

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Schippers, Mimi. *Beyond Monogamy. Polyamory and the Futures of Polyqueer Sexualities.* New York: New York University Press 2016. Pp. 201, \$27.00, paper (9781479886227).

Mimi Schippers's book is an important contribution to the new critical scholarship on consensual non-monogamy and polyamory. Schippers's framework fuses feminist, queer and critical race theory to analyse the intersecting regimes of normativity that shape contemporary representations of non-monogamous and polyamorous sexualities. Schippers works with a *polyqueer methodology* that draws on popular culture (namely literature and film), blogs, activist literature and autoethnographic writing. Schippers's focus is primarily – although not exclusively – on triangulated non-monogamies, and she is particularly interested in the *polyqueer* and transgressive potential WMM constellations, i.e. configurations that involve one woman and two men, including group sex practices. Being both theoretically ambitious and methodologically innovative, this book is an important contribution to gender and sexuality studies, critical race studies, cultural studies, literary studies and film studies.

The argument that monogamy, mononormativity, and compulsive monogamy are integral and constitutive parts of hegemonic regimes of *sexual normalcy*, runs through the whole text. Schippers argues that gender and queer studies have paid insufficient attention to mononormativity (i.e. the privileging and the naturalisation of monogamous couple bonds). Existing theorisations of mononormativity tend to diminish the centrality of compulsory monogamy in contemporary regimes of power around sexuality, by either conflating it with heteronormativity or considering it to be a mere element integral to the latter. Moreover, Schippers highlights the important role that mononormativity plays in underpinning gender and race privileges. She suggests that consensually nonmonogamous intimacies or sexualities are repressed, tabooed or erased, because they carry the potential to trouble and destabilise hegemonic masculinities along the axes of race, class and sexuality.

Chapter one explores the gender politics at the heart of the common scandalisation of intimate scenarios in which a woman may have sex with the best friend of her (male) partner. The naturalisation of jealousy, a discourse of male rivalry and the vilification of the figure of the 'cheat-

ing woman,' comply in rendering WMM love triangles impossible by insinuating that the only healthy resolution would be for the partnered (allegedly 'cuckolded') man to leave his female partner to form a monogamous bond with another, more 'reliable' and 'trustworthy' woman.

The chapter is largely based on an auto-ethnographic narration. It deplores the structural bias of public discussions of polygamy or polyamory towards polygyny (rather than polyandry), and critiques patriarchal gender constructions that tolerate men's non-monogamy, but vilify women's sexuality with multiple partners. While the chapter provides important insights into gendered dynamics within non-monogamous constellations, I have also been somewhat irritated by the author's extensive discussion of evolutionary anthropology. Although Schippers is primarily interested in counter-discourses within the debates in evolutionary anthropology, I would have liked to see some critical reflection of the implications of evolutionist framings of contemporary sexualities (which sits rather uneasily with her overtly queer feminist approach).

Chapter two explores representations of bisexuality, Black respectability and the "Down Low" in a polyqueer reading of E. Lynn Harris's *Invisible Life*. The term "Down Low" designates a colloquial reference to the African American men who identify as heterosexual, maintain heterosexual relationships with women, and have (non-disclosed) sex with other men at the same time. Schippers critiques the problematization of African American men who have sex with men and women within the "Down Low" discourse that has been fuelled by stigmatising media representations, HIV-related moral panics, white gay male homonormativity, and the politics of Black respectability. Schippers suggests that *Invisible Life* offers a view of the "Down Low" that does not voyeuristically concern itself with the sex life of the protagonists, but is interested in 'a relationship orientation towards plurality as much as sexual orientation toward women and men' (82). According to Schippers's reading, the struggles of the main male character, Raymond Tyler, Jr, who maintains sexual relationships with men and women, are not so much about working out his sexual preferences regarding gendered partner choice (within their racially coded contexts), but about finding a way of loving two people (of different genders) at the same time. Within this register, the narrative has the potential to expose and refute *biphobic* and *mononormative* assumptions.

Chapter three draws on Eve K. Sedgwick's (1985) canonical critique of mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth literary representations of WMM love triangles, and men's homosocial desire in *Between Men* and a critical reading of the 2008 film *The Other Man*. Rather than presenting a model of male rivalry that sustains heteronormative masculinity and

the domination of women, *The Other Man* depicts a polyamorous Vee structure that places the woman's sexual subjectivity at the core of the story. This in turn results in a polyqueer triangulation allowing for the reconfiguration of heterosexual masculinity and the formation of queer bonds among the men involved in the triangle. WMM triads thus emerge as a site for the potential creation of *polyqueer homosociality*.

Chapter four explores dominant discourses around threesomes and introduces the concept of the *threesome imaginary* to refer to "collective fantasies or ideations about threesomes that define them in ways that reflect and maintain existing power relations and legitimize social privilege" (143). A review of the literature on threesomes shows that sexual cultures that welcome plural sexual interactions often operate within heteronormative paradigms. Threesomes involving a man and two women (MWW) are welcome, whereas threesomes in which one woman engages with two men (WMM) are often actively discouraged. Some sex-positive scenes and spaces marginalise sexual interaction between men. Schippers uses the concept of erotic habitus and sexual field theory to highlight the different positioning of men and women in plural sexual interactions. She draws upon research, literary examples and personal experience stories to critique the restrictions posed on both man-on-man sexual action and on women's sexual agency, while demonstrating at the same time the *polyqueer potential* of WMM encounters. WMM threesomes may foster a different erotic intimacy even among heterosexual-identified men, moving away from an impenetrable straight masculinity. Drawing on the work by Sharon Patricia Holland (2012) and Trimiko Melancon (2014), Schippers further suggests that WMM inter-racial encounters may open up "a narrative space for white and black straight men to experience cross-racial union through erotic interaction and same-gender loving" (172). Schippers's discussion relates important insights to the debate on hegemonic and counter-normative masculinities. Her theorisation arguably remains somewhat limited due to its narrow focus on very specific gender constellations, namely WMM, and a commitment to a theory of *transgression* that is neatly modelled upon certain identity-related positionalities and inter-subjectivities. I also found the discussion of the potentially liberating or 'queering' effect of cross-racial touch and cross-racial identifications in this context rather optimistic. I read Sharon Patricia Holland's (2012) work in particular to be more sceptical regarding the transcendental potentials (in the context of race/racism) of *any form of erotics* and *any model of transgression*.

These concerns notwithstanding, Schippers's book contributes fresh insights and rich theorisation into the politics of consensually non-monogamous intimacies and their problematization within a culture of

mononormativity. According to Schippers, mononormativity perpetuates oppressive or femininities and masculinities, sustains rigid notions of sexual orientation, underscores possessive attitudes implicated in hierarchical gender, race and capitalist ideologies, forecloses encounters with others in social contexts that normatively prescribe race and class endogamy and generates exclusivist narratives of difference around belonging related to nation, race, ethnicity and religion. In this light, researchers interested in gender and sexuality ought to take the problem of mononormativity more seriously and conceive of it as a regime of power in its own right within their guiding theoretical frameworks. Due to its conceptual contribution, the book may appeal to readers far beyond gender and sexuality studies, being of relevance for undergraduate and graduate students and senior researchers in disciplines, such as cultural studies, American Studies, literary studies, film studies and (cultural) sociology.

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