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Theorising Multi-partner Relationships and Sexualities – Recent Work on Non-monogamy and Polyamory (Review Article)

Jillian Deri, *Love's Refraction. Jealousy and Compersion in Queer Polyamorous Relationships*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 168pp. ISBN: 9781442628694 (pbk); \$21.95 [£ 13.99]; ISBN 9781442637092 (hbk) \$50.00 [£ 30.99] Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli. *Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Cherrie, 2010. 290pp. ISBN: 978-0-7425-1036-4 (pbk); £29.95 ISBN 978-0-7425-1035-7; (hbk) £65.00

Nathan Rambukkana. *Fraught Intimacies. Non/Monogamy in the Public Sphere*. Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press. 229pp. ISBN: 9780774828970 (pbk); \$32.95 [£31.00]; ISBN 9780774828963 (hbk) \$95.00 [£69.00]

Ten years have passed since *Sexualities* presented a special issue on Polyamory (Haritaworn et al., 2006). In the period from the late 1990s until the mid-2000s, critical in-depth research into the intimacies associated with polyamory gained momentum. Special issues also appeared in the *Journal for Lesbian Studies* (Munson and Stelboum, 1999) the *Journal of Bisexuality* (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004) and the bilingual (English and German) *Journal für Psychologie* (Mattes and Dege, 2014). Barker and Langdridge (2010a) have documented the major developments in the field in a comprehensive review article for *Sexualities*. Their edited volume *Understanding Non-monogamies* (2010b), too, has made a lot of novel theorisations of polyamory accessible to a wider readership. A number of international conferences, too, have addressed questions of consensual non-monogamy. The path-breaking International Conference on Polyamory

and Monnonormativity took place at the Research Centre for Feminist, Gender and Queer Studies at Hamburg University in November 2005. The first Non-monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies Conference took place first in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2015, and will bring together academics, activists and counsellors for the second Conference at the end of August 2017 in Vienna¹. Another regular and even longer-standing event, the International Academic Polyamory Conference (titled International Conference on the Future of Monogamy and Non-monogamy) will take place for the 6th time in Berkeley, California in February 2017². The event will also coincide with a political activist meeting³.

Research has focused on nuances in identification, discussed overlaps and differences with regard to other forms of non-monogamy and looked at interconnections with (other) marginalised practices of identities, such as BDSM and asexuality. The linguistics, emotional dynamics and politics of polyamory all have been subject to critical inquiry. Research has further looked at power both within and around consensually non-monogamous practice, often deploying intersectional perspectives. Empirical research has been slowly consolidating since the mid-2000s to allow for a better understanding of various dimensions of polyamorous intimacies. Yet many aspects of this alternative approach to love, intimacy, sexuality and family have remained under-theorised.

In this review, I will look at three more recent research publications that provide rich and novel conceptualisation of core aspects of polyamorous experiences and the ways they have been represented in the public sphere. These publications were selected for

¹ <https://nmciconference.wordpress.com/>

² See <http://thesaar.com> [currently deactivated and awaiting renewal] and <http://10times.com/monogamy-and-nonmonogamy>

³ <https://sites.google.com/site/saturniaregnahome/home>

an in-depth review, because of their innovative approaches and their potential for opening new avenues within polyamory research and the study of intimacy more generally. Some interesting and important publications were not included in this review. Elisabeth Sheff's (2011) comprehensive research of poly families in the USA has already been discussed in a recent issue of *Sexualities* by Sophia Boutelier (2015). Mimi Schipper's (2016) new book *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities* was not yet available when I was writing this review. Robin Bauer's (2014) book *Queer BDSM Intimacies. Critical Consent and Pushing the Boundaries* contains excellent discussion of polyamory, but the overall research primarily focuses on BDSM practice. Raven Kaldera's (2010) book *Power Circuits. Polyamory in a Power Dynamic* has a much tighter focus on the poly/BDSM nexus, but falls within the genre of advice book literature rather than academic research/social theory.

