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Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and Possibilities of Biology

By Angela Willey, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. 195, Paperback \$23.95, ISBN: 978-0-822-36159-6

REVIEWED BY ARUNIMA KUNDU

Angela Willey's *Undoing Monogamy* is an interdisciplinary exploration of the concept of monogamy within the cultural context of the United States of America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She seeks to undermine the assumptions about human nature and biology underlying previous feminist discourses that seek to challenge monogamy's compulsory status while ultimately reinforcing it. She also seeks to challenge contemporary feminist claims that the only alternative to monogamy is non-monogamy and/or polyamory. She argues that attempts "to imagine human nature as non-monogamous, however marginalized, often reproduce the logics underlying monogamy's naturalization" (p.2). The book borrows from the following disciplines and methodological frameworks: feminist and queer theory, the natural sciences, philosophy, anthropology of science, critical science studies, history, literary and cultural studies. By looking at monogamy in a variety of contexts; as a "bioscientific object" (p.2); ethnographic fieldwork in a neuroscience laboratory; and critical readings of documents from genomics to comics, Willey aims to challenge the lens through which human nature is seen as monogamous or non-monogamous, and by doing so, seeks to show us how this forces us to "reconsider our investments in coupling and in disciplinary notions of biological bodies" (p.5). However, this book concerns itself only with methodology: it is more about how to "undo" monogamy, rather than a narration of an undoing of monogamy. The author does not deconstruct monogamy per se; rather, she describes a method to deconstruct it.

Willey writes that feminist critiques of monogamy have challenged the naturalization of monogamy and discourses about what she calls "compulsory monogamy" (p.4), but (as she shows later in the book) have naturalized non-monogamy in the process. In these discourses, monogamy is seen as a central feature of femininity and female sexuality. She adds a queer feminist dimension to this critique by challenging the use of the heteronormative, dyadic structure to define homosexual relationships, and also the assumptions about the monogamous and non-monogamous nature of homosexual and bisexual relationships respectively. She also shows how "compulsory monogamy" was central to the colonial project of nation-building of the nineteenth and the twentieth century and contains significant racial undertones. This project was accompanied by the development of a scientific discourse that asserted the naturalness of monogamy, while simultaneously gendering the concept. Monogamy, writes Willey, is an a priori assumption informing scientific research even today. Scientific naturalization genders mo-

nogamy by assuming the naturalness of monogamy in females, while producing a variety of theories of male monogamy in different situations.

Feminist critiques have done their best to maintain the nature-culture binary while talking about monogamy. They have always looked for cultural explanations of monogamy and rejected biological ones because science, according to feminist critique, is a 'social construction'. Willey argues for a "naturecultural" world (p.17), beyond the nature-culture binary because what we know as "nature" and "culture" have coevolved together- and here lies her methodological intervention. She argues that feminist engagements with monogamy would benefit greatly from knowledge of "the body" and the material world. She claims that feminists are unable to "productively engage with data" until they take into account what she calls "politics of science"¹ (p.21). She further argues that nuanced and careful narratives about relationships between feminism, science, and the body enable the work of producing "newly accountable knowledges about the materiality of the naturecultural world" (p.22). Her aim is to approach monogamy as a "naturecultural object" with its own histories and "embodied realities" (p.22). Therefore, the central argument of the book may be roughly summarized as follows: "[...] monogamy and non-monogamy are not biologically distinct conceptual or behavioral phenomena and that a naturecultural approach to their embodied reality opens space for new imaginings that non-monogamy's naturalization does not" (p.75).

The main body of the book is divided into five chapters. Chapter one is a genealogy of monogamy as an object of sexual scientific knowledge. Willey reads the discourses of monogamy in the major works of two sexologists – Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis – to locate monogamy within the historiography of sexual science and to reveal the racial underpinnings of monogamy's nature. Chapter two challenges the a priori assumption of the naturalness of monogamy in scientific research. Willey does this using the reports from the genomic research conducted by a laboratory headed by Dr. Larry Young at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center in Atlanta, involving a special type of rodents called prairie voles that are assumed to be monogamous. She shows us how sexuality is assumed to be the basis for bonding behavior and that this is the root cause behind the assumption that monogamy is natural. The third chapter addresses her central argument and discusses how feminist critiques of monogamy have viewed non-monogamy or polyamory as its only alternative and have also in turn naturalized these concepts in an attempt to denaturalize monogamy. The fourth chapter deals with Willey's methodological innovation that she calls "Dyke Ethics of 'Antimonogamy'" and is arguably the most interesting part of the book. Here she challenges the centrality of sexuality in the concepts of monogamy and polyamory

¹ By this, she refers to the fact that scientific research is never free from the biases of the scientist and one cannot dissociate politics from science; in explaining this, she draws on feminist science studies and shows how science (used of political gains) has contributed to the naturalization of gender norms and therefore, the gendered understanding of monogamy.

and argues that other forms of bonding behavior like friendship and community feeling should be taken into consideration and this would enable us to visualize many other forms of human relationship outside the heteronormative sexual dyad. She bases her arguments on Alison Bechdel's comic series *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*. In the final chapter, she looks at monogamy as a "bioscientific object" and underlines the "possibilities of biology"; and in doing so, shows us how "antimonogamy" can benefit from scientific data.

Undoing Monogamy is a fascinating book that offers a very innovative methodological intervention. Willey's interdisciplinary approach makes it all the more engaging. However, the book would have benefitted from a global approach to the concept of monogamy. Although Willey does not claim to be writing a global history of monogamy, her first chapter promises a transnational approach that very quickly disappears by the beginning of chapter two. In her first chapter, through considering narratives about "monogamy in canonical sexological texts produced in a world made global by colonial and imperial projects" (p.27), she refers to certain transnational discourses about monogamy that were responsible for its naturalized, compulsory status. She also links larger colonial narratives of race, sexuality, gender and nation-building to the discourses of compulsory monogamy. However, the second chapter abruptly takes us to twenty-first century USA and its contemporary genomic research projects. The rest of the book is situated firmly and entirely within the cultural context of the United States. Willey could have, for example, situated the contemporary US feminist critiques in a global context. Moreover, her use of a variety of conceptual paradigms initially makes the central argument very complicated and difficult to comprehend, especially for a reader who is not well-versed in feminist or queer theory and associated discourses. Some terms also seem to be synonymously used (for example, her use of "nonmonogamy" and "polyamory" interchangeably), making it difficult to know whether one needs to differentiate between the concepts.

Nevertheless, the book is a very interesting read and Angela Willey creates a methodological innovation through it that will be useful to the present and future scholars of feminist and queer studies. The most important contribution of the book is that it makes us rethink human relationships and opens our minds to various possibilities of relationships – be it sexual or otherwise – between one or more individuals. It also helps us think beyond the nature-culture binary and imagine a world where nature and culture have coevolved. *Undoing Monogamy* is definitely a significant addition to the scholarship on history of sexuality, queer history, feminist and gender studies.