

Introduction

Polyqueer Sexualities

A man and woman are in an open relationship. They have agreed that having sexual partners outside of their couple relationship is permissible. One night, when her partner is in another city, the woman has sex with the man's best friend.

A man is in love with two people at the same time. He is under tremendous pressure from his family and community to be a respectable black man by attending church, having a successful career, and marrying a beautiful, talented, and smart black woman. The woman he loves is perfect, and he wants to marry her. However, he is also in love with his best friend, with whom he has a sexual relationship. While he loves this man and has loved other men, he has never felt at home in the "gay community" and does not identify as gay. His best friend is well aware of his relationship with the woman, but the woman has no idea he is in love with his best friend.

A woman has a twelve-year affair with a man other than her husband. Over the twelve years, despite pleas from her lover to leave her husband, she refuses because she loves them both. One evening, her husband—knowing he shouldn't, but unable to resist the temptation—listens to a voicemail message on his wife's cell phone. It is a message from her lover saying that he can't live without her and needs to see her. Enraged, the husband swears to himself that he will find the other man and kill him.

A married man tells a friend that he and his wife had a threesome with another woman. With pride, he tells the friend that it was "every guy's dream"

and that he had a great time. When the friend asks him if he'd ever have a threesome with his wife and another man, he balks with repulsion and says, "No way. I'm not gay, and I would never want to see my wife have sex with someone else."

What do these vignettes have in common? With whom do you identify, if anyone? Do you judge some and sympathize with others? While most people might read these vignettes and cringe and shake their heads in disgust at the disruption and possible destruction of the heterosexual couple through sexual infidelity, I see potentialities.

Advocating for queer utopian politics, José Esteban Muñoz (2009) writes, "Unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense" (9). No doubt, what is present in these scenarios is non-monogamy, and we assume that what is eminent is some kind of violation of the integrity of the couple.

We all know how these stories should unfold. A man is expected to reject the woman who becomes lovers with his best friend; choose one or the other—the perfect woman *or* a gay identity; if not kill his wife's lover, use violence to get him out of the picture; and vociferously decline the invitation for a threesome with another man. The woman, in contrast, should expect to lose her partner and her new lover—his best friend; live a "lie" because her partner is "on the down low"; end the love affair or lose her family; enjoy a threesome with another woman but never entertain the possibility of, let alone request, a threesome with another man. The only viable path is one of *either* relationship destruction and emotional trauma *or* restoring the couple through monogamy.

In her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed (2007) offers a phenomenological approach to thinking about sexual orientation. According to Ahmed, heteronormativity is a "straight" line from one's position as a gendered and sexual subject to objects in the world, not just in terms of objects of desire, but also in choosing a life. She writes, "The lines we follow might . . . function as

forms of ‘alignment,’ or as ways of being in line with others. We might say that we are orientated when we are in line. We are ‘in line’ when we face the direction that is already faced by others” (15). In order to be “in line” with the direction faced by others, the individuals in the vignettes above must choose monogamy. Ahmed goes on to write,

In the case of sexual orientation, it is not simply that we have it. To become straight means that we not only have to turn toward the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture, but also that we must “turn away” from objects that take us off this line. . . . The concept of “orientations” allows us to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others, through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such a gesture of return. (21)

One of the objects given to us by heterosexual culture is the *monogamous couple*. In order to live a “good life” of sexual and emotional intimacy, we must turn away from other lovers. Perhaps, then, a queer life would mean reorienting oneself toward other lovers, and non-monogamy would constitute a queer life.

The people described in the situations above could “fail to make such a gesture of return” to monogamy and choose a different line. A man could accept a love affair between his partner and best friend or enthusiastically say “yes” to a threesome with another man. What if the man who is simultaneously in love with a woman and a man were honest with himself and his lovers, refuses to identify as straight or gay, and insists on being openly polyamorous with both of them, and what if they both agree? Even the man whose wife is having a twelve-year affair could, if he chose, somehow learn to accept the “other” man as part of the family; after all, the wife and “other” man have also been in a long-term relationship and, in that sense, their relationship has been part of

the family all along. What if having more than one long-term partner was available to wives as well as husbands, and tolerated or even expected across and within all races and classes?

What would have to change or be transfigured for these non-monogamous, non-dyadic outcomes to be possible? The answer, I will argue in this book, is the embodiment and structure of gendered sexuality as it intersects with race and class and manifests in individual identity, interpersonal relationships, face-to-face interactions, and cultural representations. My concern here is what *effect* poly (involving more than two people) relationship choices might have, not just on the individuals involved, but also, if chosen collectively, on social relations more generally. Discussing her own experience of entering a lesbian relationship mid-life, Ahmed writes, “Some lines might be marks of the refusal to reproduce: the lines of rebellion and resistance that gather over time to create new impressions on the skin surface or on the skin of the social” (18). What if the potentialities for polyamory become a new line or orientation? How might poly relationships and their representation “create new impressions on the skin surface” (the body and identity) or “on the skin of the social” (social structure)?

My argument is that turning away from the monogamous couple through poly sexualities offers an opportunity to reorient not just relationships, but also gender and race relations. While institutionalized and compulsory monogamy closes off the possibility of non-dyadic resolutions to the scenarios above, it is also the dominance and superiority of white heteromascularity as a set of cultural expectations, a social location, and an embodied experience that depends on compulsory monogamy and thus obscures the queer path of poly sexualities. Stated another way, institutionalized, compulsory monogamy insists on a dyadic resolution for all regardless of gender or race, but it is gender and race privilege that are at stake in the narratives we tell about monogamy and its failures.

The central goal of this book, then, is to begin developing a theoretical framework for identifying how compulsory and institutionalized

monogamy is *constitutive of and legitimates* the discursive construction and institutionalization of gender as a racialized, hierarchical binary that situates certain forms of masculinity as superior and dominant in relationship to the inferior and subordinate feminine and/or the racialized other.

I approach compulsory monogamy in a similar way to how Adrienne Rich (1983) interrogated compulsory heterosexuality. According to Rich, compulsory heterosexuality is a network or system of social beliefs, customs, and practices that compel women into intimate relationships with men. As an institution, compulsory heterosexuality systematically ensures men's access to and "ownership" of women's bodies, labor, and children. According to Rich, compulsory heterosexuality is characterized by male identification, androcentrism, and the erasure of lesbian existence, and, as such, prevents women from bonding with each other sexually, emotionally, and politically. In her groundbreaking essay, Rich suggests that woman-identification and lesbian sexuality are important to feminist practice because they refuse and disrupt compulsory heterosexuality as a central mechanism of men's dominance over and access to women.

