

Nathan Rambukkana

Fraught Intimacies

Non/Monogamy in the Public Sphere



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Contents

Preface: Chasing Non/Monogamy / ix

Acknowledgments / xiii

Introduction: Non/Monogamy and Intimacy in the Public Sphere / 3

- 1 The Space of (Intimate) Privilege / 22
- 2 The Adultery Industry: Autonomous Space, Heteronormativity, and Neoliberal Cheating / 47
- 3 Mapping Polygamy: Discourse, Reterritorialization, and Plural Marriage / 77
- 4 The Fraught Promise of Polyamory: New Intimate Ethics or Heterotopian Enclave? / 112

Conclusion: Non-Monogamies and the Space of Discourse / 146

Appendix: Canada's Criminal Code (C. 26) Statutes on Bigamy and Polygamy / 167

Notes / 170

References / 198

Index / 220

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Preface

Chasing Non/Monogamy

THIS BOOK TALKS about non/monogamy¹ in the space of discourse. Such is its timeliness and its challenge. The protean space of the intimate public sphere is increasingly inundated with such discourse, and as a researcher, I was persistently soaked in material; an unruly subject, with no sense of personal space, it would pop up in the middle of the night, insinuate itself into my newsfeed before my morning coffee, appear as online banner ads full of material when I least expected, and stare at me from newsstands as I happened by. All of this discourse, all of this potential evidence, was at times overwhelming, and the most difficult part of my research was keeping track of it all and choosing what currents in the unrelenting flow were most prominent, most significant. Non/monogamy is not the same object that it was over a decade ago, when I first conceived of this project. Nor will it be the same a decade from now – or whenever you are reading these words. But this is one of the reasons why it was crucial to track non/monogamy as it moved through this sustained period of significant change and took up strange new spaces in the public sphere.

Although at the outset of this project I sought to investigate the privilege attached to monogamy, the work as a whole, and many of the parts that comprise it, have gone through major regroupings and changes of tenor. In the beginning, this project was an activist one, written to unearth hidden histories and voice unsaid truths. I drew my inspiration and methodological models from queer theory and bisexual feminism, mobilizing theory and identity politics to work on framing and understanding my own perceptions,

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explorations, politics, and encounters living as an openly non-monogamous subject in a societal setting that was surprised, intrigued, and infuriated by this in turn. In Jeffrey Weeks's *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (1985), I found a way to conceive of sexuality as radically plural, as irreducible to our societal standard of one intimate system, one way of being. It struck me that this oneness, this mono-sensibility, was something we were stuck on: *loving only one way*. In bisexual theory, history, and politics, I found it too, a careful questioning of the societal imperatives of both straight and gay worlds to stick to that same mono-sensibility: *loving only one gender*. Emerging from these discussions and arcing into new spaces, new spheres, was a repeated thread that kept coming back to the same issue of mono-sensibility, but this time tied to and calling into question the imperative for a normative union: *loving only one person*. Clearly, the focus of my research would be monogamy.

But through time and consideration, my project blurred and shifted. It seemed that although I was still centred on monogamy, most of what I really wanted to talk about was *everything else* occluded by our societal fixation on oneness in love. I wanted to talk about adultery's odd new publicity, about the "dark threat" of polygamy, about the weird world of swinging, and especially about polyamory; I wanted to talk about this iconoclastic new discourse and how it made all of those other alternatives – what? Obsolete? Antiquated? Certainly, they were questionable and in need of revision. As I ran through my material again and again, grouping and regrouping my objects, thoughts, and approaches, what emerged were the following chapters in their earliest form – although the one on swinging never made it into the book and is tucked away in a file awaiting further work.² Clearly, the focus of my research would instead be non-monogamy.

But something happened that I didn't expect. In researching non-monogamies, I began to question my basic premise. As I broadened my initial forays into queer theory and sexual pluralism through the more nuanced theoretical frame of intimacy, other factors suddenly began to pop out of the woodwork; other kinds of intimacy began to cluster in curious patterns around the discourses and discourse-cultures in which I was interested. In addition, other theoretical paradigms began to assert their influence upon my thinking, quite unbidden by me. The dynamics of space slowly showed their relevance to this project as I contemplated polyamorous space from the inside and interacted with a public sphere where intimacy and space were often articulated together. The politics and perspectives of critical race

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feminism invited me to rethink my own positionality with respect to non-monogamous structures and with respect to the discourses that framed them both in the mainstream public sphere and in the subaltern poly counterpublic of which I was growing increasingly wary. Through the lens of intimate privilege, I found that I was not just looking at monogamy or non-monogamy but – simultaneously – at non/monogamy, and it hit me that if I was truly addressing states of privileged intimacy within that system, my analysis would have to cut across my objects and discourses of study. Not only would I have to take intersecting and interlocking privilege into account, but my own categorical framing of the project – with “good” non-monogamy on one side and “bad” non-monogamy (alongside monogamy) on the other – would be inadequate to the task at hand. At that point, I left my activist project and preconceptions at the door. Clearly, there was no way to know in advance where my research was going to take me.

