

Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Women's Erotic Autonomy: Feminist and Queer-Feminist Critiques of Monogamy

Introduction

References to the erotic autonomy figure prominently in women's accounts on why they are practicing consensual non-monogamy. At the same time, the concept autonomy occupies a rather precarious position within feminism. Some modes of feminist analysis present autonomy as an inherently individualistic and androcentric concept that is at odds with feminist practices of solidarity and care. In this paper, I turn to the history of feminist and queer-feminist critiques of monogamy to show that this body of work rests on a long-standing commitment to the value of erotic autonomy. It provides a rich repertoire of political theorising that allows for the conceptualisation of both autonomy and sexual politics far beyond individualistic or liberal humanistic/inter-subjective models. Many feminist and queer-feminist conceptualisations of erotic autonomy place erotic and intimate actors within wider networks of oppressive relations, with more recent queer-feminist work conceiving of compulsory monogamy itself as an intersectional set of power relations. This paper aims to underscore the prominence of feminist and queer-feminist voices within the debates on non-monogamy, contribute to restoring a focus on autonomy within feminist theorising and highlight the relevance of distinctly feminist and queer-feminist notions of *relational* autonomy for sexual politics and ethics.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section, I place the question of erotic autonomy within a longer-standing debate on autonomy within feminist political theory and make a case for a *relational model* of autonomy. In the 2nd part, I present a brief genealogy of a feminist discourse of erotic autonomy through an engagement with European, North

American and Caribbean feminist and queer-feminist work that either explicitly or implicitly contests (hetero-patriarchal) monogamy or defends women's non-monogamous life choices. In the conclusion, I argue that a retrieval of the structuralist emphasis that runs through much of this work could provide alternative perspectives to the reductionism of liberal choice discourse pervasive in contemporary non-monogamy and polyamory advocacy (Jackson 2014; Author 2014). The systemic critiques of previous generations of feminism and the Black and queer feminist emphasis on intersecting social divisions contain helpful resources for rethinking autonomy within a *multiscalar* logic that encompasses individual, intersubjective, multiple socio-political and socio-economic dimensions within and across the realms of gender, sexuality, race and class.

Toward a Relational Model of Autonomy

Certain positions within feminism treat the notion of autonomy with suspicion, if they do not reject the concept as being irreconcilable with the ethics of feminism altogether. They assume that the concept derives from views of the subject that endorse masculinist behaviours and character traits and fail to scrutinise the socio-economic and gendered conditionality of care relationships (Code 1992; Lynch 2014). The hegemonic current within the history of political theory has construed the sphere of justice and citizenship in androcentric terms and described moral actors as prototypically male, hyper-rational and detached from social bonds, namely from the bonds of care (Benhabib 1992). In all their differences these critiques have been important in rebutting idealised models of contract and exaggerated notions of choice and restoring a critique of power relations at the core social theory. At the same time, many critiques have gone too far by dismissing the concept of autonomy altogether. Many feminists are adamant that some notion of autonomy needs

to be retained, if we want to conceive of the possibility of agency, personal change or collective social struggle (McNay 2000; Hague 2011). The close connection of autonomy with agency becomes evident in most definitions used by feminist theorists. Amy Allen (2008) equates autonomy with the twin capacities of self-reflection and self-transformation. Catriona Mackenzie (2014) sees autonomy manifested in the three interrelated values of self-determination, self-governance and self-authorisation. Marilyn Friedman (2003) defines autonomy as *self-determination* that is inherently related to choices and actions. A strong emphasis on *reflexivity* and *capacity* reveals to what a strong extent the question of autonomy in feminism is connected with the construction of gendered subjectivity (Benhabib 1992; Allen 2008; Hague 2011). Some feminists use the term *relational autonomy* to promote accounts of autonomy that acknowledge that people are always constrained by power relations and that social agents' identities are always formed by intersecting social determinants, such as class, gender, race/ ethnicity and sexuality as they are mediated by global capitalism (Mackenzie and Stoljar 1999; Friedman 2014; Mackenzie 2014). Relational theories of autonomy focus on intersubjectivity, emotionality, embodiment, social embeddedness and the complex conditionality of subjective *agency* (Veltman and Piper 2014).

Feminist philosophy and political theory have created a rich archive of theories of autonomy and agency. However, it is striking that not much of this work engages with sexuality and there are few explicit treatments of the question of erotic or sexual autonomy within the mainstream canon of feminist political theory. Questions of erotic autonomy and agency have been more explicitly addressed in work specifically concerned with sexual ethics (Cornell 1998; LeMoncheck 1997) and activists or theoretical publications that highlight the

implication of sexual oppression in the lives of women in general (Vance 1992) or specific groups of women (such as Black women, sex workers, lesbians, bisexuals and queer or non-monogamous women) in particular (Rubin 1992; Alexander 1997; Deri 2015; Schippers 2016). Although proponents of these different discourses of women's autonomy have not frequently directly engaged with each other, establishing a link between these debates can be highly beneficial to a more comprehensive understanding of gendered power relations, multiple oppressions, sexual subjectivity and relationality. In the following, I will turn to the complex genealogy of feminist and queer feminist critiques of monogamy to explore how the value of women's erotic autonomy has been construed in different ways across different periods within different strands of feminism.