Theorising emotions - *Love's Refraction* (Jillan Deri)

How people can possibly manage jealousy is one of the most frequently asked questions with regard to polyamory. Deri's (2015) study *Love's Refraction. Jealousy and Compersion in Queer Polyamorous Relationships* acknowledges that jealousy is not an unknown phenomenon within poly circles. Like monogamous people, polyamorists, too, are *affected* by jealousy. Yet in contradistinction to mainstream culture, jealousy is neither demonized nor tabooed within polyamory. Rather, polyamory elaborates a complex ethics and etiquette that is designed to control, modify and channel jealousy in order to stop this complex feeling from interfering with and damaging intimate relationships which are built upon the assumption that *in principle* it should be okay for

partners to get erotically involved with others. Polyamory provides a repertoire of scripts or rules on how to engage with jealousy in a creative fashion. What are the feelings rules around jealousy and love in multiple erotic entanglements? How does poly culture resist and transform mainstream strategies to address the problem of jealousy. These are the questions Deri addresses in her exciting qualitative study on the challenges and contradictions that shape the experiences of queer, lesbian and bisexual polyamorous women in Vancouver, Canada. Apart from in-depth interviews, Deri draws on community sources and popular texts, including journalistic advice columns and blogs. Deri's study is concerned with emotions and the cultural dynamics and politics around them. Focussing on how queer polyamorous women deal with jealousy in their personal lives allows Deri to describe what is distinctive about polyamory as a style of non-monogamy and a form of love. It also enriches the literature on polyamory (and relationships in general) by touching upon ambiguities, contradictions and challenges within close intimate bonds. It therefore conveys precious knowledge on how to deal with the vicissitudes and the vulnerability implied in opening up to others.

Jealousy and *love* are the key emotions explored in Deri's book. Deri takes a social constructionist stance that sees emotions as being shaped by cultural values. Jealousy is part of what Ken Plummer (2001) calls an 'emotion world', a symbolic universe made up of emotion words, value assumptions and normative response schemes. Theoretically grounded within symbolic interactionism, Deri takes recourse to the concepts *narratives* and *feeling rules*. The feeling rules deployed by queer poly women are the fruit of the cultural experiments and negotiations within polyamorous communities. They form an

important asset and function as a kind of subcultural capital and as a repository of response strategies for resolving potential conflicts around jealousy.

Deri is quite upfront about the contradictions that shape the experience of many poly practitioners. Tongue-in-cheek, many polyamorists use the term 'polyagony' to capture the painful moments of poly loving. Yet even if jealousy is not a prerequisite of monogamists, polyamorous people tend to experience it in quite a different context. Within monogamy, desire for or intimate and/or sexual interaction with other people beyond the monogamous partner are considered to be an act of betrayal. *Rivalry* is the archetype of jealousy-inducing circumstances under the condition of monogamy. Within polyamory, the act of turning to another person with a loving and/or erotic interest is not usually the cause for feeling jealousy. Polyamorous women in Deri's study experienced jealousy when a new person entered an existing constellation, when partners were distracted by the thrill of what polyamorists call 'new relationship energy' (NRE) or when they fell in love 'big time', rather than only taking a simply erotic interest. Jealousy also occurred when the new lover was too similar to themselves or when they experienced a lack of confidence or the vanishing of trust or a sense of security in the relationship. At times, however, participants could not name any particular reason for their experience of jealousy whatsoever. Since polyamory endorses consensus and honesty, it may be surprising to read that there is quite a lot of discussion about 'cheating' in polyamory circles. However, in polyamory cheating is defined in different ways as lying or breaking agreed-upon rules rather than having sexual encounters with other people (see also Wosick-Correa, 2010).

Quite poetically, Deri calls jealousy the 'shadow of love'. It is a difficult and complex emotion. Jealous responses capture both the mind and the body and many describe it as an intensely physical sensation. Like other emotions, jealousy is not a singular and coherent reaction and it is usually mixed up with other feelings, such as, for example, affection, love, fondness, embarrassment, shame, sadness, bitterness or pride. It is known to cause anxiety, paranoia, stress, withdrawal, forlornness or fits of rage. The 'green-eyed monster' of jealousy presents itself in highly personalised cocktails of intense emotions, which may differ depending on the situational and relational context.

Deri stresses that the emotional scripts for jealousy adhere to strict binary codes that result in the production of gendered response schemes. Research follows the binary logic by suggesting that men are more likely to deny the feeling in order to avoid a sense of humiliation or to respond to it with anger, while women are more likely to admit to jealousy, but may internalise it silently in a self-blaming habit. The link between jealousy, possessiveness, control and gender-based domestic violence, too, has been extensively discussed by feminists. It is against this backdrop that many research participants described polyamory as distinctively feminist or queer-feminist practice. For example, research participant Coraline stated that 'feminism is ultimately about self-determination for women. In a nutshell. And poly for me is about a self-determinationist expression of my sexuality' (Coraline, quoted in Deri, 2015: 75).