One of the most interesting aspects to get left behind when my research took off in this new direction was one that at first seemed essential: the need to “justify” the societal reality that people have romantic love or sexual connections with more than one person. On the one hand, the new societal prominence of polyamory had made this aspect something I no longer needed to include in the project since it could now be taken as read. On the other hand, there was also an entire parallel personal narrative on polyamory, love, intimacy, and privilege that was being formulated throughout this project. Although this narrative does not appear in these pages, it does inform them subtextually and was especially important in cooling my activist impulses. Although I do not trace this more personal arc in the text itself, its dynamics are still present to a certain extent in the analysis. What follows is ineluctably coloured by my partial perspective, and owning this fact is part of my commitment to situating my knowledge production (Haraway 1988).³ As always, with such deeply personal, implicated, intimate matters, your mileage may vary.

Introduction

Non/Monogamy and Intimacy in the Public Sphere

How are sexual subjects such as people in non-monogamous sexual relationships positioned along multiple axes of oppression?

– Jin Haritaworn, Chin-ju Lin, and Christian Klesse, “Poly/logue”

Discourse is a tight fabric that turns back upon the subject and wraps around and imprisons him in return.

– Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*

Contextualizing the Cusp

MONOGAMY IS A STRANGE animal. Like heterosexuality, regardless of our individual relationship with it, assumptions about its ubiquity, its desirability, and its fundamental normalness and rightness underlie many, if not all, of our societal relationships. Intimacy is like that; it gets around, filling up the nooks and crannies of culture while painting huge swathes of it in broad strokes, getting in at the stakeholder level on public planning, working its way into designs, blueprints, construction materials. It is a shaping power at work at every level of life, from individual psychology to macro-political organization and everything in between. But if monogamy is strange, a structuring force that acts upon our lives in ways we are not always

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aware of, *non*-monogamy is even stranger. More than just monogamy's shadow, its estranged evil twin (with requisite pointy beard and sinister agenda), non-monogamy is in there as well, mixing it up, acting as monogamy's foil, but also as its own strong influence in personal, social, and cultural lives. They are two sides of the same socio-cultural coin. And when that coin flips, all bets are off as to the outcome.

This book explores how privilege operates in discourses, practices, and publics surrounding contemporary non-monogamies. In doing so, it builds on work that considers how sexual discourses influence and are influenced by the public sphere, work that explores notions of social and political "space," and work that investigates how privilege operates in intimate relationships. But before we go any further, I need to stop and define terms because even in this most meagre outline, this bare sketch of a problematic, we are already slipping into habitual understandings of key terms that might mean very different things to different people. What exactly do we mean by "monogamy"?

We can understand "monogamy" by its commonplace definition: the practice of having one sexual and romantic partner at a time. This sidesteps its strict etymological meaning of having one *marriage* at a time, although I will talk about institutional structures of monogamy, such as marriage, too. "Non-monogamy" we can understand as an emergent overarching discourse that takes in multiple conceptions and practices of non-monogamous sexuality, also without necessary reference to marriage.¹ I will also be using a third term, "non/monogamy," a framing deployed by Angela Willey (2006, 543) that is effective for discussing monogamy and non-monogamy as a linked system – as I will elaborate below. Zeroing in on non/monogamy at this point in the history of, and scholarship on, intimacy is crucial because it is increasingly pertinent, prominent, and on the move.

Although often invisible, there is substantial cultural privilege attached to normative forms of intimacy. Central to this privilege are the sexual politics that condense around the cultural binary of non/monogamy. In recent years the politics surrounding non/monogamy have been increasingly discussed in forums ranging from the academic and the legal to the political and the popular. Several factors have combined and gathered in the public sphere into a perfect storm of discourse: rising divorce rates; fewer marriages; same-sex marriage debates and legislation; new conceptions of what constitutes a family; pro-adultery discourse; raids, charges, convictions, and court cases involving polygamy; and the rising popularity of polyamory.²

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This ongoing convergence opens a window for the critical examination of the power and consequence of discourses surrounding non/monogamy.

Such discourses are many and varied, with significant questions attached to them that have been asked by scholars and non-scholars alike: Are anxieties within gay male culture about multiple-partner sex related to a growing desire to be “sexually mature,” or does this trend speak more to concerns over AIDS and a wish to be read as “normal” (Warner 1999, 81)? Is the “civil union” a marriage substitute – a second-tier union that continues the symbolic oppression of non-straight subjects even as they are offered a type of formal inclusion – or is it a more flexible institution useful for articulating alternative intimacies (Eskridge 2002, 96)? Is the fear that legalizing same-sex marriage is a “slippery slope” to legal polygamy or polyamory (Kurtz 2000, 39) just conservative rhetoric, or is it a significant question that bears exploring beyond an oversimple dismissal of all plural marriages as oppressive? How exactly do queers, feminists, and sex-radicals – both scholars and non-scholars – articulate the links between heteronormativity and hegemonic monogamy? And what of non-monogamies? Despite eschewing monogamy, can they still reinforce elements of heteronormativity or else other forms of privilege such as male, class, or white privilege? What are the major forms of non-monogamy practised in modern Western societies, and what are their real – rather than presumed, assumed, or believed – differences and similarities? Why is living in a multipartnered marriage legally and socially unacceptable, when cheating is tacitly accepted as part of society (Beaman 2014, 6)? Do non-monogamous lifestyles travel across subjects and geographies with the same capital, or do non-monogamists’ experiences vary depending on their positionality within intersecting systems of power and privilege?

