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# Escaping the Perils of Sensationalist Television Reduction

## A&E Networks' *Escaping Polygamy* as a Reality TV Atrocity Tale

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Michelle Mueller

**ABSTRACT:** Mormon polygamy has become a popular subject for contemporary reality television shows. TLC's polygamy reality shows center around Mormon polygamist families from the families' points of view. In contrast from these, Lifetime/A&E Networks' *Escaping Polygamy* (2014–) centers around three twenty-something ex-members of a Mormon fundamentalist sect known as the Kingston group. The show depicts the ex-members as heroines who rescue other young adults as they are leaving Mormon polygamist sects. In this article, *Escaping Polygamy* is interpreted as an "atrocity tale" that relies on a history of moral panic around Mormon polygamy and perpetuates reductive stereotypes about Mormon fundamentalist groups. After an evaluation depending on content analysis of the series and informal interviews with key individuals represented on the series, this article explores the possible damage *Escaping Polygamy* causes for Mormon polygamist sects and even the young adults shown leaving the groups.

**KEYWORDS:** media, Mormon polygamy, Kingston Clan, Davis County Cooperative Society, atrocity tales, new religious movements, cults, reality television

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Today's popular reality television programming includes content that is impartial or even favorable to Mormon fundamentalist polygamists [National Geographic's *Polygamy USA* (2013) and TLC's *Sister Wives* (2010–)] and content that is unfavorable [Lifetime/A&E's *Escaping Polygamy* (2014–)].<sup>1</sup> Cable television network TLC founded the market for reality television shows about well-functioning polygamist families. To date, the network's most successful polygamy series has been its very first, *Sister Wives*, but this has not stopped the network from trying new shows. TLC's shows, *Sister Wives*, *My Five Wives* (2013–2014), *Seeking Sister Wife* (2018–), and *Three Wives, One Husband* (2017–), focus on representing the lives of practicing polygamists from their point of view. As TLC was growing its polygamy-friendly programming, a competing television conglomerate, Lifetime/A&E Networks, produced a show that would be the direct opposite of the TLC content. That show, *Escaping Polygamy*, can best be interpreted as the anti-polygamy reality television response to TLC's popular shows.

A key difference between *Escaping Polygamy* and TLC's leading series, *Sister Wives*, is each show's focus on defectors from religious sects versus active members of a religious sect. The contrasting media products resulting from this difference relate to studies from religious scholars Carole M. Cusack, and Lynn Davidman and Arthur Greil.<sup>2</sup> In a study of new religious movement ex-members and their internet presence, Cusack found that ex-members have continued to construct their identity with respect to the religious group, regardless of both the length of time since their departure and the nature of the terms on which they left. Davidman and Greil's study showed that formerly ultra-Orthodox Jews seek external narratives for conceptualizing their terminated membership of a religious sect. Both studies have emphasized ex-members' framing of their identities with respect to the religious sects of their origin even years after departing. These findings suggest that both the current members and the ex-members of the religious polygamist groups are bound to construct their identities in relation to the groups. The *Sister Wives* family members, who are practicing Mormon polygamists active with a Mormon fundamentalist church, are likely to offer a more favorable representation of religious polygamy on their show. Having left sects, the women of *Escaping Polygamy* likewise construct their identity in relation to their religious upbringing, but their identity as ex-members depends upon their dissatisfaction with the religious sects. The shows are framed in ways that evoke contrasting reactions from audiences.

In their study, Davidman and Greil discovered that former ultra-Orthodox Jews lacked scripts for making sense of their exit from the Haredi community. Former members of the Kingston group and other Mormon fundamentalist sects, however, have a script. Their script is informed by the books written by other ex-members, who are known

anti-polygamy advocates. These books include Carolyn Jessop's *Escape* and Flora Jessop's *Church of Lies*.<sup>3</sup> The creators of *Escaping Polygamy* develop television storylines that perpetuate the most severe complaints against Mormon fundamentalist sects from their former members.

Reality television shows on both networks are edited according to the tones the media professionals wish to set.<sup>4</sup> For example, *Sister Wives* documented a family situation when Kody, the husband in the polygamous family, proudly announced that he had picked out new wife Robyn's wedding dress, which made the sister-wives feel circumvented. After Kody's announcement, Christine was so upset she walked off the set. In their book, the family reports that the episode made it seem that she returned shortly thereafter when, in actuality, she was so upset she avoided Kody for three days.<sup>5</sup> This manipulation downplayed a conflict in a religious polygamist family, ultimately making a family disagreement seem relatively benign and limiting the amount of pain seen by viewers. *Escaping Polygamy*'s manipulations do the opposite, as this show depends upon religious polygamy appearing dangerous.

David G. Bromley, Anson D. Shupe, and J.C. Ventimiglia defined an atrocity tale as a "presentation of [an atrocity] (real or imaginary) in such a way as to (a) evoke moral outrage by specifying and detailing the value violations, (b) authorize, implicitly or explicitly, punitive sanctions, and (c) mobilize control efforts against the alleged perpetrators."<sup>6</sup> This article analyzes *Escaping Polygamy* as an atrocity tale created as a profitable enterprise. The space for this type of content was created by TLC's shows, which are more sympathetic toward polygamy. *Escaping Polygamy* brings to the reality television genre the same moral panic that has followed the Mormon fundamentalist population in news media and court rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> The show falsifies events, conflates all fundamentalist Mormon populations as if they are one homogenous culture, and focuses on the most culturally shocking aspects in order to provoke moral outrage in the audience. *Escaping Polygamy* "authorizes, implicitly or explicitly, punitive sanctions" by alleging incest, child abuse, forced underage marriages, and the expulsion of lost boys. *Escaping Polygamy* "mobilizes control efforts against the alleged perpetrators" by presenting women and men in the communities as needing to be rescued. Jason Bivins described media consumers' desire to be titillated as the "erotics of fear."<sup>8</sup> The show's producers understand the popularity of atrocity tales and produce *Escaping Polygamy* as an atrocity tale for its economic success. Despite popular interest in well-functioning polygamist families, which is demonstrated by the success of TLC's *Sister Wives*, other viewers are entertained by the morally outrageous content of *Escaping Polygamy*.

The "atrocification" of religious polygamy is not a victimless crime. In the final section of this essay, I flesh out the possible harmful effects of *Escaping Polygamy* as atrocity tale. In addition to the potential defamation of already stigmatized religious sects, Christine Marie Katas, an

advocate for victims of human trafficking familiar with the Mormon fundamentalist context, has alleged that the show has done the most harm to the young adults it filmed leaving polygamist groups. According to Katas, the show's producers encouraged young adults to leave their religious communities, thereby giving up their support systems, and afterward did very little to support the young adults through difficult and life-changing transitions. *Escaping Polygamy* as an atrocity tale represents broader patterns in popular entertainment, patterns that have lasting effects on religious populations and on individuals. Despite the fact that TLC's polygamy-favoring programming has introduced new narratives, Lifetime/A&E's *Escaping Polygamy* renews the moral panic that has defined Mormon polygamy in the public sphere since its origin in the 1830s.