The role of jealousy as a tool used by men to control women makes the link between jealousy and power obvious. But gender is only one dimension of the complex intersubjective power relations around jealousy. Deri discusses three different lines for investigating the conditionality of power/jealousy, focusing on (a) the structural angle

(class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, beauty, quantity of partners, etc.); (b) the institutional axis (relating to mononormativity, heterosexism and sexism); and (c) the question of perception. The latter is important, because how one sees one's own position vis-à-vis the intersectional regime of power and within an interpersonal dynamic of conflict impacts on *how* exactly jealousy may feel.

Despite her extensive discussion of difficult emotions, Deri is adamant that polyamory does not have to *cause* jealousy at all. In contradistinction, polyamory can also be a creative way for soothing, mediating and channelling jealousy into more bearable emotional solutions. In contradistinction to the monogamous mainstream, poly culture creates routes towards non-judgemental approaches to jealousy and encourages creative emotional practices to alleviate difficult situations. In mainstream culture, jealousy is tabooed and repressed, due to its link with humiliation and shame and the lack of emotional skills to address the issue in a constructive manner. Polyamory subscribes to an ethics of controlling one's emotions, of not 'losing control' by succumbing to jealousy. 'According to the polyamorous model, feeling any emotion is appropriate, but acting on that emotion should be tempered with grace', Deri concludes (2015: 30).

Poly culture puts so much emphasis on taking care of jealous partners that some respondents felt an imbalance. All resources and all measures of support tend to flow towards those who suffer from jealousy. The normative expectation that one always has to attend to a partner who struggles with jealousy, some respondents argued, obscures the fact that having a jealous partner, too, may put a person in a very difficult situation. For these respondents, the care ethics of polyamory can be evoked to support a double

standard that construes highly sexual (or ‘promiscuous’) partners as ‘baddies’ and those who have fewer partners (and assume a more domestic role) as ‘goodies’. This double standard misconstrues sexually highly active people as *straying* partners, who put a burden on their partners with less interest in additional outward sexual relations. Some respondents therefore suggested that the aim should be not to equalise or standardise behaviours (through the imposition of rules), but to find ways of making sure that all partners are satisfied and happy in the relationship.

Deri’s study shows that not all polyamorists experience jealousy. Many report having no difficulties whatsoever with their partners spending time with – or having sex with – somebody else. Many even talk about a particular feeling of joy in knowing that their partners are loved, cared for and happy. Utilising a word coined by the San Francisco Kerista community (1971-1991), some polyamorists refer to this feeling as *compersion*. This term modifies the meanings associated with *compassion* and has been defined as: ‘the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another’ (Webpage of the Polyamory Society, quoted in Deri, 2015: 32). Compersion is a proactive process and accumulative skill shored up by an experimental culture of rewriting the rules of love.

Polyamory is different from romantic love, because it ‘eschews the sexually and emotionally exclusive focus of romantic ideology and yet maintains the importance of love’ (2015: 13). Polyamory does not endorse the idea of a singular, exclusive and everlasting love, Deri argues. It does not nurture the belief that one person should fulfil all the needs of their beloved partner(s). But polyamory does put emphasis on a human

need for love and an appreciation of the significance of close emotional connection among sexual partners.

With regard to jealousy, compersion and love (and many other emotions linked to multipartnered intimacy), polyamory is a processes of reinventing and rewriting feeling rules (see also Barker, 2013). For Deri, this is a practice of resistance. Polyamory is resistant to mainstream culture for the following reasons: (a) it breaks the taboo and stigma surrounding non-monogamy; (b) it revises the gender stereotypes that men are driven to have multiple partners, whereas women are inclined to monogamy; (c) it debunks the common belief that jealousy is an inevitable and unbearable effect of having multiple partners; (d) it denaturalises monogamy and the feeling rules around jealousy and provides alternative models of multiple loving; (e) it does away with the unhelpful ideas that jealousy is a proof of love and commitment. Polyamory thus increases relationship choices and provides a set of skills and values to handle common relationship problems in a more effective manner. This is why Deri's subtle study of the emotion worlds of polyamory has significance far beyond the narrow field of consensual non-monogamy and polyamory and provides important insights for the sociology of emotions and intimacy and all those who like to understand better the everyday challenges of vulnerability within intimate relationships.

Theorising Intimacies and Sexualities - *Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools*
(Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli)

Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2010) book *Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools* is an outstanding example of critically engaged scholarship dealing with polyamory, mixed-orientation relationships and bisexuality. Due to its outstanding achievements in exploring novel areas and perspectives, it won the Lambda Literary Award, 2011.

