FUNDAMENTALIST RHETORICS OF SELF-DETERMINATION: A FEMINIST CONUNDRUM

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by
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DEDICATION

For Derrick…this project would have been impossible without your continual sacrifice and support; you are a true partner.

For Mom, Margaret, and Rachel…your supportive child care got me through the final push.

For Liberty … you remind me every day why my work is important.

The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

FUNDAMENTALIST RHETORICS OF SELF-DETERMINATION:
A FEMINIST CONUNDRUM

Presented by Naomi Katherine Peachy Clark,

A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Rebecca Dingo

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Professor Martha Patton

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Professor Enid Schatz

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the circulation of fundamentalist women's mediated rhetoric in the wake of Texas Child Protective Services' removal of more than 400 children from the polygamist YFZ Ranch near Eldorado, Texas, in April 2008. The mothers defended their radically patriarchal community by deploying rhetorics of self-determination, claiming agency in the context of their religious community. If, as Sharon Crowley asserts, liberalism's goals are "wildly incompatible" with fundamentalism, why did these mothers deploy liberal rhetoric, which assume a free, rational agent, to defend a religious identity based on submission (17)? Furthermore, why was their rhetoric uncritically accepted by many U.S. Americans, and to what ends was it appropriated and re-deployed? Given the speed and the augmentation that characterizes the way information travels in an early twenty-first-century moment, rhetors can quickly lose control of the texts they produce. Feminist rhetoricians should be particularly interested in the implications of these conditions for women's rhetorics. The writer extends existing scholarship that complicates and theorizes networked rhetorics in order to call for the generation of vocabularies that account for the complex networks of social, economic, religious, cultural, philosophical and geographic realities that constrain free choice.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: A FEMINIST CONUNDRUM

During the spring of 2008 Texas Child Protective Services removed more than 400 children from the Yearning for Zion Ranch near Eldorado, Texas. The Ranch is a compound of the polygamist Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints (FLDS) sect, a group that broke away from the mainstream Mormon Church in the early twentieth century. In the days following the raid, FLDS mothers were interviewed by journalists, appearing on the major TV networks, *The Oprah Winfrey Show,* and *Larry King Live* Many media consumers were baffled by the women's submissive role in this community and were eager to hear the women speak on their own behalf on the assumption that as free, rational agents, the mothers' testimony would be authentic and transparent.

In line, perhaps with these expectations, the women's conversation centered on the idea that they, indeed, have freely chosen to identify with the FLDS community, and as members enjoy autonomy in their marriage choices, move about freely, and are conscientious caretakers of their children, having chosen the interests of their children over that of their husbands. "We are free; we make our own choices," a woman named Esther, for example, declared in an interview with ABC's Robin Roberts (De Superjhemp). In the video clip, Esther is accompanied by two smiling women; all three are wearing homemade pastel-colored dresses with Peter Pan collars, button-down fronts, and puffy long sleeves. At the very moment the women proclaim their autonomy, they bear the visible, uniform signs of their identification with an intensely patriarchal,

isolated religious community suggesting that despite their argument, they may not be "free" or "rational" agents.

The juxtaposition of the women's individualistic claims against the backdrop of a collectivist social structure is a conundrum for feminist rhetoricians because at the very moment we shrink from endorsing the hyper-patriarchal religious structure of the FLDS community, we are also wary of doubting the veracity of women's claims (Warriner 42-43). Yet even though we may be confounded by these competing feminist values and disinclined to critically engage with the situation, we need to attend to the discourses the women employed because of its potential for revealing the persuasive power of self-determinist rhetorics—in an early twenty-first century neoliberal moment—in the face of documented contradictory evidence. I argue that tracing this circulation exposes abusive religious power structures, reveals self-determination's discursive power in a neoliberal context, and demonstrates the need for a richer rhetorical theory that better accounts for the multi-textured conditions in which women construct their religious identities.

The significance of rhetorics of self-determination for rhetoricians is linked to this discourse's historical, political, and cultural role in Western liberalism. The historical prominence of personal agency in the development of democracy and self-government dates back to eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke. Furthermore, legal standards that disallow hearsay and require testimony to be based on first-hand knowledge incline us to privilege an individual's claim to self-determination. In the context of these political and legal traditions, self-determination has become integral to liberalism's culture of identity construction.

Thus the pervasiveness of rhetorics of self-determination, especially the rhetorics the FLDS women use, invites critique particularly when it presumes a free, rational agent while failing to attend to the social, cultural, religious, and economic constraints of a given situation. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 is just one late twentieth-century neoliberal institution that has framed the material conditions of individuals as primarily the result of their own choices (Dingo 491). These frames then facilitate rhetorics that assume autonomy as the sole or most influential basis for one's actions and dismiss any alternative considerations.

Feminist scholars have worked tirelessly to expose many of these neoliberal assumptions that threaten to depoliticize oppression. In the context of religious identity, feminists have debated fundamentalist Muslim women's claims to autonomy (Mahmood, MacLeod, Ali); however, there has been far less attention paid to fundamentalist Christian women. Whether this disparity of attention is due to a colonialist impulse that assumes the autonomy of white American women or due to a generally low profile of Christian fundamentalist women in American culture or due to some other reason altogether, the reality is that Christian fundamentalist women are mobilizing, often online, with a stated aim of defending patriarchy and opposing feminism (Joyce).

While FLDS women do not identify with the broader evangelical fundamentalism (the political arm of which is generally known as the Religious Right), they are an example of Christian women who defend a traditional, intensely patriarchal, religious identity on the basis of self-determination—much like more mainstream fundamentalist women do. As their arguments are circulated, augmented, and transformed by neoliberal

media conduits, they develop a distinctly anti-feminist stance. By ignoring the political work of this discourse as it permeates television, radio, print, and online networks, feminist rhetoricians miss an opportunity to help shape discourses that account for and create material effects in women's lives.

The feminist scholarship on Christian fundamentalist women in general is minimal; regarding FLDS women in particular I was only able to find a master's thesis by Canadian philosophy scholar Jennifer Warriner who adapts philosopher John Rawls' account of autonomy to account for the self-determinist claims of FLDS women in Canada. Warriner engages with the conundrum of women who choose disempowerment in the context of the liberal state. Warriner concludes that "[w]hile the liberal state must work to protect the freedom of the individual to pursue his or her conception of the good, this cannot entail that the liberal state accommodate those that deny others the opportunity to develop their own as well" (120). In other words, while a liberal democracy must respect the rights of fundamentalist women to construct a religious identity in accordance with their conscience, the state must not support those who wish to impose such an identity on women.

Literature Review – Rhetorical Theory

Discursive conflicts between Western liberal values and religious fundamentalism in American public discourse tends to be “locked” into unproductive “repetition and vituperation” according to Sharon Crowley (3). This epidictic impasse is due to contradictory values and goals on the part of liberalism and apocalyptism says Crowley;

where liberalism privileges "empirically-based reason and factual evidence," fundamentalism values "revelation, faith and bibilical interpretation" (4). Since liberal argumentation is limited in its ability to account for the faith-based claims of fundamentalism, Crowley advocates for rhetorical theory as an alternative basis for engagement in discourses where "the primary motivation of adherents is moral or passionate commitment" (4). Crowley's distinction exposes the philosophical undercurrents of particular moments I study here, namely, the moments when fundamentalist women deploy liberal arguments to defend their religious community. If, as Crowley notes elsewhere, "the preferred argumentative strategies, as well as the ultimate goals, of liberalism and apocalyptism are wildly incompatible," why did these women take up liberal discourse (17)? Even more to the point, why did media consumers find their claims so compelling? What can this historical moment reveal to us about rhetorical strategies twenty-first century consumers find persuasive? These questions frame my thesis.

Crowley points us to a critical piece of the puzzle: commonplaces, which she defines as "part of the discursive machinery that hides the flow of difference, that firms up identity and sameness within a community" (73). According to this line of reasoning, the commonplaces that circulate freely and are uncritically accepted within this discourse may serve sites for investigating "flow[s] of difference" between fundamentalist voices and neoliberal audiences. Further, commonplaces can extend and appropriate meaning when a media producer transplants an image, a reference, a narrative from one discursive moment to another without distinguishing the contextual differences between the two.

Thus we can conclude that the value of rhetorically analyzing commonplaces lies not so much in their associated meaning, but in the ends to which they are used.

Of course commonplaces are not limited to traditional media venues; Barbara Warnick observes that "authors of online commentary, parody, and satire rely on familiar events, known texts, culturally specific allegories, and other components of the cultural intertext to produce discourses meaningful to various audiences" (119). Perhaps commonplaces serve an even more critical rhetorical function in an online context since writers of web content are contending with far more competitors for market share than even their print, radio, and TV counterparts are. In this ephemeral online context, commonplaces bridge gaps of intention, political affiliation, and emotional investment between (often) anonymous writers and a fragmented, disparate audience.

In addition to attending to the relevant technological factors, there are also prevailing ideological frameworks to consider. The dominance of neoliberal ideology, defined by Inderpal Grewal as "a marketization not just of welfare but of an array of social movements," in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries compels rhetoricians to be alert to its logics that emerge in public discourse. Rebecca Dingo notes the way "neoliberal logics travel along transnational networks, gently shifting and changing to fit various situations while seemingly maintaining a common connotation" (492). I want to investigate the ways in which these neoliberal logics serve as commonplaces that exert significant persuasive weight in today's mediated communication.

Neoliberalism's privileging of the free market as the primary organizing principle for economics, politics, and community life is evident in American media production. Warnick identifies media's central role in citizen's political engagement, yet this civic function is complicated by a profit-driven model that "focuses on encapsulated news that holds viewer interest rather than on in-depth consideration of complex issues" (4). When the success of news production is measured in terms of audience size rather than in the quality of the content, cheap thrills and sensationalist tricks come to dominate. Who controls the production of this content, then, largely controls the political discourse. As James Gordon Finlayson reads Jürgen Habermas, consumers "are funneled by economic and administrative systems into certain patterns of instrumentally irrational behavior" (24). In other words, media production is more than an echo chamber of self-referential commentators, more than a random selection of visually attractive actors, more than a laugh track and theme music: it is produced toward a desired end under the cover of privileged commonplaces.

Habermas traces this development back to the point newspapers turned from "a business in pure news" to begin dealing in "ideologies and viewpoints" (182). As a result, the editorial function was incorporated into news production, and the publisher "changed from being a merchant of news to being a dealer in public opinion." This editorial function not only serves, then, to shape the story, but in so far as it shapes the discourse, it also shapes the consumers and their frames of reference. From this perspective media consumers cannot listen "objectively" even if they wish to since their standard of objectivity has already been determined by the very entity they may attempt

to assess. Habermas sees this function as being far more invasive than marketing because of news production's ability to "creat[e] news events or exploit[ ] events that attract attention" under the guise of transparent reporting (194). Furthermore, Habermas argues, "By means of a dramatic presentation of facts and calculated stereotypes it aims for a 'reorientation of public opinion by the formation of new authorities or symbols which will have acceptance" (194). Thus Habermas suggests that analyzing the stereotypes—the commonplaces— that we encounter in the media might reveal to us what kinds of "reorientation" is being engineered.

As directly applicable as Habermas' theory is for traditional media production—newspapers, television, and radio—where the medium has specific owner and named editors, its application is a bit less clear for the Internet's ephemeral content. Warnick acknowledges that because of the "discontinuous, segmented texts, media sound bytes, and images" of new media, conventional theories may not seem to apply (19). Thus Warnick calls for rhetoricians to generate theoretical models that take into account the "coproduced, interactive, intertextual, ephemeral, immediate, and/or distributed" qualities of web-based media (23). In response, I suggest that Habermas' theory is still useful for online texts such as those that deal with the FLDS women's rhetoric if the theory is adequately adapted. Although the online editorial role now reflects the fragmentation of the text, its power is still evident in the stereotypes, the commonplaces, and the narratives that are invoked by text producers as well as its consumers.