But whatever [compulsory heterosexuality's] origins, when we look hard and clearly at the extent and elaboration of measures designed to keep women within a male sexual purlieu, it becomes an inescapable question whether the issue we have to address as feminists is not simply "gender inequality," nor the domination of culture by males, nor mere "taboos against homosexuality," but the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access. One of the means of enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent that rises fragmentedly to view from time to time only to become submerged again. (191)

Like Rich, I am interested in how institutionalized sexual arrangements support heteromasculine interests and ascendancy. However,

instead of focusing on the relationship between compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchal marriage, my focus is on the contemporary American context of gender and sexual politics and social relations and how the discursive conflation of the *pure relationship* (Giddens 1992) with the monogamous couple supports, legitimizes, and naturalizes a hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity.¹

As a sociologist, I follow in Rich's feminist footsteps but reorient my theoretical focus away from radical feminist theory, where men are the oppressors and women are the oppressed, and toward gender sociology and queer theory to theorize the monogamous couple as central to white heteromale privilege and superiority and to social and cultural *regimes of normalcy* implicated in power relations and sexual stratification. I argue that consensual non-monogamy, like lesbian sexuality according to Rich, "rises . . . to view from time to time" in the feminist consciousness and feminist theory "only to become submerged again." Given the emergence in the mainstream media of polyamory as a viable relationship form, I will argue that it is imperative that feminist, queer, and critical race theorists take this opportunity to unpack mononormativity, develop an interest in the queer, feminist, and anti-racist potential of polyamory, and advocate and cultivate *polyqueer* sex and relationships.

Queer Theories of Normativity

Following Michel Foucault's claim that the proliferation of discourses of sexual normalcy is a central axis of power in modern Western cultures, queer theory interrogates the discursive construction of normal, healthy, moral desire and sexual practices not just as a mechanism of disciplinary power, but also as a contested terrain of sexual politics. Queer theorists place *normativity* at the center of understanding, interrogating, and deconstructing how institutionalized regimes of sexual normalcy are implicated in establishing and maintaining social privilege and material inequalities. As Gayle Rubin (1984) suggests, those who fall

inside the “charmed circle” of sexual normalcy are perceived as moral and deserving citizens while those who are defined as “perverts” are cast out as social pariahs not deserving of the rights of citizenship. As a social scientist, Rubin argues that the charmed circle of sexual normalcy is not only a discursive construction; it is an organizing rationale for institutionalized structures of privilege and disadvantage. Legal definitions of family, educational goals and curricula, criminal law, and access to and protections against discrimination in employment, housing, and health care, for instance, systematically confer benefits on those who fall or are perceived to fall within the charmed circle of sexual normalcy while denying those benefits to people who do not.

In addition to focusing on patterns of sexual behavior, attitudes and beliefs about sex, and discrimination against LGBTQ populations, sociologists of sexuality also are interested in *normativity* or the workings of privilege as they play out in everyday, normative meanings and practices as well as in the policies and structure of large-scale institutions.² Incorporating the queer theoretical focus on regimes of normalcy, the sociological study of sexuality has expanded to include theory and research that interrogates both representations of sexuality and institutionalized practices that marginalize or erase certain erotic tastes, practices, and relationships. From a sociological perspective, our focus is on understanding how sexual normalcy is central to or an organizing rationale for social structure and social relations more generally.

Building on the work of Rich, Foucault, Rubin, and others, queer theorists and sociologists of sexuality define *heteronormativity* as the social, cultural, and institutionalized meanings and practices that systematically confer privilege in the forms of status, authority, and material resources on heterosexual people who conform to societal norms and expectations for living a “good life.” Heteronormativity includes, but is not limited to, marriage between one man and one woman, a definition of family that hinges on the presence of dependent children, relationships based on love and commitment rather than sex, relationship longevity, active participation in capitalism in terms of both employ-

ment and consumption, and monogamy. As a regime of normalcy, heteronormativity privileges those who follow and embody these norms and systematically disadvantages those who do not.

More recent work in queer theory has identified *homonormativity* as the neoliberal lesbian and gay rights movements' emphasis on assimilation to heteronormativity as a strategy for gaining entrance into the charmed circle. By claiming a desire to serve in the military, legally marry, and adopt children, some lesbian and gay activists emphasize their similarity to "normal" heterosexuals as a legitimate reason for legal, social, and political citizenship. However, as many queer activists and theorists have argued, even if most gay men and lesbians gain access to the charmed circle, the regime of sexual normalcy remains intact as an institutionalized system of privilege and disadvantage. While some lesbian and gay couples—namely Western, white, middle-class, gender-conforming, and monogamous couples—clearly benefit from access to military service, marriage, and traditional family forms, those who do not look or act like "normal" (white, middle-class, gender-conforming, and monogamous) heterosexuals are still denied the rights of citizenship.

While there is no doubt that Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978) is a foundational text in the emergence of queer theory, he has been criticized for his glaring omission of race and racialized sexuality as major axes of power and a central structuring feature of white supremacy.³ Siobhan B. Sommerville (2000), for instance, outlines how the emergence of sexual normalcy and definitions of "health" were contemporaneous with and inextricable from the rise of eugenic constructions of racial superiority and inferiority. The "healthy" individual was not only heterosexual; the "good citizen" was also white. Similarly, Sharon Patricia Holland (2012) points out that the notion of reproduction, central to legitimating discourses of "normal" and "healthy" sexuality and to Foucault's treatment of sexuality, is not simply about reproducing class structures, but also racial purity. Holland convincingly argues that interracial desire, sex, and relationships were as much, if not more,

pathologized through discourses of “healthy sexuality” as were sexual perversions.

Foucault’s omission and the dominance of white, class-privileged academics in defining the parameters of early queer theorizing led to a failure to adequately theorize white supremacy as central to regimes of sexual normalcy and black experience. For instance, E. Patrick Johnson (2001) avers that queer theory’s emphasis on discourse and deconstructing identities ignores the material necessity of identity politics on the basis of race for queers of color. He suggests that, from an African American standpoint, a critical perspective on regimes of normalcy must take into consideration the racialized body.

What, for example, are the ethical and material implications of queer theory if its project is to dismantle all notions of identity and agency? The deconstructive turn in queer theory highlights the ways in which ideology functions to oppress and to proscribe ways of knowing, but what is the utility of queer theory on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or anyplace where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed—indeed, where the body is the site of trauma? (5)

Johnson puts forward “quare theory” as a label that combines a queer theoretical analysis of regimes of sexual normalcy *and* the racialized body. Recent and provocative theoretical work by Trimiko Melancon (2014) connects representations of the racialized body with embodied erotic pleasure and power through an exploration of black women’s sexuality and interracial same-gender loving.

While Sommerville, Holland, and others point to the omission of an analysis of race in queer theory, other queer of color theorists focus on the ways in which critical race theory ignores sexuality. Dwight McBride (2005), for instance, argues that notions of black respectability as a response to the exclusion of African Americans from the construction of sexual normalcy have led African American academics to remain silent

about dissident sexualities and thereby erase queer sexual subjectivities from critical race theory. In an essay that originally appeared in a special issue of *Differences* on queer theory, Evelyn Hammonds (1994) is critical of the relative silence of white queer theorists on race and whiteness, but she also laments the lack of theoretical work by African American women on the ways in which race and gender shape “black queer female sexualities.” In particular, Hammonds is concerned with a silence about the relationships among and between African American straight and lesbian women and queer and dissident desires and/or embodiments of African American women. She suggests that a “politics of articulation” that “would build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act” (136) might replace the “politics of silence” and “politics of dissemblance” that arose within the context of the politics of respectability.

