed his ‘priesthood records,’” Jeffs described the specs for the bed’s construction: “It was to be made from hardwood, sturdy so it wouldn’t rattle, long enough to support Jeffs’ frame and equipped with padded sides that could be pulled up to hold him in place ‘as the Lord does His work with me. It will be covered with a sheet, but it will have a plastic cover to protect the mattress from what will happen on it.’” The bed was obscured within a table and sat on wheels, so that it could be rolled away, in Jeffs’s words, “so that it can be taken apart and stored in a closet where no one can see it. When I need it, I will pull it out and set it up” (King 2016).

In Jeffs’s criminal trial, jurors heard audiotapes recorded at these “heavenly sessions.” Covering the case, Britain’s Daily Mail noted that jurors wept
as the court heard “twisted tapes of sexual instructions Warren Jeffs gave brides,” including threats that “God would ‘reject them’” if they refused sex with him as their new husband. Writes the Daily Mail, “Softly telling five girls to ‘set aside all your inhibitions,’ the convicted pedophile was heard giving the young girls detailed pointers during a graphic ten-minute tape played for the Texas jury. The audiotape from 2004 was played before another, made within hours of the first, in which prosecutors say Jeffs can be heard having sex with all the girls at the same time. In one tape, he is heard telling the girls they ‘need to be excited’” (Bentley and Quigley 2011). Mainstream U.S. news sources, including CNN, also quoted from the tapes: “You have to know how to be excited sexually,” Jeffs said. “The Lord has intended that my ladies, all of my ladies be trained” (“Court Releases” 2011).

The audiotapes are excruciatingly painful to hear: a soft-spoken man in his fifties instructing teenage girls in how to please him sexually and de-
manding that they express erotic response as a sign of heavenly obedience. Jeffs starts with an invocation: “Oh Lord, our God, in heaven, join us in a circle of prayer.” He then instructs them, “All the ladies back away.” He begins breathing heavily, his ardor increasing. Speaking to one girl in particular, twelve-year-old Merianne, he prays, “We bless you of the Lord at this young age.” Breathing harder, he says in a whisper, “That feels good.” His breath speeds. “How do you feel, Merianne?” Her voice so small it is barely discernible, the sound of a frightened child responds: “It feels good. Thank you.” Warren finishes. “In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.”

It’s hard to write this scene out. It’s even harder to listen to it, Merianne’s voice so small and timid. My earbuds put her voice so deep inside my head that my teeth hurt. The reason to commit these details to the page, though, is because they demonstrate without question that Jeffs used sexual coercion to forward his authority as prophet. These scenes also indicate how fully the voice of Warren Jeffs has created the persona of the prophet, sound here functioning as an aural pedagogy on the banality of evil that is critical to mediated Mormonism. For my purposes, these disturbing moments in which an audience might hear the details of a man having sex with children offers a telling portrait of perversity in the twenty-first-century. Yet it is not just pedophilia that so disturbs about Warren Jeffs, although this, by itself, is certainly enough. It is group sex with teenagers, it is coercion in the name of faith, it is spectacularized sexuality, it is the naive consent of the girls and the willful denial of their parents who may have been watching their daughters be raped, it is demanding the girls respond as sexual agents who feel pleasure. And it is recording these atrocities, transforming them into media that, in turn, are easily accessible as downloadable sound files.

_Proselyt’s Prey_ is particularly mindful about foregrounding Jeffs’s voice as synonymous with his evil. In an interview with the documentary’s director, Amy Berg, _Vanity Fair_ positions Jeffs’s voice as the soundtrack of fundamentalist evil. “Stitched throughout the film is the voice of Jeffs himself, delivering sermons in his creepy, low-energy lisp” (Hogan 2015). Because the tapes were used as evidentiary materials against Jeffs, they are also a part of the legal record, accessible for free as court documents. Berg perceives the audiotapes’ legal function as part of their mediated necessity: “I like to take the position that, if a jury sees it, the audience will see it” (Hogan 2015).

Brent Jeffs describes his uncle’s voice as containing a peculiar hypnotic quality . . . calming, almost narcotic. . . . He spoke quietly, in a low tone, so if you wanted to take in his actual words, you

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had to pay close attention. He kept a lulling kind of rhythm that was hard to avoid being entrained to, with an almost maternal quality, like he was trying to soothe a baby to sleep, like a relaxation tape. . . . It kind of washed over you and crept round your defenses, speaking to the unconscious parts of your brain. It got to you, even when you didn’t realize you were hearing what he was saying. (Jeffs and Szalavitz 2009, 61)

As described, the adult Jeffs’s voice negotiates the relationship between hearing, listening, and self-understanding. I would argue, in turn, that sound works to blur the positions of inside and outside, intimate and formal, exteriority and interiority that are so fully manifest in the sensationalized media connected to Warren Jeffs.