Warnick nods toward one of the most discursively ground-breaking features of the Internet when she notes the intense intertextuality of web-based media: "Instead of

being fixed in a universal empirical reality, meanings emerge from interpretations of socially and historically situated viewers" (44). Even though practically any text can be understood in its relationship to other texts, the immediacy of online texts offers an intimate view of the producer-consumer relationship. Furthermore, the ability of consumers to instantaneously publish their own reactions to an online newspaper column, Youtube video, or blog offers instant feedback to the original producer. This two-way communication creates the possibility for a self-sustaining feedback loop which exponentially advances the potential for discourse-shaping editorializing. As we will later see, in the context of these dynamics, the FLDS women's arguments and narratives broadly expanded and (mis)appropriated beyond the women's initial intent.

What role then do feminist rhetoricians and their causes play in this new media context? Rebecca Dingo advocates using the model of a network "to articulate the complex ways that rhetorical appeals reach a diffused yet linked audience, while also accounting for how contiguous power relationships add meaning and force to arguments" (494). This approach is particularly relevant to current feminist rhetorical analysis because, as Dingo notes, "Women are no longer the central objects of study; rather, they are part of a network of relationships" (494). This move is less a matter of subordinating women's agency to their environments, than it is an acknowledgement of the power relationships implicit in the linkages that connect women to their families, communities, nations, and the world.

Dingo draws on Jeff Rice's definition of the network as ideological and technical "spaces—literal or figurative—of connectivity… that allow information, people, places,

and other items to establish a variety of relationships that previous spaces or ideologies of space … did not allow" (128). This model accounts for the "momentary configurations" that emerge in a new media context, facilitating rhetorical analysis of these linkages and the ways in which they change and adapt (103). Central to my concern here is the volatility of the women's message as it travels the network; even as their arguments may have maintained the same or similar commonplaces, closer analysis can reveal how the ends to which the commonplaces are used change. How then are the women's claims and narratives adapted, augmented, and appropriated as they move from one discursive site to another? What do we make of the permutations that eventually threaten to obscure their initial concerns?

To engage with these questions, I want to draw from Jenny Edbauer's notion that "bracket[ing] the discrete elements of rhetor, audience, and exigence" allows us to "attune to the processes that both comprise and extend the rhetorics" (19). This expands our attention to the movements of the original message when we explicate the way a rhetoric is "already infected by viral intensities that are circulating in the social field" (14). Edbauer emphasizes the way this "contagion" moves between and links discrete entities lacking shared exigencies or audiences. This attention to a rhetoric's movement can expose the "mutuality of material practice, embodied experience, and discursive representation that operate in public spaces every day" (21). In other words, thinking about how identity narratives rooted in and powered by self-determinism emerge in a given moment, how they engage with existing ideologies and logics, and how they re-

emerge in more or less unrelated spaces can reveal disjunctures in popular conceptions of autonomy.

Krista Ratcliffe's concept of *rhetorical listening* suggests a way to theorize the rhetorical disjunctures, the differences, which emerge from such an analysis. According to Ratcliffe, "A rhetoric of listening interrupts the emphasis of Western logic to perpetrate either-or reasoning, for instance, to recognize commonalities or to recognize differences" (95). Instead, rhetorical listening invites awareness of both commonalities and differences—critical concerns for cross-cultural communication. Ratcliffe quotes Audre Lorde who warns against "the distortions which result from our misnaming [differences]" (95). As I will argue, rhetorics of self-determination threatened to erase critical social and cultural differences between FLDS women and the dominant culture, facilitating further distortion in other sites on the network. A rhetoric of listening suggests one way to counter these erasures by consciously avoiding the temptation to disproportionately focus on only differences or similarities. Furthermore, Ratcliffe sees that this approach to critique offers possibilities for "negotiation, for questioning not just others' claims, assumptions, and conclusions but also our own. … while also continually asking: What's at stake? For whom? And why?" (97). In analyzing rhetorics of self-determination as a feminist rhetorician, these questions will be central to my study.

Literature Review – Self-determination

Given neoliberalism's organizing influence on early twenty-first century media production as well as its emphasis on hyper-individualism, we first need to recall

liberalism's philosophical roots and fundamental assumptions which date back to the European Enlightenment.

Liberalism's ubiquitous role in the American consciousness is based in the terms "liberty and equality" according to Sharon Crowley who observers that these terms are generally understood to signify "that human beings are custodians of their own persons and that all individuals are equal before the law" (71). However, this signification rests on several key assumptions. First, as "the default discourse of American politics" that privileges "personal freedom," liberal governance therefore concerns itself with "the so-called public sphere" to the exclusion of the private (Crowley 3). Furthermore, liberalism assumes that discourse will be rational and that citizens will "aim[ ] for compromise where this is possible and settl[e] for tolerance where it is not" (Crowley 21). This notion that liberal discourse is necessarily rational threatens to mask the influence of alternative values, personal desires, social contexts and economic realities—in other words, the influence of the private sphere—in public discourse. Since the liberal state ideally limits its authority to the public sphere, private concerns of family life, religious expression, and identity construction are technically not subject to liberal values. Thus these private concerns are often seen as matters of lifestyle choice and personal preference.

Nevertheless, feminists have implemented liberalism's "language of rights" in the service of advancing goals not only in women's public lives, but in their private lives as well (Diamond and Quinby 194). This privileging of self-determination as a liberal value has liberated women for generations; however, some feminist theorists have pointed out that such values can hinder achieving "the goal of creating our common life and shared

responsibilities" (Diamond and Quinby 194). These writers see that liberal "discourse obscures the webs of connection that sustain human existence" (194). Wendy Brown suggests that one of the reasons liberal discourse does so is because "liberalism itself harbors male dominance" in its privileging of autonomy, self-interest, and the public sphere, philosophical spaces that have historically corresponded to the interests of men to the exclusion of women (*Regulating Aversion* 194, 197-8). Together these theorists identify the tension between 1) women's access to self-determination and 2) self-determination's limits for advancing women's interests which is central to my project. They demonstrate the necessity of questioning claims to liberal values such as self-determination, particularly when they are employed by individuals whose lived experiences are inconsistent with liberalism's tenants.

Wendy Brown argues that the dominating combination of liberalism, neoliberalism, and American individualism have a depoliticizing effect, "mak[ing] everything seem as a matter of individual agency or will, on the one hand, or fortune and contingency on the other" (18). To unpack this claim, we can refer to Brown's definition of depoliticization as "removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its historical emergence and from a recognition of the powers that produce and contour it" (15). Brown expands this definition to note the effect of neoliberal depoliticization is such that "[w]hen every aspect of human relations, human endeavor, and human need is framed in terms of the rational entrepreneur or consumer, then the powers constitutive of these relations, endeavors, and needs vanish from view" (18). As easy as it may be to see depoliticization in anti-Affirmative Action arguments, for example, feminist rhetoricians

should also consider that we run the risk of enacting neoliberal depoliticization when the feminist ideal of taking women at their word is not balanced by the consideration of the social, cultural, economic, and religious contexts in which a given woman speaks. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology behooves rhetoricians to take note of arguments "framed in terms of the rational entrepreneur or consumer" in order to explore the power relations and material constraints they may veil (Brown 18).

Sharon Crowley points out that neoliberalism has "rearticulated" liberal values in order to "legitimate[ ] free-market capitalism and globalization by associating them with democracy and traditional liberal values" (77). Conflating free-market capitalism with traditional liberal values legitimates neoliberal goals as being manifestations of self-determination. Thus neoliberal rhetorics become naturalized as they deploy liberal commonplaces for neoliberal ends. These liberal commonplaces are then applied to both market forces as well as social issues as if liberal values applied to them both equally. For example, Inderpal Grewal notes the "imbrication of feminism with consumer culture" which results when "the concept of 'choice'" is privileged "as a central ethical framework for feminist as well as neoliberal consumer practices" (3). Yet this linkage of economic and social choice is antithetical to "classical liberal political theory [which] has understood social rights as opposed to market relations" (Grewal 219). Thus neoliberal rhetorics that imply social and cultural choices are made in the same free, rational, self-interested way that liberal ideology imagines economic choices occur not only fall short of traditional liberal ideals, but also threaten to mask the very power structures feminism works to expose.

Feminists have offered possible ways to counter this problematic conception of uninhibited self-determination. Dating back to the nineteenth century, proto-feminist Jane West defined feminine liberation as "not the power of doing what you please, for that is licentiousness, but the security that others shall not do what they please to you" (qtd. in Bannet 36). Reclaiming West's definition of freedom offers a useful contrast to neoliberalism's depoliticization of personal choice. It demonstrates that even though neoliberal ideology may imply the promise of individual rights, practically speaking, it serves as a license to the most empowered individuals at the expense of the least privileged.

Jennifer Warriner reaches a similar conclusion in her discussion of the liberal state's reaction to willfully disempowered fundamentalist women. Warriner sees that the responsibility of the liberal state to "protect the freedom of the individual," must be balanced with the duty to prevent parties [e.g., religious leaders] from infringing on the freedom of others (120). In other words, she calls for the state to recognize the politically and personally debilitating pressures that religious leaders may bring to bear upon their followers.

Wendy Brown adds another layer to these nuanced definitions of personal freedom by proposing that "autonomy [be] recognized as relative, ambiguous, ambivalent, partial, and also advanced by means other than law" (*Regulating* 199). Such recognition of a given individual's contexts, constraints, and privilege would resist the uncritical acceptance of rhetorics of self-determination, illuminating its work that is otherwise rendered invisible by neoliberal ideology.

In the chapters that follow, I want to apply the abovementioned critiques to rhetorics of self-determination in a twenty-first century, neoliberal context. When fundamentalist Christian women employ rhetorics of self-determination to construct and defend a religious identity premised on submission, how do media networks represent them? How do commentators and media consumers rearticulate, appropriate, and deploy their testimony? What can feminist rhetoricians learn from analyzing rehtorics of self-determination?

Methodology

Wendy Brown's *Regulating Aversion* offers a useful model for explicating the permutations of a given discourse. Its focus on the "political deployments of tolerance as historically and culturally specific discourses of power with strong rhetorical functions" demonstrate the way in which a word can be analyzed more or less independently of its historical definition (Brown 9). In Brown's case, she is not challenging the value of tolerance in so far as it enables diversity, but rather the ways in which the term does work at odds with traditional conceptions of tolerance.

While Brown demonstrates the ways a term can be atomized and appropriated for political ends, Rebecca Dingo suggests the network as a way to trace the dispersion of a discourse (Brown 4, Dingo 492). As Dingo points out, the metaphor of the network is suited to feminist rhetorical analysis because it can account for the way in which discourses are modified and augmented as they appear in vastly divergent situations all the while maintaining a veneer of consistency. Thus the FLDS women's claims to self-

determination are not only relevant in the situation of the moment, but also the ways in which the news event moved beyond news networks to other sites of public discourse, ultimately overshadowing the stated purposes of the women.

To trace the discourse, I begin in chapter two by reviewing relevant archived news footage and radio commentary on Youtube.com. As a popular source, Youtube offers advantages in terms of access and in gauging public interest. First of all, its open-access format and tracked views serve as rough barometers of popular interest; its comments feature offers a glimpse into the responses of the audience. Secondly, Youtube's tag feature links related videos, allowing viewers to see footage across a broad range of newscasts. Thirdly, Youtube has been a more stable source for these videos; network web sites usually allow access to their archives for only a few weeks or months after airing, but Youtube videos are available indefinitely.

To make sense of who exactly was representing the FLDS community, I tracked the frequency of specific women who appeared on eight video-taped interviews. The graph itself is not relevant to this thesis except to show that no less than thirteen women are on record defending their community.

In the third chapter I extend my analysis to include web-based newspaper articles and political blogs. *The Deseret News,* a Mormon-affiliated Salt Lake City newspaper has maintained some of the most consistent coverage of the affair. Furthermore, it attracted a great deal of reader comment in response to its columns. Political blogs were similarly chosen for their ability to attract a sizable readership, one indication of their persuasive power.

