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Between a rock and a hard place: Spaces of entrapment in *Big Love*

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The HBO cable drama *Big Love*, first aired in March 2006 and currently at the end of its third season, centers on modern-day Mormonism and, in creators' William Scheffer and Mark Olsen's words, examines "the subversive nature of how [Americans] deal with family values".¹ The series focuses on the complex existence of Bill Henrickson who must juggle between the outward appearances of the model businessman/founder and co-owner of a DIY chain called Home Plus and his hidden life as a polygamist in the suburbs of what we assume to be Salt Lake City, Utah. In this paper, I will attempt to show how the theme of entrapment functions within three specific types of spaces—geographical, emotional and ideological—in a series of 'triangular' relationships used to create narrative tensions linking the subplots of each episode. Representing the geographical spaces of entrapment are the sites of Juniper Creek, the prison-like fundamentalist compound under the control of the patriarch and "Prophet" Roman Grant; Bill's three suburban homes in Sandy, Utah housing his three wives and seven children; and Bill's business enterprise, Home Plus, site of his power struggle with Roman who demands 15% of the store's profits as a tithe to the United Effort Brotherhood. We will see that these spaces beg the political question of whether what goes on in the privacy of the home should or does really influence individuals' (be they fictional or real) standing in the public arena. In the style of the traditional soap opera, emotional spaces of entrapment involve the relationships of love, hate, jealousy and conflicting or divided loyalties between the

different characters, weaving the “web of secrets” (to quote the official website) to create interest while contributing to the viewer’s emotional entanglement in the protagonists’ lives; thus here the ‘triangular’ space of emotion consists not only of insights into “living the Principle” within the Henrickson household and the clashes it provokes between the Henrickson household and Juniper Creek, but also the emotional ties crafted and maintained to ‘trap’ the viewer/fan into a positive reading of the protagonist’s discourse and worldview. This will lead us to examine the ideological spaces of entrapment where the beliefs and practices of three different types of Mormonism collide, as well as another space where one can wonder how – and if – the viewers can be ‘trapped’ into approving of polygamy as practiced by Bill Henrickson because of the model to which they are forced to compare it (i.e. the Juniper Creek compound).

Reality and social realism

At least since the 1980s, television series and Hollywood movies have been perceived in the American culture as a battleground of ideological positions on traditional values, pitting the conservative religious right against the decadent, liberal stances of producers and screenwriters. According to conservative author and film critic Michael Medved in *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*,

Hollywood no longer reflects—or even respects—the values of most American families. On many of the important issues in contemporary life, popular entertainment seems to go out of its way to challenge conventional notions of decency. For example:

Our fellow citizens cherish the institution of marriage and consider religion an important priority in life; but the entertainment industry promotes every form of sexual adventurism and regularly ridicules religious believers as crooks or crazies.²

Big Love is no exception to this rule: the cultural “wars” on the meaning of marriage and family values are the backdrop to the controversial series that presents a new take on these themes by using polygamy as a focal point for commentary as stated by

the creators Scheffer and Olson who are themselves concerned with these questions because they are a gay couple. In a country where party platforms for national elections and high-visibility court cases expose the contradictions of the Constitutional issues concerning individual rights when applied to concepts such as same-sex marriage or the right of gay couples to adopt children, *Big Love* sheds new light on the debate. In the words of the creators, “we want to examine [family values] at a different level and without labels. Let’s take a look at people as people and find the values of the family that are worth celebrating separate of who the people are and how they’re doing it”.³ The emphasis on the environment of the protagonists and on social factors needed to ‘read’ or interpret *Big Love’s* messages thus situates the series in the mode of social realism, with its feeling of ‘nowness’ and socially extended content that give it a sense of realisticness.⁴