Pallotta-Chiarolli's study is based at the intersection of education studies, gender studies, sexuality studies and cultural studies. The book presents the argument that most educators and pedagogues lack adequate understanding of family diversity and that school and university curricula fail to provide meaningful teaching and safe environments to students with non-mainstream sexual identities and pupils raised within alternative families. Pallotta-Chiarolli, who has in the in the past extensively worked on the educational concerns of lesbian and gay youth and (lesbian and gay) same-sex coupled families, looks in this book specifically at the 'marginalised-among-the- marginalised', i.e. bisexual students (or students with a 'fluid' sexuality), multisexual families, i.e. 'parents and other family members of varying sexual identities, (...) who may also consider themselves to be in mixed-orientation marriages/relationships' (2010: 2) and polyamorous and multipartnered families, i.e. 'family members who are in openly negotiated loving/intimate/sexual relationships with more than one person' (2010: 2).

Pallotta-Chiarolli refers to these groups as 'border sexualities' and 'border families'.

While at least rudimentary knowledge on lesbian and gay youth and families has seeped into educational institutions through anti-discrimination and equality schemes, the school continues to be 'a site of absence, silence, and isolation for children from multisexual and polyamorous/multipartnered families' (2010: 9).

Pallotta-Chiarolli addresses both bisexual students and polyfamilies in the same research, because she is convinced that both groups can be theorised in similar ways by

drawing on a mix of queer and borderland theories. She further points to the potential overlaps between these groups (e.g. some bi students may be poly now or in the future and some poly parents may be bisexual or in relationships of complex gender constellations). Her decision to acknowledge the potential proximity between these groups is reflective of her opposition to a 'politics of positive images' and of assimilationist attempts at inclusion. She is adamant that the problems faced by border families and pupils and students with fluid sexualities are rooted outside of themselves, namely discrimination, poverty and the lack of adequate support and services. At the same time, she is wary of contributing to a common discourse of victimisation and stresses the research participants' agency, pleasure and creativity. Parts of the book discuss policy suggestions and advice put forward by the research participants. The text is a good example of what Game and Metcalf (1996) call 'passionate sociology', an approach Pallotta-Chiarolli found very inspirational for her own work.

Pallotta-Chiarolli deploys a mixture of interviews, ethnographic participation, survey analysis, and internet research methods, and includes data from several independent research projects conducted from the early 2000s onwards. There are also some powerful autoethnographic vignettes based on memory work or research notes.

Pallotta-Chiarolli's empirical discussion is embedded in extensive reviews of existing research, activist writings and works from within popular culture on border sexualities and families. The personal experience stories of the border dwellers that participated in her research deploy either one or a mixture of the following strategies to deal with hostile reactions and environments: (a) *passing* – through, for example, normalisation, assimilation, silence, erasure and absence in educational settings; (b) *bordering* (through

negotiation and acts of careful balancing of contradictory values that structure public [school and neighbourhood] and private [peer and family] sets of values; and (c) *polluting* (i.e. acts of non-compliance, active claims to undecidability and strangeness and the strategic politicisation of school environments by flaunting or 'clothes-lining' bisexual or poly existence).

Because Pallotta-Chiarolli wants to challenge reductionist binaries and oppressive labelling and to attend to conditions of intermixture and multiplicity, she adopts the theoretical perspectives on border zones and *mestizaje* developed by scholars such as Cherrie Moraga (2015), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 1990), Maria Molina (1994) and Maria Lugones (1990, 1994). Further inspiration comes from Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) work on hybridity. 'Mestizaje theory argues for the need to consider the reality of a third space, a metissage borderland space, in which identity is multiple, plural, shifting, with multiple parallel processes of definition and dissection' (2010: 33). (For more recent scholarship working along these lines, see Callis, 2014).

I was at first a bit worried that the application of *mestizaje* theory used by Chicana authors to explore the intersections between race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture and politics to bisexuality and polyamory could result in flattening (or decomplexifying) these concepts, narrowing the focus by considering sexuality and relational practice only. While race/ethnicity has never been the sole issue of concern for the anti-racist feminists that developed these concepts, it has certainly been a *core focus* of *mestizaje* theory. However, Pallotta-Chiarolli, who has worked on multiculturalism, ethnicity and intercultural dynamics in gender and sexual politics since the 1990s, avoids any reductionist analogies. Even if race/ethnicity is not the main focus in this publication, the

book contains powerful discussions of intersections between bisexuality and polyamory with (minoritised) experiences of race, ethnicity or indigeneity.