The Missing Critique of Mononormativity

In most queer and queer of color theory, monogamy is identified as a central feature of sexual normalcy in terms of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and the politics of respectability. However, there have been very few theoretical interrogations of how monogamy is implicated in and productive of gender, race, and sexual hierarchies or the role of monogamy as an organizing rationale for regimes of normalcy and social structures of inequality.⁴

Some feminist theorists have placed a more systematic analytic focus on the gender politics of heterosexual monogamy. Explaining why women do not see themselves as a coherent group with shared political interests, for instance, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) writes, “Male and female stand opposed within a primordial *Mitsein*, and woman has not broken it. The couple is a fundamental unity with its two halves riveted together, and the cleavage of society along the line of sex is impossible” (29). According to de Beauvoir, women are “riveted” to men in

the “primordial” couple. Women’s alliances and emotional investments are with individual men and this compromises their ability to see men as their political adversaries. As described earlier, Adrienne Rich made a similar argument, but rather than naturalize the heterosexual couple as inevitable and grounded in nature, Rich suggested that the *idea* of the “primordial couple” is a male-dominant social construction.

While Beauvoir and Rich focus on heterosexual coupling, Victoria Robinson (1997) places her focus on heterosexual *monogamy* as an institutionalized form of social control that reflects and naturalizes a capitalist and patriarchal property relationship where men possess women. Romantic monogamy encourages a woman to overinvest her energy, time, and resources into an individual man. Instead of dismissing heterosexuality as inherently male dominant, Robinson suggests that power relations within heterosexual relationships might be transformed through non-monogamy.

In a more recent article, Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2004) revisit the feminist argument that being in monogamous relationships with men limits women’s autonomy and political consciousness. They assert that the effects of monogamy on women’s lives are still important and relevant to feminists despite the disappearance of the critique of monogamy from feminist theory in recent decades.

While I agree with Jackson and Scott’s assessment of how monogamy can be disadvantageous to women in heterosexual relationships, my focus in this book is less on the effects of monogamy on women’s lived experience in monogamous relationships with men and, instead, more on theorizing monogamy as an institutionalized feature of social structure. Going back to Robinson’s focus on institutionalized monogamy, I focus on mononormativity as a central feature of contemporary regimes of sexual normalcy. Many feminists have discussed how the practice of monogamy maintains women’s subordination to men, but few have talked about the cultural and social role of the monogamous couple, as an idealized and institutionalized structure for relationships and sexual

relations, in defining, maintaining, and legitimating hierarchical relationships between and among racialized masculinities and femininities.

My goal in this book is to build upon and integrate the queer, feminist, and critical race theory discussed above to develop a theoretical framework for identifying how institutionalized monogamy is, in a contemporary U.S. context, constitutive of the discursive construction and social institutionalization of gender and race hierarchies.

As one step in theorizing the intersections of monogamy, gender, and race, I will argue that monogamy is the first and largely unquestionable discourse in narratives of relationship normalcy, health, and morality and that the pathologization of non-monogamy and erasure of consensual non-monogamies situates the monogamous couple as normal, moral, and compulsory. While Adrienne Rich's emphasis was on the erasure of lesbian existence and the political potential for the lesbian continuum, I argue that the invisibility, erasure, and recent normalization of consensual non-monogamies foreclose the possibility for what I'm calling polyqueer sexualities to undo and reorganize the structure of relationships, erotic interactions, and the gendered self.

Mononormativity, Compulsory Monogamy, and Research on Consensual Non-Monogamies

Skepticism about and critiques of monogamy are not new. Since the mid-nineteenth century, there have been several experimental and/or utopian communities that adopted non-monogamy as a central tenet of communal living (DeMaria 1978; Kern 1981; Muncy 1973). In addition, research suggests that non-monogamy is common, if not culturally normative, in many gay men's relationships (Adam 2006; Bell and Weinberg 1978; Blasband and Peplau 1985; Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Coelho 2011; Kurdek and Schmitt 1985; McWhirter and Mattison 1984; Peplau and Cochran 1981). More recently, a popular (Anapol 2004; Anapol 2010; Block 2008; Easton and Hardy 2009; Taormino 2008) and academic (Barker and Langdridge 2010a; Barker

and Langdridge 2010b; Sheff 2005; Sheff 2006; Sheff 2011; Sheff 2013) literature on non-monogamies, especially open relationships and polyamory, has emerged.

Within this growing literature, researchers and activists build on the concept of compulsory heterosexuality to identify *compulsory monogamy* as the institutionalized arrangements that compel or force people into monogamous, dyadic relationships (Mint 2004). For example, laws against polygamy make monogamous coupling compulsory. The discursive conflation of monogamy with a “real” or “serious” relationship and finding “the one and only” as the brass ring of relationship satisfaction situate monogamy as romantic (Barker 2013; Robinson 1997), psychologically healthy and satisfying (Conley et al. 2013), and something worth “working” for and toward (Kipnis 2003).

For most people, there is an assumption that their relationships are or will eventually become monogamous without ever having a discussion with prospective or existing partners about monogamy. If there is a discussion, it is not about whether or not a polyamorous or open relationship is desired, but rather whether or not to forego other lovers and be monogamous as a step toward being more committed.

The idea that “hook up” culture is a phase from which young people mature and that all adults eventually “settle down” into “real” relationships dismisses non-monogamy as immature and transitional. Wedding invitations that include “plus one,” limits of only two adults in a hotel room, and Valentine’s Day specials that are two-for-one reflect the assumption that the couple is the only legitimate and intelligible form for intimate relationships.

Even more pernicious are the many rules, regulations, laws, and policies that assume dyadic relationships and render polyamorous relationships, where individuals have intimate and committed relationships with more than one person, unintelligible. Laws prohibiting polygamy have huge consequences in terms of child custody, insurance, participation in health care decisions, hospital or prison visitation, inheritance, and so on. There are no laws that prohibit housing or employment discrimina-

tion on the basis of relationship status, and so people in polyamorous families or relationships are at risk of both.

Compulsory monogamy also renders consensual non-monogamies perverse, impossible, or a threat to “normal” relationships. For instance, family and friends of polyamorous people often fail to recognize more than one partner, or they perceive or treat new partners as threats to existing relationship(s) (Barker 2005; Mint 2004). In contrast to the social accolades and support that come with coupling in a monogamous relationship, often times others will push back with warnings about how such a relationship could never work. The resulting lack of social recognition and support puts a tremendous strain on polyamorous relationships.

Because people in polyamorous relationships are falsely assumed to be promiscuous and always looking for new partners, we are sometimes rejected by monogamous friends out of fear we will pursue their partners and destroy their relationships. Many monogamous couples will socialize only with other monogamous couples as a way to eliminate temptation (Frank and DeLamater 2010). People in poly relationships are often assumed to lack respect for monogamy and to be willing to cross the boundaries made by others. All of these examples not only push people into forming monogamous couple relationships, they also privilege those who “succeed” in doing so.

