

Angela Willey

*Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology*

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Angela Willey's *Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology* is a novel contribution to our understanding of both monogamy and nonmonogamy in both humans and nonhumans. The topic is at the core of our personal lives. Compulsory monogamy and the related institution of marriage have helped to structure land tenure and the political economy of Western states, including the United States. Yet the naturalness and status of monogamy as a moral good is rarely questioned. In this monograph, Willey takes us through a diverse intellectual terrain--into a neuroscience laboratory, across feminist and queer studies of neuroscience, into feminist and queer texts, including--both academic and animated/graphic novel representations--of monogamy and ethical nonmonogamy, family, and love. She engages the seminal writing of Audre Lorde in a way that Lorde has not been read, as a *queer feminist critical materialist*. Unlike scientists who have named a "monogamy gene" in the prairie voles they study, and unlike popular and scholarly polyamory writers who similarly look for *nonmonogamy* in our biology, Willey refuses to locate monogamy or nonmonogamy on either side of the nature/culture divide. Instead, she takes a decidedly naturecultural approach to understanding how both humans and their laboratory proxies, prairie voles, "pair bond," have sex, and/or form attachments. Willey also refuses the centrality of sex in both monogamous and nonmonogamous (non/monogamous for short) relating, opting rather for an understanding of relating, desire, joy, and the erotic that can encompass sex but that can also be manifested in an array of other possible "loves," such as "creative expression, vigorous activity, and falling in love with one's work" (138). Willey's ethnographic and interpretive approach will be familiar to feminist science studies scholars, but no other thinker so fundamentally interrogates the constitution of non/monogamy as materially embodied and as social practice. *Undoing Monogamy* is an important contribution to feminist and queer studies of science, to feminist materialisms, and to academic studies of non/monogamy. It will be less accessible to readers of popular nonmonogamy literature.

In the introduction, "Politics of Possibility: A Queer Feminist Introduction to Monogamy," Willey highlights feminist and queer analyses of compulsory monogamy and its relationship to compulsory heterosexuality as embedded in US culture and law--most notably in marriage. She recounts histories of how the triad of compulsory heterosexuality, monogamy, and marriage has made women dependent on men and (along with land) a form of property. Monogamous expectations have applied differently to men and women. Men are conceived of as having sexual drives while women have been portrayed via notions of romantic love as belonging to men. Thus women overinvest in such relationships to the detriment of developing other interests and relationships, especially with other women. Overinvestment makes it difficult to leave unsatisfying or abusive relationships. Willey also attends to the sex-centrism of monogamy in which romance and sex are conflated. Conflating sex with romantic love and then prioritizing it over nonsexual love enables monogamy to exist. After explaining the cultural entrenchment of the ideal of romantic love, Willey introduces the reader to the scientific study of monogamy, which views it in evolutionary terms as a "mating system or strategy" (11). The similarities between scientific and social ideas of monogamy become apparent. Scientific narratives, like social narratives, see males as more promiscuous in their mating strategies (that is, as "sperm spreaders") versus assumptions that females stay closer to home and allocate resources to domestic care (that is, as "egg protectors"). Indeed, scientific assumptions regarding monogamy's evolutionary advantage (that is, two parents nurture offspring, thus increasing chances of survival) make monogamy not "an object of inquiry itself [but] an a priori assumption informing scientific research" (16). Willey introduces us to an analytical lens and ethic that she will use throughout the monograph that includes feminist objectivity and feminist materialism, feminist engagements with *matter*. Willey puts genomics and neuroscience of monogamy under the feminist microscope in order to examine the cultural and material inputs and outputs of the fields and laboratory she studies.

In chapter 1, Willey examines debates about monogamy's nature in turn-of-the-twentieth-century sexology that profoundly influenced contemporary Western articulations of sexual subjectivity, including contemporary science. She focuses on the works of two leading sexologists, Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* and Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (volume 6: *Sex in Relation to Society*). Their science of sex secularized monogamy, making what had been oppressive Christian ideals and legal doctrine into human nature. Monogamy as nature could then be more freely realized by evolved (read: white) individuals and within romantic love relationships. Such free partners, as opposed to the savage Others against whom colonial doctrines of enlightenment are juxtaposed, should choose one another. Unlike the less evolved (for example, always Muslims, but also historically indigenous peoples and others seen as other) the civilized, self-determined, "normal" (heterosexual), and modern monogamous subject should not be bound by restrictive traditions of arranged marriage solely for purposes of biological reproduction, nor would they indulge in less evolved relationship forms involving nonmonogamy. For the evolved subject, sexologists saw marriage as an institution that "exceeded procreative functionality." It should be "a project of personal fulfillment and self-actualization" (36).