This book joins the scholarly branch of these discussions, where academics from many quarters are exploring the diverse problematics attached to these new spaces of desire and intimacy. It unpacks these new articulations, pairing an ongoing problematization of hegemonic monogamy with a critical appraisal of the internal discourses of, and the external discourses on, specific non-monogamies, all in the context of current public discourses and debates on the relationship between culture and the intimate.

Due to the vastness and reach of these issues, this study is limited in scope, with Western social and cultural discourses being my primary sites of analysis. It also focuses particularly on the current situation of non/monogamy in Canada but nonetheless includes material from other countries that are

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part of discourses that circulate here. That said, the patterns and power dynamics that I am trying to elaborate are not simply a “Western” issue, although how they play out in Western spheres does have its own unique character. My predominantly English-language and Western sources, however, remain a limitation of the current work, and studying non/monogamy with respect to its broader context – with further excursions into non-Western discourses, as well as a more comprehensive read of non/monogamy’s deep historical roots – is a challenge for further study.

By examining current discourses concerning non-monogamies, this book investigates the frames that we use for defining non/monogamous intimacy broadly and the relation of this discursive formation to power and privilege – both conceptually and with respect to its situated materialities. Since right now discourses, practices, and cultural institutions surrounding people’s sexual and romantic lives are being questioned and realigned, this is the moment to take a good hard look at non-monogamies – one that takes into account new insights on intimacy, as well as empirical evidence of prominent changes already underway.

Unpacking Non-Monogamy

The tricky thing about non-monogamy is that as soon as you start looking for it, you see it everywhere. There are times when topics surrounding non-monogamy seem to rise into the public consciousness and attendant mediascapes more than others, where they fade into the background while never truly disappearing. This is one of those times. It would be impossible to create an exhaustive list of all the public engagements with non-monogamy in recent years. The scope of this conversation is too broad and too scattered for a finite list to do it justice. It is, however, possible to flag some of the major moments of this discursive formation, which occur in various modalities of discourse.

In the realm of public policy, law, and journalism, a cluster of factors have spurred anxious proclamations by conservative critics about encroaching non-monogamy, including the same-sex marriage debates, Canada’s legalization of swing clubs (Tibbets and Skelton 2005), multiple polygamy scandals, and polyamory’s splashy entry into the public sphere.³ These non-monogamies become further fodder for campaigns advocating cultural assimilation and fomenting anti-immigration sentiment in North America and Europe.⁴ In news coverage, there has also been a revived hyperfocus on

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sexual diversity and non/monogamy broadly, from a proliferation and gradual mainstreaming of gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans*, and queer cultures – each of which has diverse and variously fraught relationships with, and discourses of, non-monogamy – to the media’s fascination with the openly polygamous communities of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS).⁵ And finally, an increased visibility and public acceptance of kink and BDSM subcultures, where forms of both casual and more committed non-monogamies have long been staple parts, has been joined by a more active and visible polyamorous community⁶ and by a concomitant rise in the representation of polyamory in the mainstream public sphere.⁷

On television, in film, and on stage, there is an unrelenting background of non-monogamous themes. Adultery, for example, is ubiquitous as a plot theme in fictional media of nearly every genre.⁸ In addition, many television shows have devoted either single episodes or running plotlines to non-monogamous thematics, including having main characters who experiment with open or group relationships;⁹ touching on open non-monogamies generally;¹⁰ and addressing swing culture,¹¹ polygamy,¹² or polyamory¹³ directly in their narratives. We have seen the landmark appearance of HBO’s *Big Love* (2006), a show about a polygamous FLDS family living in the suburbs of Sandy, Utah, as well as the cataclysmic popular and critical response to this program. Other shows speak to a public sphere hungry for dramas about the dynamics of non-monogamies, such as *Swingtown* (CBS 2008b), about a fictionalized 1970s swinging subculture; the reality show *Sister Wives* (TLC 2010), about the Browns, a real-life US polygamist family; and the documentary series *Polyamory: Married and Dating* (Showtime 2012). In the theatre world, some notable plays focus on polyamory or contain polyamorous themes or characters.¹⁴ Finally, mainstream films have also long taken up non-monogamous themes, such as films that focus on swing culture,¹⁵ treat non-monogamy generally,¹⁶ or directly address polyamory, such as John Cameron Mitchell’s *Shortbus* (2006) (Landman 2003).

Print culture’s engagements with non-monogamies are also many and varied. In addition to the wide journalistic coverage of non-monogamies mentioned above, these investigations are expanded into broader publics by popular journalistic work on non-monogamy, such as Terry Gould’s in-depth report on swinging culture in his bestselling book *The Lifestyle: A Look at the Erotic Rites of Swingers* (1999) and Daphne Bramham’s exposé on Bountiful, British Columbia, *The Secret Lives of Saints: Child Brides and*

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Lost Boys in Canada's Polygamous Mormon Sect (2008c). Other non-fiction works variously promote or help people to recover from specific non-monogamous lifestyles, such as self-help books focused on promoting or dealing with adultery;¹⁷ books by insiders that discuss the pros, cons, and complications of polygamy;¹⁸ and introductory polyamory manuals, such as Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy's¹⁹ *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* (1997; 2009).²⁰ There also seems to be a healthy interest in historical non-monogamy, evident in a recent glut of histories, biographies, and autobiographies of mistresses and sexually notorious historical figures and public intellectuals such as Giacomo Casanova and Anaïs Nin.²¹ Also important to consider is the cumulative history of popular novels that explore themes of non-monogamy in fiction – particularly science fiction and fantasy – some of which generate critical attention or even spawn organizations or churches devoted to the principals therein, such as the Neopagan Church of All Worlds, which is broadly based on Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961).²²