Note again Brent Jeffs’s description of Warren Jeff’s voice. It is “hypnotic” and “almost narcotic,” “lulling” and “maternal,” “like a relaxation tape” that works on the “unconscious.” It forces the listener to attend more fully, to silence the self in relation to a more powerful other, even as what defines the self is obliterated in the hearing. In this, Jeffs’s voice conveys an affective urgency that is coercive and corroding, but it is also compelling, charismatic. His voice evidences a different kind of investment on the part of his followers: the desire to blot out the often chaotic noise of worldly things, of rapidly changing and divergent social, moral, and political conditions, so that his voice might be the only voice. If Warren Jeffs’s aural hold on his followers worked as a narcotic to the unconscious, the structure and mandate of Mormonism more broadly is an intoxicant similarly reassuring and addictive.

Authoritative patriarchy is here not a premodern iteration; it does not reach to a place of the past or try to engage with a religious tradition that refuses time, as one might argue other religions are perceived as doing. Instead, this religion is a reaction to the challenges of modern living, fully cognizant of and reliant on complex morality and frenetic temporality. Much like progressive polygamy in the Kody Brown family, for whom plural marriage solves the increasing dilemmas of modern living, the structures of FLDS polygamy under Jeffs are very much reactive to, and dependent upon, the chaos of modern problems. For those inside the FLDS, Jeff’s voice might unify; for those outside the FLDS, Jeff’s voice is ominous. As Jeff’s voice is increasingly spliced into the soundtracks of movies, documentaries, news, television shows, and even court evidence, it becomes inseparable from the
sound of danger. In this Jeffs serves as a recognizable warning, his prophet-visibility making clear when danger is nigh.

Given that the overall objective of this chapter is to highlight the manner in which visibility helps create the cultural work performed by mediated fundamentalist polygamy—specifically through sexualized power relations fed by celebrity and an authoritative patriarchal masculinity—it is worth thinking more about Warren Jeffs’s ungainly body, in every description opposed to what one might consider to be hegemonically appealing or powerful. Brent Jeffs again offers the description that makes these matters clear. He describes his uncle as “a scrawny, delicate child, tending to fade into the background among his more boisterous sisters and brothers. He had no athletic talent, and soon came to prefer music, books, and art. He was socially awkward and shy. Tall and thin as a beanpole, as a young man he looked like the archetypal pencil-necked geek: dull brown hair, thick square glasses, a goofy, distracted face, and a clumsy gait” (Jeffs and Szalavitz 2009, 63). No big man on campus is he. Instead, Warren is feminized, learning his “mother’s tricks” and her “manipulative ways,” drawn to aesthetics rather than athletics (63). Warren’s unbounded sexual appetites are depicted as lasciviousness enacted on the juvenile bodies of boys and the early pubescent bodies of girls. He is a predator, both devious and deceptive.

Given the factual details captured by these “heavenly sessions” audio-tapes, the consequent reenactment in the only feature-length fictional portrayal of Jeffs, Outlaw Prophet: Warren Jeffs (2014), is tame by comparison. The heavenly sessions between Jeffs and his young brides do not include audiences, recording devices, elevated beds, ceremonial folderol, or accomplices. We do not know the age of his sex partners. Indeed, in the advertising still for the made-for-television film (see figure 4.5), there is only one fully clothed man and three young women who appear to be in their twenties, making the heavenly sessions here far less lurid than in real life. Within the diegesis of the film, the depictions are quite a lot more graphic. As Jeffs, actor Tony Goldwyn appears in a PG-13 version of nakedness, often in boxers or unclothed, his more private areas referenced but unseen (see figure 4.6). The most graphic scene in this made-for-TV movie depicts an unclothed Jeffs, in the dark bedroom he shares with his first wife, rather than on the elevated bright platforms of the YFZ temple. With five of his young, very white wives gathered around him, Jeffs sits naked on a bed, shadows doing the work of indicating not only the materiality of the penis but the symbolic power of the phallus. Yet, even with the body of the actor carefully obscured, I must say,
it is still shocking to see a naked adult man instructing young women in how to pleasure him, particularly on the Lifetime network. Watching these scenes is incredibly difficult, for they enact the processes of intimidation in extraordinary detail. “Ladies, you need to concentrate on the bond of oneness,” says Goldwyn in his whispered voice meant to represent Jeffs. One girl is reluctant, and Jeffs immediately hones in on her. The others, trying to be obedient, gather around her lovingly, but then begin to hold her down while Warren rapes her. The girl’s face shows confusion, then fear, then pain. It is excruciating to watch, only partially because of how the scene captures the dynamics of failed consent and forced consummation.

While it is harrowing to view these scenes, it is also disconcerting to see Goldwyn in this role as the ungainly Jeffs, described by his nephew as “6’4”, gawky, scrawny, and awkward—his neck is too skinny for his head and his
glasses are too big for his face” (Jeffs and Szalavitz 2009, 1–2). Jeff’s scrawny body, his countenance, his wispy voice all raise questions about how he might convince more than ten thousand followers of his absolute divine authority and charismatic appeal. By contrast, Goldwyn, who played President Fitzgerald Grant on Shonda Rhimes’s popular ABC hit Scandal, is known as much for his six-pack abs (put to full scopophilic display on Scandal) as for his Hollywood pedigree as grandson of Samuel Goldwyn of MGM Studios. He has a distinctive cocky walk that is halfway lope and halfway strut, and a head full of wavy chestnut hair that seems to drive his fans mad with desire.