Toward a Genealogy of Feminist Discourses on Non/monogamy and Erotic Autonomy

Anti-monogamy arguments can be found in Marxist and anarchist critiques of capitalist patriarchy, in existentialist and radical feminism and lesbian, bisexual, queer and heterosexual critiques of hetero-patriarchy. Angela Willey (2016) argues that due to its complexity, the history of women's critique of monogamy is difficult to categorise. In many cases its discourse has been interdisciplinary and addressed multiple political positions and affiliations. Willey herself applies a rough categorisation, referring to an early body of feminist work that was primarily concerned with a critique of hetero-patriarchy and a later body of queer-feminist work that has a more explicit focus on the critique of compulsory monogamy, driven by an impulse of sexual liberation within different identity-political movements. Yet she cautions that this scheme, too, may be too simplistic by downplaying the deep interrelation of straight and queer feminist critiques of monogamy. According to Willey's analysis, early feminist critiques of marriage originated within straight middle-class

women circles who felt trapped and exploited in heterosexual marriages. Because this tradition 'has been more or less subsumed into a reductive narrative about second wave feminism's critique of patriarchy' (2016, 5), Willey proposes to reclaim this work for a queer feminist legacy. I have a lot of sympathy for Willey's project and my discussion in this article pursues a similar goal. Like her, I have found it difficult to categorise and structure the multiple strands of feminist critiques of monogamy at the level of presentation. Yet while I appreciate Willey's nuanced emphasis of continuities and connections, I have also been intrigued by the extent to which feminist critiques of monogamy differ, depending on the socio-political and ideological locations of the authors.

In the following, I sketch prominent critiques of monogamy across different strands of feminism from the late 19th century onwards in order to show how this critique has historically unfolded around a concern with erotic autonomy. I will roughly follow a chronological order, but will also organise some sections around major theoretical and politico-ideological emphases.

Communist Feminism: Alexandra Kollontai

Apart from being a labour rights activist and revolutionary, Alexandra Kollontai was a relentless campaigner for women's rights within the Communist movement in Russia. Member of the Bolshevik party since 1915, she founded the Working and Peasants Women's Department of the Communist Party in 1919, which acted as an official representation of the women's movement within the Party until its demise in 1929 (Rowbotham 1975; Farnsworth 1980). She pioneered progressive family and social welfare policies, advocated collective childcare, the reformation of marriage and property laws and women's position in the economy (Kollontai 1972; Lokaneeta 2001). In both her political

texts (1978, 1998) and her literary work (1977), Kollontai criticises the family as an outmoded institution in the service of the patriarchal control of women's lives. For Kollontai, this requires a redefinition of patriarchal, bourgeois romantic love based on competition and self-interest to a more socially oriented kind of 'solidarity-love' characteristic of communist relations. Female characters in her stories and novels are depicted to seek out novel relations with men that seem to support women's casual approach to sexuality outside of rigidly formalised (monogamous) relationship structures (see Rowbotham 1975; Farnsworth 1980).

Kollontai envisions a new gender order beyond male self-sufficiency and female dependence and advocates the abolition of a sense of ownership in favour of a new mutualism within egalitarian relationships. Kollontai is often described as an advocate of sexual promiscuity, who allegedly compared the significance of the sexual act with a sip of water. Closer study does not sustain this view. Kollontai considers sexuality as a natural and healthy act which is not shameful (Naiman 1997), yet her vision of women's sexual freedom is primarily cast as a 'negative freedom', i.e. a 'freedom of non-attachment'. Kollontai explains: 'Many of the opponents of my writings tried to impose on me an absolutely false postulate that I was preaching "free love". I would put it the other way. I was always preaching to women, make yourself free from the enslavement of a man' (Kollontai, quoted in Rowbotham 1975, 158). Kollontai endorses a style of autonomy, love and sexuality that does not interfere too much with women's other preoccupations in life, namely their political activism.

Kollontai's vision of female independence from men is shaped by the ideal of the 'new woman', i.e. women that were erotically confident, met the challenges of life without

support of male partners by relying on their own creativity, labour and economic devices. Kollontai endorses the discourse of the 'new woman' that reflected the changing position of women in the public sphere in North America and Europe since the *Fin de Siécle* (Kollontai 1972; Showalter 1992; Felski 1995), always asserting the need for economic transformation to enable access to such freedoms to *women of all classes*. However, Kollontai's prominent position in the opposition in the early 1920s and the increasing rigidity of gender and sexual politics under Stalinist leadership forced her to adopt careful revisions of her self-presentation in order to safeguard her continuing membership in the party and her survival during times of the purging of dissidents (Farnsworth 2010).

Anarcha-Feminism: Emma Goldman

Emma Goldman, who strongly shaped anarchist politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is a much more unequivocal advocate of 'free love' than Kollontai. Goldman was a relentless campaigner of the US American and international anarchist movements and a strident defender of women's rights and the rights of sexual minorities. She also spoke out in defence of sex workers' rights (Goldman 1970a, 1970b). Emma Goldman's critique of love and marriage includes an explicit appraisal of sexual freedom as a path to women's liberation. Her vision entails freedom from regulation by the state, the church or individual men. For Goldman, sexuality is core to the gendered division of labour, which sustains patriarchal marriage as an instrumental feature of the nation state and the capitalistic economy. At the same time, sexuality remains the potential source for a life-affirming energetic connectivity, which coalesces around an inherently liberating core (Haaland 1993; Hemmings 2014).

Goldman's argument for women's erotic independence cannot be separated from her critique of bourgeois patriarchal marriage. In 'Marriage and Love', Goldman (2005) posits that marriage is an economic arrangement that works like an insurance pact. It grounds women's economic and emotional dependence and works as a disincentive for participating in public life. The married codes of motherhood further install the systematic exploitation of women's reproductive labour, which reinforces women's social isolation (Hemmings 2014). She complains that the expectation for women not to have sex before marriage which forces them to 'abstain from the depth and glory of sex experience until a "good man" comes along to take her unto himself as a wife' (Goldman 2005, 181). She opposes mutual possessiveness and jealousy, advising '[a]ll lovers (...) to leave the doors of their love wide open' so that 'love can go and come without fear of meeting a watch-dog' (Goldman 1911/n.d., 18).