Analysis of reader comments in this chapter was more complicated. I annotated the comments in order to assess general attitudes and to identify repeating themes. Since the third chapter is more focused on *changes* the discourse underwent or facilitated as much as in continuities, it has less to do with quantifying the frequency or pervasiveness of a given response. Instead, I have focused on comments that demonstrate the fluidity of self-determinist discourse.

Contributions to Knowledge

This thesis builds on current network and rhetorical theory to demonstrate the ways in which rhetorics of self-determination are deployed across a range of rhetorical situations, eventually all but de-coupled from the initial event. Furthermore, it will help fill a gap in feminist scholarship by calling for a more nuanced way to hear and understand Christian fundamentalist women's constructions of identity.

The following chapter analyzes the initial interviews where FLDS women invoked rhetorics of self-determination. The women position themselves as agents within their community in order to deflect criticism for their religious beliefs, contrasting this autonomy with the oppression of the state, masking a religious structure based on constraining women. The third chapter traces the dispersion of the discourse to other media outlets where the mothers' cause was conflated with conservative political agendas, demonstrating the discursive power of appeals to autonomy and their ability to camouflage intentions far removed from those of the source. The fourth and final chapter reflects upon the preceding analysis, concluding that there is a paucity of terminology

that adequately accounts for the complex networks of social, economic, religious, cultural, philosophical and geographic realities that constrain free choice and calling for a more complex rhetorical theory to account for these factors.

Having established the theoretical, philosophical, and methodological groundwork for analyzing rhetorics of self-determination, I turn next to the FLDS women's deployments of the these rhetorics as well as their persuasive power for broader U.S. American audiences.

CHAPTER TWO

A LIBERAL DEFENSE OF SUBMISSION

In the days following the raid on YFZ Ranch, FLDS mothers were interviewed on *Larry King Live, The Oprah Winfrey Show,* and most major news outlets. When the women returned from the shelters where they and their children had been taken and subsequently separated, the FLDS community invited the media to the Ranch for interviews where the mothers unequivocally affirmed their willing identification with the FLDS. Except for a few clips from the Associated Press, almost no men are visible in the footage. The men's absence was not explained, opening the door to speculation that they were in hiding. Whether or not that was the case, foregrounding the women served both the purposes of the media and the FLDS. Many media consumers were baffled by the women's role in this community and were eager to hear the women speak on their own behalf on the assumption that as free, rational agents, the mothers' testimony would be authentic and transparent. Perhaps Ranch strategists were sensitive to this assumption, knowing that the women were perceived as the most reliable reporters of the events and of the integrity of the community.

In these examples, the women's testimony centered on the idea that they, indeed, have freely chosen to identify with this community, and as members enjoy autonomy in their marriage choices, move about freely, and are conscientious caretakers of their children, having chosen the interests of their children over those of their husbands. In doing so, their rhetoric counters long-standing criticisms leveled by some outsiders that

their religion is an abusive one that pressures underage girls into marriage. Further, by contrasting their professed social autonomy with the oppression of Texas Child Protective Services, they indict the state as the real perpetrator of abuse. As we will see in a chapter three, their criticism of state power aligned them—however momentarily—with conservative political interests. But in order to address that association, we need to first unpack the women's arguments, tease out their implications that hail a neoliberal audience and place it alongside the material conditions and the religious beliefs of the FLDS community.

In this chapter, I examine how FLDS mothers employ rhetorics of self-determination to deflect attention from the material realities of the Ranch. These material conditions give us reason to question the extent of their autonomy even if we cannot make a definitive positive or negative claim about it. The effectiveness of these rhetorics in masking documented religious, social, and economic conditions is a testament to U.S. Americans' uncritical acceptance of claims to autonomy, calling to mind Crowley's discussion of commonplaces referenced in the previous chapter where she considers the ways commonplaces produce an aura of sameness where it may or may not exist. The pages that follow explicate the sameness that is implied by rhetorics of self-determination and the differences in social mobility, religious belief, and power structures that it masks in order to show the limitations of this discourse in relation to fundamentalist women's constructions of religious identity.

This chapter's analysis of the women's discourse in TV interviews unfolds in four parts. I begin by tracing the ways the FLDS women position themselves as agents within

their community. Secondly, I examine their strategies for defending their community's integrity which, thirdly, contrasts with their narrated encounters with state oppression. Finally, I place the FLDS women's testimony in context with its economic, religious, and legal backgrounds in order to shine a light on the inadequacy of self-determinist rhetorics in this situation.

Claiming Personal Agency

To analyze the women's discourse, we will turn to their television interviews to consider the ways the women position themselves as agents in their community.

Since numerous former FLDS members have reported difficulty in leaving the community, journalists interviewing the mothers were very interested in knowing whether the women enjoyed personal mobility or not (see Mackert, Wall and Pulitzer, and Jessop). When reporters asked outright about their freedom of movement, the women were resolute in their response. A woman named Janet tells *FOX & Friends* host Gretchen Carlson, "Nobody is forcing us to stay here; it's so easy to get off if we want to get off. Nobody's forcing us; this is a choice we have made, and it's a wonderful choice" (texasnews). In the ABC interview, host Robin Roberts asks Nancy, Marie, and Esther if they know some people deny they have a choice in where they live (De Superjhemp). The women appear baffled, almost amused by the idea; Nancy says, "We can leave any time we would like to." Esther agrees with a beatific smile, "I feel like the most free woman in the whole world." Marie asserts, "I too! My freedom left me when I entered…" She searches for the right word, and Esther offers, "the compound, where

they took us with our children." Marie finishes, "That's when our choices ended." What is notable in these unequivocal assertions is the way they pre-empt investigative questions on the part of the journalists. If criticism of the Ranch was based on the constraints it places on women, this testimony—taken at face value—argues that it is not only misguided, but ludicrous and insulting. If individual choice is the hallmark of well-being, it is difficult to question these claims without undermining the personal integrity of the women, something few feminists are willing to do.

In contrast with Carlson and Roberts' direct line of questioning, talk show host Larry King took a more indirect approach. In the interview, the women sit, silent and somber. Their distinctive prairie-style dresses and bouffant hair-dos signal a simpler, reclusive lifestyle far removed from the interconnectedness implicit in the digital map behind the host's chair. King begins by asking Sally, Esther, and Marilyn about their children in CPS custody. The three women, sitting in the front row of a group of FLDS mothers, offer brief, to-the-point answers. Marilyn says she was eating dinner with her daughter; Esther was helping her son with homework when the CPS workers came to the Ranch interrupting their maternal routines (King).

King quickly moves beyond the preliminaries to ask Sally, "You never thought that a relationship between older men and teenage girls were wrong?" Sally responds, "I would not...I would... For my own daughter, I would advise her to wait till she was of legal age. I would not want her to get married younger than that." Interestingly, she draws on her personal experience—her own daughter. Just a moment previous to this statement she resolutely stated that she has never felt there was anything wrong with

plural marriage, aligning her loyalties with that of her religious community. However, the question at hand places Sally in a difficult position because if she goes so far as to endorse underage marriage, she invites the censure of the American public. At the same time, if she answers in the negative, she places herself in opposition to her religion's practices. Therefore, she evades the answer by adopting the stance of a tolerant middle-class American mother in several ways.

First, she individuates her answer to her own daughter, using the verbiage of a broad-minded parent who would not think of imposing her beliefs on another family. This individuation disrupts the image of Sally as an unthinking religious zealot, implying instead a rational, thoughtful mother, looking out for the welfare of her daughter. Secondly, it suggests that Sally, as a mother, can weigh in on her daughter's life choices. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it projects the image of the daughter as an autonomous actor, as though she is the one making the decision. By implying that she and her hypothetical daughter are free, rational agents who choose their life's courses, Sally aligns herself with a mainstream mother sending her child off to college, warning her daughter of the dangers of underage drinking. This response normalizes Sally as well as the marriage practices of her community suggesting they are perhaps less of an oddity than generally perceived. It also demonstrates that their agency within the community does not only include physical mobility, but also social and marital independence as well. These claims of agency divert attention from the material conditions of the Ranch, undermining the criticisms that have been leveled at their community.

When King asks the women where their husbands are, all three decline to answer, saying instead that their entire focus in on the children, not their husbands.[1] Thus the women appear to distance themselves from their husbands, the perpetrators of the alleged abuse. In doing so, they resist the image of themselves as marionettes in the hands of patriocentric handlers, suggesting instead that they act autonomously, placing the interests of the children ahead of their husbands. Consciously or not, they engage the feminist observation that patriarchal structures often force women to choose between the desires of their husbands and the welfare of their children. This move implies the women enjoy a degree of agency for which feminists have been advocating. They appear to be more empowered than battered women in the mainstream who remain in abusive relationships at great cost to their children. This suggestion of social autonomy signals that the women are legitimate actors within their community, and are not bound by the constraints of traditional, hierarchical, and patriarchal structures. By privileging social autonomy, the women invoke a commonplace that signifies to most Americans a shared esteem of individualism and personal autonomy; however, as we will shortly see, this rhetoric contradicts evidence that FLDS doctrine condemns self-determination and demands individuals' submission to the community.

Defending the FLDS Community

But the women do more than merely assert their autonomy within the community. They leverage their position as agents to defend their religious identity

[1] Later in the interview, Marilyn says she has thought more about King's question and wants to say that her daughter's father is present and wants her back too.

against accusations of underage marriages, constraint, and abuse, demonstrating the potential of self-determination to serve as a commonplace to mask damning evidence to the contrary.

Perhaps the most disturbing accusation leveled at the FLDS community over the years has been the underage marriage of girls, often to much older men. This concern was eventually validated when one of the pregnant teenage girls taken in the raid turned out to be a wife of incarcerated Prophet Warren Jeffs (Adams, "Mom of Jeffs' Alleged Teen Wife"). Additionally, earlier legal proceedings in Utah found Warren Jeffs guilty when he was charged with being an accomplice to rape for his role in arranging the marriages of a fourteen-year-old girl to her nineteen-year-old cousin (Adams, "Polygamous Leader Guilty"). According to one former FLDS member, younger girls being married to older men was not unusual, upheld as a special demonstration of maturity and spirituality (Mackert).

Given this history, it is no surprise that host Larry King asks each of the three women on his show—Esther Marilyn, and Sally—about these charges. One by one, the women deny ever seeing "a younger girl marrying an older person;" they believe the "stories are false." These blanket denials aired on April 16, 2008. However, in time the story changes. When journalist Lisa Ling visited the YFZ Ranch on behalf of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* near or about the same time frame, Sally, Janet, and Sarah don't challenge the existence of underage brides, but agree that the young ones are "especially well cared-for" (markie299). Perhaps one reason for this discrepancy is that in the meanwhile the condition of Merrianne Jessop, a pregnant teen and wife of Prophet Warren Jeffs,

came to light. Pictures of Warren Jeffs holding and kissing Merrianne (then 12), were published and offered as legal evidence in the custody battles (Anthony). This situation may have prompted the women to change their story since the photographic evidence was difficult to dismiss.[2] Nevertheless, the women maintain a united front in countering the criticism, bewildered by the suggestion that anything other than innocent expressions of faith and pure love of family exist within their community. Since the women are perceived as being at the greatest risk for exploitation by their community, their claims that all is well are particularly persuasive because a liberal conception of individualism assumes one speaks and acts in his or her own best interests. To suggest they are not acting in their own best interests disrupts the very notion of a free, independent agent.

