

REVIEW

Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology, by Angela Willey (Duke University Press, 2016)

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In June 2015, the US Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution upholds the right to same-sex marriage across the nation. Justice Anthony Kennedy's majority opinion expanded the civil right to matrimony on the grounds that marriage culminates two seemingly disparate trajectories: biological destiny and refined civilization. "Rising from the most basic human needs," the opinion declares, "marriage is essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations." Marriage figures somewhat fantastically as the harmonious conjuncture of essential biological drives and the highest expressions of human culture. "No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family," Kennedy explains, before reassuring readers that at the root of same-sex couples' desire for legal marriage lies "their hope...not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions." Marriage, in other words, is the apex of human capacity for civilization. Its denial by the state pushes gay couples outside of the realm of the civilized—and of basic human sociality.

Schuller, K. (2019). Review of *Undoing monogamy: The politics of science and the possibilities of biology*, by Angela Willey (Duke University Press, 2016). *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 5 (1), 1-6.
<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312
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Kennedy's logic, feminist science studies scholar Angela Willey would say, is *naturalizing*, for it legitimates same-sex marriage by producing marriage itself as simultaneously a biological fact and social ideal. Willey's 2016 book *Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology* employs multidisciplinary feminist approaches to uncover and ultimately displace the naturalization of monogamy across scientific, social scientific, and cultural spheres. *Undoing Monogamy* exposes how monogamy discourse blends a compulsory social norm with ideas about the biological substrate of the human (and other supposedly monogamous species, like the prairie vole). The book's bold sweep in source and method are emblematic of the expanded horizon of feminist methodologies. The argument moves, for example, between observation of the prairie vole research unit of a high-profile neuroscience laboratory (chapter 2) and close reading of Alison Bechdel cartoons (chapter 4). These diverse sources enable Willey to both diagnose the problems with "monogamy's nature" and, by recruiting Bechdel and Audre Lorde, work toward a new conception of social and erotic bonding in its stead (p. 10).

Undoing Monogamy makes a key theoretical intervention: clarifying how new materialist approaches can build on, rather than depart from (or at worst, ignore), the insights of feminist science studies. Willey makes a necessary and pointed contribution by insisting that to explore ontology does not mean to embrace science without qualification. New materialisms too often, she argues, fuse the practice of science with its objects of knowledge, such that biology comes to stand in for embodiment, unmediated. "*Matter* is too often conflated with scientific ways of knowing it," Willey elegantly surmises (p. 127). This troubling conflation—often trumpeted as a political victory over toothless critique—forecloses decades of feminist work on the situatedness of science within larger social contexts. It opts instead for the appealing fantasy of transcendent knowledge. Willey demolishes this framework by explaining that critique of science is a necessary method we can and should take up alongside "engagement (with biology)" (p. 19). Willey explains, "We need 'critique' to help us remember that 'the body' is *still not* 'scientific data,' nor is 'biology' flesh 'itself'; it is,

rather, a field of study, a discipline, a discourse on the body, in Haraway's famous formulation" (p. 22). And we need engagement with biological knowledge to capture the entanglement of materiality and semiotics that make up our being.

Through historical, theoretical, and ethnographic methods, Willey uncovers monogamy as a historically contingent aspect of sexuality, itself a rather recent invention in the Foucauldian sense of sexuality-as-identity. By contrast, she shows the discourse of monogamy to produce pair-bonded sexuality as a biological given, a transhistorical expression of basic and universal sexual drives. One result of this potent biocultural mixture is that neuroscientific research into the so-called monogamy gene, for example, takes as a point of departure the assumption that *Homo sapiens* are monogamous. So pervasive is the naturalizing logic of monogamy discourse, Willey argues, that feminist and queer polyamory texts aiming to unseat the tyranny of the couple nonetheless work through similarly naturalizing rhetoric. In this allegedly oppositional writing that is the subject of chapter 3, it is now non-monogamy that becomes naturalized, often through romantic primitivism and other racial fantasies of a life supposedly "before" culture. These racial fantasies remain committed to the ideas that nature is a distinctly separate domain from the social and that "the human is fundamentally sexual, and sexuality is a naturally privileged organizing principle of relationships" (p. 76). In its place, Willey poses a new set of questions that blend Foucauldian genealogy with the feminist science studies method of investigating naturecultures, or the inseparability of biological and social life. She thus overturns the familiar agenda that wonders, "Are we or are we not wired for monogamy?" and asks instead, "What is the relationship between how we imagine social belonging and how we understand human nature?" (p. 3). How, in other words, has romantic coupling come to bear the weight of the human?