In digital spaces, non-monogamy discourse erupts in all directions, whether from pro-adultery websites,²³ from polyamory webpages, web circles, podcasts, and discussion groups,²⁴ or from the similar yet more insular web presence of swing and polygamy cultures.²⁵ In addition, other digital media exhibit themes linked to non-monogamy or polyamory specifically, such as webcomics, podcasts, YouTube videos, apps, and video games.²⁶

Finally, we see a burgeoning presence of work on non-monogamies in academia. Major collections address non-monogamous issues, such as Gillian Calder and Lori G. Beaman's *Polygamy's Rights and Wrongs: Perspectives on Harm, Family, and Law* (2014) and Jean Duncombe and colleagues' *The State of Affairs: Explorations in Infidelity and Commitment* (2004). The exploration of polyamory is particularly on the rise, with edited collections such as Kevin Lano and Claire Parry's *Breaking the Barriers to Desire: Polyamory, Polyfidelity and Non-Monogamy – New Approaches to Multiple Relationships* (1995); Marcia Munson and Judith P. Stelboum's *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: Open Relationships, Non-Monogamy, and Casual Sex* (1999); Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio's *Plural Loves: Designs for Bi and Poly Living* (2004); Jin Haritaworn, Chin-ju Lin, and Christian Klesse's 2006 special issue of the journal *Sexualities* on the topic of polyamory; and Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge's *Understanding Non-Monogamies* (2010a). There are also numerous graduate studies on these topics, some of which have been developed into monographs.²⁷

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These manifold discourses turn back upon themselves (to paraphrase Irigaray 1993, 120) in that a common feature of many discursive engagements with non-monogamy is that elements bleed across discussions, showing up, at one time or another, in other places where non-monogamy talk is occurring. For example, articles about real-life polygamy talk about *Big Love* and polyamory, discourse on polyamory refers to pro-adultery websites and discusses swinging, right-wing pundits damn polygamy and polyamory with the same “family values” rhetoric, and newspaper articles repeatedly draw links between any and all non-monogamies. Since the early 1990s, there has been an explosion of discourse surrounding monogamy and non-monogamy, a “poetic world making” (Warner 2002, 114) of epic import going on all around us – for some, merely an oddity on the margins of the public sphere; for others, an intimate rollercoaster so personal and ubiquitous that it can seem overwhelming.

Putting aside the impossibility of speaking to all of the rich texts of non-monogamy’s public sphere, it is important to have a rough appreciation of the extent of this discursive field. Together, these moments of discourse form the crucial backdrop for this book. They are the shifting curtain on the stage of the intimate public sphere; they are the lights and the painted set pieces, the crucial props and dog-eared script books. They are the material that we, as actors, take up when we move into this space of intimacy. In other words, they set the scene.

What does it even mean now to *be* non-monogamous? How, in such a highly mediated environment, do we even approach this question or this knowledge? Is *Big Love* a fair representation of what it’s like to live a conventionally polygamous lifestyle as an upper-middle-class, white member of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Does *Ethical Slut* speak the reality of polyamory? Is Laura Kipnis’s take on adultery in *Against Love: A Polemic* (2003) reflective of the values of an emergent “subculture”? These and similar questions are also immediately complicated by the autopoietic power of discourse: What does it mean if people practise non-monogamy using these texts as discursive models? What is the ontological status of a polygamous union inspired by *Sister Wives*, of polyamory initiated with reference to *Stranger in a Strange Land*, or of an adulterous affair arranged and orchestrated via an Internet cheating service like AshleyMadison.com?²⁸ Are these no longer “authentic” forms of sexual union? Are they instead hyperrealistic riffs on the culture of the intimate, or post-modern sexualities unglued from traditional forms while still citing them

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ironically? This book explores these tensions, and the privileged intimacies that can spring from them, as it follows the dance of non-monogamy at a time of its particular prominence in the public sphere.

Argument, Method, and Texts

Given the above context, this book engages with one of the dominant normative frameworks that we use to conceive of and categorize intimacy: the “system” of non/monogamy. In broad strokes, I am building on the perspective that intimacy is a significant site of social interaction organized by a heteronormative logic and that an important means by which this logic operates is the systematic way that we frame and relate to “non/monogamy,” whether individually, socially, legally, in movements, or in the public sphere. A key facet of this operation is how those frames are often organized by and through a logic of privilege. Consequently, the main theoretical question that I am addressing is: *How is non/monogamy situated with respect to socio-cultural privilege?* A second, more methodological question is: *How can we read different forms of non-monogamy together in a way that highlights how various forms of intersecting privilege (e.g., those stemming from class, race, gender, and sexual orientation) converge to create and maintain what I call “intimate privilege,” or the oppressive shoring-up of cultural intelligibility and power in spaces of intimacy?* A final question speaks to the above problematics together: *How might the way that non/monogamy surfaces in the public sphere affect the degree to which forms of monogamy or non-monogamy hold privilege at different times, for different kinds of subjects, and with different effects, affects, or articulations?*

Given the above problematics and trajectory, this book is a rethinking of the intimate spaces surrounding recent conceptions and practices of non-monogamy that situates them with respect to a logic of privilege, building conceptually on heteronormativity but also moving beyond it to take into account other forms of privilege that intersect with the heteronormative both inside and outside of non-monogamous intimacies. The central argument is that neither “non-monogamy” nor “monogamy” map unproblematically onto any one figuring (e.g., heteronormative, queer, conservative, progressive, sexist, feminist, sex-radical) but rather that both cut across these epistemological categories, challenging some forms of privilege while potentially reifying others. Through this critical approach to non-monogamies, I seek to effect a transformative analysis of these discourses, as well as of how we come to frame non/monogamy (qua system) broadly.