Significantly, the women do not merely defend the marriage practices of their community, but they also invoke the liberal language of choice and rights. Immediately following Lisa Ling's question about underage brides mentioned above, Ling asked the women, "If a girl chose not to get married, would she have a right to…" [do so]? Janet hastily replies, "That would be her right, oh, surely. That would be her right. You bet she would." Sally agrees, "There's no force, ever. They have their rights." This emphasis on the rights of FLDS women and girls is aligned with the way in which Western conceptions of autonomy are grounded in the assumption that rights and autonomy go hand-in-hand. Second wave feminists of the twentieth century based their discourse on the "language of rights and individual autonomy" in order to remove

[2] When the FLDS issued a position statement in June 2008 addressing the many "misrepresent[ations] and misunderst[andings]," it claimed that all marriages had been consensual and stated a commitment to no underage marriages in the future ("FLDS Church Policy Statement" http://www.truthwillprevail.org/index.php?parentid=1&index=55)

barriers to women in traditionally male-dominated fields (Diamond and Quinby 194). However, Janet and Sally's deployment of the language of female empowerment threatens to depoliticize their position in the community because it implies that women's choices are made in the same way as the iconic free, rational agents many Americans imagine themselves to be. This vocabulary assumes sameness, individuation, and independence: gendered traits according to Wendy Brown who points out that these traditionally masculine characteristics do not account for the social and kinship ties that typically mark women's lived experiences (*Regulating Aversion* 194). In other words, rhetorics of self-determination inherently fall short of adequately accounting for the economic, kinship, and social ties that constrain the choices of many women. (I will address the philosophical aspect of this point in greater length shortly.)

Many of the narratives of former FLDS members not only highlight the personal constraints they experienced within the community (See Wall and Pulitzer, Jessop, and Mackert), but also demonstrate the inadequacy of self-determination as an organizing principle in their lives. As they tell it, their choices were severely constrained regarding marriage, educational and professional ambitions, and throughout their daily lives. Some of these constraints were explicit commands of an authority figure, and others were the result of more subtle socialization. In addition to the example of Elissa Wall's underage marriage above, Carolyn Jessop wanted to be a physician, but she was only permitted to earn a college degree if she became a teacher; this dictum came on the heels of her arranged marriage to a man decades older than she. When Mary Mackert left her husband, she was "kidnapped" by her step-sons and forcibly returned to her husband's

house. For each of these women who eventually left the FLDS community, their departures involved not only cutting ties with oppressive elements, but with loved ones as well. Their departures came after many months of agonizing indecision; as much as they wished to flee, they despaired of losing all contact with mothers, sisters, and close friends who remained behind. Although loyal members of the FLDS deny the veracity of these reports, considering them sensationalized narratives of fringe elements, the stories gain credibility by the specificity of their detail and their independent corroboration of each other. Even though they offer a compelling counter-discourse to the FLDS mothers in the news, the complexity of their stories does not have the familiar ring of self-determination that is so revered in the dominant culture. Perhaps it is not so surprising, then, that narratives such these receive far less attention in the media.

Moreover, in these interviews the women's testimony does not merely defend their community against accusations of constraint, but it also makes a positive argument. Namely, their discourse attempts to rehabilitate the reputation of the Ranch by invoking images of innocence and purity. In the *FOX & Friends* interview mentioned earlier, Sally, Janet, and Rosie recount the events of the raid, their traumatic separation from their children, and the resulting anxiety and grief (texasnews). Janet has five children and Sally has nine children that have been taken into custody. Sally's voice breaks when she describes how her handicapped child was torn from her by the CPS workers. Host Gretchen Carlson appears to be almost in tears as she identifies with the women's maternal concerns and then asks, "I'm so sorry because I also have a child who's almost five. I can't imagine what you're going through. But I have to ask you, the life that

we've heard about inside this sect— some people look at it and think that it's not a good life. Can you tell us?"

"It is a wonderful life, pure life, and we love it here," Sally responds.

"Nobody is forcing us to stay here; it's so easy to get off if we want to get off. Nobody is forcing us. This is a choice that we've made, and it's a wonderful choice," Janet adds. All three women nod in solemn agreement, and the interview subsequently moves on to a different topic. The associations with the word *polygamy*—harem, sex, multiple partners, degradation and abuse of women—conjure up sensational, possibly lurid, images of darkness and mystery. The emphasis Sally places on purity counters this perception by de-mystifying it, suggesting instead openness, light, and freedom. Situating their community in contrast to the accoutrements of mainstream American life—the banality of TV, immodesty, and secularism—strikes at the heart of political conservatives concerns about twenty-first century modernity. This depiction of the Ranch as a "pure, simple" community was further reinforced by the images displayed on truthwillprevail.org, an official FLDS Web site, of happy children in simple, old-fashioned clothes: boys in long-sleeve button-downs and girls in pastels and braids. Since the presumed victims of polygamy are women and children, their testimony—whether spoken or visual—to the innocence of, and their satisfaction with, their community is a strong argument for the integrity of the Ranch.

Furthermore, the very use of the word Ranch as a name for their closed community is a shrewd rhetorical choice. In the ABC interview, Marie resists Robin Roberts' referring to YFZ Ranch as "a compound" since, she said, "It's our ranch; it's

our home" (De Superjhemb). (Remarkably, elsewhere in the same interview Marie refers to the CPS's temporary holding facilities as "the compound.") By correcting Roberts, Marie rejects a word usually associated with cults and implying physical, emotional, and social barriers intended to inhibit the movement of members, preferring instead words that have very wholesome, familiar connotations. Thus Marie transforms the FLDS community from a dangerous oddity into what many consider a foundational element of American history and national identity—the space of family on the western frontier. This idea brings to mind images of *Little House on the Prairie*, of a hardworking, self-made man carving out a life for his family in the face of privation and hardship. Appealing to these familiar, often sentimentalized, commonplaces that invoke personal agency normalizes the community by implying a shared cultural heritage in spite of profound material and social differences.

Indicting the State

Yet by arguing valiantly on behalf of their own agency within the context of their "normalized" religious community, the mothers also risk implicating themselves as accomplices to the alleged abusers. A CPS worker's condemnation of Sally's ability to be a good mother makes this a very real possibility (King). On the other hand, if they were to present themselves as powerless adults within their community, they implicate the Ranch as oppressive for women and themselves as unable to properly defend their children from abuse. By making the children their central focus, they maintain a poignant appeal while deflecting association with their male counterparts. This appeal

deflects attention away from inquires about their community practices toward the state which they charge with aggression toward family structure, deception, and religious persecution—charges which we will later see intersecting with partisan concerns of particular media consumers.

For example, in the *Larry King Live* interview, Sally cuts short King's questioning, taking a measure of control in the direction of the dialogue when she emphatically reminds him that they are on the show because of their children. Sally's narrative contrasts her position of agent in the context of her home community with her victimization in relation to the state. Framed in this way, Sally's story is a nightmare of unrestrained government intrusion. Her rhetoric shifts the allegations of FLDS-inflicted abuse (according to King's line of questioning) to allegations of state-inflicted abuse. She describes being separated from her five-year-old handicapped son and details their experiences at the Fort Concho shelter in the care of Child Protective Services workers. When Sally expressed concern for her son's care, the CPS worker allegedly responded, "You don't know how to take care of him. You haven't been his mother for five years." Whereas Sally's home community reportedly afforded her agency as a mother (as we discussed earlier), her narrated exchange with the CPS worker characterizes the state as constraining, robbing her of a deeply-treasured identity, and fracturing the family structure.

This perceived attack on family was also expressed by Willie Jessop, an FLDS spokesman, who said that "the women called as witnesses are being asked to choose between their children and their husbands, their freedom and their faith" (qtd. by

Solomon). As Dorothy Allred Solomon points out, this choice is one that has followed women through the centuries, although in this particular case she sees that the women are actually choosing between "freedom and the patriarchy." Solomon, born into fundamentalist polygamy but today a journalist and academic, celebrates the possibility that the women will choose freedom.

However much feminists may champion "freedom" in this sense, Solomon's positioning of freedom and patriarchy as opposites goes against the grain of a traditional Western ethos that conflates freedom with masculine qualities. As alluded to earlier, Brown notes a "deep and abiding male superordiantion within liberalism" that promotes a culture where autonomy, freedom, and equality are associated with men in contrast with the dependence, self-denial, and difference expected of women (197-98 *Regulating*). These cultural norms facilitate a Victorian or 1950s conception of family where women's domestic roles of keeping house, nurturing children, and supporting their husband's career aspirations facilitate economic freedom for men while deepening women's dependence. In spite of the advances made by second-wave feminism, the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, in broadening women's opportunities, these rigidly defined social roles for men and women in the context of the home are still largely accepted as normative in the larger American public, particularly among social conservatives. Therefore, when Sally quotes the CPS worker as challenging her maternal role, her discourse suggests that the state is challenging these domestic structures. Willie Jessop echoes this assertion by suggesting the state is not respecting family unity, but pitting husbands, wives, and children against each other. By framing

the narrative in this way, Sally and her cohorts indict the state as antagonistic to the solidarity and independence of the family, distracting audiences from the reality that freedom—in the traditional sense—of both monogamous and polygamous families rests upon the subordination of women. Not only does this charge mask the way traditional family units are at odds with popular, individualistic conceptions of freedom, but it also implies that FLDS concerns are aligned with those of social conservatives in the American mainstsream.

On *Larry King Live*, Sally recalls the step-by-step process by which the CPS workers separated the mothers from their children. At the Fort Concho shelter where the women and children were initially taken, the authorities told the mothers they were being taken "to a better place where [they would] be united with [their] families." Once they had boarded the buses, mothers with children under five were dropped off at one location. All the other mothers were taken to a shelter, then directed to temporarily leave their children and gather in another room. There a CPS worker told the mothers, "Your children are not yours and you have two options. You can either go back to the ranch or you can go to a woman's shelter." When Sally protested leaving her handicapped son, she was told, "if you don't make your choice right now, then you're not going to have a choice." Sally continues, "And I said, now wait a minute, tell me what's going on. And they told me that if I didn't do what they said, that I'd be arrested. And I took longer than they wanted me to talk to them. And so they started and said, OK, you don't have a choice now. You're just going on this bus." In this narrative, not only does Sally demonstrate the constraints imposed by the state, but also the manipulative way in which

they were carried out. She exposes the apparent hypocrisy of a state apparatus that invades the lives of private citizens on the charges of abuse only to further inflict dehumanizing abuse on the presumed victims. When Sally positions the state as the aggressor, her rhetoric elides the FLDS community's constraints that have come to light and which I will discuss further momentarily.

This narrative also demonstrates the irony of this "rescue." While journalists were very concerned about the degree of choice FLDS women have in their home community, Sally showed how government personnel challenged her autonomy, first by misleading her, then by withholding information, and finally by explicitly denying her a choice. Marie echoes this irony in the ABC interview mentioned earlier when she says, "My freedom left me when I entered [the compound]" (De Superjhemp). Recall that moments before, Marie protests Robin Roberts' reference to the Ranch as a compound, saying "It's our home!" Now Marie calls the battered women's shelter a compound, implicating it as a place of constraint and detainment. By shifting the terminology, she indicts the state and its auspices of denying them mobility, unlike the autonomy afforded her by the FLDS community.

But not only does the mothers' discourse accuse the state of abuse and detainment, it also charges the state with religious persecution. In a CBS interview, Nancy reflects on being separated from her children: "We never dreamed that this could happen in America. We never dreamed" ("Polygamist Wives Speak Out (CBS News)"). Nancy's fervent, willful identification with the FLDS both validates and powers this lament; by claiming agency, Nancy (and her cohorts) gained public

credibility. Thus this professed astonishment serves not only as an appeal to pathos, but is based on an appeal to ethos as well. In other words, if Nancy is a free, rational agent, her shock and dismay in response the government's action gain particular force permitting her testimony to overshadow important contradictory historical and material evidence.

First of all, history suggests a raid was entirely possible and that their community was very aware it. During the first half of the 20th century, state forces raided FLDS communities a number of times, most notably in 1953 when Arizona Governor J. Howard Pyle forcibly removed the women and children from the Short Creek community near Colorado City, Arizona. The operation quickly disintegrated when public sympathy sided with the FLDS community (Wagoner). Former members independently recount the way in which as children, they were taught to fear being taken away by the state (see Jessop, Mackert, and Wall and Pulitzer). Secondly, construction of the walled compound was begun in 2004 when outside forces were placing pressure on the community in Colorado City to open up to state investigation (Winslow). The very presence of the wall indicates anticipation of opposition. But regardless of what Nancy intended to convey by her disbelief, her words resonant with a larger America public who uttered similar disbelief in the wake of catastrophic events such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 that shattered a national sense of invincibility. A sense of American exceptionalism also extends to religious freedom, although perceived threats to this freedom are rallying points for political conservatives who accuse their political opponents of infringing upon their religious rights. Thus when Nancy ties the raid to un-American statist forces that

deny her the autonomy to worship freely, she invigorates a segment of political conservatives who also fear their fundamentalist beliefs and practices are subject to persecution by the state.