Such a politically aware understanding rests on knowledge of events in the ‘real world’ contemporary to the show: in our case, several federal investigations on actual polygamists and fundamentalist compounds in Utah, Arizona and Texas, in particular the case of Warren Jeffs who fled Utah to escape investigation and became one of the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted until his arrest and trial in 2007 (he is currently serving a sentence in Utah State Prison for two counts of rape). The media ‘buzz’ created by the coverage of police raids into FLDS⁵ compounds and investigative reports on the different ‘actors’ involved (abusive patriarchs, child brides, “lost boys”, sister-wives...) provided ample material for the scenario of *Big Love*; it has even been remarked that the choice to cast Harry Dean Stanton as patriarch and Prophet Roman Grant was due to his physical resemblance to Warren Jeffs. In another high-profile case in 2007, polygamist Rodney Holm and his three wives appealed to the Supreme Court to overturn his polygamy conviction by citing a Supreme Court ruling on gay rights in 2003. These real-world events pop up periodically in *Big Love* episodes, for example a scene in which Roman Grant comments on a TV report about Warren Jeffs, calling him a pervert and worrying out loud that such adverse media attention will ruin things for other polygamist sects; or another where Roman receives a local reporter to explain the historical and religious

reasons for polygamy, citing the gay rights Supreme Court case to justify the right to practice plural marriage.⁶

Last but not least, in the advertizing blitz that preceded the airing of the first season, Mormon protest against the misrepresentation of the Church of the Latter Day Saints was so strong that executive producers Tom Hanks and Gary Goetzman added a disclaimer at the end of the pilot episode: "According to a joint report issued by the Utah and Arizona Attorney General's Offices, July 2005, approximately 20,000 to 40,000 or more people currently practice polygamy in the United States. The Mormon church officially banned the practice of polygamy in 1890".⁷ There is much to be said about the role of the music which accompanies the message, a song which proclaims "I love America, her secret's safe with me/ And I know her wicked ways, the parts you never see". To conclude it can be said that *Big Love* relies heavily on the social experience of the viewer if its potential meanings are to be appreciated to the fullest, even if the multiple receptions remain within the control of the audience and may thus escape the creators' (stated) intentions. As John Fiske points out in *Television Culture*, "[the] blurring of the distinctions between the fictional and the real [...] reduces the power of the text to construct a viewing subject position. The text can only suggest that the various diegetic worlds are related, not self-contained: it cannot specify the links that the viewer makes between them".⁸

"Circle the wagons": geographical spaces of entrapment

As mentioned previously, the different spaces of entrapment in *Big Love* can be perceived as triangular in nature; we are first going to examine geographical spaces, that is physical sites or settings of the narrative and how they are depicted.

First, the suburban setting of Sandy, Utah where Bill lives with his wives Barb, Nicki and Margene and their combined total of seven children; this space projects the familiar TV show image of the white middle class suburban area with its look-alike house facades and identical, perfectly manicured lawns. The viewer recognizes this both in its traditional and more modern readings: one can understand it as representing a place of refuge and moral sanctity housing the perfect nuclear family of post-war America, with the TV reference being shows like *Father Knows Best* or

Leave It To Beaver;⁹ or on the contrary, the setting can be read as the site of dysfunctional families and dark secrets as in recent series such as *Desperate Housewives* or *Weeds* with their theme of the suburbs as a trap for its inhabitants, especially women.

The geographical space of the Henrickson homes is characterized by circularity; and despite the fact that Bill's three houses are shown in a row in the panoramic street shot of the pilot episode, the backyard shots show them in a U-shaped arrangement with a round swimming pool in the middle. Important family moments, such as the "sister-wives" planning the week or the entire family gathered for dinner are preceded by prayer with members holding hands in a circle.



At the same time, the name of the suburb, "Sandy", calls up the image of the desert as the emblematic landscape of the great Southwest and so reminds the viewer of the Mormon exodus to Utah in the mid-nineteenth century as well as of the Biblical reference to Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt; these intertextual references are reinforced in Season 1 Episode 3 in a scene where Roman Grant comments on a mural commemorating his people's historical trek.

Evoking Mormonism as a religious community which had to set itself apart from the outside world to flee persecution also brings to mind the idea of utopia, allowing for another reading of the Henrickson homes as a geographical space which offers an alternative, superior social order within the confines of the family circle, where equality and mutual love seem to reign supreme. And yet like many utopian schemes, it carries the seeds of its own destruction: the strict organization which bears no deviation or evolution; the pathological fear of strangers; or the potential totalitarian nature of the visionary who creates the system. All these flaws apply to the Henrickson family arrangement, especially for Nicki and Margene who have no legal existence as Bill's wives in secular society, so that the refuge of their homes is in fact a cage in which they remain captives if they want to be protected from the outside world. This is particularly the case for Nicki who systematically falls into the traps of consumer society; in Season 1 she has a shopping addiction which leads to 60,000 dollars in credit card debt, which in Season 2 becomes a gambling addiction when Bill buys a company called Weber Gaming and takes his wives to a video gambling room to convince them it is not sinful but a sound business investment. Being cut off from reality in this way also affects Bill's oldest children Ben and Sarah, both teenagers who must confront the temptations of 'normal' young people their age when outside of the home. Their parents' polygamist lifestyle leaves them caught between enclosing themselves in the family circle or going out into the real world of drinking, drugs and pre-marital sex.