Her liberal views on love go hand with a belief in the value of erotic independence. In the essay 'Marriage', she demands 'the independence of women, her right to support herself; to love whomever she pleases, as many as she pleases. I demand freedom for both sexes, freedom of action, freedom in love and freedom in motherhood' (Goldman 1897, quoted in Lowe 2014, 202). While Goldman's critique of marriage is framed within a wide net of economic and political arguments, the denial of women's erotic autonomy is a core reason for her principled anti-marriage stance. Goldman's arguments put a stronger emphasis on sexual freedom and have less of a tendency to subordinate the pleasures of love and eroticism to an overarching political task than Kollontai's. However, despite different emphases both authors present a strong argument for women's erotic autonomy. Both Kollontai's and Goldman's critique of monogamy is formulated as a critique of the

institutionalisation of hetero-patriarchal gender relations within the framework of marriage (or heterosexual couplehood). Class analysis, the validation of class struggle and the aim of strengthening women's creative world-making capacities are core to both authors' refutation of monogamy.

Existentialist Feminism: Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir critiques women's subordination within a gender order that posits the masculine as the 'absolute human type' (1976, 15). Women's submission is shaped by social conditions that and doom them to immanence through the denial of recognition and self-realization. The social ontology of women renders reciprocal and equal love within the current gender order close to impossible. The field of love consequently emerges as deeply structured by gendered difference with women being prone to lose themselves, 'body and soul' in a craving for validation and recognition by men – or more abstractly, within a masculine world (ibid., 653). Only through the love of a man, women can 'feel essential'. Heterosexual love within patriarchy thus encapsulates a psychic dynamic, which invites women's (self) submission (see Lowe 2014). The economic precarity of women, normative gender scripts, and the sexual double standard, result in a situation in which women may choose and at times also desire to get married for reasons that are entirely different from love. Beauvoir's description of marriage is as negative as Goldman's. The chores of domestic labour, the never-ending 'war against dust, stains, mud and dirt' (ibid., 471), tend to create unbearable boredom, a situation which de Beauvoir equates with social death. Moreover, the habitualisation of sexual intercourse in marriage under the condition of compulsory monogamy results in the frustration of the sexual longings of women (ibid., 454-455). For Beauvoir, there is no love without freedom: 'Genuine love ought to be founded on the

mutual recognition of two liberties, the lovers would then experience themselves both as self and as other: neither would give up transcendence, neither would be mutilated, together they would manifest values and aims in the world' (ibid., 677). Yet due to economic, social and cultural pressures it is difficult for women to build independent lives. Independent women thus are torn between their professional ambitions and an erotic existence.

Beauvoir is clearly sympathetic toward women who wish to explore recreational or casual sex, 'not only to satisfy her physical desires but also to enjoy the relaxation and diversion provided by agreeable sexual adventures' (ibid., 696). However, she cautions that a woman who decides to exert her sexual freedom 'risks compromising her reputation, her career; at least a burdensome hypocrisy is demanded on her' (ibid., 696).¹ In her own life, Beauvoir practiced non-monogamy within an open relationship model which drew strong boundaries around the core couple. Although her open long term relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre was not without pain, their relationship experiment inspired many people within feminist and new left circles in the 1960s and 1970s (see Appignanesi 1988; Mitscherlich-Nielson 1989; Robinson 1997). Her mapping of the conditions and obstacles for women's erotic autonomy emphasises independent work (that resembles Kollontai's arguments) and a principled defence of women's casual sex and their choice of multiple relationships (comparable to Goldman's more explicitly sexual concept of autonomy). There is no major emphasis on class relations, although economic inequality is considered as an integral part of gendered power relations.

One line of Beauvoir's argument for women's erotic autonomy advances along a critique of patriarchy and the way it shapes women's experiences in the fields of romance and married

relationship life. Beyond that, it is also possible to identify in her work a much more foundational appreciation of the erotic as a source for women's independence. 'For Beauvoir, the erotic is a good thing because it quite simply allows women in particular to possess their own sexuality', argues Sharon P. Holland (2012, 47). Despite all its ambiguity, for Beauvoir, the erotic carries the 'revolutionary potential for a certain autonomy' (ibid.: 47), the promise of transcendence at the conjunction of oppression, responsibility and freedom (of choice). This vision of revolutionary autonomy inspired many feminist theorists during the last decades of the 20th century and also informs contemporary queer and queer feminist endorsements of erotic autonomy²

Anti-monogamy Critiques in late 20th Century Feminism

Anti-monogamy arguments were very common and pervasive in radical feminist politics of the 1970s and 1980s (Jackson and Scott 2003). The critique in this period focused both on personal and institutional factors, including emotional cultures and the wider economy of productive/reproductive labour (Lewis 1981). The critique of monogamy flows from a wider commitment to the value of erotic autonomy and cuts across different identity-political currents, including lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual and Black feminisms, with further differences depending on the political-theoretical leaning of the authors (e.g. decolonial, socialist, radical (cultural) or liberal).

The Critique of Marriage

In *Wedlocked Women*, Lee Comer (1974) describes marriage as a social contract that institutionalises a division of labour between genders that ensures the exploitation of women. Monogamy functions as a means of control establishing the institution of marriage

as a safety valve, i.e. a space where women's anger is soothed by the promises of romance and where women waisted their energies in private quarrels with men, rather than pursuing a collective struggle against gender inequality in the public sphere. For Comer, 'monogamy has come to be the definition of love, a yardstick by which we measure the rest of our emotions. "Real" love is only that which is exclusively focused on one person of the opposite sex – and all else is labelled "liking". Like so much butter, romantic love must be spread thickly on one slice of bread; to spread it over several is to spread it "thinly" (1974, 219). This critique of romance resonates with subsequent decades of feminist critique of marriage and romantic love (see Robinson 1997; Jackson and Scott 2004).