Contextualizing the Discourse

This intersecting anxiety, validated by shared rhetorics of self-determination, facilitated the appropriation of this sensational media event by partisans far removed—geographically, doctrinally, materially—from the Texas situation. This disjuncture is the focus of my next chapter, but first we need to establish the religious and material contexts of the FLDS women that their rhetorics of self-determination elided.

Of course it is important to note once more that given the complexity of social, psychological, economic, and cultural pressures of any community, it is impossible to determine whether or not these specific (or any other) women speak as autonomous agents. However, comparing women's claims to autonomy with their religious doctrine and daily practices can demonstrate the persuasive power of self-determinist rhetorics in the face of documented contradictory evidence.

The first piece of evidence that challenges the FLDS women's claims of autonomy involves the usually silent, but influential, role of the women's legal counsel. In both Lisa Ling's interview with the mothers on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and in NBC's *Today Show*, at least one attorney was present. Ling specifically states that the attorney coached the women (markie299). In the NBC interview, the attorney also spoke on camera, admitting that the FLDS community has no minimum age for marriage, but

that it is a choice that is made by individual family members and the people involved. He denied the existence of 13-year-old brides, and quickly turned the dialogue back to the situation at hand, focusing on what he called the illegal actions of CPS. On the face of it, the attorneys are representing the mothers; however, given the economic structure of the FLDS, the women did not independently have the means to hire attorneys. Instead, the community was footing the legal bill. This suggests then, that the women's legal counsel was financially motivated to advocate for the community's interests rather than those of the women as individuals.

Although the interests of the women and the community coincide to a certain degree, the intensely patriarchal structure of the FLDS would privilege the interests of the male leadership if and when the interests of the two diverged. For example, it would serve the interests of the community to play down the possibility of abuse and constraint even if doing so undermined the welfare of the women and children. Thus rhetorics of self-determination, which are rooted in traditionally masculine terms, were well-suited to the situation. Further, the attorneys (non-FLDS members), trained in the arts of persuasive discourse, know what type of appeal will be most persuasive to a given audience. As conduits between the cloistered community and American TV audiences, the attorneys can coach the women in the enduring American narrative of the free, rational agent who stands above the constraints of his or her environment. Thus the women engage with a larger discourse that has been crafted to advance a specific agenda: the return of the children. To that end, their legal counsel has served up a strategic discourse that they, in turn, successfully deliver to media consumers.

Beyond the community-sponsored legal counsel, however, there is far more damning evidence in FLDS doctrine that rhetorics of self-determination inadequately communicate the social and cultural conditions of FLDS women's lives. The principle of plural marriage is based on Mormon Scriptures. Joseph Smith founded the Mormon religion (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) in 1830, but he did not receive the principle of plural marriage until a few years later; it was made public in 1852 (Bradley 1). At first the principle was only practiced by church leadership, but later it was encouraged for all members. The broader American society was appalled when the practice of plural marriage became publicly known. It was linked with slavery as the "twin vestiges of barbarism" (3). Publicly, President Abraham Lincoln denounced it, but privately he sent word to Brigham Young that he would not prosecute them for the practice (Firmage and Mangrum 139). Eventually the principle was dropped from official church practice in order for Utah to achieve statehood. Still polygamy continued more or less in secret, until the church began to excommunicate polygamists. In 1929 a group of excommunicated polygamist Mormons formed a priesthood council which became the ecclesiastical basis for the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS) (Bradley 27). This group clung to the original teachings of Joseph Smith, believing that marriage to at least three women was imperative for exaltation in the afterlife.

The passage cited as the basis for plural marriage reads as follows:

> 61 And again, as pertaining to the law of the priesthood—if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second, and they are virgins, and have vowed to no other man, then is he justified; he cannot commit adultery for they are given unto him; for he cannot commit adultery with that that belongeth unto him and to no one else.
>
> 62 And if he have ten virgins given unto him by this law, he cannot commit adultery, for they belong to him, and they are given unto him; therefore is he justified. (Doctrine and Covenants 132:61-62)

While this passage doesn't explicitly indicate constraint, it does imply a patriocentric model in which men are agents and women are "given" to them. Polygamy itself is a family structure in which women must compete for the time, attention, and resources of their spouse. In another place Emma, Joseph Smith's first wife, is instructed to submit to Joseph's wishes on threat of being destroyed (Doctrine and Covenants 132:54-56). The historical context of this passage was Emma Smith's resistance to Joseph Smith's marriage to other wives. This passage continues to be used by FLDS leadership as a warning to non-compliant women (See *Lifting the Veil*, Jessop, and Wall and Pulitzer). Choosing to resist their religious authorities' dictates amounts to eternal damnation to hell for having broken faith with their religious commitments. One former member puts it this way, "There was no way I was going to leave because I felt I had covenanted with God" (*Lifting the Veil*). This threat serves to create a very limited set of choices:

conformity or damnation. Yet as Jennifer Warriner points out, this situation cannot legitimately be considered a choice since "an individual's option set should not contain only options that require an individual to act immorally" (33-34). Thus polygamy's scriptural basis does not advocate any sort of independent thought or action on the part of women; indeed, it is premised upon women's constraint and submission to masculine authority.

Scholar David Gore emphasizes the philosophical differences between Joseph Smith and John Stuart Mill, a nineteenth-century British philosopher who has since had a great deal of influence on American thought. According to Gore, "For Smith, happiness comes from obedience to God's laws within a community devoted to keeping them; for Mill, happiness is derived from an appreciation of self-interest in political and social life, an appreciation that includes reason as the critical factor" (87). *Obedience* and *reason* are key terms in this passage because they indicate the fundamentally different objective of these two views. Obedience subordinates the individual to the collective. It invokes a type of morality and faith (belief without evidence) that privileges compliance especially when it comes at great personal sacrifice. On the other hand, reason suggests a critical stance whereby the individual thinks and acts self-interestedly. If these two perspectives are basic organizing factors for human interaction, then it follows that those who organize their lives according to Smith's versus Mill's view will perceive life experiences differently.

However, the institutionalized subordination of women is not merely a doctrinal or philosophical abstraction; former members independently corroborate each other's

accounts that unquestioning submission to authority is a mark of spirituality within the FLDS community (See Mackert, Jessop, and Wall and Pulitzer). Women and children are continually reminded to "stay sweet," to express cheerful endurance in the face of any hardship. In the Colorado City, Arizona, community, women had access to vehicles, but the vehicles had expired license plates. The local police force, also FLDS members, did not stop them as long as they stayed within city limits. However, if the women had fled further, authorities outside the community would stop them and return them to their homes (Jessop 3). Even though FLDS women may have a degree of mobility as they asserted in the interviews, it does not necessarily follow that it ensures personal independence as most U.S. Americans would understand it.

In fact, it was FLDS Prophet Warren Jeffs' insistence that fourteen-year-old bride, Elissa Wall, marry her cousin and remain in the abusive marriage that ultimately exposed the systemic nature of women's subordination in the FLDS. In September 2007 Warren Jeffs was convicted of being an accomplice to rape as a result of his role in the marriage of 14-year-old Elissa Wall to her 19-year-old cousin (Winslow and Perkins). Even though Jeffs has officially resigned from his role as president of the FLDS church, many church members still consider him their Prophet and spiritual leader suggesting that even in his absence a culture of abuse is possible and even probable (Perkins).

In Jeffs' absence, Merril Jessop, relocated from Colorado City, Arizona, to oversee the construction of the Ranch (Jessop). Carolyn Jessop, formerly married to Merril Jessop, describes abuse and neglect in Jessop's household that she witnessed before eventually fleeing with her eight children: a child might be denied medical care as

a way to manipulate his mother into compliance with her husband's wishes. A crying baby was held face-up under running water until he stopped screaming. Sex was used as both a carrot and a stick; women were forced to have sex with their husbands in order to get the resources they and their children needed. Alternatively, denying a woman sex (and the resulting children) was the ultimate way to reduce her status in the family pecking order. The presence of these factors in the leadership's households (as well as the independent corroboration of a multitude of former members) offer compelling evidence that these were not unique cases, but rather typical experiences of FLDS women. These testimonials philosophically align more closely with FLDS doctrine than do the televised reports of FLDS women's autonomy indicating the failure of rhetorics of self-determination to adequately account for social, spiritual, and material constraints on females in the FLDS community.

Further, this legal and personal information complicate the testimony of the purity of the Ranch. Certainly people at the Ranch are sheltered from much of the consumerism and banal entertainment of TV, magazines, books, and music of the larger culture. In this way the mothers could in good conscience describe their environment as "pure." Yet in light of the legal evidence, Jeffs' followers were not immune from rape and sexual abuse. This slipperiness of the term "purity" is employed in such as way as to signify one thing to an audience (simplicity, innocence) even as it may have a fundamentally different meaning for the speaker (isolation, spirituality). Yet as the women affirm their voluntary solidarity with the community, even unconvinced onlookers find it difficult to articulate an appropriate response.

This effectiveness of the women's discourse relied on the commonplace that rhetorics of self-determination have become, masking a religious and social structure that is premised on constraint and the self-sacrifice of women. This contradiction in terms was ignored by U.S. Americans who uncritically accept rhetorics of self-determination as they play into a national self-concept of self-interested, rational individualism. Thus claims to autonomy gave the women's narrative "legs" which we will see in the following chapter facilitated its movement to quarters materially, culturally, and socially distant from them. We will also notice the role of radio, newspapers, and the Internet in this movement as the narrative becomes decoupled from the women's stated concerns.

CHAPTER THREE

RHETORICAL DISJUNCTURE

> A given rhetoric is not *contained* by the elements that comprise its rhetorical situation (exigence, rhetor, audience, constraints). Rather, a rhetoric emerges already infected by the viral intensities that are circulating in the social field. Moreover, this same rhetoric will go on to evolve in *aparallel* ways: between two 'species' that have absolutely nothing to do with each other. What is shared between them is *not* the situation, but certain contagions and energy. This does not mean the shared rhetoric reproduces copies or models of 'original' situations (any more than the shared C virus turns a cat into a baboon). Instead, the same rhetoric might manage to infect and connect various processes, events, and bodies. (Edbauer 14, italics in original)

Of the many different ways American audiences responded to the FLDS situation, ranging from a passing curiosity to alarm, some of the most emphatic responses came from politically conservative individuals who bizarrely compared Texas Child Protective Services to the Nazis, even going so far as suspecting then-Presidential candidate Barack Obama's campaign of complicity in initiating the raid. These baseless associations, passionately made, drew their intensity from the FLDS mothers' testimonies which were rhetorically weighty because they were rooted in and legitimized by rhetorics of self-

determination. Additionally, Internet-based technologies permitted the women's rhetoric to travel faster and wider than ever, shaping and shifting the message as it moved and blurring the lines between the traditional rhetorical elements of speaker-audience-text. These conditions invite feminist rhetoricians to consider their implications for the ways women's discourse is disseminated, appropriated, and deployed at a time when rhetors can quickly lose control of their texts. I submit that our rhetorical analysis must take these factors into account and respond accordingly, engaging with the many layers of text and context lest we risk perpetuating further (mis)appropriation.