In turn, Goldwyn’s celebrity as a sexy leading man lends Outlaw Prophet its own Shonda-land eroticized allure. Many viewers watched the premiere of Outlaw Prophet in viewing parties as appointment TV, earning ratings that made it the second-most-watched show on June 28, 2014, second to NASCAR (M&M_Vlogs 2014). Its continual re-airing and worldwide syndication have furthered the spread of Outlaw Prophet, often through the appeal of the Tony Goldwyn brand. And much like Scandal, which staked part of its claim to history-making prominence on the social media chatter its actors and fans (called Gladiators) fostered during broadcasts, both Goldwyn and Rebecca Musser (one of the real-life women who escaped the FLDS and later helped to convict Jeffs) live tweeted during the first airing of the movie. For good measure, Kerry Washington, who plays Olivia Pope, Scandal’s lead character and

FIG. 4.6 Goldyn as Jeffs, enacting the “heavenly sessions” of sexual coaching to his young wives. Screen grab, Outlaw Prophet.
Goldwyn’s love interest, also tweeted along with the premiere, adding another level of celebrity appeal. In turn, the Twitter feeds for Goldwyn, Musser, Washington, and Outlaw Prophet all reinforce the actor’s sexy good looks, his acting talents, and how “messed up” and “disturbing” Jeff’s narrative is.

To be sure, I do not believe audiences confused Goldwyn with Jeffs—they seem quite aware of the performance feat involved in playing him, and tweets on the Outlaw Prophet feed show fans, many with screen names that express Scandal-related meaning like Olitz or Fitzlover, complimenting the actor for his talent. My point, rather, is that the terms of representation so fully reinforce an almost contradictory logic whereby the actor’s body cements the attractiveness of Jeffs as a charismatic leader with a powerful and insistent sex drive, even as it separates the actor’s body from the prophet’s. “Michelle FO918” writes, “My mom is now hysterical at the ‘sex teaching’ scene. She is in love with the way that TG is sitting on the bed.” Likewise, “Dirty Sock” posted, “Fitz always gotta have all these womenfolk to love him” and “The Daily Gawk” describes Outlaw Prophet as a “sexy makeover” for Warren Jeffs.

Indeed, coverage of Outlaw Prophet very much worked to blur the sexually alluring bodies of Goldwyn, his Scandal character Fitz, and Jeffs, the actor’s movie-star body and his character’s persona of a sexy president reinforcing the shared properties of eroticaism that bind the two stories of male authority—president and prophet. In their plugging of the movie, Entertainment Tonight’s segment on the film is called “From President to Prophet.” ET starts with a sex scene between Fitz (Tony Goldwyn) and Olivia (Kerry Washington) on Scandal, only to move seconds later to the above-described rape scene in Outlaw Prophet, calling the made-for-TV movie “extremely graphic” and a “real-life sex scandal” (O’Dell 2014). The problem here should be rather obvious—rape is not an expression of sexuality; it is an abuse of power through violent sex. In this case, the limited registers of representation flatten the difference between these sex acts depicted on screen, marking them as two points on a continuum rather than as deeply incommensurate actions.

Whether or not we perceive Warren Jeffs as the kind of charismatic person to lead a cultlike religion, lifting his story to a field of mediated visibility relies on the telegenic biases of mainstream television that cannot, without difficulty, imagine a leading man who is not also sexually desirable in conventional terms.9 Playing the awkwardly embodied Warren Jeffs thus problematizes the folds and overlaps of embodied authority, sexual power, and bullying intimidation, Goldwyn’s muscular form and “sexy walk” mak-
ing Jeffs’s charismatic hold on his followers somehow understandable, even natural (see figures 4.7 and 4.8).

In sum, while this fictional portrayal of Warren Jeffs in *Outlaw Prophet* positions Jeffs as its protagonist, a man made notorious and who believed himself to be bigger than bin Laden, it defaults to a portrayal of the power-crazed and pedophilic prophet that is one-dimensional and fairly common in what we might call an archive of mediated polygamy and patriarchal abuse. I do not necessarily fault the film or its producers for this—it’s hard to humanize a man like Jeffs, responsible for so much abuse and intimidation. Indeed, it is precisely this difficulty that helps reinforce my claim that the figures at the center of these fiction and nonfiction tellings about the charismatic celebrity are themselves little more than a backdrop to a different form of emergent hero figure. Within these portrayals, it is the women and subordinated men who defy him in order to flee to a modern world where their voices might overpower his that emerge as the subjects of celebration. In this, representations of abuse, victimization, and brainwashed
groupthink ultimately serve to make the perpetrator uninteresting except for the way the prophet and his brotherhood of patriarchal leaders function as a backdrop for the calling-into-being of feminist conscience, resistance, and social justice.