The second geographical space is the compound at Juniper Creek, a sort of mirror-site reflecting a distorted image of what has been presented positively through Bill's situation. While Bill's plural marriage is located in the real world of modern secular society, Juniper Creek is secluded, even alienated, from the viewer's world of reference, illustrated by various scenes of driving across long stretches of deserted roads or through comments by characters on how long it takes to get there. Here the images of Juniper Creek are not "sandy" but dusty and extremely arid, not to say infertile, and the inhabitants seem to be living in abject conditions—the landscape is littered with shacks and broken-down cars—with only women and children visible as Bill's car drives into the compound and up to his mother's house.

We can note two preliminary reactions by the main characters: whereas Nicki rolls down the window and happily waves to two girls who call out her name (indicating she is an insider to the compound), Barb turns away from her window and looks at them with disgust out of the corner of one eye and over her shoulder. Again, the viewer recognizes the cultural implications of this place as symbolizing the model of pioneer society with its rugged living conditions and constant struggle to establish civilization in the wilderness. It is the model of the pre-industrial family as economic unit (with TV references to shows like *The Little House on the Prairie* or *Bonanza*), but with a twist: there are no men in sight, in a setting where one would expect to find the 'rugged individual' type of figure. The music is troubling and hints at the corrupt society soon to be unveiled; later scenes will show the leader Roman Grant and his demented son Alby driving around in Hummers, terrorizing all those who dare oppose them.

Contemporary 'social knowledge' allows the viewer to connect the fictional Juniper Creek compound to actual sites of fundamentalist polygamy in Utah and the horrors of incest and rape described in the media. Juniper Creek, then, seems to be a utopian communitarian project gone bad, a dystopian space where totalitarianism lurks behind the millenarian religious precepts of the "Prophet" Roman Grant. Bill's relationship to this space is complex, not only because he was born and raised there until he was expelled at the age of 14 (thus becoming a "lost boy") but also because his parents Lois and Frank, his brother Joey and sister-in-law Wanda still live there, not to mention that his second wife Nicki is Roman's and his first wife Adaleen's daughter, and Alby's sibling. These complicated subplots paint an even darker picture of life in the FLDS compound, where the mental instability of several characters (especially Alby and Wanda) points implicitly to probable inbreeding or even incestuous relationships. What is clear, in any case, in the scenes inside Juniper Creek, is that many of the women are trapped in this space, cut off from the 'real' world and subjugated by a handful of old men who collect them as wives and keep them perpetually pregnant as a way of controlling them—a feminist's worst nightmare.¹⁰

The third site of entrapment for Bill is his business, Home Plus, the geographic space of the public sphere. Here Bill is a media figure (shown through his TV ad for the grand opening of his second store for example), a respected businessman courted by the local business associations, and embodiment, in the eyes of the unknowing secular society, of the American Dream, a man who has risen from “lost boy” status to successful community member.



But this high visibility space is rife with danger: Bill risks exposure that would doom his business venture; his office is most frequently the site of damage control meetings with his partner and fellow polygamist Don Embrey as they stave off Wendy the accountant’s suspicions and plot how to neutralize Roman’s interference in their business development plans. Home Plus is the bone of contention between Bill and Roman; narrative hints help us understand that Bill’s first Home Plus store was financed with United Effort Brotherhood funds, trapping Bill in a profit-return system he seeks to escape when opening the second store. This sub-plot of conflict reaches an apex of mutual self-destruction at the end of Season 1, when Roman exposes Bill as a polygamist in an anonymous call to the governor while Bill discloses secret UEB financial records to the Utah state attorney general in hopes of getting Roman indicted. In Season 2 the plot thickens as Bill double-crosses Roman in the business deal to buy Weber Gaming, only to become entangled with an even worse group of renegade Mormons who use kidnapping and torture to get their way. In any case, the series seems to imply that money-making and religion make strange bedfellows, with Bill’s arguments and justifications to his wives becoming lamer and lamer as such questions are addressed. For polygamy has its own rules, we discover:

Roman needs a unanimous vote of the United Effort Brotherhood board of trustees for new business ventures, while Bill is morally bound to get a unanimous vote from his three wives, a far greater feat it would seem; this is the central theme of Season 2 Episode 21 ("Circle the Wagons") in which the three sister-wives understand their power to control Bill in his financial adventures, something that apparently had not occurred to them until that moment.