This chapter explores three web-based sites where the women's mediated discourse appeared either directly in the form of journalists' quotes or in commentators' paraphrase: an online newspaper article, a Youtube-hosted radio clip, and a conservative blog. By analyzing the content of the sites as well as the comments left by readers/listeners, I want to trace the disjunctures in the discourse's movement in order to identify the "viral intensities that are circulating in the social field" as described in the epigraph above, offering insight into the ways women's discourse is heard and applied. I want to emphasize up front the critical role of rhetorics of self-determination in this circulation. Without the FLDS women's claims to autonomy, their narrative would probably have traveled in very different ways than what I will explore here. But when they affirmed their agency within the context of their religious community, they birthed a narrative with which many in the broader American population could identify—rightly or wrongly. In this (false) identification with the mediated images of FLDS women, some mainstream Americans then appropriated the narrative to vastly different ends.

How is it that the localized events in Eldorado, Texas, could be linked to a national-level alleged plot involving individuals unrelated to the situation? Jeff Rice credits new media with creating new networks, "spaces--literal or figurative--of connectivity" (128). Ideas travel along technological pathways that facilitate fluctuation and "momentary configurations" (Hayles qtd. in Rice 131). Rice notes that these ideas do more than merely change as they move from point to point, but that they are augmented as they move: they "grow" (132). According to this view, then, the Internet is a space of connectivity wherein the FLDS mothers' testimonies of autonomy take on layers of symbolic and political meaning. Thus in the context of the Internet where commercially-produced television and radio programs can establish interaction—not only in response to their content—but also among and between their consumers, relationships grow exponentially, as do layers of meaning. Hypothetically speaking, there is no end to the possible augmentation of a given discourse as it continues to shift and change to the point where it no longer bears any meaningful resemblance to its source.

Tracing the Discourse

The first of these sites I want to explore is *The Deseret News,* a Mormon-affiliated Utah newspaper, which closely followed the developing situation in Texas. On April 15, 2008 it published a story quoting FLDS women recounting their experiences at the battered women shelters: "We have literally been terrorized," said a woman named Nancy (Perkins, "FLDS Mothers Say"). The article foregrounds the plight of the women, describing their separation from their children at the hands of Texas Child Protective

Services. The events the women recount are essentially the same as those they described on *Larry King Live* in the previous chapter and so will not be discussed at length here. However, the 294 online reader comments are useful in providing insight into the minds of media consumers. This section analyzes a portion of the 294 comments, focusing on particular recurring themes. Although some of the commenters supported CPS's removal of the children, another—very vocal—element did not. In considering the commenters who opposed the removal, I have identified three recurring associations that dramatically shifted the issue away from the mothers' concerns: comparisons of Texas authorities to the Nazis, invocations of religious rhetoric, and anxiety about state interference in mainstream families. The commenters' ability to shift the focus in this way demonstrates the instability of discrete speaker-text-audience delineations, a critical consideration for twenty-first century public discourse analysis. These shifts also demonstrate Edbauer's model of mutating, circulating rhetorics that intersect erratically with otherwise unconnected narratives, ideologies, and logics, indicating the potential for a rhetoric to take on a life of its own quite apart from the rhetor's intentions.

One of the most egregious misappropriations of the developing FLDS situation was a surprisingly frequent comparison of the CPS workers to the Nazis. For example, a poster, "just thinking" writes, "would someone stand up against these thugs. lets take the mothers to the right and the children to the left so they can have showers. that is what the nazis did to the jews. and now it is happening all over again [sic]." Here the commenter alludes to other interviews where FLDS women mentioned that CPS workers promised them better facilities. This comment is representative of numerous comparisons of the

CPS workers to Nazis (we will discuss another one later in this chapter). Yet beyond the initial images of mass "rounding up" that occurred, the comparison quickly breaks down under closer scrutiny. First of all, legitimately or not, CPS was acting on behalf of the women and children rather than removing them as a punitive measure. For another, the community was able to defend itself in court unlike the Jews in Nazi Germany who were denied due process. How then was this comparison possible?

Warnick notes the inevitability of "meanings emerg[ing] from interpretations of socially and historically situated viewers" (44). This sort of intertextuality, enhanced in an online environment, strives to conflate the material conditions of the case at hand to culturally-encoded "memories" of slaughtered millions, the familiarity of the latter eclipsing the materiality former even though the differences between the two events are vast and profound. As we will see shortly in greater detail, "Nazi" has become a handy epithet to affix on political opponents because it is already "infected" as Edbauer would say, with the stench of genocide; its usefulness as a rhetorical device does not necessarily reflect a given speaker's attitudes toward Jewish people. References to these kinds of politically-charged, shared symbols, then, should alert us to the possibility that the FLDS womens' narrative is being appropriated for others' ends.

Another theme that emerges is religion. "Wise Man vs Foolish Man" compares those who support the CPS action to "support[ing] this house upon the sand." This reference to Jesus' parable of the wise man who built his house upon a rock and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand (Matthew 7:26). This comment suggests Texas CPS is on precarious legal ground, implying that removing the children from the

Ranch was a premature indictment of FLDS men. "[J]ust thinking" prays that "Christ will come again, and restore peace to this earth," suggesting that those removing the children are acting in opposition to God and will be revenged in the apocalypse. "WRONG MOVE" points out that the FLDS mothers and children are not "SMOKING, DRINKING, OR ON DRUGS," and is thankful that "THE LORD IS THE TRUE JUDGE OF ALL PEOPLE." This remark indicates a belief that the FLDS community is not being judged fairly, and that those doing the judging are on the wrong side of God.

On the surface, these comments seem to align with the mothers' stated intentions. That is, until one considers the strong probability that these commenters are not FLDS members even though their statements imply a shared religious perspective. Whether or not these commenters find grounds for identification with some FLDS beliefs, the doctrinal teaching of the community draws a deep and emphatic line between insiders and outsiders, believing that all outsiders are doomed to eternal condemnation. Conversely, the official positions of the mainstream Mormon Church and many evangelical Protestant churches would soundly condemn FLDS doctrines. Therefore, inferences of shared identity are not mirrored by any official ecclesiastical offices, suggesting these comments are on tenuous doctrinal ground by almost any church's standards. Yet for the casual observer—as well as the commenters—the intensity of these remarks, indicated typographically by the liberal use of all-caps and rhetorically by the unequivocal word choice, bend the mother's discourse toward a false comparison.

Commenters also give a good deal of attention to Constitutional and legal rights. "FLUtahn" says the American government is "willing to spit on the Constitution and then

rub our faces in it," listing eroded rights such as "Due Process, Habeas Corpus and fair treatment." This commenter warns parents that "this is just the beginning": government agents could also take their children if they (the parents) hold an unpopular political position. "NevadaCoug" comments, "The Nanny state is getting way out of control. Let me raise my kids. It's my job, not yours." This pejorative metaphor for social welfare programs expresses the commenter's anxiety about state interference in private homes. "Is the Constitution DOA?," a commenter from Massachusetts, calls for the firing of the Texas Governor given this "assault on the family." Such comments employ the Religious Right's language of a culture war and family values, smoothly shifting the terms from a particular localized event to the political concerns of more mainstream Evangelicals. Since these political concerns explicitly promote a Westernized patriarchal family unit, one that is emphatically sold as one-man-one-woman, their alignment with the FLDS women's defense of polygamy is dubious at best.

A Habermasian reading of these "coproduced, interactive, intertextual, ephemeral, immediate, and/or distributed in nature" texts suggests their value has less to do with the quality of self-expression and more to do with disclosing the meta workings of public discourse (Warnick 23). In other words, these comments can indicate what symbols and vocabularies are perceived, privileged, preached, and deployed in the shared work of media production. Ironically, in the moment the women go on-air to defend their autonomy, their message takes on a life of its own, and they lose control over its dissemination and appropriation. The Internet provides a forum wherein their presumed audience can now participate in media

production, associating their discourse with interests the interviewed women did not intend to promote. In other words, the FLDS women's rhetorics of self-determination lent a certain "energy" to this discourse production that circulated independently of the original rhetorical situation. Therefore, we cannot see these rhetorics as static, but as networked, dynamic flows.

Intersecting Market Forces and Political Commentary

Not only are lines blurred between speaker and audience, but Barbara Warnick points to the obfuscation that can occur at the intersection of market interests, entertainment, and political discourse as well. In the case at hand, this confusion can manifest itself in the relatively benign "infotainment" of shows such as *Larry King Live* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* or, as I will presently demonstrate, in politically charged right-wing radio shows that traffic in paranoid sensationalism. Warnick expands on the conflicted role of media production as outlined by Habermas, noting the problem of political discourse taking place in a "profit-driven" milieu that privileges "encapsulated news that holds viewer interest rather than [ ] in-depth consideration of complex issues" (4). Analysis of one such indistinct site reveals a symbiotic relationship between radio commentators and their audience that has an exponentially greater capacity for (mis)appropriating first-person testimony.

While the political allegiances of CNN and FOX News may be debated, there is no question about the biases of commentary disseminated daily by the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Michael Savage, and other politically conservative talk show

hosts. Even though these hosts refer to themselves as entertainers or rodeo clowns, the credibility of their diatribes goes virtually unchallenged by their conservative audiences (Stetler and Carter). In the passage that follows, radio host Michael Savage protests the state intervention on-air. Unfortunately, a written medium does not capture the intensity of his breathless, fevered tempo which suggests an emotional investment in the FLDS situation that resists any rational explanation. He rants,

> State authorities moved women and children to the San Angelo Coliseum telling them that they were being taken to 'a bigger better place.' Did they promise them showers too? Did they tell them to take the gold out of their teeth on their way into the shelter?
>
> The women were lied to by these pigs! These man-hating vermin of Child Protective Services!
>
> The mothers were told they would be reunited with their family as soon as they went along with what the state told them to do.
>
> Did you know that mothers of aged six or older were herded into a room, each one flanked by a beefy, man-hating CPS worker? Did you know that fifty cowardly troopers, according to the women, lined the room? Cowardly men who should have their guns taken away? Cowardly men in Texas who should be in jail for doing this! The women were forced with a choice: return to the ranch without your children or go to a domestic violence shelter run by radical, lesbian feminists.

> The children, they were told, were no longer theirs. A mother said, "They told us the state is in charge of them now. They wouldn't even let us go back and say goodbye to them" said Sarah who now has five children ages 8-16 in state custody. ("Polygamist Women Lied to by CPS")

Throughout the length of this epidictic passage, Savage does not make a coherent argument; instead, he draws on the FLDS women's narratives of being separated from their children to make incongruous comparisons between the battered women's shelters and Nazi concentration camps. Without explicitly stating as such, he draws on the American consciousness of World War II atrocities to equate the San Angelo Coliseum to gas chambers and the CPS workers to Nazi soldiers who collected the prisoners' personal effects. By limiting himself to insinuation, he sidesteps any sort of accountability to the facts, pre-empting possible opposition.

Furthermore, in insulting the "fifty cowardly troopers," Savage insults the rugged individualism that characterizes Texans' state-wide self-concept, doubting the troopers Second Amendment rights and implying they committed a crime by assisting CPS. But Savage saves his most emphatic words for the "beefy, man-hating CPS worker[s]": "pigs" and "vermin." His repeated emphasis on "man-hating" and "radical, lesbian feminists" again implies but does not state that CPS is leveling an attack against the traditional family structure. He links "domestic violence shelter" with "radical, lesbian feminists" which implicates such shelters as being outposts of anti-family, anti-male political efforts. These colorful associations suggest Savage is appropriating the

women's narrative in an opportunistic move to denigrate progressives and the work of feminist activists. Thus the women's narratives, rooted in rhetorics of self-determination, are now deployed by Savage to decidedly non-feminist ends.

Yet we might ask, given Savage's over-the-top imagery, how seriously can we take him? Isn't this mere entertainment? According to Warnick's theory, in straddling the line of market-driven entertainment and political discourse, Savage is motivated to focus on what attracts the greatest number of listeners rather than on a civic responsibility to critically engage them in issues of the day. Sensational media events such as this one can easily be over-simplified and "spun," lending themselves to Savage's style of "infotainment."