### **MORMON POLYGAMY AND MORAL PANIC: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

Throughout its nearly two-hundred-year lifetime, Mormon polygamy has been met with public criticism and accusations of moral values violations. Founder Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–1844) was murdered by a mob, largely driven by their dislike of his polygamist teachings. Polygamy and slavery were termed “the twin relics of barbarism” in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> In response to the new Mormon polygamous population, United States Congress outlawed polygamy nationwide with the 1882 Edmunds Act. In 1953, federal forces invaded Short Creek, a settlement of Mormon fundamentalists at the Utah-Arizona boundary, in what D. Michael Quinn has labeled “an unprecedented effort by American law enforcement to destroy a peaceful community, eradicate family relationships, and scatter a people to the winds [whose] only American parallel is the federal actions against Native Americans in the nineteenth century.”<sup>10</sup> A false accusation of forced underage marriage and physical abuse by a non-member of the group triggered a state government raid on the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS) Yearning for Zion Ranch near Eldorado, Texas, after which television hosts Larry King and Dr. Drew approached FLDS women with questions such as whether they “know” that polygamy is wrong.<sup>11</sup> Throughout these events, the United States and the public have been guided by the presumption of polygamy's absolute immorality and the presumed need to protect Americans from the risk of polygamy.

News media have done very little to educate the public about the actual diversity of the Mormon fundamentalist movement. This lack of information continues to fuel the moral panic since any atrocity is perceived by the public as representative of all polygamist groups.

The Kingston Clan, the focus population of *Escaping Polygamy*, is one of several Mormon fundamentalist sects that emerged after the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [LDS (Mormon) Church] moved away from the practice of polygamy. Joseph Smith had first introduced religious polygamy to a small following and eventually taught it as a core Mormon doctrine. The LDS Church moved away from polygamy at the turn of the twentieth century, which many have attributed to Mormons' desire for Utah statehood.<sup>12</sup> LDS Church President Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898) brought the First Anti-Polygamy Manifesto in 1890. President Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972), nephew to Mormonism's founder, reinforced it with stronger terms in the Second Manifesto of 1904.

As the LDS Church moved away from polygamy, Mormons who continued to practice polygamy came to be known as the religion's fundamentalists. Mormon fundamentalists believe that Woodruff's predecessor John Taylor (1808–1887) had "conferred special priesthood authority" onto Lorin D. Woolley (1856–1934) and appointed Woolley "to continue performing plural marriages even if the church abandoned 'the Principle.'"<sup>13</sup> Woolley headed a priesthood council responsible for ensuring the continuation of Mormon plural marriage. As typically occurs in major religious schisms, the men of Woolley's council butted heads and many parted ways, which over time led to the establishment of several sects of Mormon fundamentalism.<sup>14</sup>

Today's Mormon fundamentalist groups include the Allreds (approximately 7,500 members); Centennial Park in Arizona (approximately 1,500 members); the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), which has approximately 8,000 to 10,000 members; and the Kingstons (approximately 3,500 members). Additionally, unaffiliated Mormon fundamentalists use the term "independents" and are estimated at nearly 15,000.<sup>15</sup> The various sects originated in early twentieth-century splits among Woolley's councilmen and in later schisms. The largest sect of Mormon fundamentalists is the FLDS, whose original base was Short Creek, Arizona. The Apostolic United Brethren, also known as the Allred Group or simply "the Allreds," was established by Rulon Allred, in a splintering from the existing Short Creek sect. Other Mormon fundamentalist groups emerged through similar disagreements, leading to a rather diverse assortment of sects, all of which uphold shared religious beliefs in the revelations of Joseph Smith—including the doctrine of religious polygamy—and each having unique cultural distinctions and histories that separate them.

The 1930s and its Great Depression saw the establishment of the Kingston group, which today is the focus of *Escaping Polygamy*. The sect is also known as "the Kingstons," the Kingston Clan, the Kingston group, and the Order. Charles Elden Kingston (1909–1948)—better known as

Elden Kingston—led the formation of the new group after his father, Charles W. Kingston, parted ways with Short Creek leader John Y. Barlow, one of Woolley’s original council.<sup>16</sup> Elden Kingston led the new movement under the name of the Davis County Cooperative Society (DCCS). Elden Kingston’s movement united families who believed in the principle of plural marriage and others who were not affiliated with Mormonism and brought the families economic benefits through their “coming together in the form of a cooperative and working for a common goal.”<sup>17</sup> The organization’s goals included sustainability and economic success and also protection for its polygamist members, whose religious practice was illegal. Although the DCCS was more overtly an economic, political, and social organization, Elden’s nephew John Ortell Kingston (1919–1987) assumed leadership of the group upon Elden’s passing in 1948 and introduced a religious branch as an affiliate of DCCS. Ortell Kingston’s church was The Latter-Day Church of Christ and is now recognized as another Mormon fundamentalist sect.<sup>18</sup> The sect is currently headed by Ortell Kingston’s son, Paul Kingston, whose brother, Daniel Kingston, is the biological father of *Escaping Polygamy*’s three heroine characters.

The Kingston Clan, and specifically its patriarchs, have been accused of several violations of moral values, the alleged violations being consistent with the accusations against other Mormon fundamentalist sects or Mormon polygamy at large. The accusations include child abuse, harm toward women, forced underage marriages, and incest. The Kingston group’s practice of consanguineous marriages, which include marriages between first cousins and are criminalized in Utah, has contributed to the group being ripe for sensationalist dramatization on television.<sup>19</sup>

With respect to popular concerns about the well-being of women and children in religious polygamy, anthropologist Janet Bennion identifies key variables for harm, which sometimes coexist with polygamy but are not synonymous with polygamy. Bennion’s key variables include illegality, isolation, inequality in relationships, male supremacy, lack of female networking, economic deprivation, and abuse. Bennion argues that these characteristics sometimes occur in religious polygamist communities, but that the characteristics are separate from polygamy and that polygamy can and does exist without them in what she terms “well-functioning polygamy.”<sup>20</sup> Bennion adds that child abuse, forcefully arranged marriages, and sexual abuses including incest have occurred in religious polygamist societies, but the same and other abuses have occurred in non-polygamist religious societies.<sup>21</sup>

Bennion and other researchers have emphasized the diversity of groups in the Mormon fundamentalist movement and have identified important distinctions among the many sects.<sup>22</sup> The sects vary in their dress styles, their education norms for children and youth, and their marriage customs. These differences are rarely understood by popular

audiences. As a profitable enterprise, *Escaping Polygamy* benefits from lacking audience knowledge. The show depicts young people running from oppressive religious households. With every episode focusing on the story of a young person leaving a group, the distinctions between groups are lost. Mormon fundamentalism is reduced to universal “religious polygamy,” and the show reinforces the existing social premise that religious polygamy is harmful to women and children.

### **COMPETING PORTRAYALS OF MORAL VALUES ON TODAY'S POLYGAMY-RELATED REALITY TELEVISION PROGRAMMING**

Despite the moral panic that has informed the popular discourse of Mormon polygamy, the confluence of a unique, innovative television producer, the existing organization of public Mormon fundamentalist advocates (some of whom being particularly photogenic), and a television network ready to try something new ushered in an era of polygamy reality shows. Preceded by HBO's favorable representation of a modern polygamist family in its fictional drama series *Big Love* (2006–2011), TLC introduced a favorable approach toward representing polygamists on reality television and, with the addition of other shows, became the leading network for polygamy reality TV. Competing network, A&E Networks, which is the parent company to Lifetime, joined in the available market for polygamy reality TV, but, instead of taking TLC's favorable approach, relied on the moral panic impulse reminiscent of other anti-polygamy media to attract and retain viewers. In this section, I summarize the current polygamy-related reality television programming, which consists of TLC's shows and A&E Networks' *Escaping Polygamy*. With the exception of the very short-lived *Escaping the Prophet* (2014), TLC's shows have been overwhelmingly positive representations of polygamous families, emphasizing the life stories of polygamists from their points of view and highlighting their balanced family values. *Escaping Polygamy* is the exact opposite; this show focuses its attention on three women who left the Kingston group as youth or young adults and on other young women who are in the process of leaving polygamist sects. TLC shows and A&E Networks' *Escaping Polygamy* are framed to evoke opposite reactions in viewers, sympathy with an alternative population in the former and moral outrage in the latter.