"God only knows what I'd be without you": Emotional spaces of entrapment

The different geographical spaces naturally lead us to the emotional reactions which they solicit among the characters themselves as well as between the characters and the viewers. Although it is not possible to explore all the complicated relationships and multiple subplots within the scope of this paper, we are going to take a closer look at a few of the emotional spaces of the primary text (i.e. the narrative itself) before examining the central role of secondary texts as a vital space for viewer involvement.

Because emotional spaces are the privileged site for commentary on marriage and family values, most attention at least in Season 1 is focused on Bill and his family affairs. In the same way that the family is contained geographically in the suburban home setting, husband-wife relationships evolve mainly in the closed space of the bedroom. It is here that we discover the first 'trap' of the polygamist lifestyle: Bill cannot keep up with three sexually active women and has to take high doses of Viagra to perform (Season 1 Episode 1, is entitled "Viagra Blue") until he gets blurred vision and chest pains. The sexual rules used to schedule with whom Bill should be sleeping and when does not exclude 'illicit' copulation with a different wife on the side. Yet in this situation Bill seems more like the pawn than the king, at the mercy of power struggles between Barb, Nicki and Margene that can literally 'cost' him not only physically but financially; the scene in which Bill is apologizing to Margene for having had sex with Nicki in Margene's bed on "Barb's day" ends with a close-up of a tear running down Margene's cheek just before she tells Bill "I still need a car". Trapped in this emotional blackmail, Bill will actually come home the next day with a brand new car for his third wife.

The theme of the sanctity of marriage, set in the framework of polygamy, is presented through several conversations between Bill and his eldest son Ben, conversations which intend to counter any suspicions on the viewer's part that plural wives only means abundant sex. On the contrary, "living the Principle" as Bill calls it, is a deeply religious conviction linked to the Mormon belief in a celestial kingdom where the family will be reunited in the hereafter; it is not to be taken lightly nor entered into if one is not called upon by God, as illustrated in the scene from the episode "Damage Control" (Season 2, Episode 13) in which Bill shares with his prayer group his conviction that polygamy is the true path to heaven.



The intensity of the scene, the sincerity of Bill's beliefs, cannot help but move we the viewers to sympathize with him, forcing us to adhere to such principles and to accept his vision of family values even if we were to find them reprehensible in another context. Here we can say that we are being confronted with a radical way of understanding the family which needs to be rationally argued against the status quo so that it appears to be the 'natural' perspective;¹¹ yet it is confusing because it seems so mainstream or dominant in its content, i.e. a man assuming responsibility for his family as head of household and who calls upon God to help him through the trial of a possible family break-up. Another such subversive or radical emotional space is the one dedicated to the relationships of the wives among themselves, where Barb, Nicki and Margene profess love for one another while secretly competing against each other for Bill's attention. It is an ambiguous space where reader reactions and

interpretations can vary the most, where it is possible to perceive a feminist heaven or, on the contrary, a feminist hell.

Concerning now the role of secondary texts in 'entrapping' the viewer into added emotional involvement, the *Big Love* website offers special spaces that allow for continuing encroachment of the fictional on the real; the website proposes three different spaces:

- "the web of secrets" where fans can "relive all of the last season's secrets from *Big Love* and explore thousands of secrets of strangers" (that is secrets supposedly added by 'actual' visitors of the site). Much can be said about the texts that appear in this space, where the names of the authors are aliases ("Big in Duluth", "Fool in Arizona", etc) reminding the reader of agony columns or movies like *Sleepless in Seattle* (dir. Nora Ephron, 1993);
- "Margene's blog" where fans can exchange with the character on her life and evolving emotions towards her marriage, her sister-wives and her pregnancy, all fictional of course and most certainly not even written by actress Ginnifer Goodwin who plays Margene in the series;
- a *Big Love* bulletin board where fans are invited to "catch up on what happened in Season 3 and discuss what's next", and to exchange on their impressions of the show among themselves with messages such as:

Big Love is easy to get addicted to and it does seem to blend with your life. If you have any experience with cultish fundamental compounds then the show brings even more to the table. Some of it is dead on, while other stuff is a bit over the top....although it is fictitious they seem to have done their research on "fundys". Who am I to judge though.....most people deem me to be a "fundy" as well....I would argue though that if I was....I wouldn't be watching HBO. Perhaps I am just a hypocritical fundy *sigh*. (posted by "TrueProphet")

Such viewer creation of, or contribution to, secondary texts does not mean that *Big Love* fans are "cultural dopes" incapable of distinguishing between character and real-life actors; rather the self-deprecating tone of "TrueProphet" indicates the intention to maintain an illusion, a conspiracy entered into by the viewer in order to

increase the pleasure of the program. In John Fiske's words, "Deliberate self-delusion is fun: it involves playing with the boundary between the representation and the real, and playing with the duality of the viewer's reading position as it switches between involvement and detachment".¹²

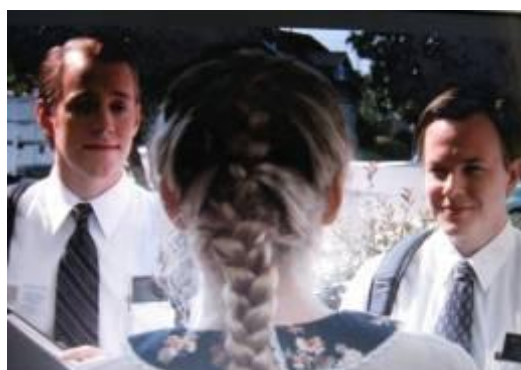
"The Writing on the Wall": ideological spaces of entrapment

The last spaces I propose to examine are the ideological ones, since one of the core questions of *Big Love* is its treatment of Mormonism in its different forms. Passions ran high on this subject before the first season ever hit the screen, situated as it was in the context of FBI raids on FLDS compounds. Three representations of the Mormon religion compete for viewer attention in the show: the fundamentalist version practised at Juniper Creek; the modern Mormons that make up most of Utah's LDS community in present-day America (represented by characters such as Pam the neighbor, Sarah's friend Heather, Wendy the Home Plus accountant and Cindy, Barbara Henrickson's sister); and Bill's private brand of marginalized Mormonism forbidden by the mainstream church but seemingly more evolved than Roman's version of fundamentalist polygamy. Bill's version (and the one promoted by the show's producers, one could say) is represented in the opening credits sequence which according to Scheffer and Olsen illustrates "the underlying rationale for polygamy itself, the promise of ultimate salvation".¹³ The sequence is supposed to have a fairy-tale aura about it, with the microcosm of polygamy equated with the ideal family lifestyle, and the Beach Boys' song adding an 'Americana' feel. First a heavenly light shines on Bill, symbol of the divine inspiration of his fundamental Mormon beliefs; then he is joined on the ice consecutively by Barb, Nicki and Margeen who all join hands and skate in a circle, i.e. their circle of love and family values; suddenly a crack in the ice, symbol of the separation in this world, appears, and we see the characters wandering through a series of veils then finally meet at the table of God, in the celestial kingdom of the hereafter.



Four shots from the credits sequence: the three wives join Bill on the ice; crack in surface symbolizing death that separates them; fleeting encounters in veiled passage to heaven; united in the celestial kingdom

The irony of Bill's situation is that they are living in a predominantly Mormon environment; but because he is living illegally according to modern LDS principles and Utah state laws, neither he nor his family can be church-going Mormons. This leads Pam and Carl (the neighbors across the street) to send missionaries to try and convert the Henricksons, causing a confrontation between Nicki and the proselytisers.



Nicki, with her braided hairdo, button-up long-sleeved shirt and long skirt brands her visibly as a “FLDS-er”; her extended knowledge of the Book of Mormon tips off the missionaries as to her true nature, thus exposing her as a polygamist although no connection is made at this point in the plot to Bill and the others. Pam later tells Margene that “polygamists are like cockroaches”. Another take on polygamy comes from Barb’s devoutly Mormon sister Cindy who claims “when you followed Bill into polygamy you couldn’t have shocked us more if you’d put a towel on your head and converted to Islam”. Wendy, the accountant at Home Plus, also launches her own private investigation into the Henrickson family situation when she accidentally discovers Barb’s, Nicki’s and Margene’s wills on Bill’s desk. The pressure from mainstream Mormons on Bill’s lifestyle increases within the subplot dedicated to this theme; it can be said, however, that all of these scenes depict unsympathetic images of mainstream Mormons, showing them as straight-laced, intolerant and prating moralists rather than tolerant, well-meaning Christians.