Throughout, Willey interrogates how the intersections of race and gender help to produce the human vis-à-vis ideas of normative sexuality. She shows how monogamy discourse hinges upon the institutionalization of white bourgeois values as "sexuality," a historical product problematically

rendered a universal quality. Chapter 1 examines how monogamy became an object of scientific study, specifically in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexology of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis. Willey explicates their work, which adopts distinctly different attitudes toward monogamy, as nonetheless relying upon a similar civilizationist frame that corresponds to the political priorities of colonial powers. The remaining chapters point to the ongoing legacy of these colonial notions of civilized sexuality, including the very idea of binary sexes in the first place, within monogamy discourse. The book suggests that ideas about civilized refinement and biological need are thoroughly confounded in monogamy discourse, such that we might read Justice Kennedy's opinion as all but predetermined.

The second half of the book offers new frameworks for human relationships with the hopes of displacing monogamy discourse. Turning to Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For* cartoons from the 1990s and Lorde's famous theory of the erotic, Willey offers an idea of community affiliation that refuses to prioritize the romantic couple and erotic joy that suffuses all manner of being in the world. The broad disciplinary reach of the book stretches a bit thin here, as the Bechdel chapter in particular falls into plot summary that neglects, for one, the visual aspect of the cartoons under discussion. It also offers an overly romantic view of "dyke community" that fails to consider how often that very concept has been, and continues to be, wielded as a weapon to exclude transwomen—an aspect Willey's nod toward Bechdel's inclusion of transmale characters does not satisfy (pp. 115, 119, 121). Given that the book ends with an epilogue conjuring a "Dyke Science," a clear discussion of how dyke is being re-reclaimed would be useful. The argumentation could use a broader scope to fulfill its goals of offering new visions for relating, one that reads Bechdel within a larger field of representation. The organization of the book's chapters generally follows a pattern of explicating individual texts, a method that does not do justice to the text's world-making ambitions.

Willey's last chapter is more successful in working toward its inspiring goal: it sketches a theory of "biopossibility" as an alternative to "biology," an

act of theory making highly unusual in a scholar's first book (p. 124). Biopossibility signifies "a species- and context-specific capacity to embody socially meaningful traits or desires" (p. 124). It denotes a capacity of becoming in which the very "intelligibility" of matter itself takes material form (p. 125). In other words, biopossibility supplants the new materialist valorization of plasticity as an innate capacity for change pertaining to pure matter itself with a naturecultural framework in which the very act of naming a condition or a process has an effect on its materialization. Willey claims that the complex systems now hypothesized—but not yet mapped—to control gene expression suggest that the scripting of the hormones oxytocin and vasopressin and their receptors into proof of a "monogamy gene" has been highly reductive. "The effect of 'monogamy' is not the result of a linear chain of neurochemical events," Willey acutely notes, pointing to a range of environmental possibilities that shape hormone circulation (p. 136). She highlights other ways of interpreting prairie vole behavior in the laboratory besides the now-dominant one: voles who spend time with voles they have already met provide evidence of monogamous behavior. This measure, Willey explains, is particularly troublesome given that the laboratory does not track whether or not sexual relations actually take place. The process of naming vole sociality "monogamy," in other words, helps enact the very materialities we measure and envision.

Biopossibility is a highly intriguing concept, if necessarily not fully elaborated in this admirably concise text. I hope for its further development in Willey's future work. This is a scholar to watch for self-reflexive, multidisciplinary, and intersectional feminist research that challenges us all to conceive of critique and world-building as compatible projects.

Reference

Obergefell et al. v. Hodges, No. 14–556 slip op. at 1 (June 26, 2015).

Bio

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