Comer's (1974) critique clearly aims at validating many forms of love, including non-heterosexual love and bonds that may include multiple partners. Her analogy of the butter bread challenges the 'scarcity model' of monogamous love and prefigures contemporary poly philosophies of effervescence and plentitude (Mayer 2014).

Jill Lewis's (1982) discussion in 'The Politics of Monogamy' mirrors some of the core concerns of Comer (1974) and presents them in a distinctive blend of psychoanalytical and Marxist ideas. Lewis (1982: 88) defines 'monogamy as a *political* construct that is integrally connected to patriarchal modes of sexual oppression'. Like Beauvoir (2010), Lewis suggests that women, if compared to men, feel to a much stronger extent dependent on the validation of their identities through the experience of romantic love. The cultural politics of monogamous love structures women's subjectivity in a way that undermines their emotional autonomy.

Lewis sees monogamy as a core factor in shoring up compulsory heterosexuality, the institution of marriage and a gendered politics of (re)production that is functional to

capitalist relations. Drawing on psychoanalytic insights, she suggests that '[i]t is within this privatised and privileged space of the monogamous relationship, echoing the emotional landscape of our nuclear childhood and our gendered unconscious, that the strongest confirmation of identity, security and intelligibility is sought' (Lewis 1982: 92). Lewis develops a theory of monogamy which is very much in line with Althusser's theory of ideology. According to Althusser (1976, 175), ideology permeates all human activity and 'is identical with the "lived" experience of human existence itself'. Without referring to Althusser directly, Lewis evokes a notion of ideology as a process that connects socio-economic reality with individual consciousness and thereby shores up the dominant (patriarchal) formation by constituting women as romantic subjects bound by the rules of monogamy and motherhood.

In the 1970s, marriage was critiqued as a form of 'sexual slavery' by both heterosexual and lesbian feminists. 'Feminists advocated demanding an end to sexual slavery and called attention to the prevalence of marital rape while at the same time championing the rights of women to express sexual desire, initiate sexual action, and be sexually fulfilled', recalls Bell hooks (2000, 79). For many, this included the promotion of non-monogamy since monogamy was seen to reinforce the idea that women's bodies were male property, an assumption that functions as an integral part of the double standard reacts with leniency to men who are sexually active, while insinuating that women with multiple partners promiscuous (ibid., 78). Compulsory monogamy was thus identified as a core pillar of normative gender relations and submissive enactments of femininity (Melancon 2014; Willey 2016).

Sexual Liberationism

Apart from the critique of (heterosexual) marriage and romance, some feminists of the period also assumed explicitly sexual liberationist arguments. In the 1950s, women's sexual activities outside of marriage were heavily stigmatised. The lack of access to contraception for non-married women and the harsh penalisation of women who had children out of wedlock rendered sexual liaisons with men very risky (Reekie 1998). Writing from a UK perspective, Lynne Segal (1994) argues that women who came of age in the 1960s, a period of legal liberalisation concerning sexual matters (including divorce, the usage of contraception, abortion, pornography, and homosexuality), experienced this relaxation of mores as personally liberating. Sexual liberationist voices within feminism attacked the persistence of taboos and restrictions placed on women's sexuality and the lack of control women faced with regard to fertility and contraception. Some feminists advocated women's erotic empowerment, non-monogamy and even reclaimed the term promiscuity. 'Women's sexual passivity and objectification undermines their functioning as autonomous individuals. Acknowledgment of lust, acceptance of so-called promiscuity must be recognized as potentially inevitable stages in women's escape from sexual conformity', argues Beatrix Campbell in 1973 (quoted in Segal 1987, 80/81).

However, sexual liberation had very contradictory effects in the lives of women in a context, in which sex and sexualised femininity became increasingly commodified and in which most heterosexual men hung on to a patriarchal self-image and domineering behaviours. Non-monogamy often seemed to give more power to men in a relational context than to women (hooks 2000, 78), Those feminists who have continued to advocate heterosexual sex as a source of pleasure and empowerment (e.g. Hollway 1993) have been very aware of the contradictions sexually active women were running up against. For example, Victoria

Robinson (1997, 144) concedes that non-monogamy is not usually an easy option for heterosexual women, but she insists that it 'can (potentially) allow for a radical reworking of gendered power relationships' and should be valued as 'one possible way (...) to transform and reconstruct the gendered relationships of heterosexuality' (ibid., 152).

Some aspects of the sexual liberationist argumentation has been incorporated in positions of 'sex-radical' feminists during the so-called 'sex wars' from the late 1970s into the early 1990s (in which feminists clashed about the ethics regarding – among others – pornography, BDSM³, sex work, casual sex, the usage sex toys, bisexuality, butch/ femme and transgender identities). Proponents of a libertarian or anti-censorship agenda clearly endorsed women's sexual experimentation along these contested lines (Duggan and Hunter 1995; Healy 1996; Walters 2016). In a core text of this debate in the USA, Carol Vance (1992a) highlights the systematic repression of women's sexual independence, agency and pleasure. For women, there have been few safe zones for exploring pleasure and their status has been notoriously precarious. This has clouded women's sexuality in a culture of taboo and shame. Against this backdrop, sexual exploration – if engaged in a safe and consensual context – appears as a feminist value in itself. In contradistinction to earlier sexual liberationist ideas, this argumentation reflects both empowerment (pleasure and autonomy) and societal constraints (power and risk) as evidenced by the title of the edited volume: *Pleasure and Danger. Exploring Female Sexuality* (Vance 1992b). The emphasis on erotic agency in the face of constraint and oppression gave rise in the 1990s to a politics of 'sexual dissent' that 'forges a connection among sexual expression, oppositional politics, and claims to public space' (Duggan 1995, 5). This can be seen to be an early articulation of a *queer feminist*

politics that has produced a new set of critical ideas on monogamy, which I will discuss later in this article.