Many of the research findings are quite shocking. For example, the research reveals the quasi-total absence of references to bisexuality at schools (even within anti-discrimination programmes), the prevalence of heteronormativity of the curricula, the reign of bullying, the panopticonic effects of pressures to remain in the closet and the vital significance of queer community among peers for survival. It documents the common fear among poly parents to be out at school (or even to be out towards their own children), their struggle to protect their children from discrimination and bullying, and the widespread ignorance within schools regarding polyamory or indigenous, Muslim or African polygamies. All this has damaging impacts on the well-being of bi, poly and queer youths and puts pressure on multipartnered family lives. However, the research also documents the defiant reactions of young people and parents to assert the legitimacy of their sexualities or family practices and their attempts to contest ignorance and bigotry in educational environments.

Bisexuality and non-monogamy have become more visible in popular culture and they form integral parts of youth cultures, but they remain tabooed in in school and university education. This leads Pallotta-Chiarolli to demand that '[t]he realities of bisexuality and nonmonogamy in youth cultures and in families in all their positive and problematic possibilities, need to be articulated and included within school policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and student-welfare programmes' (2010: 226).

Research participants come up with manifold practical suggestions and direct attention towards useful resources from within popular culture (children's books, novels for

adolescents, cinema and TV, music and web-based resources). Specific and inclusive resources and learning activities play an important role for the validation of family and sexual diversity. Yet there is also need for focused institutional programmes, diversity training for teaching staff through professional development schemes, and the implementation of effective antidiscrimination and antiharassment policies.

Pallotta-Chiarolli's book achieves something quite exceptional in the current world of sexuality research: she presents thoughtful and nuanced analysis of marginalised sexualities and families that avoids stereotyping and generalisation. She pushes boundaries within education studies and advances an agenda for policy change with a high level of theoretical sophistication. For this reason, the book is an important resource for educational professionals and sexuality, family, relationship and sexuality researchers alike.

Theorising Discourses and the Public Sphere - *Fraught Intimacies* (Nathan Rambukkana)

Rambukkana's book *Fraught Intimacies. Non/Monogamy in the Public Sphere* explores the position of non/monogamy in the space of discourse. Rambukkana's analysis highlights the rapid change of public debates on different forms of non-monogamy and engages in a radical historicisation of non/monogamy discourses. Myriads of cultural products, such as journalistic coverage of polygamy and adultery court cases, novels, cinema films, TV series and reality shows work through the emotional stuff bound up with cheating, affairs and multipartner bondings such as polygamy and polyamory. Popular psychology guidebooks provide food for the soul and stimulate reflection

whereas science fiction novels spur the imagination. Non-monogamy is a hot issue in digital networks and the social media. All this chattering discourse across different public spheres accumulates to a cacophony of symbolisation, or – in the words of Michael Warner (2002) – a form of ‘poetic world-making’. Yet despite the strong presence of non-monogamy in the public sphere, the majority’s moral judgment regarding these way of life remains shaped by ambivalence, if not rejection. Attributions of respect depend upon a public commitment to monogamy, the desirability of which is rarely questioned within mainstream media formats.

Rambukkana is particularly interested in how social privilege is tied to different discursive framings of the non/monogamy nexus. Rambukkana presents different non-monogamies (such as polyamory, polygamy and adultery) as *networked* phenomena that can only be fully understood if considered in relation towards each other. Access to privilege is distributed unevenly across the monogamy/non-monogamy divide and is always mediated by the intertextual context and the situational impact of social divisions around as race, class and gender.

Rambukkana draws on a broad repertoire of concepts derived from cultural studies and queer theory to understand specific moments of the articulation of non-monogamy in the public sphere. While one chapter is dedicated to an in-depth theorisation of privilege, other chapters deal with selected case studies regarding the framing of adultery, polygamy and polyamory.

Rambukkana thinks about the public sphere as a spatial phenomenon, a space that is both real and virtual at the same time. Hakim Bey’s notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (T.A.Z.), Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia and Gill Deleuze

and Felix Guattari's model of de/reterritorialization are among the core concepts deployed within his spatial analysis of public mediations of non/monogamy.