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This theoretical engagement is based on writing coming out of queer theory, critical race and queer feminisms, and broader poststructuralist engagements with sexuality and the cultures of the intimate. As well, it is based on my own situated observations, research, and analyses as a formerly polyamorous activist engaging with discourses of and on non/monogamy. Finally, it draws on the specific discussions and debates on non/monogamy in academic literature, including the burgeoning critical response to – and critique of – polyamory. This engagement sets up a methodological imperative to attend to the intersectional and interlocking²⁹ nature of privilege in these discourses and in the cultures attached to them. Methodologically, this project can be seen as genealogical, in Michel Foucault's (1980, 83) sense: a “union of erudite knowledge and local memories,” a situated figuring of both theoretical and practical reflections on, and expressions of, this material in the realm of public discourse.

Foucault (1980, 83) presents genealogy as a more “horizontal” and equitable mode of performing research; it attempts to position itself outside of a framework of science qua “Science,” striving to avoid becoming imbricated in a hierarchized, centralized system of institutional power where only certain voices have the authority to produce discourse (84). By mobilizing the concept of genealogy, this book respects this perspective of horizontal authority, where diverse voices and perspectives are taken into account. This is especially important to discourses of sexuality, where so much of the knowledge and history production occurs in “officially” disqualified and subaltern spheres and with respect to which many official discourses – including the psychological and legal – are constrained or determined by powerful structures and influences, such as those of governmental politics, legislation, and social conservatism. A genealogical approach to discourse allows me to critically engage with non/monogamy using any texts articulated with the material under study, be they theoretical engagements, practical reflections, cultural expressions, or incidental moments that are in some way connected to it. This breadth of source material allows a scope of inquiry that matches that of the issues I am addressing, allowing for a more nuanced critical engagement.

My focal points are drawn both from subjugated (i.e., not societally dominant) knowledges of the workings of sexuality and intimacy, as well as from the lived discourses that surround the non/monogamy system and the deep shadows that it casts. And the deepest such shadow is the one that falls on “non-monogamies” themselves, making the public-sphere discussions of various non-monogamies key locations for exploring these discourses. As a

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genealogical perspective does not necessarily hierarchize these “minor knowledges” (Foucault 1980, 85), I skirt the issue of whether the forms of non-monogamy explored in this study are a set of discursive objects or an ensemble of products of discourse. To a certain extent, they are both. A better way to say this might be to call them *dispositifs*, in the Foucauldian sense of assemblages of both discursive and non-discursive parts that come together, break apart, and recombine to produce their own realities in ongoing ways (Deleuze 1992, 162). Both monogamies and non-monogamies create spaces, *worlds*, and the texts produced in and around these worlds are a discursive map of the hegemonic system they create – and of that system’s cracks. The manifestations and nuances of the dirty dance between monogamy and non-monogamy have an impact – a trace – somewhere in discourse. By reading several prominent discourses of non-monogamy and *thinking them together*, I hope to draw out some of the subtleties and interconnections of these already entangled objects.

In the next chapter, I introduce the specific theoretical lens that I use to scrutinize this significant discursive moment: that of “intimate privilege.” But first it will be useful to situate this project with respect to current debates and discussions within cultural theory broadly and sexuality theory specifically.

Queer Theory and Critical Intimacy Studies

Being a fusion of poststructuralist thinking with currents coming out of feminism, Marxism, gay and lesbian studies, queer activism, and identity politics in general, queer theory considers previous knowledges and discourses around sexuality, identities, and politics alongside theoretical reflections on contemporary problematics.³⁰

A strong current in queer theory – one that may be attributed to a number of writers but most notably Lauren Berlant – holds that focusing solely on sex and sexuality is a limited way to conceive of intimacy. Rethinking the intimate begins with acknowledging that how we engage in intimacy is fused with very public and life-long, even multigenerational, desires for constructing “a life” and having a family, often along the lines of engaging with narratives, categories, or structures that we have learned signify those things (Berlant 1998, 281). Berlant asks that we consider how others who might not see their lives or desires reflected in those dominant, hegemonic life narratives might be falling off the symbolic map of intimacy and, by extension, even personhood:

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I learned to think about these questions in the context of feminist/queer pedagogy; and how many times have I asked my own students to explain why, when there are so many people, only one plot counts as “life” (first comes love, then ...)? Those who don’t or can’t find their way in that story – the queers, the single, the something else – can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves. Yet it is hard not to see lying about everywhere the detritus and the amputations that come from attempts to fit the fold; meanwhile a lot of world-building energy atrophies. Rethinking intimacy calls out not only for redescription but for *transformative analyses* of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects while, at the same time, attachments are developing that might redirect the different routes taken by history and biography. (286, emphasis added)

When Berlant writes about enabling “hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects,” she is addressing normative sexuality in a way that begins to defamiliarize it from its embedded, common-sense context. This is a crucial step in her thinking and paves the way for her and Michael Warner (Berlant and Warner 1998) to mobilize the keen-edged concept of “heteronormativity”³¹ in order to take the normative sexuality that they are critiquing and refigure it into something else: an active and critically approachable problematic. This key point bears some expansion.