#### **TLC Shows**

The first of the polygamy reality shows was *Sister Wives*. *Sister Wives* debuted in 2010 and has become one of TLC's strongest series. The



show follows Kody Brown and his four spiritual wives. The Browns are a Mormon fundamentalist family whose image challenges many common stereotypes about the religious group. The series depicts the Browns dealing with typical American middle-class family challenges in addition to a few plural-family-specific ones. To the former, the Browns adjust to their older children leaving home for college; struggle to finance a large, growing family including six children born and adopted during the show's lifetime; and navigate around American society's anti-polygamy stigma as Kody seeks to adopt his stepchildren. To the latter, the wives discuss the effects of changes in one relationship on other relationships in the family; these relationships include those between each wife and Kody as well as those between the sister-wives. Although television producers control the final content, the *Sister Wives* show has given a family of Mormon fundamentalists partial control over their image on national television.<sup>23</sup>

The success of *Sister Wives* was a factor in TLC trying additional new shows about polygamy. In the years since the *Sister Wives*' premiere, TLC has launched several additional polygamy-centered reality television programs. These have included a one-hour special about Joe Darger and his three wives, who were at the time rumored to be getting their own show; a two-season series about the Brady Williams family, *My Five Wives*; and the 2017–2018 additions *Three Wives*, *One Husband* and *Seeking Sister Wife*.

Like *Sister Wives*, *My Five Wives* represented a modern polygamist family who valued their consensual plural relationships and dealt with discrimination. The Brady Williams family advocated progressive social views, approaching topics of homophobia, sexism, and racism on the show. Unlike *Sister Wives*, the Brady Williams family have been critical of the Allred Group, the sect of Mormon fundamentalism both families came from. As young men, Brady Williams and Kody Brown had been peers in the sect. In sum, *My Five Wives* upheld *Sister Wives*' polygamy-friendly view but cast aspersions toward the religious sect of their combined origin, the Allred Group. For audiences, *My Five Wives* offered a view that affirmed polygamy as a viable alternative to monogamous marriage while continuing to feed dislike for religions popularly perceived as cults. *My Five Wives* ran for two seasons until cancellation.

TLC debuted *Three Wives*, *One Husband* and *Seeking Sister Wife* in March 2017 and January 2018, respectively. *Three Wives*, *One Husband* follows two families in the Mormon fundamentalist Rockland Ranch community in eastern Utah. *Seeking Sister Wife* shows two Mormon polygamist families, one of whom just added a third wife and the other looking for a third wife, and one African-American polygamist couple looking for a sister-wife.

All of the shows include Mormon polygamists. *Seeking Sister Wife* is the only of these shows that has included polygamists beyond Mormon

fundamentalism, as it includes, in addition to two Mormon polygamist families, one African-American polygamist family who have not disclosed a religious identity. TLC's second polygamy series, *My Five Wives*, was unique because this show focused on a polygamist family who had disaffiliated from a Mormon fundamentalist sect.

### **A&E Networks' *Escaping Polygamy***

In contrast, *Escaping Polygamy* revolves around three women in their twenties who left the Kingston group about a decade prior and their current quest to rescue other women from Mormon polygamist groups.<sup>24</sup> The women, Jessica, Andrea, and Shanell, are daughters of Daniel Kingston. Jessica and Andrea are from the same mother and Shanell is their half-sister. The show depicts its heroines assisting teens and young women leaving the Kingston group, the Allred Group, and the FLDS. A reality TV exposé of women's suppression in Mormon polygamist groups and their strenuous departures from these groups, *Escaping Polygamy* appears to be the anti-polygamy reality television show response to *Sister Wives* and other polygamy-friendly shows.

The characters describe their backgrounds in the Kingston group as defined by physical and emotional abuse and strict religious indoctrination. Jessica and Andrea allude to physical and emotional abuse in their upbringing. At the age of eighteen, Shanell married a cousin who became verbally and physically abusive.<sup>25</sup> Although Shanell describes that she never reached the point of having sister-wives, she classifies her husband's regular and persistent threats of adding wives as part of the abuse she endured. The show frames these characters as heroines and advocates for women and children being abused in polygamist groups. As of the first season, Jessica (25) was pursuing a master's degree in social work, and Andrea (23) was attending law school to become an advocate for children.<sup>26</sup>

The show continues the conflation of all religious polygamist groups as if they are a single homogenous culture and ensures that the worst aspects, which may be real or imagined, appear representative of polygamist culture in general. By focusing on the stories of ex-members and of young adults allegedly struggling to leave, the show feeds the ongoing moral panic.<sup>27</sup> Jessica, Andrea, and Shanell's backgrounds in the foster system and with adoptive parents are substantiated with official documents and news reports. Yet, the show relies on a few extreme events to exaggerate new plotlines. The show echoes the accusations of moral values violations that have historically informed public opinion about Mormon polygamy. *Escaping Polygamy* is successful as entertainment for its target audience on account of its atrocity tale nature. As an atrocity tale, *Escaping Polygamy* relies on existing audience fears around secretive,

polygamist groups; cases of abuse within the Kingston group, which might be representative or isolated; and lacking public awareness about the diversity of Mormon fundamentalists.

### **ATROCITY TELLINGS: FALSIFICATIONS AND MANIPULATIONS ON *ESCAPING POLYGAMY***

*Escaping Polygamy's* producers develop a television storyline that depicts religious polygamous culture as oppressive toward women and children, and rely on ex-members with traumatic personal histories to propel this storyline forward. *Escaping Polygamy* actors and RIVR Media exaggerate and re-spin events to further the viewer's assumed bias against polygamy. The show uses music and melodrama to represent young adults' departures from polygamist sects as terrifying and risky. The show's producers use television techniques, such as overly dramatic language and sound effects, to guide the viewers into perceiving the Kingston group and other polygamist groups as much more sinister than the show's own data actually communicates. While some of the stories on the show might be told accurately or with partial accuracy, dialogue on the show frequently contradicts what is actually caught on film in the scenes that depict practicing polygamists and polygamist culture. In these cases, the dialogue, which emphasizes the Kingston group and other polygamist groups as malevolent, masks the neutrality or even benevolence of the cultural artifacts and events being filmed. The pilot and the series at large work to elicit in viewers' moral outrage toward religious polygamist groups, sympathy for and valorization of the show's three heroes, and perhaps also pity or anger toward women like Shanell's mother, Shirley, who choose to stay in polygamy. The emotionally provocative tropes inherent in *Escaping Polygamy's* storylines make for a tale about atrocities and the heroes who survive them. In marketing, the show's producers present *Escaping Polygamy* as a series about true stories. In actuality, the show is a product of the entertainment industry; the producers make use of audience fears of polygamist sects for a successful television show.