The fundamentalist branch of Mormonism is of course presented to the viewer early in Season 1 when Roman Grant is interviewed by local reporters. The accent is on the history of Mormonism, and the fundamentalist viewpoint that secular society has unjustly interfered with private religious convictions, as explained by Roman as he comments a mural of the events:

Joseph Smith, unearthing the long lost tablets of the Neeophites in Palmyra, New York. Brigham Young, our second president, leading us on our great trek into the American West [...], into the beautiful Salt Lake Valley where we as a people fought to defend polygamy [...]. You see, the principle of plural marriage was God’s sacred gift to us; but in 1890 the so-called leaders in Salt Lake buckled to outside pressure and repudiated polygamy and the teachings of our beloved prophet Joseph Smith. We alone have kept the principle alive – we are the one true church. (Season 1, Episode 3)

The questions asked by the reporter concerning violence, abuse and child brides are, as we said earlier, anchored in the contemporary reality of real-life polygamists under attack by state attorneys and the F.B.I., allowing the viewer to ‘read’ this scene and

others depicting Juniper Creek in the light of other media representations. The two opposed versions of polygamy finally collide in a scene where Bill, doubting his capacity to win the war against Roman over the Home Plus stores and the disruptions it causes inside his own family circle, is watching a video of himself from the past; he is confronted here with his own denunciation of polygamy and the expression of his gratitude toward mainstream Mormonism for helping him integrate secular society, but from the viewing position of a practising polygamist estranged from the church and in danger of being exposed as he had exposed others in the past.

Last but not least, the most interesting ideological 'trap' that can be mentioned in conclusion is not inside the show; it is the show itself. Because its starting point and initial inspiration are anchored in a specific cultural moment with certain societal and political events giving the show its ideological impetus, the fading of the issues from the limelight has a definite impact on the viewer's interest. When the show lost the immediacy of arguments on marriage and family values echoed in the culture at large during the presidential campaign of 2008 for example, it became necessary to turn to other 'tricks of the trade' of the soap opera genre to keep the plot moving. The result was a drop in audience from 5 million at the end of Season 1 to a mere 1.3 million for the Season 3 finale. Even though the website declares that Season 3 "continues to explore the evolving institution of marriage through this typically atypical family", the theme of polygamy has perhaps reached its limits that will lead to the termination of *Big Love* in future HBO programming.

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NOTES

¹ Brian Moylan, p. 2.

² Michael Medved, p. 10.

³ Moylan, p. 1.

⁴ See Fiske, p. 22-23.

⁵ Fundamental Latter Day Saints.

⁶ The case in question is *Lawrence and Garner v. State of Texas* in which the Supreme Court ruled on 26 June 2003 that sodomy laws are unconstitutional. "In *Lawrence vs. Texas*, two gay men say the state of Texas deprived them of privacy rights and equal protection under the law when they were arrested in 1998 for having sex in a Houston home. A neighbor had reported a 'weapons disturbance' at the home of John G. Lawrence, and when police arrived they only found two men having sex. Lawrence and another man, Tyron Garner, were held overnight in jail and later fined \$200 each for violating the state's Homosexual Conduct law. The neighbor was later convicted of filing a false police report. All sodomy laws in the US are now unconstitutional and unenforceable when applied to non-commercial consenting adults in private." <http://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/lawrence/lawrence.htm> consulted October 25, 2009.

⁷ Brady, p. 1.

⁸ Fiske, p. 147.

⁹ See Spigel, p. 41.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note here that such fundamentalist-style compounds are common in dystopian fiction by women in the 1970s and 1980s where they are depicted as representative of the ultimate horror tale of conservative backlash against the feminist movement; examples are *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985) and *The Gate to Women's Country* by Sherri S. Tepper (1986).

¹¹ See Fiske, p. 134.

¹² Fiske, p. 121.

¹³ Bonus features, HBO video DVD 1.