According to Rambukkana, privilege is mediated within a complex system of interlocking power relations. He strikingly illustrates this point with the case of Laetitia Angba's struggle against deportation from Canada in the years 2006-2008. Laetitia Angba, a Côte d'Ivoire born teenager, faced the threat of losing of her citizenship and being deported, when it became public knowledge that her father Barthélémy Agba (also from Côte d'Ivoire) had married a Quebecois woman while he was technically still married in Côte d'Ivoire. His Quebecois (ex) wife, who had sponsored Barthélémy Agba and his daughter (who was six when she came to Canada) during their early years in Canada, accused him of polygamy a year after their divorce and withdrew her sponsorship. This in turn triggered the involvement of immigration control and the courts. Barthélémy Agba was deported (and stripped of any rights for future family reunion), whereas Laetitia Angba could secure her right to remain in the country after a successful campaign against her deportation. Rambukkana's careful reading of the discourse deployed by various actors in this conflict, shows the marginal position of polygamy with regard to constructions of the nation and reveals the profoundly racialised nature of Canadian citizenship.

In one chapter, Rambukkana critically explores pro-adultery discourses. He suggests that the popularity of adultery within popular culture (via self-help literature or social media dating services) and in counter-normative social theory reveals the extent of individualised and instrumental approaches to intimacy in neoliberal capitalistic consumer societies. The existence of an 'adultery industry' (a term coined in analogy with Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry) is taken as evidence for

the secure place that adultery assumes within contemporary cultures of intimacy, despite widespread moral condemnation.

Rambukkana uses Hakim Bey's (1991) concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (T.A.Z.) to explain the strong appeal that adultery has for many people. Within adultery, human bonds are contingent, bounded, temporal and ultimately disposable. Hakim Bey proposed the T.A.Z. as a tool for forging spaces for anti-capitalist or anarchist politics that cannot be corrupted and reintegrated into the mainstream. The conceptualisation of cultural resistance as the *temporary* strategic action of place-making means to safeguard the autonomy and authenticity of the resistant action. Obviously, when Rambukkana is discussing the adultery industry, he uses the T.A.Z. to explore adultery as a practice of privilege, rather than one of resistance. For Rambukkana, adultery is a dead end, because 'that slippery state of clandestine intimacy (...) is the one non-monogamous form that is contained almost entirely *within* a heteronormative understanding of intimacy' (2015: 56).

Resultantly, Rambukkana does not have lot of sympathy for the arguments presented in Laura Kipnis's book *Against Love: A Polemic* (2000) (his first case study), either. In her book, Kipnis hails adultery as a form of resistance against the containment, monotony and relationship labour of monogamous romance. For Rambukkana, Kipnis's celebration of adultery as 'critical practice', 'special brand of heresy in the church of modern love', 'sit-down-strike of the love-takes-work ethic', 'reinvention', 'private utopian experiment' or 'a defacto referendum on the sustainability of monogamy' amounts to nothing more than an euphemistic idealisation of an irresponsible act (all quotes Rambukkana, 2015:

61). For Rambukkana, adultery is an individualistic, apolitical practice that resonates with the neoliberal lure of consumerism.

While I have a lot of sympathy for Rambukkana's general argument, I found his critique of Kipnis's work at times to be quite harsh. For me, at least her original essay 'Adultery' (1998) works really well as a polemic, a feisty act of blasphemy in the face of the quasi-sanctified status of romantic love. I read it with a lot of joy and I have rarely laughed so much engaging with a piece of social theory. Yet Rambukkana has certainly a point, when he suggests Kipnis's endorsement of untrammelled autonomous individualism to be a major limitation of her social critique. It is only because she hails individual liberty at the expense of a thorough engagement with the power structures that surround cheating intimacies that adultery can appear as a promise of the 'great escape'. For Rambukkana, Kipnis fails to show how adultery may be implicated in the repressive culture she exposes and does not engage with meaningful alternatives to 'covert non-monogamy', i.e. consensual non-monogamous arrangements, such as, for example, polyamory.

The limited vision of Kipnis's critique of mononormativity and heteropatriarchal bourgeois romance becomes more obvious when read along Judith Brandt's (2002) *The 50-Mile Rule: Your Guide to Infidelity and Extramarital Etiquette* (2002) (Rambukkana's second case study). Brandt presents a version of pro-adultery discourse that is unashamedly and explicitly framed as a business venture, a strategic endeavour to enhance personal freedom at minimal cost without risking the privileges and securities that come with 'social monogamy'. Brandt's discourse finds its logical extension in the entirely commercialised organisation and marketing of adultery by dating agencies such

as Ashley.Madison.com (Rambukkana's third case study in this chapter).