However, what makes this style especially relevant to my analysis is the way audience members engage with the allusions to "put the pieces together" as if they have serendipitously discovered a critical insight. Of the 26 comments responding the Youtube.com posting of Savage's audio clip, approximately two-thirds support Savage's perspective. Significantly, the comments state explicitly what Savage only implies. For example, "freedomintheus" says, "When the Constitution is gone, they will be doing sh1t like this to all of us," he seems to be responding to Savage's symbolic reference to Nazi concentration camps, expressing fear that statist forces are struggling to dismantle the U.S. Constitution. Inexpicably, however, another commenter, "ShawnCastle" points his anxiety in an anti-Semite direction when he states, "Fuck the ZOG machine government and all leftist liberal traitors who participate in the genocide and destruction of our people and our nation." Not only do these statements make broad criticisms of the left—which

apparently may have Nazi or Zionist motivations, but they also suggest the commenters identify to some degree with the FLDS members, believing themselves to be vulnerable to the same state action.

This identification is also expressed by two commenters who describe having their children taken by the state—one says Missouri CPS took her daughter for "the state's financial rewards;" another says she was called "corky due to [their] religious beliefs," "eccentric," and "offensive" by attorneys in the San Diego court that took her granddaughter. Where Savage hints that CPS is abusive, his commenters confirm a pattern of institutionalized abuse of American families at the hands of CPS.

What becomes clear is that these commenters take Savage and his insinuations very seriously—they show no awareness of the market forces that drive his commentary. The tendency of profit-driven media to pass up substantive discussions in favor of easy sensationalism as Habermas theorizes is exponentially expanded by the early twenty-first century's dominance of neoliberalism. Combined with neoliberalism's privileging of the consumer's baser instincts, the Internet serves as an interactive milieu where media producers can manipulate consumers into co-producing discourse in particular ways. In this light, the FLDS women and children can be seen as offering a moment of "encapsulated news" that Savage appropriates for the interests of his audience who enthusiastically respond, creating a mutually satisfying feedback loop where Savage implies, consumers explicate, and together both purport to expose the malevolent intentions of progressive forces such as CPS. This symbiotic relationship, held together by the capitalist enterprise of producing an irresistible message that engages the greatest

number of viewers, is no joke to the politically-invested audiences who join in the production of discourse online driving the FLDS women's narrative ever further from its intended purpose.

Local Situation or National Conspiracy?

The disjuncture between the intentions of the women's discourse and its devolvement into speculative hype sunk to the level of conspiracy theory when it was discovered that the caller who initiated the events was not a pregnant 16-year-old girl calling from the YFZ Ranch, but was actually Rozita Swinton, an African-American women in Colorado, Springs (Mount Athos). Not only did this revelation further incriminate the CPS by demonstrating that they acted upon false information, but it drew on circulating political intensities, transposing existing alarm from the FLDS situation to election politics when The Jawa Report, a politically conservative (apparently anti-Muslim) blog reported that Swinton was listed as an Obama delegate (qtd. in Mount Athos).

The Jawa Report's story appeared on FreeRepublic.com where a writer reflects, "Another example of a Democratic activist making up a fake but accurate story? Sure, she lied about everything, but isn't the goal of removing children from parents who's lifestyle we don't approve of trump truth?" Once again we see anxiety about threats to traditional family structures. This remark is similar to the comments responding to Savage in its general indictment of progressive Democrats; however, this blog's comments then drive the discourse from general finger-pointing to more specific

indictments of progressives' mental health and allegations that the Eldorado events were instigated by Democrats in order to sabotage Mitt Romney's Vice-Presidential aspirations.

Suggestions that Rozita Swinton had a history of mental instability were easily extended to other Democrats as well (borne on the possibility that Swinton was a Democratic delegate or super-delegate). "[T]omkat" says, "LOL...it would be fun to see how many felons and crazies there are among pledged Dem delegates. It will be up to the American Spectator to investigate the list, because it is certain that no msm outlet will be curious about this bunch" (Mount Athos). "Recovering Ex-hippie" joined in by saying, "Thus proving... once again... 'Liberalism is a mental illness'. (Michael Savage)." These connections, almost gleefully made, rest on the basis of circulating insinuations about progressives. Savage's pseudo-diagnosis of liberalism—in the political progressive sense, not in the classical Enlightenment sense of a free, rational agent—is ripe for application to the instigator of this situation (Swinton). Knowledge that Swinton was a Democratic delegate, then, suggests to these commenters that her mental state is representative of Democrats, confirming to them Savage's symbolic indictment in a concrete, demonstrable way.

Swinton's presumed status as a delegate was extended to further implicate Democrats, specifically in relation to the impending Presidential election. For example, "xtinct" suggests, "Maybe it was something that had in the works in the event Romney was the nominee to make the real LDS Church look bad" (Mount Athos). "Mount Athos" speculates, "Perhaps the purpose is to knock Romney off the "short list"

of vice-presidential contenders?" "july4thfreedomfoundation" agrees, "This kind of stuff absolutely sinks Mitt Romney's chances to be chosen for the VP slot." When John McCain edged out former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, a social conservative Presidential candidate, in the Republican primary, Romney, a member of the (mainstream) Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was conservative Republicans' last best hope for the White House. (These concerns preceded the McCain-Palin ticket which developed later that summer.) Thus, even though Romney is an east-coast, mainstream Mormon far removed from the Texas custody battle, these commenters suspect that Obama exploited a presumed link between the two. Thus very localized events in Eldorado, Texas, were linked by these circulating discourses to figures on the national political scene, unrelated to the original situation.

To trace the growth, then, in this particular situation, we might say that a rhetoric of self-determination first masked the power structure of the religious community; this distracted attention from the constraints of the situation sufficiently enough for commentators to appropriate the discourse for market-driven entertainment. Listeners joined in the production by adding their own layers of speculation. Ultimately, the discourse devolved into conspiracy theories in the service of campaign politics, far removed from the FLDS mothers' stated concerns.

Given the speed and the augmentation that characterizes the way information travels in an early twenty-first-century moment, rhetors can quickly lose control of the texts they produce. In fact, in an online context, the appropriation of their messages by others can almost be expected—whether maliciously or innocuously. Therefore, whether

we are producing texts or consuming them, rhetoricians must be alert to the potential that exists in this particular political, economic, and technological moment for a message's movement and (mis)application. In particular, feminist rhetoricians should consider the implications for women's discourse and its potential for masking or exposing agendas. In the following chapter, I extend existing rhetorical theory to these circulations in order to draw attention to the lack of terminology available to feminist rhetoricians that accounts for these potentialities, especially when discourses cross cultural and social barriers as the FLDS women's testimony did.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In reflecting upon the previous chapters, what do they offer of interest to feminist rhetoricians? This chapter will answer that question as well as suggest practical applications for rhetoric and composition studies. To review, Chapter 1 outlined the way in which rhetorics of self-determination served as the basis for mediated representations of FLDS women defending their religious identity and the integrity of their community. Chapter 2 then traces this discourse in other venues where it was linked to unrelated ideological symbols and election politics. These chapters demonstrate the uncritical acceptance of autonomy discourse ("This is my choice") in American media production and consumption as well as explore its usefulness in masking social, religious, and economic differences by serving as a commonplace that invokes other unrelated agendas. When a given discourse reaches this level of nearly universal acceptance, it threatens to lose its vitality because it becomes a catch-word, a Trojan horse which appears as a commonly-held value while accommodating contradictory material conditions. To mis-apply a Scriptural reference, such a term covers (or hides) a multitude of sins (I Peter 4:8). Given the murkiness and ubiquitousness of this discourse, how can and should rhetoricians respond to the conundrum of liberal discourse used in non-liberatory ways? As feminist rhetoricians, we need to extend the work of scholars that complicate and theorize networked rhetorics in order to generate vocabularies to account for the complex

networks of social, economic, religious, cultural, philosophical and geographic realities that constrain free choice.

When the FLDS mothers deviated from the collectivist ethic that privileges submission to one's community as espoused by Joseph Smith (Gore), they deployed a fundamentally American rhetorical device that invokes a free, rational agent, uninhibited by social and family ties. Their audience was primarily non-Mormon American media consumers who identified with the symbolic discourse of free choice, a value that is a nearly universal, quintessentially American ethic. Therefore, many sectors within the court of public opinion were blinded to the philosophical difference between the FLDS community and popular conceptions of traditional all-American society. This conflation of conflicting social values permitted media producers to speak of the situation in oversimplified, reductionist terms: either the women chose to live this way or they didn't; given their discourse, it seemed to naturally follow that it was their choice to do so. Therefore, the state had no reason to intervene. This tidy logical schema not only impeded a more accurate understanding of the material conditions and identity constructions of the situation, but reinforced the conceit that women within the larger American population also construct their identities via the same logic of uninhibited autonomy.

Feminist scholars have soundly deconstructed and critiqued this conceit of American self-determinism, exposing its basis in patriarchal ideology (Diamond and Quinby 194). So while it is tempting to write it off as merely a relic of irrational masculine desire, Habermas theorizes that this sort of public persuasion is not irrational at

all, but is orchestrated by media producers for economic ends (Finlayson 24). Thus the self-reinforcing feedback loop comprised of commentators and their audience within the context of newer technologies is far from a transparent process of news production and dissemination.

First of all, a market-driven news industry in a neoliberal moment necessarily privileges conceptions of individuals as free, rational agents. Thus mediated images of individuals claiming autonomy and presenting an emotionally-laden, poignant narrative of events fit well into this schema. Secondly, this discourse of self-determination is then appropriated by commentators–who self-identify as entertainers, but pose as political analysts–who rely on associative imagery to convey an implicit political message. This associative imagery is critical because of its potential for creating a veneer of commonality between sites where little or none exists.

Given the interactive medium of the Internet, individuals who once were quite limited in their role as audience now become an important cog in the machinery of production. Commenting features of web-hosted newspapers, videos, and blogs facilitate a feedback loop whereby consumers are also producers. The newly-configured relationship of co-producers can now create a whole greater than the sum of its parts. In the situations analyzed in the previous chapter, for example, the commentator may refer to a national symbol or commonplace in order to make an inference about an unrelated event. The audience/co-producers, in turn, state explicitly what had only been implied. This interaction, then, provides fodder for multitudes of self-styled political bloggers who traffic in paranoia and conspiracy theories. As the discourse moves outward through the

networked sites, the narrative becomes decoupled from the concerns of its originators. In the case I explore here, rhetorics of self-determination fueled this machine and served as the commonplace that united ultimately disparate parts.

What then do we make of the feedback loop sustained by mediated representations of iconic ideals such as freedom, agency, and self-determination? One conclusion might be to critique the tendency of the media—which one could argue is merely a reflection of a larger American ethos—to oversimplify a given issue into a yes/no, black/white, right/wrong issue. In the case of FLDS mothers, the question was, "Do you choose to live this way?" The implication was that if they answered in the affirmative, then Texas law enforcement acted wrongfully. On the other hand, if they did not choose or wish to live that way, then intervention was called for. What this oversimplification does not take into account is the possibility that the wrong question was being asked indicating the presence of a Lyotardian *differend* because an either/or question about personal autonomy may not take into account the negative implications for one of the parties (9).

This impasse might be better illustrated by considering a situation closer home. If we were to ask whether professional middle-class American women choose to wear make-up and heels, could this question be answered adequately by either yes or no? On one hand, no one is forcing them to wear make-up and heels; women ostensibly choose to spend significant amounts of their own hard-earned money acquiring what are more or less status symbols. Therefore, it appears the answer would be, yes, they do choose to do so. On the other hand, these same women have little control over the actual design and

production of these items. Further, many women consider these accouterments essential to professional and economic advancement; a woman in a pony-tail and sneakers is not typically associated with positions of influence. From this perspective, then, we could conclude that no, professional, American women actually have limited choice in determining their own appearances. As Wendy Brown asks, "What makes choices 'freer' when they are constrained by secular and market organizations of femininity and fashion rather than by state or religious law?" (*Regulating* 189). If it is problematic to conclusively determine whether or not many women in the American mainstream freely choose the elements of their lives, then we should approach the choices of women in other (sub)cultures with the same openness to complexity and nuance.