**Polygamists OG: Brothers Joseph and Brigham**

As I note, the FLDS and LDS religions sprouted from a common seed, sharing the same prophets until the splits that occurred in 1890 and 1904 when what is now the mainstream church disavowed plural marriage. The mutual prophetic heritage is not just a historical matter but a representational one as well, since references to the original Mormon polygamists and prophets, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, riddle these contemporary imaginings of patriarchal power and the charismatic prophet. Look to the background of most documentary and nonfiction television representations of patriarchal...
Polygamy, for instance, and you are sure to see the framed visages of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young looming behind the action playing out at the front of the screen. In Church of Lies, Flora Jessop literalizes these connections by including the images of Smith and Young in the section containing family photos, visual evidence here reinforcing her rights to patriarchal critique (Jessop and Brown 2010).

Indeed, as troubling as the incest, pedophilia, and rape I’ve discussed in this chapter are, they are telling for their equation of fundamentalist polygamous perversions with mainstream Mormonism through the figure of its founder, Joseph Smith. If we briefly return to Outlaw Prophet, we see a scene with a mural behind three of Jeff’s naked young sister wives (see figure 4.9), a rendering of Smith, featured in iconic pose as he receives the spirit of the Angel Moroni in his own queer ecstasy. This not-so-veiled reference to the Mormon origination story follows a well-worn pattern. The mimetic properties of what defines the prophet do not arise from a vacuum: they are referential to entrenched visual and aural codes that solidify the meanings of the all-American prophet, even as they critique those terms. In this respect, while the mainstream church has worked hard to distance itself from its polygamist past, media keep the past always present. We can see the truth of this contention in many places, but another telling illustration occurred on the TLC reality show 90 Day Fiancé, when a young mainstream Mormon boy from Idaho brings a Russian girl back from his mission so that

they might marry. At their wedding, her Russian parents ask if the family is polygamous. His LDS family is shocked at the question, but the audience is in on the joke. Media here function as a pedagogical reminder of a history that is not always spoken but also isn’t forgotten.

The founding fathers of both Mormonism and polygamy in the USA—Joseph Smith and Brigham Young—thus remain part of a living history, told and retold through other persons and stories in the present moment. But the prophets are fully present in their own skins as well, usually as the good cop/bad cop of Mormon history. While in their own day both Smith and Young were deeply flawed and highly controversial figures whose audacity brought the wrath of angry mobs, state troops, and, ultimately, the federal government, in the long whitewash of history, Joseph Smith has emerged as the good, jovial, and charismatic first prophet, and Brigham Young is often cast as the less-compelling organizational genius of the church. Basically, Smith upholds the charismatic center, the holy force of reckoning that brought the church into being. By contrast, Young is more phlegmatic: Brigham is plain where Joseph was handsome, parsimonious where Joseph was generous, practical and plotting where Joseph was whimsical and impulsive. In her nineteenth-century denunciation of Mormon polygamy, former Mormon Fanny Stenhouse speaks of a “contagious rapture” that occurred among believers in response to Smith. By contrast, she says that Young “discouraged” the exercise of these charismatic gifts, to be “excited to frenzy” (Stenhouse 1875, 38, 39). Stenhouse claims that Young possessed a “narrow soul,” incapable of looking beyond anything but his own small frame of reference.

While she concedes that Young held great fame in midcentury America, Stenhouse denounces his legitimate right to this stature, saying he had “obtained a place in the recognition of the world, to which by nature or by grace he had not the shadow of a claim.” Instead, she characterizes him as having the “mind of the wildest savage who prowled among the cliffs and canyons of the Rocky Mountains.” “He probably is one of the greatest cowards in existence, both morally and physically” (Stenhouse 1875, 238, 240). Her most damning critique? Stenhouse accuses Young of a debased morality due to his practice of blood atonement (what she calls the “ditty of assassination”), the enforcement of polygamy, the sustenance of the Adam/God doctrine, and robbing Christ of his birthright by putting him on equal ground with humans (245).10

Ann Eliza Young (1876), Brigham Young’s nineteenth (or thereabouts) wife, was equally condemning in her published memoirs and one-woman stage performances. She calls him a man of “selfish cupidity and egotistical vanity” (123), who cannot tolerate criticism and “sneaks, and skulks, and cowardly
hides behind any one he can find who is broad enough to shield him” (123). He is a “grasping lecherous, heartless tyrant” (160), a murderer with “moral rottenness to the very core” (315). “His avarice is so inordinate that no amount of suffering stands in the way of his self-enrichment” (317). He is an entitled despot who has created a “reign of terror” (131), and in this sin, he commits the distinctly American crime of acting like royalty.

Brigham Young’s heartlessness is particularly reinforced in relation to two historical travesties: the handcart disaster of 1856 and the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857. In the former, the prophet spoke of a vision urging converts to come to Zion immediately. Mormon faithful walked the thousand miles from Iowa to Salt Lake, pushing and pulling their belongings—and often their sick and fragile family members—on rickety handcarts. Scores died along the way, but Young never relented in his demand that the faithful keep coming. By media accounts, he did little to help. Also in 1857, the Mountain Meadows Massacre is named for a mass killing in southern Utah. An expedition traveling from Arkansas to California was surrounded by the Utah Territorial Militia, many of them Mormons dressed as Paiutes to make their abuses seem the work of Native Americans rather than white men, in turn reinforcing the racial appropriation that is behind so much of settler colonialism. Young’s involvement was highly suspected but never proved, and both Tell It All and Wife No. 19 speak in harshly condemnatory terms of Brigham Young’s culpability with respect to the lives lost in these travesties.