Ashley.Madison.com markets adultery with a mixture of a pseudo-feminist discourse of gender equality and evolutionist psychology. In Rambukkana's reading, not only the act of introducing potential partners to each other is commodified, but adulterous partners or lovers also commodify each other within the rationality endorsed by the agency.

The chapter on polyamory refrains from depicting consensual non-monogamy as being an alternative free of contradictions. 'The Fraught Promise of Polyamory' complains that polyamory discourse largely sidesteps an engagement with power relations and invests in a discourse of othering to shore up its own privileged position in the public sphere.

While polyamory could rightly be theorised as heterotopia, i.e. as a space of difference, counter-practice and community that – unlike utopias – does actually exist within real world (Foucault, 1986), Rambukkana also points to polyamory's own exclusive normativity.

Apart from a vast array of discussion of polyamory in the blogosphere, online media and activist literature, Rambukkana engages in a close reading of two texts: Robert Heinlein's science fiction classic (1961) *Stranger in a Strange Land* (that figures on many reading lists on polyamory and has inspired well-known spiritual polyamory experiments in the United States) and Easton and Hardy's (2009) popular self-help book *The Ethical Slut*. Rambukkana's reading critiques an unreflective generalisation of an assumption of class privilege and problematic practices of racialization (through frequent allusions to Orientalism, primitivism or tribalism) in these texts.

A truly distinctive feature of Rambukkana's (2015) book is the inclusion of an extensive discussion of polygamy in his discussion of contemporary non-monogamies. What

Rambukkana calls 'conventional polygamy' (i.e. exclusive polygyny) is often excluded from the treatment of non-monogamies in contemporary Western societies, although the discourse of polygamy shapes the perception of virtually all non-monogamies in explicit or implicit ways. In the chapter on polygamy, Rambukkana presents case studies on the function of slippery slope arguments in the arguments against marriage equality, the media hysteria around FLDS communities (Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) that openly practice polygamy in Bountiful, British Columbia, (2008-2009) and the prime time HBO series *Big Love* (2006).

The increased media interest in matters relating to polygamy of FLDS communities in Bountiful, B.C., was triggered by a few high profile events in the United States that included the arrest, trial and conviction of FLDS leader Warren Jeffs in 2006-2007 and the raid of the Yearning for Zion (YFZ) Ranch in Texas, which is affiliated with the FLDS, in 2008. All these events and the arrests and failed convictions of the Bountiful leaders Warren Blackmore and James Oler led to a constitutionality test of the anti-polygamy statute of Canada's Criminal Code in the B.C. Supreme Court which upheld the polygamy ban in the judgment *Reference re: s.293 of the Criminal Code of Canada* in 2011 (Ashley, 2014; Lenon, 2016).

The raid of the YFZ Ranch in Texas included the forceful removal of 100 women and 400 children from their families by Texas Child Protection Services. Rambukkana's analysis of 2008 and 2009 media coverage of the charges against polygamists in Bountiful, B.C., the YFZ Ranch raid in Texas and associated custody cases reveals the prevalence of biased anti-polygamy representations. The frequent usage of the term 'wives' in inverted commas or 'conjugal relations' implies that only monogamous wives can be proper wives and

monogamous marriage is the only real kind of marriage. Many journalists used loaded descriptions such as 'cult' (for the religion) or 'compound' (for the area of residence). There were frequent suggestions of a conflation of polygamy with child abuse. Proposals to use DNA testing to decipher 'true' family structures and to verify claims about parenthood reinforced the discourse that only biological family can be true family. There was no proper consultation of polygamous women and no serious attempt was made to provide media space for them to articulate their views. A largely liberationist discourse suggested that women and children had to be saved from exploitation by this 'polygamous cult'. The HBO Series *Big Love*, on the other hand, pictures a different, more privileged version of polygamy, which is based in white middle class consumer capitalist suburban settings. All main characters are at the margins of the Mormon Churches and communities. According to Rambukkana, HBO depicts main characters as more 'civilized polygamists', while continuing to contribute to the *othering* and racialisation of other Mormon communities.