In this particular case, rhetorics of self-determination dramatically limited the range of possible responses to the situation. Since the FLDS mothers said they did in fact choose to live on the Ranch, speaking as supposedly willing defenders of their community and declining the relative autonomy offered to them by the battered-women's shelters, a dualistic understanding of free choice that takes their discourse at face value threatens to prohibit state interference. More importantly, it served as a barrier to investigations of alleged child abuse and underage marriage—investigations which recent events reveal were entirely warranted. As of March 19, 2010, no less than four FLDS leaders had been prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced to double-digit prison terms on the basis of evidence uncovered during the raid (Waller). Had Texas officials been swayed by the conservative commentary in the weeks following the children's removal, these crimes may have continued unpunished.

On the other hand, to entirely discount the women's discourse is also problematic. For one thing, it threatens to objectify them and deprive them of rhetorical agency much like their community has been accused of doing. Concerned members of the public can do little more than walk away shaking their heads in dismay, and the state is left with an even greater quandary on its hands: practically speaking, what is to be done with more than four hundred children and their (presumably) incapable mothers? Maintaining them in shelters and foster homes is an unsustainable long-term solution.

Both of these discursive responses serve to detract attention from vital issues, failing to take into account the complex social and cultural structures of these women's lives. To reiterate Dingo's observation, women cannot be the only object of study for feminist rhetoricians; rather, we must recognize the networks of relationships that characterize their lives (494). Thus evaluating women's choices as if they occur in a social cultural, and religious vacuum imposes an eighteenth-century Enlightenment conception of autonomy that assumes an unattached male agent, a far cry from the mosaic of many women's lives. Just as with non-FLDS women, it is impossible to conclusively determine whether personal rewards or a sense of duty is the basis for a mother's care for her family. It is impossible to conclusively determine whether any religious adherent remains faithful out of a sense of imposed guilt and social obligation or because of spiritual well-being. In any society, extended family members maintain relationships in spite of acrimonious differences of opinion. These examples demonstrate that even though an individual may find a given social and cultural environment problematic, removing oneself from the situation is far more involved than a simple, self-

interested choice. Women who leave abusive situations—particularly within the context of closed communities—are not only breaking ties with oppressors, but also with family members with whom they share deep and meaningful attachments (See Jessop, Mackert, and Wall and Pulitzer). So while on one hand, yes, they may "choose" to remain, it is a choice made in the face of many factors beyond their control.

Nineteenth-century proto-feminists recognized this complex relationship between self-determination and assymetrical power structures. Speaking of the freedoms women of her day desired, Jane West wrote that "the liberty ladies sought was 'not the power of doing what you please, for that is licentiousness, but the security that others shall not do what they please to you'" (qtd. in Bannet 36). Rhetorics of self-determination that assume a dualistic view of individual choice conflate these two aspects of personal liberty. Yet the freedom of doing as one pleases is worth little if others who are more powerful can do whatever they want to you. Regarding the justice of a given situation, then, as a facile matter of free will is a *differend* that masks the power of socially-constructed constraints. Instead, a feminist alternative to this rhetorical binary should emphasize attention to the particulars of the situation, resisting the temptation to make global definitions of freedom and autonomy.

Understanding the interaction between FLDS mothers, journalists, commentators, and media consumers within the context of a network clarifies the ways in which "meaning and force" augmented rhetorics of self-determination such that the issue now has implications for women far removed from Eldorado, Texas (Dingo 494). Not only did the appropriation of the women's narrative by commentators and bloggers culturally and

politically distant from them overshadow the material conditions of the community, but in doing so they reinforced the weight rhetorics of self-determination are given in much American public discourse. As much as the rhetoric masked abuses at the Ranch, it also obstructs the broader American public from identifying social, cultural, and material constraints in mainstream situations where policies, punishments, and privileges are based on assumptions of self-determination.

Aside from the power of American myths of self-reliance, questions that assume a yes or no answer fuel these deployments of self-determinist rhetoric. The answers to such questions suggest global responses to very specific situations. In other words, they do not facilitate a plurality of answers specifically suited to a given situation; instead, such questions suggest that the presence or absence of autonomy is constant across dramatically different cultures, classes, and religions. Therefore, even though women in marginal religious sects may seem far removed from mainstream concerns, they deserve the attention of feminist rhetoricians because the mediated representations of such women are ultimately linked to broader audiences through television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet. When these linkages inaccurately or inappropriately deploy feminist discourses, feminists risk implying consent when they do not respond.

Krista Ratcliffe's concept of *rhetorical listening* suggests one way to respond to the rhetorical disjunctures, the differences that arise across rhetorical situations. According to Ratcliffe, "A rhetoric of listening interrupts the emphasis of Western logic to perpetrate either-or reasoning, for instance, to recognize commonalities or to recognize differences" (95). Instead, rhetorical listening invites awareness of both commonalities

and differences—critical concerns for cross-cultural communication. Ratcliffe quotes Lorde who warns against "the distortions which result from our misnaming [differences]" (95). Rhetorical listening disrupts the work of commonplaces—such as rhetorics of self-determination—that threaten to erase critical social and cultural differences between groups of women by focusing only on differences (religious identity and constraining social norms) or similarities (U.S. citizenship and whiteness). Considering both the differences and the similarities facilitates "negotiation, for questioning not just others' claims, assumptions, and conclusions but also our own. [… W]hile also continually asking: What's at stake? For whom? And why?" (97). These questions continually interrogate circulating discourses, exposing the ambiguity of commonplaces in order to bring the focus back to the materiality of the situation.

Rhetorical listening is one possible starting point for generating a more vibrant rhetorical theory that acknowledges the uniqueness of women's lived experiences in the context of the choices and constraints that characterize them. Such work could potentially begin to move discourses beyond the superficial question of whether or not women are autonomous in given situations. Such a theory could begin to reflect the multiplicity that exists even within local contexts, resisting the tendency to impose superficial sameness at the expense of material and cultural differences.

One example of how a theory based on rhetorical listening might disrupt assumptions of sameness or difference is in the way U.S. Americans think about polygamy as a family structure that does or does not marginalize women. For example, the HBO show *Big Love* is, for all intents and purposes, the face of polygamy in the

dominant American culture. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the comfortably-suburban family of Bill Henrickson, the male protagonist who is married to three women, is at all reflective of the vast majority of people living in plural marriages. That is to say, this dominant face of polygamy at best represents only a narrow slice of the women who actually engage in the practice. Yet this is not to say that most women practicing polygamy experience it the same way FLDS women: not all groups who practice polygamy engage in underage marriage nor force unwilling participants to comply as the FLDS have been accused of. Thus, to presume that women's autonomy in a Henrickson-type household or at the YFZ Ranch is at all proportionate or that either one of these is a "true" representation of polygamy does a disservice to the complex lived experiences of women in such circumstances. A rhetorical theory that distinguishes between the material, social, and cultural differences of such women's experiences, a theory that asks "What's at stake? For whom? And why?" would begin to prevent us from conflating disparate individuals, identities, and situations and turn us toward more more accurately and specifically reflecting the needs and desires of women concerned (Ratcliffe 97).

At the same time that such a theory would address particulars, it should do so with an eye to the way they interact with and function within larger social systems. In the present example, such a rhetorical theory should take into account both the uniqueness of the FLDS community as well as its position within and connections to the larger American society. In other words, we need a theory that not only gives us more nuanced ways to talk about different types and permutations of autonomy and agency, but also

acknowledges the political and economic structures that perpetuate uncritical acceptance of dominant discourses.

This kind of rhetorical theory has practical applications for both activist and pedagogical concerns. Rhetorical listening can interrupt the conundrum for feminists when they encounter the discourses of women who use self-determinist discourse to identify with oppressive social structures—whether inside or outside the mainstream. Instead of denouncing their testimony on one hand or uncritically accepting it on the other, rhetorical listening gives rhetoricians an opportunity to intervene by asking Ratcliffe's questions ("What's at stake? For whom? And why?"), potentially moving the conversation in more productive directions. For example, in the context of the FLDS media event, had more of these kinds of questions been posed by journalists and/or by feminists in online discussions, perhaps it would have helped move participants to think more critically about rhetorics of self-determination both in the situation at hand and in other situations generally.

Further, combining the questions of rhetorical listening with a network lens in the context of the classroom is one way to help students think about the world and engage more meaningfully with its plurality and variegation. When teaching argumentation, it is easy for students to become mired in a dualistic view of an issue, thinking of an argument in terms of who is right, who is wrong; thinking in terms of winners and losers. Well-meaning instructors may contribute to the problem by attempting to present "balanced" sides of an issue. Yet this move is based on an essentializing, dualistic assumption that limits discussion to pro/con debate rather than meaningful problem-solving. Instead,

hearing a discourse in terms of its stakeholders, its growth, its movement, and its moments of disjuncture invites complexity into the classroom.

For an example of how this might play out for a politically charged topic, in the current semester I am teaching a first year writing course entitled "Writing about Food." My first conception of the issue was along an organic vs. conventional divide; however, upon further reading, I encountered critiques of the organic-inspired critiques. I also learned that parties in food-production conflicts cannot be neatly categorized into villains and heroes. The more I read, the more complex the problems and possibilities became. Thus in assigning readings for my students, I have attempted to provide as broad a range of voices as possible. Is it balanced? I cannot conclusively answer yes or no because the very question implies a bifurcated issue that does not do justice to the many stakeholders involved. Therefore, when teaching writing in this context, a rhetoric of listening prompts students to critically assess advertisements that at first glance appear entirely "logical." It encourages them to interrogate the visual and textual arguments they encounter in terms of what is at stake: who stands to gain (or lose) as a result of this argument? Furthermore, how do meanings of words such as *organic, green*, and *sustainable* change and expand as different parties appropriate them? Who stands to gain (or lose) from a given definition? Although these questions draw on poststructuralist conceptions of multiplicity, at the same time they point students to very real, material implications.

Furthermore, this model is adaptable in the context of a women's studies course as well where students read, not only competing perspectives, but perspectives that

complicate the debates popularly associated with the issues. Should feminists denounce the wearing of religious scarves? Can a feminist be a housewife or must she pursue a career outside the home? Is feminism or multiculturalism more important? Although students in introductory-level courses may plead for dualistic answers to hot-button issues, such binaries risk inducing a level of relativism that eventually fosters cynicism on the part of students who feel bereft of agency in the face of impossible conundrums. However, by involving multiple perspectives, interrogating investments, and tracing rhetorical disjunctures, students may be empowered to recognize moments of potential engagement in specific situations that may result in real social change. If such agency falls short of promising total self-determination, at least it may help us identify in what ways it is both present and absent, enabling us to meaningfully, appropriately, and purposefully act.

TIMELINE

2008

April 3 – Raid begins.*

April 5 – 167 children taken into custody.*

April 7 – 401 children and 133 mothers have been removed or voluntarily left the Ranch.*

April 15 – Salt Lake Tribune and other journalists interview mothers who have returned to the Ranch. Three FLDS mothers are interviewed by CBS and *Deseret News*.

April 16 – Interviews with various FLDS mothers are aired on NBC, FOX News, and *Larry King Live.*

April 17 – Child custody hearings begin in Tom Green County, Texas. On or about this date, three FLDS mothers are interviewed on ABC.

April 18 – Associated Press publishes video of visit to YFZ Ranch

April 19 – Selected blog post is published on FreeRepublic.com.

April 20 – Selected clip of Michael Savage is posted to Youtube.

April 22 – CPS begins transitioning children from the shelters to foster homes across the state.*

May 22 – Judge Walther's ruling to remove the children from the Ranch is overturned.*

May 29 – Lisa Ling's investigative report airs on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*

2009

July 23 – Last child of the 439 removed from the Ranch is placed with her aunt, ending the custody battle.

2010

March 19 – Fourth FLDS man is convicted and sentenced; eight more FLDS men await trial (Waller).

*Source: "Timeline of Raid on FLDS-owned YFZ Ranch." *Deseret News*. 23 May 2008. Web. 2 May 2010.

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