Now clearly, memoirs of this sort have an agenda, in that their representations are meant to undermine the institution of polygamy that both Stenhouse and Young considered to be corrosive to womanhood, which is to say to the nineteenth-century prevailing social code of monogamous heteronormativity. Yet this sort of reactive nineteenth-century media set the template for how both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young continue to be read today: Joseph as laughing and loving, Brigham as devious and dour. It is telling, given these differences, that Brigham Young was first anointed Smith’s successor after giving a speech some weeks following Smith’s death. Suddenly bathed in a column of light that blinded all present, Young seemed to the assembled crowd to take on the appearance and sound of Joseph Smith—one seeming to speak through the other. By contrast, in mediated accounts such as Avenging Angel, September Dawn, and Brigham Young, Young emerges in the model made salient through memoir, as a commanding, if often heartless, leader who will sacrifice all for power.

It is largely due to this more benign rendition of Smith that his relation to polygamy has been hotly contested. During his life, he disavowed his own
participation in plural marriage. In a 2014 move for transparency—believing that a little bit of truth is better than a whole lot of spin—the mainstream church released a statement through its website Mormon.org, acknowledging that Joseph Smith both practiced polygamy and had several young wives, probably ten of whom were only barely into their teens (“Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo” 2014.). These are statements that decades earlier had been excommunicable offenses. Yet, as Outlaw Prophet and an increasingly active blogosphere make clear, the polygamy that Joseph Smith started in the nineteenth century will always be something that modern-day Mormons must address, in both the idea of who they are and in actual practice, since so many present-day Mormons are descended from polygamist ancestors and because polygamy as an institution is very much an open possibility in the LDS afterlife.

The power dynamics at the heart of polygamy constitute the very DNA of Mormon belief, and really of orthodox culture, in which the truth of God can only be known through the words of man, and one man in particular holds unwavering power. For both mainstream and fundamentalist versions of the faith, the male leader of the church is considered to be its absolute authority figure and the exclusive receiver of divine revelations from God. Obedience becomes the primary, and in some respects only, way for those under the prophet to show their belief in God. In the words of the mainstream church: once the prophet speaks, the thinking is done. In the words of Warren Jeffs: “Obey the prophet when he speaks, and you’ll be blessed. Disobey him, and it is death” (Knoll 2009b). Those who do not obey are threatened with banishment from family and loved ones, both now and in an eternity of outer darkness. Within the fundamentalist faith, the disobedient can also be punished and/or compelled to prove their faith through blood atonement. Oddly, however, this draconian demand for obedience has yielded depictions so grandiose and over the top that they often speak through the idiom of queerness and camp culture, particularly as related to that first all-American prophet, Joseph.

More Famous Than Jesus: Joseph Smith as Audacious Celebrity and Queer Figure of Excess

There is a charismatic appeal to audacity. The man of renown often raises the twin banners of the visionary and the egoist by breaking preconceived notions about decorum and decency. It’s not by accident that these are also the qualities of a certain kind of narcissistic hegemonic masculinity that
assumes its own right to rule, reinforces hierarchical power relations, boasts of its heterosexual prowess, and continually seeks affirmation of its own authority. The great man is a highly gendered construct that reinforces masculinist codes of singularity and exceptionalism—and though a woman and certain subordinated males can certainly aspire to and achieve these heights, the category of the great man itself carries the markings of an alpha heteromasculinity that tilts toward the bold, the daring, the fearless, and the audacious. Yet I would submit that hegemonic masculinity itself is an elaborate stage-crafted artifice, filled with bravado, theatricality, and quite a good bit of homoeroticism, the style codes that mark a queer camp sensibility that self-consciously toys with its own hyperbole. Indeed, I’d outright label hegemonic masculinity camp were it not persuaded by its own performance—so camp, minus the self-aware irony, perhaps.

As I’ve noted, Joseph founded his church in 1830 in Palmyra, New York, a small town on the edge of the Erie Canal, not far from Seneca Falls where a different kind of political action would soon take place for women with the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. In the 1820s and ’30s the entire country was awash in a fevered emotional moment when a mass of people turned to religion and religious extremes to counter social ills and affective malaise. The mid-nineteenth century reinforced a doomsday scenario that preached the end of the world was nigh, and this, in turn, opened the door to a religious fervor that fostered fantastic leaders (celebrity) and bred unswerving devotion (fans). As one demonstration of this religio-celebrity culture, in the 1850s, the Congregationalist preacher Henry Ward Beecher (of the renowned Beecher clan) was “the most famous man in America,” preaching twice a day to audiences of five thousand or more. Historian Debby Applegate notes Beecher’s “spectacular sermons at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn Heights had made him New York’s number one tourist attraction, so wildly popular that the ferries from Manhattan to Brooklyn were dubbed ‘Beecher Boats’” (2006, back cover).