The show's producers select terms that are likely to incite moral panic in viewers. Many of the terminological usages are falsifications, exaggerations, or rhetorical choices. As an example of a rhetorical choice, the show's characters inform the viewers that men high up in the Kingstons' religious hierarchy are known as "Numbered Men" and that Daniel has fourteen wives and almost two hundred children.<sup>28</sup> Because patriarchy and such extreme cases of polygamy are predetermined as immoral, the details can then be used to easily convince the audience of other claims about polygamist societies. As an example of a falsification, each character who has left a polygamist group is

introduced with the caption, “Escaped [X] years ago,” regardless of the group each departed from and the details of her or his leaving. As the episodes continue, the stories told reveal that many of these very cast members left the religious sects on their own and without forceful resistance. The label “escaped” is therefore quite the exaggeration, which works to elicit the moral outrage characteristic of atrocity tales.

Another rhetorical choice is found in the show’s references to consanguineous marriages in the Kingston group and the suggestion that these are characteristic of religious polygamy. “Consanguinity,” as mentioned earlier, refers to marriages between genetic relatives. Despite consanguineous marriages being taboo and, depending on the state and the degree of relation, sometimes illegal in the United States, they are accepted and even considered ideal in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.<sup>29</sup> “Incest” has been defined as “sexual intercourse between persons so closely related that they are forbidden by law to marry.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, marriages between cousins are always consanguineous but are only incestuous if local law determines that they are. Utah and Arizona, states with historic Mormon polygamist populations, have outlawed marriages between first cousins, whereas some other states, Colorado and Minnesota for instance, do not prohibit marriage between first cousins.<sup>31</sup>

According to the show’s characters, the Kingston family claims a divine bloodline that they trace to Christ, and the Kingston elders teach that their divine marriages are immune from incest-related genetic issues.<sup>32</sup> The detail of this alleged teaching is especially horrifying for the audience, as it suggests religious corruption and harm to children. While the show’s use of the term “incest” is not inaccurate for Kingston cousin marriages on account of Utah’s law, the term “consanguinity” might more accurately describe the Kingston Group’s cultural practice, as in comparison with other global cultures where consanguineous marriages are normative. In a study of the factors that influence cultures’ allowances of cousin marriage, psychologists Ashley D. Hoben, Abraham P. Buunk, and Maryanne L. Fisher identified consanguinity’s possible benefits as longevity and success of cousin marriage and the preservation of wealth within a family.<sup>33</sup> These benefits being in spite of the possibility of genetic birth defects, Hoben, Buunk, and Fisher concluded that societies weigh a variety of factors in their determination to permit or prohibit consanguinity. The DCCS has attributed consanguineous marriages among its members to endogamous preference and the small size of the group’s population, reasons that are consistent with the many factors Hoben, Buunk, and Fisher cited.<sup>34</sup> Despite the cultural relativism in the determination of cousin marriage, the American social consensus on the non-permissiveness of cousin marriage rules out the possibility of *Escaping Polygamy* viewers looking beyond consanguineous marriages as they determine the moral value of the Kingstons’ culture.

Continuing to establish viewer bias, *Escaping Polygamy* references a historic child abuse conviction in the Daniel Kingston family. In 1998, Daniel was accused of beating his sixteen-year-old daughter Mary Ann after she resisted marrying his brother David Kingston. Daniel pleaded no contest to the assault charge and served twenty-eight weeks in county jail.<sup>35</sup> The uncle to whom Mary Ann was allegedly promised for marriage, David Kingston, was “convicted of incest and unlawful sexual conduct with a minor.”<sup>36</sup> He was released early after four years in state prison.<sup>37</sup>

As a result of there being known, high-profile atrocities including this case and the crimes by Warren Jeffs and Tom Green, media consumers are quite prepared to accept both similar accusations about other Mormon polygamist groups and other accusations against the Kingston Clan. Lori G. Beaman wrote about the related context of polygamy-related trials in British Columbia, whereby the court was shown “videotapes of ex-polygamist women who recounted the horror stories of their experiences” that led to there being “no space for doubt that polygamy was inherently harmful.”<sup>38</sup> *Escaping Polygamy* presents individual instances as supporting evidence for all sorts of accusations, including the accusation that the Kingstons’ religion is defined by abuse and that all religious polygamy shares the same abusive behavior. The show relies on moral panic as a motivating factor in viewership and thenceforth its economic success.

As with the news reports relating to Mary Ann Kingston described above, a news trail exists for Jessica and Andrea from a decade prior to the *Escaping Polygamy* show; only scrutinous viewing of the show reveals that the show’s “evidence” contradicts its character’s script. In 2004, Jessica and her younger sister Andrea were removed from their parents as a result of abuse accusations.<sup>39</sup> On the show, Jessica claims that at the age of fourteen she was being groomed to be her 42-year-old uncle’s third wife and cites this as the reason for running away.<sup>40</sup> As she narrates her personal story, a *Salt Lake Tribune* article is flashed before the audience—quickly and zoomed out so that the viewers see only the headline, “Kingston runaway placed with aunt.” The audience would reasonably presume that this article supports the story Jessica is sharing. However, the content of this article does not corroborate Jessica’s story of being groomed for an incestuous marriage. The *Salt Lake Tribune* article, which is still available online, reported that “the oldest girl [Jessica] ran away and reported she feared Kingston would beat [her and Andrea after they had their ears pierced (which was against the Order’s standards)].” According to Jessica, the police told her she was being “a defiant child” and sent her back home.<sup>41</sup> A few days later, her aunt (who had previously left the sect) arrived at the Daniel Kingston family home with a restraining order and removed Jessica and Andrea from their parents’ home.<sup>42</sup> The article discussed Andrea’s testimony of physical abuse but

did not mention any potential or intended marriage for Jessica. The omission in itself does not confirm that Jessica's story is false. But, the show's version of Jessica's story is suspiciously similar to Mary Ann's story and, as it upholds the show's premise, may be a fabrication of the show.

An example of the cinematic melodrama occurs when Jessica and Andrea introduce the Kingston group's religious principles. The sect's charter of religious principles, which is known in the group as the Gospel Rules or the Order's "ABCs," is shown on screen so rapidly that viewers inevitably take the characters at their word without reading or hearing the Order's complete religious doctrine. In actuality, the Order's "ABCs" (which, indeed, I needed to pause the screen in order to read) are comprised of: universal religious virtues and ethics, one use of extreme language to express a common religious principle, emphasis on the Order and the religious quest, and modesty and chastity similar to Islamic and Christian evangelical values.<sup>43</sup>

With background music (drawn-out melodramatic chords and crashes) and condemning style of dialogue, the show intends to present the mission of the Kingston group as a sinister one. Accompanied by an engineered crashing sound, the show uses all capital letters for the caption, "THEY HAVE LEGAL MARRIAGES, BUT ONLY WITH THEIR FIRST WIFE," which merely indicates that the members of the Kingston group practice cohabitation as opposed to procuring multiple marriage licenses. The three women introduce themselves: "My birth father is John Daniel Kingston" (Andrea); "My father is John Daniel Kingston" (Jessica); "My biological father is Daniel Kingston" (Shanell).<sup>44</sup> As they utter these words, a guitar riff plays, one that recurs throughout the show during these supposedly condemning narrative moments. Again, the effect elucidated on the television show is much more ominous than the actual dialogue, which literally conveys that they are daughters of the same father.