Like the queer theoretical concept heteronormativity, these are examples of *mononormativity*, which refers to the institutionalized arrangements and cultural narratives that situate the monogamous dyad as the only legitimate, natural, or desirable relationship form, thereby systematically conferring privileges on those who are or appear to be in monogamous couples (Pieper and Bauer 2005) and disadvantages on those who are not, whether single or poly. In Pieper and Bauer’s and others’ discussions of mononormativity, the emphasis is not on sexual identities or practices, but instead on *relationship form* as variable and central to the operations of sexual stratification in contemporary U.S. and European contexts.

Though mononormativity intersects with heteronormativity, institutionalized dyadic monogamy confers privileges and advantages on people in or perceived to be in long-term, monogamous couple relationships regardless of the race, gender, or sexual identities of the partners. In other words, mononormativity is part of the regime of sexual normalcy, but it is not the same thing as heteronormativity. Mononormativity operates through its own logic of privileging monogamy, not heterosexuality. Despite being disadvantaged by heteronormativity, monogamous gay and lesbian couples benefit from mononormativity. Similarly, the politics of respectability are structured not just by heteronormativity, but also mononormativity. Clearly, white heterosexual couples reap far more material, social, and cultural benefits than heterosexual African American or gay or lesbian couples by being monogamous and coupled, as has been documented by decades of social science research. The point here is not to dispute or supplant heteronormativity with mononormativity, but instead to add mononormativity to feminist and queer critiques and analysis by highlighting how being in a long-term, monogamous couple relationship gets one closer to being “normal.” Moreover, and more central to my purposes here, as is the case with heteronormativity, the monogamous dyad, as an institutionalized and compulsory relationship form, not only privileges the monogamous couple, it also intersects with race and gender to support white supremacy and heteromale dominance.

Polyamory as an Emerging Relationship Form and Culture

“Polyamory” refers to committed, emotionally and sometimes sexually intimate relationships involving more than two persons. Polyamory is often distinguishable from “cheating” in that, unlike in monogamous relationships where one partner covertly has sex with someone else, in polyamorous relationships all partners are aware of each other and consent to the relationship (Anapol 2004; Easton and Hardy 2009; Mint 2004; Taormino 2008).

Moreover, polyamory is not the same thing as male-dominant forms of polygamy in that there is an emphasis on and expectation of gender egalitarianism (Cascais and Cardoso 2012; Easton and Hardy 2009; Sheff 2013; Taormino 2008). Unlike polygyny, where one man has more than one wife but women are limited to one husband, in polyamory, access to multiple partners is acceptable for all genders. Rather than creating a shortage of women, which in the context of polygyny often increases competition and hierarchies among men and exacerbates inequality among men and between men and women, polyamory expands the number of available partners to all adults. (For a critique of the comparison between polygyny and polyamory, see Rambukkana 2015.) As a result, those who are already attached are, in theory, available to others as potential partners. In fact, because of its emphasis on gender egalitarianism and because there is no limit to the number of partners any individual might have, polyamory decreases the competition borne of scarcity that is found in monogamy as well.⁵

While polyamory increases available partners in terms of numbers and is therefore quite different from polygyny and monogamy, there are other aspects of polyamory as a subculture that mitigate competition and bolster gender egalitarianism (Cascais and Cardoso 2012). Until recently, polyamory as a viable relationship option has remained outside mainstream culture. Because of its marginalization, a relatively coherent subculture of collective understandings and behavioral ethics has emerged among polyamorists through online blogs and forums, how-to books, podcasts, and localized community organizing. Ritchie and Barker (2006) demonstrate how mononormativity necessitates development of a new language and how new discourses about emotional and sexual intimacy change the experience of intimate relationships for polyamorists.

For instance, polyamorists offer alternative languages and collective understandings of sexual jealousy. “Compersion” in the American and “frubbly” in the British context are words used by polyamorists to refer to feeling pleasure (rather than fear or anger) when one’s partner expe-

riences pleasure with another person. Because poly subcultural norms insist upon gender egalitarianism, everyone, regardless of gender, is encouraged to cultivate compersion rather than jealousy and to feel frubly rather than frightened or angry when a partner is emotionally or sexually involved with another person. Not only is this a counternarrative to the evolutionary anthropological assumption that sexual jealousy is “natural” or biologically intrinsic among men (more on this in the next chapter), it also encourages women to reject the idea that other women are competitors for men’s attention.

Redefining the structure of relationships also encourages cooperation rather than competition among men and women. So, for instance, another relationship innovation to mitigate jealousy and competition is a subcultural expectation for open communication and an ethic of care, not only for one’s partner(s), but also and significantly, one’s partner’s partners, a role polyamorists call “metamour.” For example, two men who are in an intimate and committed relationship with the same woman would be considered metamours. The label not only situates a partner’s partner as a recognizable and legitimate social location in intimate relationships, it also establishes interpersonal expectations and responsibilities between metamours. There are strong expectations that metamours will develop lines of communication, and in some cases, emotional ties with each other.

As I will explore further in this book, this has important implications for gender relations and racialized masculinities, femininities, and the relationships among and between them. Moreover, because emotional intimacy and interpersonal responsibility among and between more than two people is the defining feature that distinguishes polyamory from monogamy and sexually open relationships,⁶ it can be productive of feminist and queer potentialities that would not otherwise arise within the context of polygyny or monogamy (Wilkinson 2010).

Empirical research on people who have open relationships and/or participate in swinging and/or polyamory consistently shows that gendered power dynamics are affected by consensual non-monogamies in

ways that disrupt or undermine male-dominant understandings and workings of gendered sexuality (Sheff 2005; Sheff 2006; Frank 2008; Frank 2013). However, we still do not have a theoretical framework with which to *explain* the effects of consensual non-monogamies on gender and power.

Empirical work on open and polyamorous relationships also consistently finds that the people who identify as polyamorous and/or who participate in activism or community building around poly identities or practices are overwhelmingly white and middle class (Sheff 2014). Christian Klesse (2014) links polyamory subcultures to capitalism and neoliberal cultural politics to begin unpacking the class homogeneity of polyamorous communities and activists. However, while most researchers acknowledge that the racial homogeneity of research participants is an issue of methodology (snowball sampling, racial homogeneity of researchers, different definitions of “community,” etc.) and not necessarily a reflection of the racial identities of people practicing some form of consensual poly sexualities, most of this empirical work lacks a theoretical framework that can explain why people who identify as open or poly and their communities and organizations are overwhelmingly white.