One such “hegemonic fantasy” is the perpetuation of arbitrary categorical distinctions between sexual and non-sexual forms of intimacy. The absolute separation of sexuality from other intimacies obscures their continuity with each other and contributes to heteronormative figurings of intimacy (in much the same way as ignoring continuity between genders contributes to gender division and sexist social structures). Another hegemonic fantasy is the assumption that only certain forms of intimacy can be articulated together to constitute coherent or desirable life structures; other constellations are divided off as inconceivable or unstable, such as being friends who hold hands or who sleep together regularly but not sexually. A third hegemonic fantasy is how we generally accept only one intimate life narrative as right and true; as Berlant (1998, 286) puts it, “First comes love, then ...” This kind of thinking is why most people don’t consider remaining single or celibate to be viable life choices, why many think that same-sex or triadic relationships – even single-parent households – are necessarily poor parental

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structures, and why we're convinced that a life without finding "true love" is not worth living.

Rethinking intimacy allows us to mount arguments that such assumed continuities and discontinuities are not compulsory, arguments that extend our ability to understand our lives' wayward intimacies and make them intelligible as part of actual rather than assumed and often hegemonic contexts. They also allow those with marginalized intimate identities to take part in a common "world making" (Berlant and Warner 1998, 557) that is taken for granted by subjects whose intimacies are already legible and intelligible in the public sphere. The field of "sexuality studies," from this perspective, extends far beyond the slippery realm of actual *sex*, reaching, as many scholars in the tradition of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978)³² have noted, deep into the realms of identity, community, and society without ever losing sight of sex-practices themselves and their political nature.

Situating "monogamy" and "non-monogamy" in relation to this transformed conception of intimacy is not to locate all relations that are either romantic or sexual in one category or the other, lauding one form of intimate relating (either monogamy or non-monogamy) while condemning the other as oppressive or limited.³³ It does not even mean seeing monogamy and non-monogamy as opposite ends of a continuum along which various intimacies are placed. Rather, this rethinking questions the binary logics at work in our seeing monogamy and non-monogamy as opposed to each other and co-extensive with the totality of intimate possibilities, and it posits *this very opposition* as one of the most significant manifestations of an overdetermining heteronormativity at work.³⁴ Berlant and Warner (1998, 554) define heteronormativity as follows:

This sense of rightness – embedded in things and not just in sex – is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture.

From this broad perspective, frames related to monogamy and non-monogamy colour our conceptions of all romantic and sexual intimacies and, by extension, all other intimacies. Tracking how this framing manifests

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in discourse – and through the deep mirror of discourse in everything from law and policy to institutional structures and individual narratives – is one of the central problematics I address in this book.

The Non/Monogamy System

Monogamy and non-monogamy are less binary opposites, an opposed pair whose sides play off each other, than they are two aspects of a single system for relating sexually, romantically, socially, and culturally, with multiple parts and different articulations. A few brief examples should be sufficient to illustrate this point. One would be tempted to class marriage (qua legal and social system) as an exemplar of “monogamy,” yet it creates adultery as its shadow, a non-monogamous form. A second example shows the inverse. Conventional polygamy, as a similar societal *dispositif*, is non-monogamous by definition, but in using the same tropes of possession and male dominance that many associate with monogamy, it also stands as a form of heteronormativity *par excellence* – heteronormativity multiplied.³⁵ Finally, a less fixed discourse such as polyamory may have both non-monogamous and monogamous parts, the “non” before the monogamy here speaking to a non-*compulsory* approach to monogamy, making it a choice among others rather than excluding it outright as a possibility.³⁶

Seen this way, the interplay between monogamy and non-monogamy is revealed as a variegated and interpenetrating field of relations, hardly a binary at all outside of the highly limited heteronormative mould that casts them as separate. Exploring this complex and at times counterintuitive structure of relations between monogamous and non-monogamous forms of intimacy puts both monogamy and its shadow conceptually at risk, both likely to shift and blur their edges and specificity in the relation. But the fact that the symbolic placeholders we use as one way to categorize sexuality – the terms “monogamy” and “non-monogamy” – are already implicated in the system we are deconstructing is not an obstacle for this project: the tension stemming from this overdetermined binary can be harnessed as productive, a flawed aporia that helps us to organize our journey through these theoretical and practical landscapes.

More specifically, it’s the seeming contradiction between monogamy and non-monogamy that can help us to see tacit assumptions that are the residue of heteronormative logics at work in the identities, concepts, communities, and institutions associated with them. For example, the assumption that

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bundles “commitment” with monogamy is the force behind seeing non-monogamy as necessarily embodying “fear of commitment.” That these properties – commitment and the fear of it – are equally available to individuals living both types of lifestyle suggests that this logic only *seems* central and that these polar designations might instead be more properly arranged within some sort of Venn projection: a series of overlapping territories rather than categorically different locations.