The series' pilot episode allegedly depicts the trio helping Leah escape the Allred Group. Jessica and Shanell meet Leah outside the Allred church. Leah says she needs to hurry because church is letting out soon; she does not want anyone to catch her escaping. Leah, with darkly painted fingernails and wearing a long-sleeved, black sweater atop a scarlet red V-neck and low-cut undershirt, a light knee-length patterned skirt, and casual dress flats, jogs around a bend and up an incline (all on a paved sidewalk surrounded by dirt hills) to meet Jessica and Shanell. There is no one following Leah shown on film. The women climb into the SUV and drive off away from the Allred church. Ominous music is added in production to dramatize the departure. Midway through the episode, the cast is involved in Leah's makeover shopping excursion, which is a regular component of the episodes as the girls transition to their lives outside the sects. In this scene, Leah says that women in the Allred Group are expected to wear long-sleeved shirts to their wrists and

long pants to their ankles, which is in direct contradiction with Leah's own initial appearance.<sup>45</sup> This contradiction is part of the show's pattern of fabrications that bias the viewers against the groups.

In the final quarter of the pilot, we meet Amanda (17) and fiancé Erik (21), who left the Kingston group together and are planning their wedding.<sup>46</sup> The couple met at Kingston social events and wanted to date, but Amanda's father had another man (a cousin of hers) in mind for Amanda to marry. Amanda reveals that her father was unhappy with her decision, but the show does not suggest that any force was used to keep Amanda and Erik in the group.

The show has dramatized, in its dialogue, the sense that women are trapped in these communities, whereas Amanda left on her own and chose her husband. Amanda expresses a fear that her father will show up at her and Erik's wedding. She claims she does not know what to expect from her father in this situation. She does not name any specific behaviors, but her fearful tone suggests that he might do something to get in the way of her marrying Erik. When the father does show up, uninvited, his actions do not support the image of the fundamentalist community the core cast members of *Escaping Polygamy* have taken pains to depict. Specifically, the father waits in line with other guests to be greeted by the couple, hugs his daughter Amanda while she has tears in her eyes, apologizes to Erik for his previous behavior, and congratulates Erik on the marriage.<sup>47</sup> Shanell, to whom Amanda's father was formerly a father-in-law, had expressed her own fear of seeing him and being reminded of past traumas. Again, his actions are unlike those that have been foreshadowed in the television drama. During the reception, Shanell confronts the ex-father-in-law for permitting his son's abuse during their marriage. The former father-in-law acknowledges the role he played, "I know I could have done a lot better. I know I could have done a lot better," and takes his leave.<sup>48</sup> The core cast members repeat script tropes that polygamist communities are universally harmful for women, keeping them trapped, while the fundamentalist community members filmed do not uphold this image in their actions.

Another suspicious representation occurs in the second episode when Shanell and Jessica help eighteen-year-old Melanie escape a Kingston family home. The alleged rescuers arrive to receive Melanie from her suburban home on a fully paved residential street. Shanell, Jessica, and Melanie's friend Cody walk into the home, uninvited. As they enter, a dispute ensues. This dispute consists of family members shouting, "You cannot kidnap her," and the *Escaping Polygamy* cast members responding, "We're not taking her," "She wants to go," and so on. A police officer arrives, and, with very little apparent intervention, Melanie walks out of the house. Melanie's family members (presumably her siblings) hug her goodbye before she boards the vehicle. In this episode and others, there is added dramatization from the

young women about the resistance they will encounter as they supposedly rescue women from polygamist groups.

Further support for my suspicion about this particular story came when Melanie's mother (Susan Nelson) initiated a lawsuit against RIVR Media (the production company) and A&E Networks.<sup>49</sup> Nelson's charges were trespassing, intentional infliction of emotional distress, intrusion upon seclusion (i.e., intrusion in private affairs), and defamation. As for defamation, Nelson reported in her civil complaint:

DeRieux, Christensen, and RIVR Media falsely represented that Susan's home was unfinished, alluding to a dilapidated home shown earlier in an episode of "[E]scaping Polygamy." . . . DeRieux, Christensen, and RIVR Media falsely represented that the (sic) Susan's home smelled like rotten vegetables, alluding to earlier statements that polygamists cannot afford food and therefore eat rotten vegetables.<sup>50</sup>

Nelson's complaint is similar to my other criticisms of the show: the dialogue belies what is actually shown. As for intrusion, Nelson accused the producers of offering her daughter \$5,000 to leave her home. Nelson alleged that, "RIVR Media wanted Melanie to appear on 'Escaping Polygamy' as an individual who has been convinced to leave her home."<sup>51</sup> Nelson continued:

On December 13, 2014 Melanie informed her mother Susan that although she did not want to move out, Melanie had already committed to RIVR Media that she would move in with some friends so she could participate in the television filming. Melanie disclosed to Susan that RIVR Media was pressuring her to move out of her home.<sup>52</sup>

Nelson's report included that she and other family members were about to "discuss alternative living arrangements with Melanie, such as an apartment for Melanie that Susan and her family [would] pay for," when RIVR Media arrived to film.<sup>53</sup> From the perspective of this claim, *Escaping Polygamy's* television producers have been baiting young adults to uphold the show's story that young women are trapped in polygamous societies. The lawsuit did not proceed, however, because Nelson never served the defendants.<sup>54</sup> After ninety days, the court clerk was directed to close the case as according to civil procedure.<sup>55</sup> Unlike the other episodes, "Melanie" is no longer available on A&E On Demand or Amazon Video. A&E Networks and RIVR Media have likely pulled the episode to avoid further charges or prosecution. The particular responses from Melanie's family that were documented on film—gracious affection and concern—are in direct contradiction with the claims *Escaping Polygamy* makes. Yet, the show's producers rely on audiences' existing bias against polygamy and groups perceived as cults to carry the show despite ineffective examples.



A running story throughout season one of *Escaping Polygamy* is the supposed plight of Shanell's mother Shirley. Shanell feels strongly that Shirley should leave the group, while Shirley has mixed feelings. When asked why she might want to leave, Shirley names the condition of her home life; she is shown to live in poverty. The complaints that Shirley herself raises have to do with the basic functionality of her home, for example, a water leak causing damage to the kitchen floor.<sup>56</sup> The show's dialogue suggests that because Shirley is less submissive and more outspoken than the other wives, her husband is less attentive to her.<sup>57</sup> She does not name physical or verbal abuse. If there is abuse in her marriage, it appears in the form of neglect. Shirley, on occasion, discusses wanting to leave, but, more frequently, it is Shanell who encourages Shirley to leave. The footage provided on the show suggests that this could be a textbook case of a person in an abusive cycle who remains with her abuser, or an instance of the television show producers forcing a certain interpretation of Shirley's situation without regard to Shirley's own understanding of or wishes for her life. The most salient example suggesting the latter is when Shirley's daughters, Shanell and Kollene, attempt to have her apartment condemned as a means of forcing her out against her wishes. Their attempt was not successful, representing a lost battle in the war against polygamy.