Beecher allows me to emphasize an important point: it was a crowded moment on the religion/celebrity stage, where any Tom, Dick, or Harry had to fight against the charismatic powers of Joseph and Henry to assume the glories of fame and adulation, and only the rare woman need even presume such grandiosity. Indeed, one could argue Joseph Smith played the politics of commemoration impeccably: by the time of Beecher’s ascendancy in the 1850s, Joseph Smith had already outdone Beecher’s fame. Smith had emerged as a martyr (killed by an angry anti-Mormon mob in 1844), transcending—might I even say, resurrecting—from body to idea.
and fusing his own overlarge personality with God’s. Now that’s audacious. And a bit campy.

I admit that it is more than sacrilege in certain circles to think of Joseph Smith, founding prophet and fallen martyr, as a camp celebrity figure. His memory is revered by legions of Saints worldwide as the earnest, God-inspired founder of the One True Church. Often mimetically linked with Jesus, Joseph Smith stands as the righteous man of honor, who brought God’s truth to American soils. Joseph was an unusual prophet, in that his human weaknesses and appetites were so fully manifest in his celebrity bearing. Unlike the prophets of biblical times, Joseph was a robust man of the moment. Writes Irving Wallace, “Combining the delicate and handsome features of a matinee idol with the physique of an athlete, he wrestled, gambled, swore (‘like a pirate,’ the governor of Illinois would observe), drank and whored” (1962, 35). Mormonism, in its twentieth-century commitments to conservatism and its nineteenth-century roots in polygamy, is ever the fascinating touchstone for these registers of sexuality, faith, regulation, and rules.

Given all of this, it might be counterintuitive that if one reverts to that most contemporary form of scholarship, Google, little of this background is revealed. Typing the three words “Joseph” “Smith” “celebrity” into a search engine yields a fairly lackluster array of possibilities: famous people named Joseph, a website on a split-apart faction of Mormonism called Strangism or the Strangites that emerged after Smith’s death in 1844, Joseph Smith’s zodiac sign, a church-authored history of Joseph Smith that calls him a “humble man”—and a list of famous Mormons, including “Hey Girl” Ryan Gosling, who was raised LDS but no longer considers himself Mormon.

Some of this absence may well be because the mainstream LDS Church is both resolute and savvy in its telling of its own story and the policing of search algorithms. The mainstream church’s website describes its founding prophet’s story as a young boy, who asked God’s help in knowing which church to worship. As they explain it, “When Joseph asked which church he should join, the Savior told him to join none of the churches then in existence because they were teaching incorrect doctrines. Through this experience and many others that followed, the Lord chose Joseph to be His prophet and to restore the gospel of Jesus Christ and His Church to the earth” (“Joseph Smith” 2016). A most unusual moment made perfectly reasonable. Rather than seeing Joseph Smith as a pious fraud or divine charlatan as do many of his biographers and historians of the period, the mainstream church insists on Smith’s unwavering veracity because the entire embedded structure of faith requires a buy-in to the truth of Joseph’s vision. In their words, “The
truthfulness of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rests on the truthfulness of the First Vision and the other revelations the Lord gave to the Prophet Joseph. In the Doctrine and Covenants we learn, Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it” (Maynes 2017).

But let us not be overly persuaded by a telling of history that presumes Joseph Smith’s meekness, kindness, and all-around humbleness simply because he began a church whose mainstream members are now marked by many of these adjectives. Joseph Smith was a man of presence and audacity, marked by “religious genius” (Bloom 1992, 80), even in a nineteenth-century context dominated by big personalities. Indeed, Bloom argues that Smith possessed charismatic appeal “to a degree unsurpassed in American history” (98). In his own time, Joseph Smith did not just look like a matinee idol, he lived a life of immense celebrity that, in our present moment, is rivaled only by entertainment celebrities. Joseph was a figure of charisma and controversy, a personality that generated strong and polarizing reactions. His church—largely due to its rumors of non-normative sexual behaviors but also because of its capacity to thrive under separate sovereignty (indeed, it had its own standing army)—generated strong fascination and fear.

Joseph Smith and the towns he created—first in Ohio, then in Arkansas, then in Illinois—became celebrities of untold fascination. Alex Beam (2014) notes in American Crucifixion that there were “four landing slips in Nauvoo, and in the summer as many as ten boats a week stopped by, often filled with tourists and day-trippers eager to catch a glimpse of the exotic Mormons.” R. Lawrence Moore similarly reports, “Mormon communities were three-star sights in European guidebooks to North America” (1987, 26). In Manifest Destinations, J. Philip Gruen writes that by 1900 Western tourists visited Salt Lake City in great numbers—“150,000–200,000 per year”—in order “to experience what they perceived as a deviant population on native soil. . . . This alone set [Mormons] apart from most tourists, and as historian Patricia Limerick has argued, cast them as exotic and ‘other’ in the popular imagination” (Gruen 2014; see also Seppi 2015). As Moore rightly summarizes, “Although Mormons were publicly despised and ridiculed, visitors to the United States sought them out as if they provided vital clues to the nature of the American people,” perhaps to the American people themselves (Moore 1987, 26). Indeed, Kurt Andersen considers Smith a “quintessentially American figure,” whose “extreme audacity—his mind-boggling balls—is the American character ad absurdum. America was created by people resistant to reality checks
and convinced they had special access to the truth, a place founded to enact grand fantasies,” argues Andersen. “No Joseph Smiths emerged elsewhere in the modern world” (2017, 72).

