

IMAGINATIONS:
JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE
L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imagination.s.glen.don.yorku.ca>

Critical Relationality: Queer,
Indigenous, and Multispecies
Belonging Beyond Settler Sex &
Nature
July 25, 2019

To cite this article:

Smith, Rick W. A. "Monogamy Undone: Review of A. Willey's *Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology* (2016)." *Imaginations*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2019, pp. 385–388. doi:10.17742/IMAGE.CR.10.1.14.

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.CR.10.1.14>

The copyright for each article belongs to the author and has been published in this journal under a [Creative Commons 4.0 International Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives](#) license that allows others to share for non-commercial purposes the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of this article represents the author's original work and any third-party content, either image or text, has been included under the Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act, or the author has provided the required publication permissions. Certain works referenced herein may be separately licensed, or the author has exercised their right to fair dealing under the Canadian Copyright Act.

MONOGAMY UNDONE: REVIEW OF A. WILLEY'S UNDOING
MONOGAMY: THE POLITICS OF SCIENCE AND THE
POSSIBILITIES OF BIOLOGY (2016)

RICK W. A. SMITH

In *Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology*, Dr. Angela Willey powerfully critiques and reconfigures monogamy's nature. Moving beyond the now well-worn critiques of monogamy's reification as "natural" within mainstream Scientific discourses, Willey engages with and significantly expands upon recent developments in material feminism, offering productive new ways to rethink the entanglements nature, culture, and belonging. Significantly, Willey takes on the science of Biology as a space of care for feminist and particularly lesbian imaginings, knowledge productions, and possibilities for living beyond the sexual, relational, and intellectual confines of compulsory monogamy. Engaging with a wide array of topics, including sexological history, laboratory ethnography, poly discourse, as well as lesbian culture, writings, and archives, Willey offers a compelling and affective feminist manifesto that leads us through the limits of monogamy to what might lay beyond. Skillfully engaging both scientific and feminist discourses about the body and its embedded capacities for knowing and relating, Willey offers new theoretical insights into the possibilities of both human and non-human relations where "the politics of science and the possibilities of biology are not [...] separate sets of concerns" (3).

In the opening pages of *Undoing Monogamy*, Willey situates her project within a genealogy of feminist and queer materialisms, imagining new concepts of materiality that might emerge from efforts to simultaneously reckon with feminist, scientific, and other modes of knowing the

body. Willey's goal is not only to move past feminist critiques of social constructionism in science to enable new engagements with materiality, but to evade the imposition of knowledge hierarchies over multiple capacities for producing bodily knowledge. Perhaps most significantly in her introduction, Willey offers an important theoretical intervention on contemporary material feminist scholarship, identifying an ongoing intellectual slippage between "biology" and "the body itself", and "Science" and "nature itself", which has led to the impression that the science of "biology" is an unmediated process of knowledge production. To take both feminist and scientific insights about the body more seriously, Willey argues, involves starting from a position that does not take the mediated processes of bodily knowledge production, nor the sole ownership of those knowledges by Science and its practitioners, for granted.

In the five chapters that follow, theorizing compulsory monogamy is at the heart of Willey's project, but the author also questions basic assumptions about human biology that underlay discourses of both monogamy *and* its possible non-monogamous alternatives, assumptions that Willey links with the racial logics of transnational colonialism and how they are constantly redeployed in theorizing human nature and belonging. Willey begins by tracing the emergence of monogamy as an outcome of nature in 19th-century sexology, where monogamy's nature played a central role in reifying European nationalism and imperialism. She then traces the science of monogamy to contemporary research on the behavioral genetics of prairie voles, the central animal models upon which public and scientific discourses on monogamy have coalesced in recent years. Offering a powerful and deeply moving feminist ethnography of one of the US's leading behavioral genetics laboratories, Willey evaluates the genetic and hormonal mechanisms that have been linked with both monogamous behavior in voles and the ability to form social bonds in humans, and problematizes the experimental frameworks through which sexual monogamy and coupled relations are measured and made natural. Turning to scholarly discourse on polyamory, Willey evaluates a variety of queer and feminist counternarratives of monogamy's nature which have instead argued for the fundamental nature of polyamory. Willey calls for new kinds of poly discourse, ones that do not recapitulate monogamy's

appeals to Science or envision polyamory as monogamy's logical opposite in destabilizing the centrality of coupled relations, but imagines new naturecultural ways of seeing both monogamy and its possible non-monogamous alternatives. Moving towards these new poly discourses, Willey focuses on excerpts from Alison Bechdel's comic strip, "Dykes to Watch Out For", working from the subject positions and embodied knowledge of lesbians towards the invention of new, anti-monogamous relations. Here, Willey advances a "Dyke ethics of anti-monogamy", where a centering of "friendship, community, and social justice decenters the sexual dyad in ways that polyamory does not" (97). Returning to the question of monogamy's nature, Willey engages Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", to theorize what she calls "biopossibility", which challenges Science as the central site of producing authoritative knowledge about the body, and works from the embodied knowledges of queer women of color to understand matter and its possible relations. Here, Willey brilliantly refuses a simple denial that there are molecular substrates for human attachment, but insists that matter is inextricably embedded within webs of social relation and that bodies are always already bodies in context.

In *Undoing Monogamy*, Willey takes up the troubled but crucial work of not simply critiquing monogamy's nature, but claiming Biology as a space of feminist and queer re-imaginings of human and non-human relations. In her epilogue, "Dreams of a Dyke Science", Willey's unfolds a vision for remaking Science that will flow from occupying it with feminist and queer subjectivities, where "the feminist scientist will not only 'be aware' of the interconnectedness of the personal and the political; that awareness will lead to a fundamental transformation of science's very definition" (143). Willey's dream, therefore, "is not for a better science, but for a different one" (143).

Dr. Angela Willey is a Five Colleges Assistant Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies whose teaching and research activities span the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Mount Holyoke, and Hampshire College. Willey received training in contemporary feminist theory and science studies at Emory University and the London School of Economics. Her research centers on postcolonial feminist and queer critiques of coupled belonging, with a focus on the productive powers of monogamous discourses and the advancement of more livable alter-

natives. Her work will be of particular value for readers of new, feminist, and queer materialisms, as well as those interested in feminist science studies, history and philosophy of science, critical behavioral genomics, women's and gender studies, and decolonial studies.