Lesbian Feminism

In the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, lesbian feminists were often most vocal in their critique of monogamy as an integral part of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Although Adrienne Rich's (1983) famous text 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' does not specifically address non-monogamy, women's agency and erotic autonomy is at the heart of her critique of institutionalised heterosexuality and the culture of marriage. Willey (2016, 4) refers to the article in her genealogical narrative of feminist critiques of monogamy as 'a paradigmatic example of (...) [the] early challenges to the naturalized ideal of heterosexual marriage'. Bemoaning the social pressures and sanctions that force women into heterosexual relationships, Rich's analysis denaturalises heterosexuality and shows its prevalence to be an affect of cultural norms. Compulsory heterosexuality *curtails the contact women may have with other women* and is thus opposed to the vision of a communal lesbian existence around woman-identified life choices.

Numerous feminist and queer feminist critiques of monogamy from the 1990s into the 2000s engage with Rich's text and her arguments (see Kaplan 1992; Rosa 1994; Emens 2004; Heckert 2010). The politics of creating women-identified (or women-focused) counter-cultures has been part of bisexual feminist (Gregory 1983), lesbian feminist (Rosa 1994) and queer feminist (Emens 2004; Deri 2015) refutations of monogamy. According to Deborah Gregory (1983), non-monogamy allows bisexual women to adopt a women-identified way of life, to stay true to their intimate and erotic interests, and to establish a (feminist) position of strength towards their male-gendered (sexual) partners. Becky Rosa (1994, 107) posits

that anti-monogamy 'provides a positive and profound challenge to the institution of compulsory heterosexuality'. Willey (2016) treats Rosa's text as paradigmatic of what she calls a 'dyke ethics of anti-monogamy', i.e. an approach that de-naturalises monogamy and refutes the normative scripts of couplehood and romantic love in favour of a reflexive, pragmatic and experimental approach to non/monogamy that prioritises community and friendship values. For Rosa (1994), non-monogamy can be conducive to lesbian feminist autonomy by responding in flexible and non-assimilationist ways to women's relationship needs and by supporting the collective strength of women through the creation of friendship-based women's communities. An analysis of the essays included in the *Lesbian Polyamory Reader*, edited by Marcia Munson and Patricia Stelboum (1999a), too, shows that most contributors describe polyamory not simply as an individual life choice, but as collective resistance, group-centred responsibility or community building. The renewed emphasis on the value of friendship in treatments of women's non-monogamy cuts across nuances of identity-political currents and includes lesbian, bisexual and queer feminist contributions (Murray 1995; Rothblum 1999; Deri 2015; Willey 2016).

On Black Feminism and Erotic Autonomy: Sexuality, the 'Politics of Silence' and the 'Culture of Dissemblance'

In feminist theories of the last three decades of the 20th century, the critique of monogamy has been an integral part of debunking the mythology of romance and the rejection of the division of labour (productive, emotional and sexual) within the institution of marriage and the regulation of women's sexuality within hetero-patriarchal cultures of intimacy.

Compulsory monogamy was identified as pillar of the heteronormative order, patriarchal gender relations and the regulation of women's sexuality. A commitment to women's erotic

autonomy (codified as a right for women's sexual self-expression and individual sexual choice) was a key feature of the debates. This included a principled defence of women who decide to live non-monogamous lives. The ideological promotion non-monogamy as a social and political project – wherever it took place – drew upon sexual liberationist and/or cultural and gender-political currents within psychoanalytical or Marxist analysis.

Identity political rationalities textured these debates, e.g. around lesbian or bisexual feminist commitments. Black feminists, too, participated in the exploration of non-monogamous alternatives fashionable in 1970s countercultural western feminisms (see hooks 2000, 79).

The concept of erotic autonomy has been a salient feature in Black feminist analysis, including voices from African American, African Caribbean and African feminisms (Lorde 1984; Alexander 1997, 2005; Collins 2000, 2004; Lewis 2005). In these perspectives, too, demands for women's erotic autonomy have been part of a wider critique of hetero-patriarchal structures and an endorsement of women's solidarity with each other. However, in contradistinction to most other feminist (and also queer-feminist) analyses, the urgency for the struggle of erotic autonomy is underlined by an emphasis on the denigration of Black women's sexuality through past and present economies of racism (Hammonds 1997; Holland 2012; Melancon 2014). Under slavery Black women were considered as property, stripped off their human rights and subjected to rape, abuse and violence. Slavery and the disenfranchisement of Black people have been legitimised through discourses of their alleged lewd, 'primitive' and sexually excessive nature.

Discourses of the alleged pathological hypersexuality of Black women span from the days of slavery through the civil rights and post-emancipation era, right into the contemporary

period, deploying tropes of promiscuity, gender deviance, degeneration and anti-miscegenation anxiety (Hammonds 1997; Collins 2004). Due to this history, Sharon Holland (2012) argues, it is impossible to separate erotics (and the question of autonomy) from race, racism and exoticism: '[T]he erotic is tied to notions of blackness, and race *as* blackness', she claims (2012, 45). The metalanguage of sexuality thus is closely entangled with the metalanguage of race (Higginbotham 1992; Bailey and Stallings 2017). Black people's sexuality has been cast in an abject position to constitute the 'outside' of respectability and normalcy, functioning as icons of the 'transgressive', which in turn has been constitutive of 'normality' (Melancon 2014, 16/17).

Black women find themselves in a predicament and paradoxical situation, because 'black women's sexuality has been constricted in a binary opposition to that of white women: it is rendered simultaneously invisible, visible (exposed), hypervisible, and pathologized in dominant discourses' (Hammonds 1997, 170). As a result, the struggles of Black women to gain access to the category of humanity (under slavery) and to citizenship (in the post-emancipation periods) depended on countering and correcting racist stereotypes of Black female sexuality. In the context of the politics of many women's organisations – and beyond that also in the liberationist discourse of Black nationalism – this has led to the emergence of a 'Black Gender Ideology' of respectability (see Collins 2004). This has gone hand in hand with a 'politics of silence' through which Black women shielded their inner lives from the oppressors, grounding a culture of secrecy that has been mapped with a discourse of the 'super moral' black woman (Hammonds 1997, 175).