In addition to sensationalizing the marriage practices and other traditions of the Kingston group, the show furthers the conflation of Mormon fundamentalists as a single group, an inaccuracy that polygamist advocates have striven to correct.<sup>58</sup> Since the diversity of Mormon fundamentalisms would challenge the show's fabric, the show's performers and producers omit mention, except on rare occasions, of the significant differences between the various Mormon fundamentalist groups. The Allred Group, for example, encourages adults to wait until the age of eighteen before marrying, does not practice arranged marriages, and prohibits consanguinity.<sup>59</sup> In Centennial Park, women choose their husbands, or, at the least, take the first step before being courted for marriage.<sup>60</sup> Occasionally cast members address that there are differences between the groups, such as in the season two episode, "Fighting for Freedom," when Andrea identifies FLDS as the only group in which women wear prairie dresses. Moments such as this are the rare traces in the show of the actually complex landscape of Mormon fundamentalist cultures that is not unlike other religious traditions in its diversity of political identity, behavior, and observance. For the most part, *Escaping Polygamy* belies these differences, painting polygamy as irrespectively and, simply, bad for women and children.

The most suspicion-raising event of the series is when the three women begin receiving anonymous packages sent from within the Kingston group. Notes are unsigned, and typed, so as to mask the identity of the sender. Packages include, at first, cell phones with videos of

Kingston church sessions, and then photos that could supposedly incriminate the Kingston group. What is suspicious about this scenario is that a person claiming to be responsible for these packages appears masked, wearing a dark “hoodie” sweatshirt, and is interviewed by the camera crew for the show.<sup>61</sup> A person who is as fearful of the Kingston group as is suggested by the anonymous packages to the three women is unlikely to out herself to a popular television show’s staff, especially if she shares other members’ fear of authorities and journalists.

I find it particularly interesting that the show includes commentary on males disaffected from the groups in addition to the female characters it shows as vulnerable; however, the show again contradicts itself. The show depicts the story of Ethan but alternates between identifying him as a lost boy and as a runaway.<sup>62</sup> Alleged lost boys are young men expelled from polygamist communities because of competition for brides. Researcher Ken Driggs reports that he has “never observed such a thing and [does] not accept that adolescent males are cast out by older patriarchs in order to free up young girls for plural families.”<sup>63</sup> But, Janet Bennion is less convinced. She writes, “Although I have no evidence, I assume that many [post-Ortell, non-Kingston-blood] rogue males were ostracized through the same vehicle of alienation and excommunication that FLDS prophet Warren Jeffs used.”<sup>64</sup> In the show, the viewer sees Ethan in a troubled state of addiction, recovering in a rehabilitation center, and unfortunately relapsing in season two.<sup>65</sup> The sequence seems to document the important social issue of runaways’ vulnerability to drug abuse and addiction, but the producers frame it as a negative reflection of religious polygamist culture.<sup>66</sup>

## **PERSPECTIVES FROM INFORMANTS**

In addition to my content analysis of the show, I have been informed by my field research involving Mormon fundamentalist groups. Discussion with informants attending Sunstone Foundation’s 2017 Short Creek symposium corroborated my suspicion of sensationalism and deception on the show. Members of Mormon fundamentalist groups, researchers, and socially liberal LDS Mormons gathered in Hildale, Utah, at the inaugural Sunstone Short Creek symposium. Orchestrated by Sunstone’s current Executive Director, Lindsay Hansen Park, an LDS Mormon who works to heal the rift between LDS Mormons and Mormon fundamentalists, the symposium hosted talks on the histories and equality-seeking political movements of the various Mormon fundamentalist sects as well as a panel of Mormon fundamentalists including members of the Kingston sect. I spoke directly with Daniel Kingston; one other active member of the Kingston group; and Christine Marie Katas, a human trafficking victim

advocate who was depicted on *Escaping Polygamy* providing support for a young woman named Priscilla who was separating from the Kingston group.

The two Kingston group members and Katas shared their insights about the show's lack of ethics. These informants agreed that the show falsifies events and misrepresents Mormon fundamentalist cultures, which affects the minority religious populations. They also suggested that the show's producers take advantage of vulnerable young adults, encouraging them or even bribing them to leave their families and religious groups. These perspectives agreed with the sentiment expressed in Susan Nelson's civil complaint against the television producers discussed above in which Nelson summarized, "The premise of 'Escaping Polygamy' involves [Shanell] DeRieux and [Jessica] Christensen convincing individuals from polygamist families to run away from their homes."<sup>67</sup>

According to Katas, the major ethical issue with the show is that its producers have done little to nothing to support the young women it depicts leaving groups after the women "put their lives on the line and damaged personal relationships" by being filmed for the show.<sup>68</sup> According to Katas, the producers pay characters shown leaving polygamist groups \$5,000 per episode. Katas conveyed that this amount is a start for young adults who wish to begin new lives outside of polygamist groups, but RIVR Media and A&E Networks failed to put into place any support system for the young women in the aftermath.<sup>69</sup> Katas continued that the producers and cast members lack training or qualification to support adults and teenagers in the particular situations that constitute the show's plotlines.

In an effort to check Katas's claims, I searched RIVR Media's and A&E Networks' *Escaping Polygamy* webpages. I found that support resources are subsidiary to the company's casting call, which reads: "**Do you want to escape polygamy?** If you want to escape polygamy and you want your story documented, you may reach us [by phone or email]."<sup>70</sup> Beyond the casting call, the webpage's listed resources are weblinks to Holding Out Help, Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN).<sup>71</sup> Aside from these weblinks to well-known organizations, I found no other evidence of support from RIVR Media or A&E Networks for the young people.

In addition to this critique, Katas offered corrections to *Escaping Polygamy*'s representations. In response to every former member of a polygamist group receiving the label of "escaped" on the show, Katas stated that, whereas "escaped" may be an accurate term for some of the characters, others simply left. She explained, "If someone wants to leave, they just leave. . . . They don't have to crawl out of a window in the middle of the night."<sup>72</sup> Katas's mention was in direct reference to a specific episode of the show and matched an independent comment made to

me by Daniel Kingston. In this episode, as a girl was preparing to leave her home, she was shown having a conversation with her grandmother. According to Daniel Kingston, the grandmother told the girl, if she wanted to leave, she could go out the front door, and the girl responded in a hushed voice on account of the cameras, “Grandma, they won’t give me the money if I don’t go out the window.”<sup>73</sup> These two independent references from informants for the same event suggest that the television producers intentionally misrepresent the nature of the Kingston group and, by extension, other polygamist groups, making them appear especially atrocious for the television audience.

In addition to this example, Daniel commented on a contradiction regarding the show’s claim to help a middle-aged mother, Kathy, evacuate a home in the Kingston group. According to Daniel, Kathy had separated from her husband on her own prior to the show, making this “escape” a fiction of the show. Furthermore, Daniel claimed that, later in the series when the cast claimed to help a girl move away from the Kingston group, the house they used as a set for her relocation is the very same Kingston home they previously claimed to move Kathy out of.<sup>74</sup> Aside from these contradictions, Daniel and Katas agreed that the show fictionalized the trajectory of women from the groups reaching out to the show’s heroines for assistance.<sup>75</sup> Whereas the show depicts women calling, texting, and emailing the heroines for help, Katas reported that, with the exception of the heroines’ direct relatives, single-episode guests were contacted and solicited directly by television producers. I presume that this was done in addition to producers’ consideration of any responses to the show’s aforementioned open casting call.

According to Kingston sect members and the presumably more neutral human trafficking victim advocate, *Escaping Polygamy*’s producers have falsified women’s statuses within the Kingston group, the ownership details of set properties, and characteristics of Mormon fundamentalist groups to accommodate the producers’ intended storyline about religious polygamist groups as atrocious and their women as in need of saving.