Based on this premise that monogamy and non-monogamy form a fallacious and overdetermined binary, as well as on deconstructions of similar binaries, such as nature/culture and sex/gender, I adopt a terminology based on Gayle Rubin’s conception of the “sex-gender system”³⁷ fused with Angela Wiley’s useful formulation “non/monogamy” and refer to this binary as the “non/monogamy system.”³⁸ This move is important for two reasons. First, as in Rubin’s conceptualization, it allows movement outside the conventional binary without abandoning the ability to discuss it; and second, it acknowledges the binary as a systematization (and symbolization) of one way of subdividing intimacy that is often taken to represent and categorize a broader swathe of intimate possibilities. To crib what Rubin says about systematic gendering, the non/monogamy system can be seen as a system of social relations that transformed biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which the resulting historically specific sexual needs are met (quoted in Haraway 1991, 137). This is to say that non/monogamy is socially constructed, an overlay on the interplay of biological relations that we sometimes see it as merely reflecting. This does not mean that, as constructed, it is somehow “false” or that we need to get back to an underlying set of “natural” relations, but rather that it is something that has been built up through history and, in many ways, through the workings of discourse. This discursive aspect of its systematic nature bears further study, especially in relation to aspects of that discourse that reflect heteronormative frameworks for understanding life and culture.

Outside of a facile conception of all things sexual as emanations from some essential nature, there is necessarily an acknowledgment that when it comes to our sex lives, social construction plays a shaping role. The current prominence of sexuality debates and discussions brings those cultural influences into the foreground, where, liberally admixed with power and privilege yet tempered with emerging subaltern voices, they transform the dominant meanings of what it is to be a sexual subject – for good or for ill. Therefore, to explore the texture of these debates and discussions is more

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than just to track a politically important conversation; it is also to engage with those discourses in one of the very crucibles of sexual identity: the intimate public sphere.

The Intimate Public Sphere

We often assume that intimacy is a private matter, but it is our broad relations among strangers that allow us to even speak of anything so expansive as “intimacy” or “sexuality” at all.³⁹ When discourse enters the public sphere, it becomes estranged from its makers, only to become immediately more vital: a shared discourse among many. But what does this dyad of events – being made strange, being made public – mean with respect to non/monogamy? To one extent, it means that the context within which we live and experience monogamy and non-monogamy is increasingly outside ourselves, alienated from that convincing impression that it is merely a fact of our biological existence. In other words, the increasing mediation of non/monogamy in the intimate public sphere defamiliarizes intimate practices, making strange what we know (or think we know) about marriage, adultery, polygamy, dating, cheating, sex, bigamy, divorce, making out, open relationships, friendship, family, and kinship broadly. This strange-making publicness throws open the doors of the bedroom and lets in the whole world.

According to Michael Warner (2002, 113), the making-public of a social discourse opens it up, making it less secure, less stable. In opening up to the world, it extends itself into space, unfolding into the strange, unknowable vastness of public scrutiny, circulation, and creation. This at once makes it vulnerable and infuses it with power, notably the power to provoke change. As Warner puts it, “the projective character of public discourse, in which each characterization of the circulatory path becomes material for new estrangements and recharacterizations, is an engine for (not necessarily progressive) social mutation” (113). The making-public of intimacy is such a productive space, especially around issues that recent same-sex marriage debates have projected from counterpublics and the margins of discourse into the centre of the vast alchemical engine of the mainstream public sphere. It’s a Deleuzian machine cranking out changed notions of intimacy, new becomings in which novel figurings of non/monogamy are a significant part (see Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 183). But just what is being forged by this powerful machine, this convergence of time, space, and intimacy? By considering the discourses of non-monogamies in the public sphere, I articulate

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how certain privileged frames of non/monogamy take up that discursive space, crowding out a broader, less oppressive conception of the intimate.

Breakdown of Chapters

As a whole, this book explores how, since the early 1990s, discourse on all forms of non-monogamy has been riding a new wave of prominence in the public sphere. It considers how this very prominence – this publicness – has profound effects on how these discourses circulate and manifest. The publicness of intimate discourse makes it open to the vicissitudes of the public sphere as a whole. It takes this discourse and amplifies it in ways that change it simultaneously; it becomes, when public, *out there* in a way that not only allows it to become buffeted and nuanced by this very exposure but also, crucially, weaves it into the texture of public life as a whole.⁴⁰

Chapter 1, “The Space of (Intimate) Privilege,” ties together threads from critiques of privilege and from understandings of space to move toward a notion of privilege as a process of “taking up too much space.” This spatialization of privilege is then used to conceptualize the privileging of some forms of intimate space above others in ways that are nuanced by the intersectionality of privileges. In coming to the concept of “intimate privilege” – an emergent gauge of how much one’s intimacies are read as viable, ethical, or real – this chapter outlines a theoretical endpoint to which I build throughout the book.

Following this line of argumentation, each subsequent chapter pursues a study of a specific form of non-monogamy through an engagement with selected texts pertinent to its ongoing discourse and to the most pressing issues at play (and being discussed) therein. Taken together, they explore how the non/monogamy system acts as an overdetermining frame on these intimate practices and their attendant subjectivities, communities, and institutional structures, as well as how broadly looking at privilege in relation to these frames complicates and nuances how any potential anti-oppressive reframing would have to proceed and what it would have to take into account.