Many black feminists agree that this politics of silence has been an obstacle to combating the hostile stereotypes continuously poured out within racist culture. As a result, a

discourse on Black women's erotic autonomy abounds within Black feminism, even if it rarely takes the form of explicit engagement with sexual practice.

For example, Audre Lorde's (1984) famous article 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic of Power' presents a powerful argument for women's erotic autonomy while not explicitly relating the discussion to questions of sexual practice and/or non/monogamy. Lorde favours a holistic interpretation of the erotic, broadly understood as 'the life force of women', which is empowering, affirmative of community and can be expressed in both sexual and non-sexual ways. Her musing on the impact of the 'erotic charge' of relations between women evokes a clear sense of passionate pleasure and bonding (Barriteau 2014). Embracing the power of erotic is about sharing joy and deep feeling, which is described as a radical act that may take women outside of established safety zones: 'the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough' (1984, 54). Her article is referred to by many feminists, who advocate a critical theory of women's erotic autonomy and agency (Collins 2004; Sheff 2005; Sheller 2014; Willey 2016) and who defend women's non-monogamous life choices. Sharon Holland (2012) is more sceptical with regard to the possibility of appropriating Lorde's work for a queer feminist politics of pleasure and sexual autonomy. According to her reading, Lorde's juxtaposition of the erotic with the pornographic jettisons Black feminism against the major thrust of the new (queer) sexuality studies that embrace a politics of the autonomy of desire.

Jacqui M Alexander's (1997) essay "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice and in the Bahamas Tourist Industry" and her subsequent work (2005) have given rise to vocal discourse on erotic autonomy among

feminists working on both African Caribbean and African American female sexualities (Robinson 2007; Sheller 2012; Collins 2004; Bailey and Stallings 2017). Alexander argues that Black women's sexuality, their erotic agency and autonomy have always been troublesome for the state. National ideologies – and in particular post-independence anti-colonial nationalisms – deploy heterosexual family values to legitimise state power and to perpetuate colonial inheritance. She discusses three inter-connected threats: the body of the prostitute, the sodomitic (gay male) body, and the immoral lesbian body (1997, 89/90). Alexander's sums up her arguments by advocating a decolonial feminist project 'in which women can love themselves, love women, and transform the nation simultaneously' (1997: 100).

Again, Alexander does not explicitly address non-monogamy as such, but I read her critique of promiscuity allegations directed toward sex workers, and also men who have sex with men, as an act of solidarity with regard to groups that are stigmatised within a regime of hetero-patriarchal compulsory monogamy. This reading is supported by Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) discussion of Alexander's article in *Black Feminist Thought*, where she calls upon Black feminists in the USA to resist the stereotyping of sexually active women and lesbians as deviants in an attempt to forge a platform of solidarity among women in the defence of the erotic autonomy of *all* Black women. In a similar vein, Hammond (1997, 181) avers that 'if we accept the existence of the "politics of silence" as an historical legacy shared by all black women, then certain expression of black female sexuality will be rendered dangerous, for individuals and for the collectivity' (Hammond 1997, 181). At the same time, many Black feminists assert that a simple politics of pleasure without proactively challenging the intersections of sexuality with race, class, gender, reproductive biopolitics and neoliberal

commodification does not help in addressing the predicaments of Black women. This emphasis marks a distinctive rupture between Black feminism and mainstream queer theories of transgression (Cohen 2000; Holland 2012), even within the work of those who take a keen interest in cultural forms and politics that contest the 'classical female script' (Melancon 2014).

Queer Feminism and the Critique of Mononormativity

The burgeoning of queer theoretical ideas within gender and sexuality throughout the 1990s has led to the elaboration to distinctly queer feminist critiques of monogamy, namely from the mid-2000s onwards. Queer feminist critiques have taken an intersectional approach aiming to address gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality and other social divisions or 'axes of power' within a framework stressing the 'simultaneity of multiple oppressions' (as it had been aptly formulated by the Combahee River Collective (1982) (see Haritaworn et al 2006). Willey (2016) sees forbearers of such queer feminist critiques in refutations of compulsory monogamy from within different identity-political movements that are driven by a sexual liberationist impulse. She points to work within lesbian feminism (Rosa 1994), bisexual feminism (Murray 1995), trans feminism (Richards 2010) and asexuality studies (Scherrer 2010).

Like most queer-inspired analysis, queer feminist critiques of monogamy are concerned with questions of normativity. The concept mononormativity was first used by Marianne Pieper and Robin Bauer (2005) in their call for papers for the 2005 Hamburg Conference on Polyamory & Mononormativity 'to refer to dominant assumptions of the normalcy and naturalness of monogamy' (Barker and Langdrige 2010, 750).

Much work has been undertaken to identify the interconnection between mononormativity and heteronormativity (i.e. the naturalization and privileging of heterosexual bonds).

Christian Klesse (2007) points to the prominence of differential anti-promiscuity discourses as a tool for the stigmatisation of both non-heterosexual and marginalised heterosexual populations. He proposes a broad concept of heteronormativity that exceeds the regulation of (gendered) object choice and (sexual) identification to include the imposition of mononormative emotional and sexual scripts. Nathan Rambukkana (2015) argues that hegemonic discourses around non/monogamy result in the production of a complex system of stratification based on gender, class, sexuality and race-related privileges that pitch non-monogamous groups against an abstract monogamous ideal and different forms of non-monogamy (e.g. polyamory, polygamy or adultery) against each other.