## CONCLUSION

Television networks and production companies mediate public opinion about polygamists through their casting and content decisions. The contrast between *Sister Wives* and *Escaping Polygamy* is an example of the striking difference when practicing Mormon fundamentalist families are included in their representation, since *Escaping Polygamy* prioritizes only the narratives of ex-members. The portrayals of polygamist religious groups are worlds apart across TLC and Lifetime/A&E Networks. The latter’s *Escaping Polygamy* simplifies the complex landscape of Mormon

fundamentalists and paints a falsely universal image for a popular audience that reaffirms existing stereotypes, whereas TLC's shows are friendly toward polygamist families.

Based on testimonies and court proceedings relating to the Mary Ann Kingston case, it is difficult to imagine that child abuse has never occurred within the Kingston family. *Escaping Polygamy* likely depicts some genuine problems in the Kingston group. The expected marriage of Amanda to her first cousin and the patriarch's neglect while his son physically abused Shanell are examples of these problems. But, there is a cost. My research has shown that the show's claims of heroines, villains, and victims are problematic for actual people's lives. Religious minorities are misrepresented, and, according to Katas's view, young adults are harmed in the making of this show.

*Escaping Polygamy's* brand, as a reality television series, depends on an image of authenticity, even when false. But, RIVR Media producers, professionally, are neither documenters nor journalists. *Escaping Polygamy's* perpetuation of biases against religious polygamy is a business strategy. As entertainment, *Escaping Polygamy* offers viewers an alternative to TLC's polygamy-friendly shows. *Escaping Polygamy* repeatedly heightens drama and fictionalizes instances to present a threatening image of Mormon fundamentalist communities, appealing to what Bivins termed "the erotics of fear."

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this article I do not discuss National Geographic Channel's *Polygamy USA*, which depicted favorably an Arizona-based Mormon fundamentalist group, Centennial Park. Despite some similarities, its documentary style is notably different from the interpersonal drama style of the TLC and Lifetime reality shows. I am grateful to Santa Clara University's legal reference librarian Tom Deguzman for assistance obtaining legal records for this article.

<sup>2</sup> Carole Cusack, "Both Outside and Inside: 'Ex-Members' of New Religions and Spiritualities and the Maintenance of Community and Identity on the Internet," in *The Insider/Outsider Debate: New Perspectives in the Study of Religion*, ed. George D. Chryssides and Stephen E. Gregg (United Kingdom: Equinox eBooks Publishing, 2019); Lynn Davidman and Arthur Greil, "Characters in Search of a Script: The Exit Narratives of Formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews," in *Sociology of Religion: A Reader*, eds. Susanne C. Monahan, William A. Mirola, and Michael O. Emerson, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2016), 24–35.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Jessop and Laura Palmer, *Escape* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007); Flora Jessop and Paul T. Brown, *Church of Lies* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> William Jankowiak, interview by author, Las Vegas, Nevada, 10 September 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Kody Brown, Meri Brown, Janelle Brown, Christine Brown, and Robyn Brown, *Becoming Sister Wives: The Story of an Unconventional Marriage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 227–28.

<sup>6</sup> David G. Bromley, Shupe, Anson D., and Ventimiglia, J.C., “Atrocity Tales, the Unification Church, and the Social Construction of Evil,” *Journal of Communication* 29, no. 3 (September 1979): 43.

<sup>7</sup> See Stuart A. Wright and James T. Richardson, eds., *Saints Under Siege: The Texas State Raid on the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); Stuart A. Wright and Susan J. Palmer, *Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Susan J. Palmer, “Frontiers and Families: The Children of Island Pond,” in *Children in New Religions*, ed. Susan J. Palmer and Charlotte E. Hardman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 153, 161; Michael W. Homer, “The Precarious Balance Between Freedom of Religion and the Best Interests of the Child,” in *Children in New Religions*, eds. Susan J. Palmer and Charlotte E. Hardman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 198.

<sup>8</sup> Jason C. Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), Chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> D. Michael Quinn, “Plural Marriage and Mormon Fundamentalism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 12.

<sup>11</sup> “Inside polygamy: secret lives,” *Larry King Live*, CNN, 18 April 2008, <https://youtu.be/ahx-9JGhxUg>, accessed 1 June 2018; *Dr. Drew*, [https://youtu.be/1B\\_Bj9\\_rVki](https://youtu.be/1B_Bj9_rVki), accessed 1 June 2018.

<sup>12</sup> See Gordon, *The Mormon Question*; Martha S. Bradley, *Kidnapped From That Land: The Government Raids on the Short Creek Polygamist* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993); W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Quinn, “Plural Marriage and Mormon Fundamentalism,” 10.

<sup>14</sup> Quinn, “Plural Marriage and Mormon Fundamentalism”; *The Primer: A Guidebook for Law Enforcement and Human Services Agencies Who Offer Assistance to Fundamentalist Mormon Families* (Taylorsville, UT: The Family Support Center, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> With the exception of the Kingston group, these population estimates are from the 2009 resource *The Primer*, 11–21. The Kingston group estimate is from Janet Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 39.

<sup>16</sup> Irwin Altman and Joseph Ginat, *Polygamous Families in Contemporary Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56; Hans A. Baer, *Recreating Utopia in the Desert: A Sectarian Challenge to Modern Mormonism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 36, 66; Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 39, 309n15.

<sup>17</sup> *The Primer*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 39, 215; Benjamin Shaffer, Gabriel Owen, Mary Ashton, Ruth Williams, and Laura Fuller, “Our Church: The Beliefs and

Culture of Different Mormon Groups” (panel at Sunstone Short Creek, Hildale, Utah, 20 April 2017).

<sup>19</sup> See Bennion, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Janet Bennion, “The Variable Impact of Mormon Polygyny on Women and Children,” in *The Polygamy Question*, eds. Janet Bennion and Lisa Fishbayn Joffe (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 62–84.

<sup>21</sup> Bennion.

<sup>22</sup> See Bennion; Quinn, “Plural Marriage and Mormon Fundamentalism”; Altman and Ginat, *Polygamous Families in Contemporary Society*.

<sup>23</sup> Anne Wilde, “Fundamentalist Mormons in the Twenty-First Century” (Sunstone Short Creek, Hildale, Utah, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> *Escaping Polygamy* debuted for one season of seven episodes on Lifetime Movie Network (LMN) in 2014–2015. For undisclosed reasons, the show went on hiatus for a full year, but it returned for a second season in July 2016 on A&E.

<sup>25</sup> “Leah; Hannah,” *Escaping Polygamy*, aired 30 December 2014, on Lifetime.

<sup>26</sup> “Leah; Hannah.”

<sup>27</sup> Craig L. Foster raised related concerns about Jon Krakauer’s book, *Under the Banner of Heaven*, upon its release. Foster accused Krakauer of “mix[ing] events and teachings in Latter-day Saint history in an attempt to portray . . . fringe elements as murderous and libidinous offspring of a religion steeped in its own history of violence and quirkiness” and of using “highly charged, inflammatory, and prejudicial language [for shock value and the reinforcement of] negative stereotypes.” Craig L. Foster, “Doing Violence to Journalistic Integrity,” *The FARMS Review* 16, no. 1 (1 January 2004): 150, 167.

<sup>28</sup> “Kathy,” *Escaping Polygamy*, Season 1, Episode 2, aired 21 July 2015, on Lifetime. See also Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 41.