Polynormativity

Polyamory, like other forms of intimate and sexual relationships, is a result of and embedded within patterns of significant social change, but is also mired in contemporary social circumstances. Included in those social circumstances are persistent gender and racial inequality and an emphasis on neoliberal solutions for social and cultural problems. For this reason, there is a small critical voice in the blogosphere and in academia raising concerns about *polynormativity*. Polynormativity refers to beliefs, practices, and values within polyamory that reflect and sustain regimes of sexual and relationship normalcy and/or social privilege along the lines of class, race, gender, religion, citizenship, and so on. As blogger Sex Geek writes in an entry entitled “The Problem with

Polynormativity” (Zanin 2013), “The problem—and it’s hardly surprising—is that the form of poly that’s getting by far the most airtime is the one that’s as similar to traditional monogamy as possible, because that’s the least threatening to the dominant social order.”

For instance, in the wake of the marriage equality movement, some polyamorists and much of the mainstream commentators on polyamory wonder if polyamory is “the new gay” in terms of marriage rights. In most cases, this is couched in speculation about whether or not polyamorists will organize around a collective movement for the legalization of plural marriage.⁷ While this is an important question in terms of discrimination on the basis of relationship status, it erases important differences between being gay and/or transgender and being polyamorous. As Pepper Mint (2007) writes on his blog *Freaksexual*, “Poly people do not get queer-bashed, or anything close to it; polyamory does not induce the same level of straight-out revulsion and violent response that is engendered by violations of gender or sexuality.” Moreover, polyamory does little to question legal marriage as a system of privilege and inequality (Rambukkana 2015).

Similarly, many polyamorists rely on narratives of “normalcy” to make polyamory intelligible and acceptable. To take one example, Cuning Minx, a leading poly educator and creator of the popular podcast *Polyamory Weekly*, offers advice to poly and poly curious people about specific issues or problems that are common or relevant to polyamorists. One of the tropes Minx uses on the podcast is “WWMD,” as in “What would monogamists do?” This is a very effective way to situate polyamory in the continuum of relationships, and for monogamous listeners, it can make polyamory seem less foreign. While I applaud this strategy of normalization, I am less enthusiastic about the way in which it situates monogamy in the center and polyamory as “just like” or similar enough to monogamy to be intelligible.

This strategy of normalizing polyamory is strikingly similar to claims made by gay and lesbian activists that gay and lesbian families are no different from heterosexual ones and therefore deserving of the privi-

leges of legal family status. As queer activists, critics, and theorists have argued, this constitutes a heteronormative strategy and a move away from a critique and toward an endorsement of heterosexual marriage. While it might be true that there are many similarities between monogamous and polyamorous relationships, I worry that the tendency to think through dilemmas, problems, or ethical concerns within polyamory by invoking “WWMD” closes off the possibility to hold a queer, feminist, and anti-racist critical distance from the monogamous couple as an ideal standard and as implicated in broader relations of inequality.

Eleanor Wilkinson (2010) has similar concerns and argues that polyamory can offer a new way of relating that challenges heteronormativity, but not unless polyamorists emphasize their differences rather than their similarities to white, class-privileged heteronormativity. As Wilkinson suggests, by emphasizing the similarities between monogamous and poly relationships, we run the risk of rendering invisible *poly difference* and how those differences not only challenge the hegemony of monogamous marriage as a system of benefits and privileges, but also how poly difference might offer new and effective ways to do family, kindships, and sexualities differently.

Blogger Polysingleish is also critical of emphasizing normalcy and similarities to monogamy and, while she sees the benefits of polynormativity in making polyamory acceptable as it is introduced in mainstream media, she thinks it is time for something else. She writes in an entry called “Polynormativity and the New Paradigm” (Mariposa 2013), “Polynormative [*sic*] has done much to bring poly and non monogamy into the arena of public awareness and discussion. And, it will probably continue to do so. I do believe it is now time to add poly-alternative to the mix. There are *so many ways* to be non monogamous, and there are *so many ways* to do so ethically. So many ways to be polyamorous with multiple emotional and sexual loving relationships in our lives!”

In addition to emphasizing how normal polyamory is, the mainstream media and many polyamorists consistently present polyamory and open relationships as “not for everyone,” but a possible “choice” for

some individuals and couples. While this challenges compulsory monogamy, it does little to elucidate the structural features of an individual's life that might constrain or enable making this "choice" (Klesse 2014; Rambukkana 2015). In his discussion of "intimate privilege," Nathan Rambukkana (2010, 2015) points to the significant role social location, including but not limited to race, class, religion, and citizenship, plays in constraining or facilitating access to transgressive relationship forms including polyamory. Similarly, in her review of the how-to poly literature, Melita Noël (2006) writes,

The limited amount of available texts written about polyamory offer an individually-based challenge to monogamy without closely examining systemic privileges and benefits, particularly around such issues as: nationality, race/ethnicity, education, class, language, ability, age, gender, and sexuality. The possibility for meaningful challenge to and systemic change around heteronormative monogamy is limited by this pervasive focus on individual choice and personal agency. The texts reveal that polyamorists also offer a short-sighted, isolationist alternative that serves to further solidify privileges for a few rather than realize an improved reality for many. (604)

Many people offering advice to those who are in polyamorous relationships cast the pitfalls and difficulties of polyamory as resulting from interpersonal dynamics rather than social constraints and emphasize hard work and interpersonal communication rather than a restructuring of broader gender and/or race relations to remedy problems. In discussions of jealousy, for example, most advice focuses on examining one's own biography to identify emotional and psychological insecurities and working through those feelings in order to cultivate frubby feelings of compersion. Although there is no gender structure to this encouragement—everyone, regardless of gender, is encouraged to take personal responsibility for their own feelings of jealousy and cultivate compersion—with only a few exceptions (e.g., see Veaux and Rickert

2014) there is little, if any discussion of masculinity, femininity, or the gender dynamics and structures of possessiveness and control.

Nathan Rambukkana (2015) is particularly concerned with polyamorists' emphasis on consent and communication rather than internal power dynamics.

Since forms of power and privilege have affects across different realms of personal and social interaction, honesty (although extremely important) does not on its own flatten out those relationships, and a polyamory that does not take this into account often does little to address those unfair relationships and can instead conceal their unfairness under the banner of being open and, *consequently*, equal. (120; italics in original)

Janani Balasubramanian (2013) writes in an entry entitled “9 Strategies for Non-Oppressive Polyamory” on the website Black Girl Dangerous,

Polyamory doesn't get a free pass at being radical without an analysis of power in our interactions. It doesn't stop with being open and communicative with multiple friends, partners, lovers, etc. We've got to situate those relationships in broader systems of domination, and recognize ways that dating and engaging people (multiple or not) can do harm within those systems. Our intimate politics are often the mostly deeply seated; it's hard work to do.

Without a critical social analysis of the inner workings of power and privilege within polyamorous relationships, most how-to books on polyamory discuss sexism, but rarely as a dynamic *within* polyamorous relationships.