In the ethnographic chapter 2, "Making the Monogamous Human," Willey studies Larry Young's neuroscience laboratory at the Yerkes Primate Research Center in Atlanta, where scientists

research so-called monogamous prairie voles, and where they help strengthen a dominant narrative of monogamy as biological fact. The Young lab has received much press for the discovery of a "monogamy gene," which is comprised of "longer strands of [a particular] section of microsatellite DNA--that is, strands with greater repetition of . . . base pair sequences" that correlates with "monogamous behaviors" (88), although not as cleanly as the term "monogamy gene" would lead us to believe. Beyond the correlation of markers with behavioral outcomes, an unquestioned narrative of normalcy is at play. The lab assumes that "normal" natural behavior includes (heterosexual) sex, which then results in pair-bonding or "monogamy" in so-called normal and social prairie voles, say as opposed to their "abnormal," promiscuous, "asocial" meadow vole relations who have the gene at lower frequency. The Young lab is careful to point out that sexual fidelity is not a requirement in their definition of monogamy. Rather they are looking at monogamy as a *social bond* between two individual animals that is presumed to include heterosexual sex, but is not limited to it. Their research has implications for humans diagnosed with autism, which involves problems with social bonding. Accordingly, the lab's funding comes largely from the National Institute of Mental Health. In short, undergirding the Young lab's hope for a specific therapeutic application of its research are unquestioned raced and gendered societal norms about the biologically reproductive, heterosexual couple being central to healthy, normal relations and family. Like that of early twentieth-century sexologists, the lab's work rests implicitly on evolutionary thinking that sees a progression toward what are actually historically European values related to sex and family. A particularly delightful or perhaps disturbing aspect of this chapter is Willey's own in-person observations of caged voles, which scientists observe remotely via motion-sensing cameras with the aid of software that tracks the movement of collared animals. Close up, Willey sees something other than "monogamy." She sees animals attending to each other, attempting to escape and to free themselves and one another from tethers and other monitoring apparatuses. In follow-up conversations, lab scientists acknowledge that indeed prairie voles are "really smart" and the lab "spent a lot of money on cage design and newer, taller, more secure cages to keep the voles in" (66). One ends this chapter with a sense that there are other, equally compelling questions with different underlying politics that could be asked of these small animals. For example, and aside from the profit incentives of looking for a pharmaceutical response to autism, what are the neurobiological mechanisms underlying perhaps even more complex social behaviors than "pair bonding"? What about the tenacity and cooperative group problem-solving dynamics when animals are tethered and caged? This chapter reveals the generative and critical power of feminist attention to the sciences via laboratory ethnographic practices.

In chapter 3, "Making Our Poly Nature," Willey examines through textual analysis a different set of societal actors--: a feminist neuroscience laboratory, with younger staff, that studies multiple simultaneous social bonds that are not always heterosexual, and several texts on bisexual and lesbian polyamory. The feminist texts, as opposed to more common how-to poly-relationship literature, are theoretical and feminist in their analyses, and counter the heterosexual orientation of much poly literature. Yet the feminist research and texts examined--though they question a dominant monogamy narrative--share naturalizing tendencies with the Young lab. These feminist scholars of nonmonogamy also locate in nature social bonds and intimate (human) relating. Willey explains that although such thinkers "reject monogamy as natural and desirable, especially for women," they too rely on forms of evolutionary logic similar to that of the Young lab when they see a "pre-monogamy state of evolutionary and cultural development as more

natural" (74). Although a feminist rebiologization of sexuality rereads hierarchies, say, between Europe and the rest, and puts women on more equal footing with men, there are risks to deploying biological discourse that is historically co-constituted with raced and gendered evolutionary narratives. For example, the examined feminist poly texts feature nonwhite sexuality and bodies being romanticized as existing in a more natural, primitive, and sexually freer state. A second concern is that feminist *nonmonogamy-as-nature* discourse, like the more dominant idea of monogamy as nature, implicitly centers on sex and ultimately coupledness in understanding the human relations that come to matter, which are at the center of what counts as family. But these are decidedly not universal understandings of family. Willey emphasizes the importance of this kind of feminist research on social bonding. It counters naturalized heteromonogamy. But both narratives can ultimately help strengthen dominant ideas of the individual, self-actualized subject, as mainly nurtured in sexual and coupled relationships.