In the conclusion of his book, Rambukkana presents a thorough analysis of Chief Justice Robert J. Bauman's British Columbia Supreme Court's ruling regarding the question of the constitutionality of Section 293 of the Criminal Code of Canada that prohibits polygamy and lays out the terms of its criminalization. Rambukkana deplores the double standard of the verdict that ignored virtually all evidence presented to the Court that diverged from the condemnatory mainstream view and deploys the concept of harm in a discriminatory fashion (by excluding hetero-patriarchal monogamy entirely from scrutiny). The verdict confirmed the validity of Section 293, because of the significant harm polygamy causes to women, children, society and the institution of marriage. It further suggested that the section only applies to 'formalized marriages'. The latter has

major consequences for polyamorous unions, at least if they refrain from formalising their relationships through marriage or marriage-like arrangements.

While large parts of the Canadian poly communities celebrated the ruling, because of its decriminalisation of non-formalised forms of polyamory, Rambukkana (2015: 156) cautions: 'Institutionalizing informal polyamory in some way more privileged than conventional polygamy could act as a wedge that drives these communities further apart'. As a judgment, the *Reference* is a further prime example for the differentialist construction of non-monogamies in the public sphere.

Rambukkana's study covers wide ground and is unusual for its relational and inter-textual analysis. His discussion not only highlights differences, but much common discursive ground across which different styles of intimacy are constructed. Rambukkana explores communalities, even if they may be uncomfortable and brush against the grain of cherished taken-for-granted wisdoms. Truly impressive is Rambukkana's consistency in working along intersectional lines of inquiry, thereby enriching polyamory scholarship with an approach that is attentive to race, class and gender perspectives.

Conclusions

As the review of these three books has shown, recent scholarship of polyamory has made major inroads in the theorisation of emotions, sexualities and intimacies and the discourses and politics around consensual non-monogamy. Despite their differences in terms of focus and argumentation, the publications are unified by the shared openness on the part of the authors to pair qualitative and textual cultural inquiry with interdisciplinary and queer sensibilities and theoretical sophistication.

Taken together, the reviewed publications direct attention to a range of key problems that shape and unsettle polyamorous relationships. The prevalence of moral normativity of monogamy and judgemental attitudes regarding consensual non-monogamy de-validate and de-legitimise polyamorous relationships and families. As both Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010) and Rambukkana's (2015) studies reveal, the stigmatisation of polyamorous and polygamous parenting practices emerges as the key territory of stigmatisation and exclusionary practices. Both children and parents are likely to suffer due to stigma and/or pressures towards a closeted life.

The position of women in polyamorous and polygamous relationships is a nodal point in discursive constructions of polyamory and polygamy. This does not only concern their roles as mothers. Parenting and non-parenting women in (heterosexual or bisexual) mixed-gender multipartnered relationships, and most pronouncedly in conventional polygamy, are often perceived to agree to exploitative constellations and assumed to suffer from false consciousness regarding the scope of their own agency. At the same time, research suggests that many aspects of the non/monogamy complex, from the construction of emotions around jealousy to the division of labour are profoundly gendered, often in ways that enable or legitimise male dominance and/or violence. Studies on polyamory within distinctively feminist and queer-feminist contexts, such as Deri's (2015) Vancouver study further reveal to what extent feminist and women-centred culture can shape non-hegemonic practices of non-monogamy.

Racialization emerges as a key dynamic within the construction of discursive formations around non/monogamy. Both Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010) and Rambukkana (2015) have shown that it is a major axis of othering regimes with regard to polyamorous, non-

monogamous and polygamous intimacies. Rambukkana (2015) further reminds us that narratives deployed or endorsed by polyamorists themselves frequently propose a racialized filter to order and stratify the assemblage of non-monogamies.

Border processes separate some non-monogamies from others and map out territories of privileging, assimilation and stigmatisation. At the same time, polyamory itself is banished into a border zone, outside and beyond the new respectable population of lesbian and gay families of choice, a position not dissimilar from the one inhabited by bisexuals (and other fluid identities) with regard to the wider lesbian and gay established communities (a group which makes up a significant portion of many poly communities in the first place) (see Callis, 2014).

Social divisions, boundaries and borders are core concerns within recent theorisations of polyamory. Boundary processes produce both inside and outside positions. The same applies to the social divisions of class and the boundary dynamics propelled by capital accumulation. Class as a *stratifying process* is rarely discussed in any detail in the work discussed here. Structural notions of class recede into the background in favour of more cultural interpretations of capitalist relations around the notions of neoliberal *commodification* (as discussed in Rambukkana's [2015] book). Yet overall, it is more than fair to say that recent polyamory research has gained greater depth through a more thorough and rigorous engagement with intersectionality-inspired research agendas than previous scholarship (see Noël, 2006).

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