For instance, when providing advice about how to deal with mononormativity, many authors, podcasters, and bloggers will discuss the double standard and how women might face more stigma for having multiple partners (Easton and Hardy 2009; Veaux and Rickert 2014), but few discuss masculinity and the pressures on men to feel jealous,

perceive other men as rivals, and police their partners' relationships with others. Elisabeth Sheff's (2005, 2006) research on gender in polyamorous relationships suggests that some polyamorous men exhibit what she calls poly-hegemonic masculinity, including "the alpha male syndrome." While most men she interviewed spoke of gender egalitarianism, some articulated the male-dominant idea that "having" many women signifies status and power while, at the same time, they relied on evolutionary excuses for having difficulty with and/or not tolerating the presence of other men in their relationships.

Sheff's (2006) research also shows that, despite an ideology of gender egalitarianism, women in poly relationships take on the majority of emotional labor. To the extent that poly relationships often require more time management and communication than monogamous ones, and emotional work is "women's work," when women are partnered with men, polyamory increases their labor. Moreover, when there are multiple women in a household, poly men face even less pressure to do their "fair share" than in monogamous relationships (Sheff 2013). These issues of gender inequity and power often get glossed over by bloggers, podcasters, and authors of how-to books.

Finally, if there is too little discussion among podcasters and how-to authors of the internal workings of masculinities, femininities, and power in polyamorous relationships and subcultures, there is also relative silence about how race, ethnicity, religion, or class shape the experience of compersion, metamour relationships, or polyamory more generally. In response, polyamorists of color are creating their own networks in local poly communities and in social media. For instance, there is a Poly People of Color (n.d.) Tumblr page and a Meetup group in New York that is specifically for black polyamorists (Black & Poly n.d.). However, most of the poly-related material in print and on the Internet pays too little attention to race and racism.

That is not to say that polyamorists are more sexist or racist than monogamists. Instead, it is to say that the mainstream and subcultural discourses about polyamory lack a sociological lens that can clarify the

sexism and racism that is there. A quick perusal of the subject indices of the most popular how-to books on polyamory reveals that *none* list “gender,” “race,” “sexism,” or “racism” as relevant topics. As the mainstream media increasingly focuses on open and polyamorous relationships as a solution to the monotony of monogamy and polyamorists continue to focus on individual strategies and ethics, we risk losing an opportunity to cultivate poly sexualities that reconfigure rather than reinscribe hegemonic notions of family, kinship, and relationships.

Nathan Rambukkana (2015) argues that heteronormative polyamory is, for the most part, a homogeneous enclave that includes very privileged people who isolate themselves and alienate others. In contrast, queer polyamory, he suggests, could be a transgressive heterotopia that articulates critical opposition to “straight” relationships and consciously works to cultivate queer spaces for relating in ways that disrupt or dismantle oppressive structures of privilege and power.

Although this scholarly and activist work on polynormativity has documented the race and class homogeneity of people who identify themselves to researchers as open or poly, and recognizes polynormativity and the need for a queer polyamory, there is not yet a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework for linking compulsory monogamy and mononormativity to *the intersection* of gender and racial inequality.⁸ More important, there is little in the way of articulating what a queer polyamory would look like.

To summarize then, research on polyamory provides empirical insight into some of the workings of gender, race, and class in non-monogamous relationships but lacks a coherent theory of compulsory monogamy and its constitutive role in establishing and legitimating white, heteromascu-line privilege. On the other hand, feminist theory and queer theory have well-developed theoretical frameworks for the workings of heterosexism, racism, and sexism but lack a conceptual apparatus for identifying the role of compulsory monogamy and mononormativity in ensuring hegemonic gender and sexual relations as they intersect with race. It is time for research on polyamory to develop a coherent theoretical framework

for the role of monogamy in social and cultural relations of inequality and for feminist, queer, and critical race theories to bring monogamy from the margins to the center of the politics of normalcy.

Toward a Sociological Theory of Mononormativity and Polyqueer Sexualities

This book brings together these two areas of research and theory—empirical work on polyamory on the one hand and feminist, queer, and critical race theory on the other—to begin filling this theoretical gap in our understanding of the role of monogamy in legitimating and perpetuating relations of social and cultural inequality. My two central theoretical goals in the book, then, are to (1) begin unpacking the links between compulsory and institutionalized monogamy and heteromasculine privilege and dominance as it intersects with race and sexuality, and (2) develop a theoretical framework for identifying and cultivating what I am calling *polyqueer sexualities*—sexual and relationship intimacies that include more than two people and that, *through plurality*, open up possibilities to “undo” race and gender hierarchies in ways that would not otherwise arise within the context of dyadic sex or monogamy.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that mononormativity or compulsory monogamy are the only or most important structuring features of race, gender, and sexual domination. Nor am I naively suggesting that polyamory will eliminate gender, race, and sexual inequalities. I do not believe that poly sexualities are “liberating” or always already feminist, queer, or anti-racist, or that monogamous relationships are, by definition, oppressive or reproductive of race, gender, and sexual inequality. Instead, I hope to convince readers that mononormativity and compulsory monogamy, as institutionalized regimes of relationship normalcy, are embedded within and constitutive of broader race, gender, and sexual regimes of domination, but through their own logic and separate from race, gender, and sexuality, obscure, legitimate, and support contemporary power relations.

In other words, they matter and, despite being a perhaps small but significant part of larger systems of social inequality and injustice, they have been largely ignored by sociologists, feminists, critical race theorists, and queer theorists. I also hope to convincingly argue that, given the role of compulsory monogamy in legitimating and perpetuating race, gender, and sexual inequalities, polyqueer challenges to mononormativity can, if done collectively, undo at least part of those systems of domination within the context of intimate relationships both in terms of their symbolic meaning and their embodied practice.

In her book *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, Marjorie Garber (2000) introduces bisexuality as the third element in heterosexual and homosexual desire. Adopting a psychoanalytic theoretical framework, Garber begins from the assumption that all desire is essentially bisexual in that it includes the psychosexual drama of children's negotiation of their relationships with mother and father. In order to secure the notion of stable homosexual and heterosexual identities, bisexuality must be suppressed and cast out of the heteronormative and homonormative charmed circles of sexual normalcy.

[I]ssues raised by therapists, journalists, and bisexuals themselves in analyzing the ambivalent position of bisexuality in today's cultural scene are *nonmonogamy* (less supportively called promiscuity, flightiness, or instability); *maturity and immaturity* (heterosexuals often see bisexuality as a "stage" rather than an achieved condition or lifestyle; gays likewise sometimes scorn bisexuality as a "stage in the coming-out process of people who are "really" lesbian or gay); *trendiness*; and "*heterosexual privilege*." (28; italics in original)

Though discursively denied as a viable "place" in sexual identities, bisexuality or the desire for a third element is ever present in what appears to be dyadic erotic desire and relations. Building on the work of René Girard (1965), Eve Sedgwick (1985), and Terry Castle (1993), Garber

suggests that the erotic triangle is a central feature of Western narratives of the erotic couple.