In chapter 4, "Rethinking Monogamy's Nature: From the Truth of Non/Monogamy to a Dyke Ethics of 'Antimonogamy,'" Willey writes against what I and other theorists working at the intersections of indigenous studies and queer theory might call "settler sexuality" (Morgensen 2011). Although she does not use this term, this chapter should also be of special interest to indigenous queer theorists. Settler colonialism has at its heart both hetero- and homonormative entanglements of coupledness, nuclear family, monogamy, and marriage. In this chapter, Willey articulates what she calls a "dyke ethics" by building on Becky Rosa's concept of *antimonogamy* as not an alternate and natural sexual subjectivity like non/monogamy, but as aspirational: as a "way of life" committed to undoing monogamy. How? By breaking down "this very system that dictates how we should conduct our relationships" (95). Constituted along with nuanced ideas of non/monogamy and embodiment, a dyke ethic understands coupling and romantic, including sexual, relations as "within a broader schema of friendship and community valuation." It also questions compulsory sex as a central organizing principle of privatized romantic relationships centered on the couple and inside the nuclear family, all of which Willey sees as undermining "friendship." This argument resonates ethically, if it differs a bit in form, with what I call an indigenous ethic of relationality, in which a broader network of sustaining social and biological relations constitute kin and tribal community. And not all of those relations, as with Willey's reading of Lorde in chapter 5, are human. To demonstrate one version of what Rosa's *antimonogamy* might look like in practice, Willey analyzes Alison Bechdel's long-running comic strip, *Dykes To Watch Out For (DTWOF)*, which follows a group of lesbian characters over the course of two decades and emphasizes their coupled, friendship, social justice, and community practices. The characters sometimes build kin via coupling and baby-making. More often they do it socially. This chapter analyzes the complex personal politics of characters who engage in both monogamy and nonmonogamy as messy, intimate, and negotiated relationships over the course of their lives. Willey argues that their relationships are formed within "a dyke worldview, an entire logical system in which homophobia was inextricably linked to sexism and racism and militarism and classism and imperialism" (100). Whereas both science and the doctrine of romantic love naturalize non/monogamy, the dyke ethic articulated in *DTWOF* is co-constituted with more fluid, but long-sustained intimate relations in and around which dyke lives are lived.

Chapter 5 lays out Willey's overarching theoretical contribution in this monograph, a unique rereading of Lorde's pivotal essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." Willey reads Lorde as providing us what she calls a "biopossibility of the erotic." Willey names this important black

lesbian feminist writer as also a *queer feminist critical materialist* thinker. She highlights Lorde's expansive definition of the erotic, which includes deep sharing of joy, "whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual" as a bridge across difference between persons and nonhumans, including entities and concepts not considered to be alive in a typical Western framework. In conversation with Lorde, Willey articulates a naturecultural idea of bonding and becoming. She distills a materialist analytical framework in which biology, though not unimportant to the vital body, is not conflated with the body. For example, the sexual and the romantic may be present in Lorde's concept of the erotic, but they have no special status as a form of vital connection. Music, love of one's work, satisfaction in building something, making love to another human being, artistic expression--all bring joy and fulfillment and are forms of eroticism. Lorde locates these pleasures in part in the material body without reliance on biologizing language. Her concept of the erotic helps us to envision different forms of belonging beyond those produced by non/monogamy and its sex-centered understandings. Lorde's work helps Willey re-engage both monogamy and nonmonogamy as social bonding in ways in which they are not so easily distinguished from one another, nor distinguishable from the erotic bond of friendship. Lorde's expansive embodied eroticism helps Willey to analyze what she observes in the lab and in literature--: complex and not completely known molecular and environmental pathways for social relating in voles and humans that produce an array of behaviors in response to similar neurochemistry. Thus, when Willey is often asked, "Is there a monogamy gene?" she replies that the answer to that question depends on how one defines "monogamy" and how one defines "gene." Both are socially and biologically complex ideas. Moreover, Willey sees it as the wrong or as too narrow a question. Because she argues that human and nonhuman social relations and bonding combine nature and culture, she calls for more openness to a variety of human and nonhuman social bonds in scientific hypothesizing.

Willey's epilogue, "Dreams of a Dyke Science," takes us to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, an archive of the late twentieth-century lesbian feminist political movement where we glimpse the notes of a lab scientist who dreamed of a science in which we might "figure out how we can live with each other to nourish ourselves at no others' expense"--a feminist science that explicitly seeks to not do violence and destruction to the earth and to marginalized humans. Like that feminist science, Willey's dreamed-of "dyke science" does not bracket politics and critiques, but explicitly engages them in order to transform how we think of science. It also specifically values friendship and community, decenters sex and coupledness rather than continuing to debate the virtues of monogamy vs. nonmonogamy, and avows an embodied, naturecultural construction of desire. A dyke science is politically committed to questioning the rigid social formations wrought by compulsory monogamy and sexuality and to critiquing the burdens of such social formations that accrue disproportionately to those who are sexually and racially nondominant. The closing paragraph of this book is a game changer:

Queer feminist activist, "ecosexual," and porn star Annie Sprinkle famously called for feminists to make our own pornography. We can make our own sciences in the same spirit--they don't have to happen under the auspices of the same economic, epistemic, and institutional structures and logics. . . . When we claim sciences, instead of "engaging" them, the terrain shifts from one of how un/friendly feminists are to Science to one of what a world of sciences has to offer, where so much is at stake. (146)

Reading Willey's dyke science declaration from an indigenous standpoint, I am again reminded why it was feminist critics of science who brought me to feminism. Indigenous peoples too must move on from simply engaging science and attempting to intervene to make it better serve our needs. We must take a harder approach. We must claim science. This is a more powerful conceptual space from which to go about changing the political-economic structures with which the sciences are co-constituted in order to make a different world. *Undoing Monogamy* provides us with an example of how to approach science differently in ways that are grounded more in the lives and needs of a wider variety of diverse humans and nonhumans.

#### ***REFERENCE***

Morgensen, Scott Lauria. 2011. *Spaces between us: Queer settler colonialism and Indigenous decolonization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.