Mimi Schippers (2015) suggests that mononormativity should be understood a system of power in its own right that in many cases may overlap with, but can never be reduced to heteronormativity. Like the other authors discussed in this section she promotes an intersectional critique of mononormativity that highlights power dynamics around gender and race in everyday interactions: '[C]ompulsory monogamy insists on dyadic resolutions for all regardless of gender and race, but it is gender and race privilege that are at stake in the narratives we tell about monogamy and its failures' (2016: 4). The cultural power of the ideal of the monogamous couple sustains heteromasculine privilege and regimes of normalcy bound up with various forms of stratification (such as the ones around gender, race and class). For Schippers, a reflexive, power aware and decisively queer politics of polyamory have the potential to rupture problematic gender performativity bound up with heteropatriarchal and racist cultures of eroticism.

Willey's (2016) queer feminist critique of the naturalization of monogamy in scientific discourse highlights the extent to which monogamy figures in late 19th and early 20th century sexology as a symbol of racial and civilisational supremacy. For example, Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1906) juxtaposes the (allegedly) refined mental and moral superiority of monogamous 'Christian nations' with the (allegedly) less advanced culture of Islam and what he refers to as 'polygamic races'. Christianity figures here as an indicator of evolutionary progress and the superiority of (white) European culture. Krafft-Ebing's Islamophobia merges both religious and racialising tropes. His primarily religious discourse is matched by more explicitly secular biological accounts from within race science that tackle colonised populations across the globe (Gilman 1985; Somerville 2001). Sexology and race science of the period combine gender, race and sexuality-related stereotypes in ways that mobilise compulsory monogamy (and discourses of domestic virtue) for imperial projects (McClintock 1995). Queer feminist critiques of mononormativity thus converge in highlighting the systemic and intersectional dimension of the power relations around mononormativity.

Although queer feminists tend to have a gender political agenda that goes beyond specific identity political concerns, a sustained defence of women's erotic agency is a salient feature of their agenda. Queer feminist critiques of compulsory monogamy highlight the differential stigmatisation of groups of non-monogamous women along the lines of race, ethnicity, class and sexuality (Klesse 2005, 2007; Rambukkana 2015), foreground the social constructions of emotions (such as jealousy and possessiveness) as tools for the control of (monogamous and non-monogamous) partners (Deri 2015), challenge the naturalization and discursive fixation of both monogamy or non-monogamy as essential 'sexualities' (Willey 2016), or

show up routes for cracking heteronormative and mononormative gender codes by creating *polyqueer bonds* through intimate and/or sexual encounters that avoid normative scripts or constellations.

Queer feminist critiques of monogamy validate women's non-monogamous sexualities. Jillian Deri's (2015) study of queer poly women in Vancouver highlights that many participants saw their non-monogamy as an embodied feminist practice, i.e. a practice that resonates with the values of gender-equality, autonomy (self-determination), non-possessiveness and erotic freedom. This view is well expressed in the following quote by Coraline: 'My political statement supports poly, because feminism is ultimately about self-determination for women. In a nutshell. And poly for me is about a self-determinationist expression of my sexuality' (Deri 2015: 75).

Conclusion – Feminist and Queer Feminist Critiques of Monogamy, Erotic Autonomy and Contemporary Politics of Consensual Non-monogamy and Polyamory

As I have shown in this article, concepts of erotic autonomy have been core to feminist critiques of hetero-patriarchy and compulsory monogamy since the 19th century. In earlier work (well into the 1990s) the critique of monogamy was closely bound up with multi-layered attacks on the institution of heterosexual marriage and its cultural underbelly, romantic love. Key problems identified include asymmetrical expectations to be monogamous, women's experience of subordination in monogamous heterosexual relationships, a culture of emotional and material dependency bound up with romantic love, the exploitation of women's emotional labour and care work, the obstruction of women's creativity and political participation, the devaluation of women's friendships and communities, the reinforcement of compulsory sexuality, the cultivation of sexist and

bourgeois ideas of property, and the co-constitutive interaction of mononormativity with homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (see Willey 2016). Sexual liberationist ideas and arguments pertaining to the value of an autonomy of desire reach back to the 19th century (there are traces of such a conceptualisation for example work of Emma Goldman) and gain momentum from the 1970s and unfold in the articulation of a sex-positive feminist libertarianism in the course of the sex wars and the successive formation of a distinctive queer feminism. Queer feminist work from the mid-1990s and namely the early 2000s onwards moves towards more thoroughly elaborated theories of compulsory monogamy or mononormativity as a distinctive systemic form of power in its own right, usually articulated within intersectional frameworks that highlight the implication of multiple oppressions (Schippers 2016; Willey 2016).

Some feminists reject the concept of autonomy, because they see it as an articulation of an individualistic and rationalistic politics, which is modelled upon the notion of a sovereign and self-interested subject (Veltman and Piper 2014). Feminists have held against this an ethics of care and the representation of a subject, which is profoundly dependent on others for its development and survival. However, as my discussion in the previous sections has shown, autonomy does not have to be framed in individualistic terms. Many of the ideas of erotic autonomy outlined by feminists have taken their starting point in a critique of institutions and structures, such as patriarchy at large or marriage as a social institution of reproduction. Personal emotions, such as romantic love, too, have been scrutinised for their instrumental role in up-holding *structural* power relations. The critique of institutionalised monogamy, marriage and hetero-patriarchy cuts across the identity-political currents of lesbian, bisexual, queer and heterosexual feminisms. Radical and cultural feminism (which

prioritised patriarchy and framed gender as a class oppression), socialist feminism (which started with capitalism and looked at gender in the reproduction of capitalist social relations) and Black feminism (which explored the denigration of Black female sexualities from intersectional perspectives), too, cannot be charged with the liberal fallacy of individualism.