Though dead at age thirty-eight, Joseph drew the most important of American and European personages to himself and later to his proxy, Brigham Young, in Salt Lake City. Mark Twain, P. T. Barnum, Stephen Douglas, Horace Greeley, Richard Burton—all trekked to either Nauvoo or Salt Lake for the Mormon experience. Josiah Quincy, the mayor of Boston, with his cousin Charles Francis Adams (son of President John Quincy Adams) visited Smith in Illinois in 1844 when Smith was himself running for president. Quincy described Smith as “a man of commanding appearance, clad in the costume of a journeyman carpenter . . . He was a hearty, athletic fellow, with blue eyes standing prominently out upon his light complexion, a long nose, and a retreating forehead. He wore striped pantaloons, a linen jacket, which had not lately seen the washtub, and a beard of some three days’ growth” (Quincy 1883).

In his biography of Ann Eliza Young, Wallace refers to this meeting of early American celebrities—Smith, Adams, and Quincy. “During their conversations Quincy frankly told Smith that he possessed too much power. Smith was not abashed. He replied, ‘In your hands or that of any other person so much power would, no doubt, be dangerous. I am the only man in the world whom it would be safe to trust with it. Remember, “I am a prophet!”’” To which Quincy added for his readers: “The last fine words were spoken in a rich, comical aside, as if in hearty recognition of the ridiculous sound they might have in the ears of a Gentile” (Wallace 1962, 36). Smith, who had appointed himself mayor of Nauvoo, general of the Nauvoo legion, and, by some accounts, king of the world once the apocalypse occurred, was fond of surveying his troops while clad in a uniform “made according to the latest pattern.” Beam writes, “Joseph favored a cerulean officer’s tailcoat, dripping with weighty gold braid and epaulettes, topped off with a black cockade chapeau that was adorned with a black ostrich feather. As accouterments, he wore black leather riding boots, white gloves, a gold campaign sash, and a four-foot-long, leather-handled, forged cavalry saber” (2014, 56–57).

In a more contemporary context, Jane Barnes (one of the producers of the PBS documentary The Mormons and author of Falling in Love with Joseph Smith) considers Joseph a “pure product of America,” grounded in contradiction and hyperbole, a charismatic celebrity presence as iconic and irreverent as Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, as poetic as D. H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman, and with more sheer aliveness in him than Jesus Christ (Barnes
Polygamy USA

2012). She writes, “Not to confuse Jesus with Joseph, just to compare their biographical trajectories for a moment: Christ’s life has been so swarmed with commentary, the feel of religion has all but been squeezed out of it for me. Joseph’s life still simmers in the vital, chaotic, wondrous aftermath of his big bang encounter with God. The facts about Joseph are still being unearthed; and as messy as Joseph continues to be, he’s still in on the mysterium tremendum” (Barnes 2012, 61–62, emphasis in original). Clearly, Barnes doesn’t overstate the case when she calls her book Falling in Love with Joseph Smith.

Joseph Smith’s bravado admitted no equal: “I have more to boast of than ever any man had. I am the only man that has ever been able to keep a whole church together since the days of Adam. . . . Neither Paul, John, Peter, nor Jesus ever did it. I boast that no man ever did such work as I. The followers of Jesus ran away from Him; but the Latter-day Saints never ran away from me yet” (Smith 1920, 6:408–9). His over-the-top regard for himself made him a diva of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Alex Doty (2007) notes that “divas are frequently portrayed as both victims and villains” since they can be “figures of worship as well as of ridicule for their attempts to confront, transcend, or carve a new space within the patriarchal dominant culture.” They create what Doty calls “category trouble” by refusing to stay in their proper culturally assigned roles in order to “live life on their own terms, making them important figures for other groups at the margins of the dominant culture.” Doty’s version of the diva positions her as resolutely counterhegemonic, always working to undermine dominant culture in the service of marginal identities, always gendered feminine. By contrast, the figure, fortitude, and ongoing camp personality of Joseph Smith allows for what I consider to be a more frightening possibility: the political work of the diva might well be marshaled through hegemonic white hetero-masculinity, the audacity of difference working to naturalize the codes of patriarchal power relations found in the polygamous prophet.