All three of these readers of Western literature—Girard, Sedgwick, and Castle—presume that what they are explaining is the erotic couple. Girard explains romantic love as triangular desire; Sedgwick sees the relations between the male rivals as the point of a structure in which they seem to compete for a woman; Castle sees relations between women as what Sedgwick and Girard leave out and what she wants to celebrate by eliminating the male mediator. . . . But what do all three analyses of coupling instate as *constitutive* of the dynamics of their pairs? Triangularity. In other words, bisexuality. In all three cases, it is bisexual triangularity that provokes, explains, and encompasses both heterosexuality and homosexuality. While all three analysts appear to privilege the couple, they all prove only that the shortest distance between two points is a triangle. (428)

As the third element in all desire and erotic coupling, Garber argues that there is a queer potential for bisexuality to unravel the notion of fixed gender and sexual identities as a reflection of unidirectional desire.

Building on this notion, I want to suggest that another and constitutive third element is non-monogamy. In Girard's, Sedgwick's, and Castle's reading of the couple, a heterosexual, homosocial, or lesbian resolution of triangularity depends on a mononormative, dyadic outcome. For Garber, bisexuality drives the triangulation of desire and she offers a treasure trove of examples from literature and popular culture to illustrate her theoretical point. Acknowledging and building on the notion that bisexuality is ever present and drives triangulated desire, here I am interested in sociologically exploring how poly sexualities are an ever-present potentiality in the social and cultural sexual field (Green 2008b) and suppressed through mononormativity to eliminate the potential for polyamory to reconfigure hegemonic gender and race

relations. The third element in my exploration, then, is not bisexuality, but instead polyamory.

A Note about Methodology

In this book, I argue that The Monogamous Couple,⁹ as a discursively constructed, institutionalized, and compulsory relationship form, is central to the production, maintenance, and legitimization of heteromale domination and white privilege. I ask, what are the ways in which the discursive construction of The Monogamous Couple relies upon and supports race hierarchies and racialized constructions of masculinities and femininities? What happens to heteromale—its dominance and superiority—when sex and relationships include more than two people?

To begin answering these questions, I bring together sociology, cultural studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory. I also rely upon the growing empirical literature on polyamory as well as auto-ethnographic descriptions of the workings of compulsory monogamy, mononormativity, and polyqueer sexualities in my own life as a queer, feminist, white, cisgender, class-privileged, and polyamorous woman.

In addition, I adopt deconstructionist methods to discursively analyze fictional representations of polyqueer sexualities and, in some places, offer fictional narratives and fantasies of polyqueer potentialities of what could be. As a polyqueer scholar, I refuse to commit myself to one and only one theory or methodology, and as is the case with polyamorous relationships, each perspective, theory, and method brings something unique and essential to the table. In other words, while my theoretical framework is decidedly sociological, my methods are *polyqueer*.

As part of adopting a polyqueer methodology, I also incorporate multiple genres of writing. My focus in the book is to develop theory to explain and elucidate the connections between monogamy, gender, and race, but also to explore the feminist and queer potential of poly

sexualities and relationships. To do so, I offer fictional narrative to both illustrate and guide readers toward an imagined polyqueer futurity. Following in the footsteps of many scholars who “queer” genre, like Gloria Anzaldúa, who weaves together poetry and academic language, and Robert Reid-Pharr (2001) and John Giorno (1994), who braid sexually explicit, detailed, and autobiographical descriptions of their sexual experiences with men into their writing to theorize the political, here I include sometimes explicit descriptions of my own sexual experiences and embed short fictional vignettes about polyqueer sexual interactions and intimate relationships into my otherwise academic writing.

I build my theoretical framework through explicit descriptions of sex for two reasons. First, as a queer feminist (or feminist queer) committed to reconfiguring the social organization of sexuality, including sex negativity, I am motivated to collapse the binary between the profane pornographic and the sacred academic. Within the context of academia, the cultural construction of sex as different from and inferior to all other social phenomena leads to the marginalization of the erotic in scholarly work.¹⁰ While sexuality and the production of sexual cultures and media products are central to the sociology of gender and sexuality, and feminist theories offer insightful and important critical elucidation of the gendered organization of sexuality, erotic and sociopolitical fantasies of doing things differently are relegated to the world of popular fiction. Catherine Waldby (1996) writes:

Theoretical feminism is, I suspect, rather inhibited about employing an explicitly erotic or pornographic imagination because it is still for the most part caught up in the academic aesthetics and politics of reason and sobriety, and in a liberal distaste for the violence of desire. . . . [T]here are certain regrettable ways in which the absence of such an erotic imaginary leads theoretical feminism to reinscribe precisely the bodily imagos it wants to disable. If the desire to dephallicize the heterosexual male body that I have articulated here is to find further theoretical elaboration it seems crucial to draw on the resources of perversity and fantasy that can

be found both in experimental cultural work . . . and in everyday sexual practice. Maybe what theoretical feminism needs now is a strap-on. (275)

In the spirit of “strapping one on” to write feminist, queer theory, I employ “an explicitly erotic [and] pornographic imagination” to offer a peepshow, of sorts, into my own erotic experiences and *sociological* fantasies of a polyqueer futurity—a futurity that I experience as eminent in my own life and in contemporary culture.

Robert Reid-Pharr (2001) writes, “I am often asked to write about politics and culture, but I find that in most occasions the offer comes with the understanding that one will marshal the never fully stated but almost wholly appreciated modes of discretion, the deletion of pleasure, that work to keep most political writing decidedly dull and noncommittal” (10). In his refusal to do so, he says, “I offer this [explicit] image of [sex with a white lover] because I believe that in our struggle to produce an American progressivism we are lost if we discount the ways in which desire operates in the production of putatively rational decisions about government and politics. We risk the charge of hypocrisy if we offer only more and more sophisticated expressions of the anthropological gaze. We will clearly fail if we give into the fear that our dreams, our obsessions, our grubby secrets can never be vehicles for the articulation of the universal” (11). As a feminist, polyqueer sociologist, not only am I interested in documenting my “grubby secrets” so as to insert my own sexual subjectivity to theoretically penetrate heteromascularity, I am motivated to explore what could be, both in terms of polyqueer sexualities and, as literary feminist theorists have done for at least a century, in terms of writing social critique and building sociological theory through fictional narrative.

The second reason I incorporate erotic, polyqueer narrative into an otherwise academic text is to bridge academic writing about polyqueer potentialities to polyqueer cultural production. J. Halberstam (2005) suggests that academic participants in queer culture are in a unique position to bridge the gap between academia and everyday queer cultural

practice. Halberstam writes, “The queer . . . theorist and the cultural worker may also coexist in the same friendship networks, and they may function as coconspirators” (162). As an academic who is active in local poly communities and forging polyqueer relationships in my own life, I am motivated to participate in polyqueer cultural production. As Halberstam suggests, “new queer cultural studies feeds off of and back into subcultural production” (163). Here I mix polyqueer narrative with academic theorizing not only to participate in cultural production by “speaking” the language, but also to flatten the hierarchy between “low” subcultural production and “high” academic theory.