Black feminism's has been adamant in demonstrating the core role of sexual subordination and subjectification in the history of racism's gender politics and argued that it is impossible to conceptually separate the politics of race/racism from the history of sexuality. Holland (2012) has gone so far to suggest that the very conceptualisation of the erotic is inflicted by an imaginary of race and racism and that any hypothesis of erotic autonomy implies the forgetting (amnesia) of the legacy of racism. It is clear that both Black feminists who articulate a positive vision of erotic autonomy (Alexander 1997, 2005) and those who declare its impossibility (Holland 2012) present a profoundly politicised understanding of sexuality that rests on *social and structural premises* and endorse a *collective practice of transformative (sexual) politics*.

Even more individualistic concepts of erotic autonomy, such as Kollontai's refutation of a life plan that involves women's submission to a self-effacing life for love or Beauvoir's (2010) proposal of forsaking cohabitation and marriage in favour of intellectual and artistic creativity only unfold their full meaning against the back-drop of *collective struggles*. Kollontai believes that women should be independent from men (economically, emotionally and sexually) in order to be able to serve the revolutionary struggle. From a historical materialist point of view, she argues that women's sexual freedom is dependent on access to income and resources. In these accounts, Individualistic and relational dimensions feed

into each other, rather than being irreconcilable. Notions of erotic agency in European, North American and Caribbean feminist struggles in the late 20th century were associated with processes of collective consciousness raising, discussions of political organisation and community formation. Individualistic themes thus merged with social, cultural and political ones. Mackenzie and Stoljar (1999) rightly assert that most feminist concepts of autonomy have been inherently relational.

Apart from the emphasis of the socially embedded, fully socialised and ideologically formed character of the autonomous female subject, a concern with the emotional and embodied features of women's lives and actions shapes feminist critiques of mononormative patriarchal relations across the decades. Such positions can be identified in Goldman's recognition of pleasure as a source of vitality and her notion of companionate revolutionary love (Hemmings 2014). It is evident in Lorde's endorsement of women's erotic sentiments and connections (Sheller 2012; Barriteau 2014). It is alive in lesbian, bi and queer feminist celebrations of women's friendships and the emphasis on communities of care within radical, socialist and lesbian, bisexual and queer feminisms (Willey 2016). Although some theories of erotic autonomy focus to a stronger degree on the structural level (such as institutional monogamy or the division of labour) and others primarily on the subjective level (such as emotional dependency, romance and the denial of recognition), the individual and the social are described as interconnected in most models. At times, these distinct levels of analysis are bridged by intermediating concepts, such as for example psychoanalytic models of ideology (Lewis 1981). The conceptualisation of erotic autonomy as relational autonomy thus implies a *multiscalar analysis* that aims to address different dimensions, ranging from the *personal* experience of emotionality and physicality over

intersubjective (face-to-face or communal) articulations to the more abstract dimensions of the cultural, social and political. Plummer's model of 'intimate citizenship' lends itself for 'fleshing out' such a multiscale notion of erotic autonomy, referring to 'decisions around the *control (or not) over one's body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc; and socially grounded choices (or not) about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences'* (1995, 151). In the light of Black feminist analysis, it is important to add questions of reproductive self-determination, because the brutality and (sexual) violence of slavery and the forceful regulations of eugenic and anti-miscengenation politics were part of strategic biopolitical attacks on Black women's erotic autonomy (Collins 2004; Holland 2012; Sheller 2012)⁴.

Control and access in all these matters depends not only on (individual) capacities, but also on external conditionalities. Friedman (2003) defines autonomy not only as a question of the hypothetical possibility of doing something, but also as a mode of *action*. Like many other feminists, she highlights that the ability to act is always impacted – and to a certain extent defined and circumscribed – by questions of *material reality* (such as customs, conventions, legal regulations, access to resources, modes of hegemony, etc.). If we agree that the question of erotic autonomy is in substance related to the question of erotic freedom, Breanne Fahs's (2014) argument that the advancement of women's erotic and sexual lives depends both on 'positive liberty' (in the sense of *freedom to*) and 'negative liberty' (*freedom from*) becomes relevant. The realisation of either of these liberties depends on collective efforts of social transformation on a revolutionary scale.

This insight has implications for contemporary politics around consensual non-monogamy and polyamory. Many critical scholars converge in the analysis that the bulk of mainstream

publications on polyamory focuses on question of individual lifestyle and relationship choice without further reflections of social, cultural or economic injustices (Noël 2006; Author 2014; Rambukkana 2015). It is due to the primarily *individualistic* focus of much of the poly debates that Stevi Jackson (2014, 42) calls polyamory as ‘a pale imitation of feminist anti-monogamy’. The lack of awareness and of a thorough proactive engagement with questions of social injustices along the lines of gender, race and class may be one of the reasons why many contemporary poly communities in Europe and North America constitute themselves primarily as networks of exclusively (or nearly exclusively) white and middle-class groupings (Sheff and Hammers 2011; Author 2014). The re-examination of the complex models of power advanced by feminist and queer-feminist discussions of erotic autonomy of the 19th, 20th and early 21st centuries can provide rich stimulation for the development of a more transformative politics around polyamory as an alternative way of life and counter-cultural relationship and/or family praxis.

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¹ De Beauvoir also discusses the risks of violence, the burden of negotiating protection regarding unwanted conception and/or the potential transmission of STI's bound up with women's decisions to seek casual sex (ibid., 696).

² It is important to note that Holland (2012) is herself highly sceptical of the promise of (individual) erotic autonomy, because the erotic has been deeply shaped – and damaged – by the histories of racism, genocide and state violence. I will return to Holland's critique later in the article.

³BDSM stands for Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadomasochism.

⁴ Sheller (2012) avers that most theories of sexual citizenship ignore the extent to which modern European citizenship has been rooted in histories of brutal and often sexualised denigration of Black bodies.