<sup>29</sup> Ashley D. Hoben, Abraham P. Buunk, and Maryanne L. Fisher, “Factors Influencing the Allowance of Cousin Marriages in the Standard Cross Cultural Sample,” *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* 10, no. 2 (2016): 98–99.

<sup>30</sup> “Incest,” in *Merriam-Webster’s Medical Dictionary*, edited by Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> American Prosecutors Research Institute, “State Criminal Incest Statutes” (National District Attorneys Association), 2, accessed 16 July 2018, [https://www.ndaa.org/pdf/criminal\\_incest%20chart%20\\_2010.pdf](https://www.ndaa.org/pdf/criminal_incest%20chart%20_2010.pdf); Arizona State Legislature, “25–101. Void and Prohibited Marriages,” accessed 17 July 2018, <https://www.azleg.gov/ars/25/00101.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> “Leah; Hannah”; “Rachel,” *Escaping Polygamy*, Season 1, Episode 3, aired 28 July 2015, on Lifetime. See also Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 40, 42, 215.

<sup>33</sup> Hoben, Buunk, and Fisher, “Factors Influencing the Allowance of Cousin Marriages in the Standard Cross Cultural Sample.”

<sup>34</sup> *The Primer*, 16; Hoben, Buunk, and Fisher, “Factors Influencing the Allowance of Cousin Marriages in the Standard Cross Cultural Sample.”

<sup>35</sup> Cala Byram, “Polygamist Arrested in Daughter’s Beating,” *DeseretNews.com*, 3 June 1998, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/633764/Polygamist-arrested-in-daughters-beating.html>, accessed 22 June 2017; Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 42, 279; “Rachel”; Jennifer Dobner, “Polygamist Kingston Walks out of Prison

a Free Man,” DeseretNews.com, 11 June 2003, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/989281/Polygamist-Kingston-walks-out-of-prison-a-free-man.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Dobner, “Polygamist Kingston Walks out of Prison a Free Man.” See also “Melanie.”

<sup>37</sup> Dobner. See also “Melanie.”

<sup>38</sup> Lori G. Beaman, “Opposing Polygamy: A Matter of Equality or Patriarchy?,” in *The Polygamy Question*, eds. Janet Bennion and Lisa Fishbayn Joffe (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 43.

<sup>39</sup> Jacob Santini, “Kingston Runaway Placed with Aunt,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 27 July 2004, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=2383549&citytype=NGPSID>, accessed 26 June 2017; “Leah; Hannah.”

<sup>40</sup> “Leah; Hannah.”

<sup>41</sup> “Leah; Hannah.”

<sup>42</sup> “Leah; Hannah.” See also Santini, “Kingston Runaway Placed with Aunt.”

<sup>43</sup> For more on the Kingston group’s Gospel Principles, see Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 39, 41.

<sup>44</sup> I refer to John Daniel Kingston as “Daniel” or “Daniel Kingston,” as he is commonly known, throughout in this article.

<sup>45</sup> “Leah; Hannah.”

<sup>46</sup> “Leah; Hannah.”

<sup>47</sup> “Leah; Hannah.”

<sup>48</sup> “Leah; Hannah.”

<sup>49</sup> I presented my original analysis of the “Melanie” episode at the Sixth International Conference of the Center for Media, Religion and Culture (University of Colorado at Boulder, January 2016) prior to hearing news breaking about Susan Nelson’s lawsuit. See Esther Lee, “Mom Sues ‘Escaping Polygamy’ Producers for Trespassing, Pressuring Daughter to Join Show,” *Us Weekly*, 28 March 2106, <http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/escaping-polygamy-producers-sued-for-trespassing-w200412>, accessed 3 August 2016. Bennion identified Susan Nelson as a plural wife of Daniel’s and the mother of Mary Ann Kingston. See Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 215.

<sup>50</sup> Susan Nelson, Complaint filed by Susan Nelson, Case 2:16-cv-00228-DN, Document 2, United States District Court of Utah, Central Division, 21 March 2016: 9.

<sup>51</sup> Nelson, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Nelson, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Nelson, 3.

<sup>54</sup> I can only speculate as to the reason Nelson did not serve the defendants. Nelson may have filed the lawsuit to send a message. She may have wanted to avoid inviting further media attention or, possibly, to avoid drawing attention to her own consanguineous relationship with a trial. See Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 215.

<sup>55</sup> Judge David Nuffer, Order from the Judge, Case 2:16-cv-00228-DN, Document 7, United States District Court of Utah, Central Division, 31 May 2017: 1.

<sup>56</sup> “Leah; Hannah.”



<sup>57</sup> “Melanie,” *Escaping Polygamy*, Season 1, Episode 1, aired 14 July 2015, on Lifetime.

<sup>58</sup> Joe Darger, Aline Darger, Vicki Darger, Valerie Darger, and Brooke Adams, *Love Times Three: Our True Story of a Polygamous Marriage* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011); Anne Wilde, “Fundamentalist Mormons in the Twenty-First Century” (paper presented at Sunstone Short Creek, Hildale, UT, 20 April 2017).

<sup>59</sup> Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 37; *The Primer*, 12; Kristyn Decker, *Fifty Years in Polygamy: Big Secrets, Little White Lies*, Second edition (St. George, UT: Synergy Books Publishing, 2013).

<sup>60</sup> “Mormonism Beyond the Mainstream: Practicing Celestial Marriage on Earth” (panel at Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2015); Jennifer Huss Basquiat, interview by author, 14 September 2015.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, “Priscilla,” *Escaping Polygamy*, Season 1, Episode 5, aired 4 August 2015, on Lifetime.

<sup>62</sup> “Leah; Hannah”; “Melanie.”

<sup>63</sup> Ken Driggs, “Twenty Years of Observations about the Fundamentalist Polygamists,” in *Modern Polygamy in the United States: Historical, Cultural, and Legal Issues*, eds. Cardell K. Jacobson and Lara Burton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 83.

<sup>64</sup> Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime*, 42. See also Bennion, “The Variable Impact of Mormon Polygyny on Women and Children,” 69.

<sup>65</sup> “Leah; Hannah”; “After the Escape: Fighting for Freedom,” *Escaping Polygamy*, aired 7 February 2015, on A&E.

<sup>66</sup> See Mark-David Janus, Arlene McCormack, Ann Wolbert Burgess, and Carol Hartman, *Adolescent Runaways: Causes and Consequences* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987).

<sup>67</sup> Nelson, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Christine Marie Katas, telephone conversation with author, 28 June 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Christine Marie Katas, telephone conversation with author, 28 June 2017.

<sup>70</sup> RIVR Media, “Casting Calls,” <http://www.rivr.com/casting/>, accessed 27 June 2017.

<sup>71</sup> RIVR Media, “Escaping Polygamy,” <http://www.rivr.com/shows/escaping-polygamy/105/>, accessed 26 June 2017. Holding Out Help is an organization that focuses on people who desire to leave isolated polygamist groups.

<sup>72</sup> Christine Marie Katas, telephone conversation with author, 28 June 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Daniel Kingston, personal communication with author, Hildale, Utah, 20 April 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Kingston informants, personal communication with author, Hildale, Utah, 20 April 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Daniel Kingston, personal communication with author, Hildale, Utah, 20 April 2017; Christine Marie Katas, telephone conversation with author, 28 June 2017.