While Halberstam’s focus is specifically on queer theorists’ participation in queer subcultures, the idea that the marginalized academic theorist has a unique perspective and role in both academia and her community outside of academia is not new. As Patricia Hill Collins (2002) suggests in her black, feminist epistemology, the specialized knowledge of black women academics is an important conduit for the flow of ideas between academic and non-academic communities. In writing this book, one of my goals is to, from my location of situated knowledge, offer fantasy, in the form of fictional narrative, as both polyqueer cultural production and a temporary move away from the “evidence,” which is always a looking back, and toward the futurity of polyqueer potentialities. This is not to say I will ignore the evidence, but that I will move beyond it through fantasies that are at once sociological and pornographic.

Finally, in this book, I specifically and exclusively explore sex and relationships that include one cisgender woman and two heterosexually identified cisgender men (WMM). While there are an infinite number of ways to do non-dyadic sex and relationships,¹¹ I limit my theoretical interest and analytic exploration to WMM sex and relationships because this relationship configuration, I will argue, is particularly instructive, not just in terms of the role of monogamy in hegemonic gender relations, but also in the queer and feminist potential for polyqueer sexualities and relationships to disrupt the meanings and embodiment of

racialized masculinities and femininities. I am not suggesting WMM triangulation among cisgender, heterosexual women and men is the best or only non-dyadic relationship configuration for queering gender, sexuality, or mononormativity,¹² but there are several reasons it is particularly effective in *theoretically* unpacking the relationship between monogamy and hegemonic gender relations.

First, there is social and cultural tolerance for heterosexual men to have more than one woman partner (whether in the form of polygyny or in terms of the heteromale fantasy of having sex with two hot bisexual babes) whereas cultural narratives, social space, and/or institutionalized rituals that celebrate and condone women having more than two men partners have been, until very recently, virtually nonexistent in mainstream U.S. culture. The eroticization of WMM triangulation, like lesbian existence, has been silenced and/or erased.¹³ This, I will argue, is not a coincidence. A polyamorous triad or erotic threesome between two straight-identified cisgender men and one woman is not a staple in the heterosexual imaginary precisely because it challenges heteromale privilege and dominance. WMM threesomes offer a cogent contrast to the hegemony of men “having” more than one woman either through polygynous marriage, a mistress, or a threesome encounter.

Another reason I limit my focus to WMM triangulation is for simplification purposes and so as to not compromise or confuse my theoretical and political argument in the minutiae of different relationship configurations. The effects of poly sexualities on gender dynamics are always going to be variable depending on the gender, age, race, class, religion, and so on of the people involved. Because there is, quite literally, an infinite number of ways to do plural relationships, it would be beyond the scope of this book to begin theorizing the gender dynamics of all configurations. That is not to say that polyqueer sexualities in gay men’s and lesbian’s lives and relationships are less important or theoretically insignificant; it is to say that they are beyond my scope and will, I hope, be taken up by others. While this, no doubt, will leave some readers dissatisfied and wanting more on gay, lesbian, MWW, transgen-

der, and/or asexual poly sexualities, my hope is that this book opens up dialogue about compulsory monogamy and mononormativity so others will begin thinking about relationship form as variable and an important area of theoretical and empirical inquiry.

Finally, WMM triangulation is the analytic focus of Eve Sedgwick's foundational queer text *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick argues that the narrative construction of WMM triangulation as a rivalry between men for possession of the prized feminine object is a foundation for the abjection of homoerotic desire between men and central to the subordination of women. As I will argue, introducing polyamory and metamour relationships to her analysis of WMM love triangles, something Sedgwick never considered, necessitates a rethinking of homosocial desire between men and its dependence on not just the abjection of homoerotic desire, but also on compulsory monogamy.

Chapter Summaries

I started this chapter with the description of four scenarios of non-monogamy. In each chapter that follows, I will take one of those scenarios as the starting point and object of analysis to identify how *The Monogamous Couple* is implicated in racialized gender relations and heteronormativity, and to explore the polyqueer potential of poly sexualities. In chapter 1, I describe my own experience of having sex with my lover's best friend to interrogate cultural assumptions and narratives about "cheating" wives and "cuckolded" husbands. My focus will be on how the narratives we tell about infidelity reflect and sustain normative expectations for masculinity and femininity and establish *The Monogamous Couple* as "natural" and, in its "natural" form, restricted to white middle-class women and men.

In chapter 2, I analyze the "down low" as both a mainstream media social construction and as described by E. Lynn Harris in his novel *Invisible Life*. I will argue that the secrecy and marginalization of men on

the DL reveal the centrality of monogamy in definitions of both black respectability and homonormativity. The contrast between the mainstream media construction of *The Black Man on the DL* on the one hand and Harris's personal account of secretly loving a man and a woman on the other sheds light on how dominant constructions of the DL not only perpetuate racism, heterosexism, and hegemonic notions of gender, but also mononormativity. Specifically, I demonstrate how narratives of *The Black Man on the DL* rely on compulsory monogamy to maintain race, gender, and sexual hierarchies and to displace anxieties about promiscuity and HIV transmission on to the bodies of young black men. Moreover, I suggest that *Invisible Life* is a polyqueer narrative of the DL in that it offers a critique of compulsory monogamy and a vision of a world in which bisexual African American men would not have to choose to be either gay or straight.

In chapter 3, I revisit Eve Sedgwick's "love triangle" as theoretically developed in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* by analyzing a contemporary fictional narrative of erotic triangulation between two men and a woman. I adopt a polyqueer lens to analyze the film *The Other Man* as a contemporary example of *polyqueer homosociality* between men. I argue that the introduction of polyamory to narratives of WMM triangulation opens space for unraveling and reconfiguring heteromascularity in a way that disrupts the relationship between homosocial bonding and male dominance in fictional narrative and as theorized by Sedgwick.

In chapter 4, I introduce the *threesome imaginary* as a mononormative and heteromascularity fantasy of non-dyadic sexual interactions. By contrasting the heteromascularity fantasy of a threesome with two hot bi babes with a polyqueer fantasy of a WMM threesome, I will probe how erotic threesomes involving two straight men and one woman offer a phenomenological opportunity to queer the embodiment of heteromascularity. Compulsory monogamy, I will argue, is not just about relationship form, but also translates into the normalization and strict enforcement of dyadic sex as the only legitimate kind of sexual interac-

tion. By insisting that the only “normal” way to have sex is in pairs, compulsory monogamy fixes (1) sexual orientation as defined by the gender of the object of one’s desire and (2) the phenomenological embodiment of gendered subjectivity within temporally and spatially bounded erotic interactions.

Each chapter ends with the same question from a different angle. What is the feminist, anti-racist, and/or queer potential of poly sex and relationships? José Esteban Muñoz (2009) writes, “[H]ope can be disappointed. But such disappointment needs to be risked if certain impasses are to be resisted” (9). At the risk of disappointment, I hope to shed light on mononormativity and compulsory monogamy as important, yet undertheorized regimes of normalcy that uphold hegemonic gender, race, and sexual relations, and to reorient my readers toward polyqueer sexualities as a fruitful line of feminist and queer theoretical and political intervention and innovation.