Conclusion: The Logic of Open Secrets

While in Canada, I was introduced to Uncle Jason’s brother Winston Blackmore, the bishop of our FLDS community there. He was a jovial yet callous man, a product of his environments and his beliefs. I laughed at some of his jokes but cringed at how harshly he treated his wives. Even at the pulpit, he would couch unkind remarks in humor. “Like Brigham Young, I don’t like whiny women! Just like him, I tell ’em, ‘Leave! I’ll replace you in an instant with another wife, and she will serve me the way a woman should serve her Priesthood Head.’” —Rebecca Musser, The Witness Wore Red
“Inside Bountiful: Polygamy Investigation,” is an episode of 16×9, a news magazine television program on the Canadian network Global that aired in October 2011 and is in perpetual readiness for international viewing and reviewing on Youtube (16x9onglobal 2012). Amid the legal backdrop of the Canadian Supreme Court’s deliberations about the relative legalities of polygamy, 16×9 promised an exposé of “Canada’s most famous polygamist,” Winston Blackmore, who had, at the time of the show’s taping, fifteen wives and 130 children. All of Blackmore’s family practiced a version of the Jeffs-inspired FLDS faith that espoused polygamy as one of its primary tenets. In the program, Blackmore notes that his tally of wives had been considerably higher at some indeterminate point in the past—twenty-four by his reckoning. And though we are not told what happened to these women—the program notes in vague terms that they “left”—it is a sign of this polygamist patriarch’s relative gender progressivism that wives and children might come and go as they choose from his compound in this bucolic valley, situated less than an hour from the U.S. border with Idaho.

In the program’s hands, Canada’s rather notorious polygamist comes off as a non-prepossessing granddad kind of fellow, who jokes with community members, doesn’t mind if his children date or choose to live outside of the plural marriage commitment, and repeatedly encourages the interviewer, Carolyn Jarvis, to ask her questions of his wives and children rather than of him. Jarvis herself seems somewhat stunned that none of the things she expected to find in Bountiful are there. “We were warned to expect ‘no trespassing’ signs,” she tells the viewer in voice-over narration, “women who would hide their kids in bushes at our arrival. Much to our surprise, there was none of that.” Jarvis claims she couldn’t even detect the pioneer-style clothing associated with the FLDS plural marriage lifestyle—at least not in the extended family over which Blackmore is the patriarch. Occasionally, the camera glances off to the fields, to the other parts of Bountiful not run by Blackmore. Haunting the edges of the frame are those very silent and secretive figures in long hair and longer pastel dresses that Jarvis expected—these are the FLDS folk who still follow the other Mormon patriarch, Warren Jeffs.

In Blackmore’s compound, the camera comes back and holds intently on the scuffed and battered white high heels worn by one sister wife as she works intently in the kitchen, her shoes clearly meant to indicate that this is not your father’s polygamy (see figure 4.10). Over the images of these white shoes, Jarvis narrates the separate-spheres labor of polygamy. She is fascinated by the sheer effort involved in feeding so many people. “The biggest meal of the week feeds anywhere from two to three hundred people,” says
Jarvis in voice-over. “The sister wives take turn staging this production. . . . The preparation begins the night before. By daybreak, the baking begins. Homemade rolls, by the hundreds.” The screen is filled with images of slicing, chopping, boiling, setting tables, all in fast motion as if to accentuate the pace of women’s work. Thirty-two hundred pounds of tomatoes arrive that have to be canned. “It will take two 12-hour days and all the girls pitching in to finish,” says Jarvis. “The one thing you won’t find in this kitchen is a man. The odd boy wanders in and quickly wanders out. . . . This is a community based on gender roles. To find the men, you have to go to the mill.”

The camera and Jarvis quickly do just that—heading off to the mill where men labor for money, rather than nourishment. As one might expect, the switch to a mill necessitates the background sounds of power saws and heavy machinery, the aural signifiers here punctuating the work of masculinity with a soundtrack fit for the industrial revolution. But rather than following them so quickly to the spaces of male industry, I want to stay with the sister wives, in the kitchen and home spaces, amid the domestic hurry and flurry that is their labor.

Indeed, the trope of those white high-heeled pumps fascinates me too. For in their impracticality, they represent the very semiotics of women’s leisure within modernity, even as (oxymoronically) the woman wearing them is, herself, at work. The shoes seem out of place, beckoning to a world of dancing or fancy lunches, not to the backbreaking labor of incessant food

FIG. 4.10 White pumps: the semiotics of gendered personhood.
preparation. In the gendered economy of labor that is the FLDS, there will be no rest for this woman, no moment when she might put those fancy shoes to fuller spectacular display. Hers is a life of labor, both the work of domesticity and the literal labor of childbirth. Yet she wears those impractical shoes anyway—I assume as a gesture of individualism, defiance, beauty. Or perhaps she wears them as a self-conscious awareness of being on camera. To engage with the mediated logics of patriarchal polygamy is precisely to tangle with this paradox as attached to the obligations of obedience and the promises of salvation: perpetual servitude is the only way that one might be free in the afterlife, but that afterlife has continuity with a mortal frame in which women serve men and birth children.

Many media accounts of patriarchal polygamy tease viewers with the secrets they will reveal; yet, as this chapter has demonstrated, patriarchal polygamy is an open secret in media culture. The prophet and his not-always-willing followers create a combined meme that is far from clandestine. Indeed, the patriarchal polygamist is a recognizable trope, made legible through his very celebrity as a figure to be despised. The alpha of Joseph and the omega of Warren thus bracket patriarchal polygamy as a key fixation for a culture working through the meanings of justice, fanaticism, intolerance, personal choice, and sexual regulation. On this screen a woman claims her voice to speak an impassioned truth—not as a satisfied, obedient, and silent victim within polygamy, but as an angry, wronged, and inspired warrior intent on demanding a justice for others that she herself was denied, wearing white high heels while she speaks truth to power.