Chapter 2, “The Adultery Industry: Autonomous Space, Heteronormativity, and Neoliberal Cheating,” is a first foray into the substantive discourses surrounding specific non-monogamies. Adultery is addressed first since it is, counterintuitively, a keystone to heteronormativity. It is the non-monogamy that exists largely *within* the logic of heteronormativity; insofar

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as it functions to define monogamy as a desired norm and non-monogamy as a bracketed exception, it is a breach – but not a break – with this system. Paradigmatically, it belongs to monogamy: it's the yin to its yang, that which could not exist without monogamy to define it. By exploring the discourse produced within and around the increasing socio-economic trend of commodified adultery, I interrogate the emergent phenomenon of “pro-adultery” discourse with a view to determining what kind of intimate space commodified adultery creates. Using insights gleaned from Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's (2002) notion of “culture industries” and from Hakim Bey's (1991) notion of “Temporary Autonomous Zones,” I explore three key texts related to pro-adultery discourse: Laura Kipnis's academic treatise *Against Love: A Polemic* (2003), Judith Brandt's cheating manual *The 50-Mile Rule: Your Guide to Infidelity and Extramarital Etiquette* (2002), and the adultery-oriented dating website AshleyMadison.com. Through an analysis of these texts, I argue that pro-adultery discourse privileges heteronormative capitalist individualism, revealing adultery as a firmly enmeshed part of status quo intimacy.

Chapter 3, “Mapping Polygamy: Discourse, Reterritorialization, and Plural Marriage,” explores the controversial topic of polygamy as intimate practice and the difficult discourses that surround it. Discussion of polygamy in the public sphere is overdetermined to such an extent that the actual dynamics and complexities of polygamous lifestyles and communities can be obfuscated by monolithic discourses that flatten out their many subtleties. At the same time, polygamy is a key symbolic battleground in public-sphere debates about sexuality and public policy, ineluctably linked to the lobby against same-sex marriage by a line of discourse and rhetoric that has had a hand in redefining public policy on intimacy in Canada. Through mobilizations of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1983) notion of reterritorialization and the concept of overdetermination, this chapter interrogates the disconnect between representations of polygamy and the lives of polygamous individuals, as well as the role of privilege in narratives of the tension between polygamy and a rhetorically “civilized” intimacy. I approach these problematics by reading three sets of discursive material: instances of the “slippery slope” figure that links polygamy, same-sex marriage, and immigration; journalistic coverage of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; and the discourse surrounding *Big Love*. Reading these frayed public-sphere “mappings” of polygamy, I show that it is more complicated than its overdetermined representations and that to truly

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address the very real issues of power and privilege incorporated in conventional polygamy, we must divest ourselves of much of what we think we know about it and try to approach it as a form of intimate relation that is at times deeply problematic but nonetheless real.

Chapter 4, “The Fraught Promise of Polyamory: New Intimate Ethics or Heterotopian Enclave?” undertakes a consideration of polyamory, often referred to as “ethical non-monogamy,” to elaborate the ways that in neglecting the intersectional and interlocking nature of privileges, polyamorous discourse might be deconstructing heteronormative frameworks of intimacy only to recreate a different kind of enclaved discourse. This chapter looks at the activist writing on polyamory and its burgeoning academic response with a view to assessing the possibilities and pitfalls of this discourse. By re-evaluating Foucault’s (1986) notion of heterotopian space, it deconstructs the idea that any socio-cultural space can be truly and completely “other” while acknowledging that a discursive frame of presumed “otherness” can have the power to create spaces for intimacy. Since polyamory is sometimes seen as a way of reformulating intimacy, an overarching intimate discourse, or even a new version of sexual ethics that is distinct from both monogamy and other non-monogamies, it risks creating a discursively heterotopian space of intimacy that can exclude many by what it does or does not include in its discourses – and even by the ways that these discourses are put into words or circulated. In this chapter I seek not only to deconstruct current articulations of polyamory but also to identify ways that it might transcend its discursive limitations with a view to becoming truly inclusive. This undertaking is facilitated by close readings of Robert A. Heinlein’s novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), regarded as one of polyamory’s inspirations; Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy’s *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* (1997), considered the “bible of polyamory”; and a sampling of other media discourses about polyamory.

Finally, the Conclusion, “Non-Monogamies and the Space of Discourse,” tracks the arc of this project and shows that by considering these forms of non-monogamous discourse together, one may read the protean vitality and reach of non-monogamous discourse. It draws on the insights gleaned from the above close considerations of individual non-monogamies, in conjunction with an assessment of the 2011 BC *Reference* case on anti-polygamy laws, to formulate some broader conclusions about non/monogamy’s relationship with privilege and about the multiply intersected nature of monogamous and non-monogamous intimacies.

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These sites form a cohesive set of research objects not because they are exhaustive or the primary sites where normative formations exist or have taken shape historically – for example, it is within religious, especially Christian, discourses and attendant cultures that the moral aspects of the non/monogamy system have been articulated (Bauman 2011, para. 187) – but because they are key locations from which the current circulation of and changes in these discourses can be read. This is due to the fact that, besides being rich and current flows in this system, they have a discursive impact on these issues as they are articulated today in the intimate public sphere. In other words, they tap the complex of meanings and understandings that, together, make up and map how we know non/monogamies. And those knowledges are at a cusp: a moment when flows in academia, society, policy, and culture could go in several directions, some of which hold the potential for a progressive politics of the intimate and others of which risk maintaining and reifying oppressive systems and logics already in place.