



Essay

Ill-Fated Portrayals of Black Non-Monogamy (and Their Harmful Consequences)

Justin L. Clardy, PhD

jclardy@scu.edu

Assistant Professor of Philosophy

Department of Philosophy

Santa Clara University

Abstract

While non-monogamous intimacies are becoming more prevalent in our present social landscape, they still face a range of injustices on social and political fronts. Politically, non-monogamists are excluded from certain rights or privileges that their monogamous counterparts hold, such as access to marriage. Socially, non-monogamists experience a kind of hermeneutical injustice where they are estranged from their own experiences with love and intimacy due to marginalization from the collective framework of understanding, to name a few. Demographically, the existing polyamorous community in the U.S. resembles that of folks in monogamous relationships. Additionally, consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships are fairly common among Black populations. Yet, despite the growing and diverse demographic profile of consensual non-monogamy, many people still think that “Black folks just don’t do that,” as most portrayals of consensual non-monogamy frame it as something that is only prevalent among highly educated middle to upper-class whites. This article discusses portrayals of Black non-monogamous relationships

in the media and underscores the importance of accurately representing consensual non-monogamy in Black media. While some recent media portrayals of non-monogamy have featured casts and characters who are racialized as Black, I argue that many of these portrayals often reinforce harmful negative stereotypes and fail to capture the diversity and validity of Black CNM relationships.

Keywords

Black non-monogamy, Black polyamory, hermeneutical injustice, mononormativity

Each day through my window I watch her as she passes by,
I say to myself “You’re such a lucky guy,”
To have a girl like her is truly a dream come true,
Out of all the fellows in the world, she belongs to me,
But it was just my imagination, running away with me.

~ The Temptations, “Just My Imagination”

Introduction

My grandfather loved The Temptations. By the time I became interested in intimate relationships in the late 1990s, I had already heard Eddie Kendricks sing the words to their timeless hit “Just My Imagination (Running Away with Me)” countless times. First released in 1971, the love song carried (and still carries) cultural cache more than twenty years later in Black American households. While quite lovely in its own right, I include it in this article to begin my discussion about how representations of Black love become etched in our social landscape.

Are our imaginations “just” our imaginations? Philosophers have said a lot about how the collective force behind certain ideas give shape to ideology, or what some call the social imagination.¹ In this article, my primary concern is with those parts of the social imagination that deal with how we think about Black love and

intimate loving relationships.

In mononormative societies² or amatonormative societies,³ marriage and marriage-like relationships contour the social imaginary. They shape how we think about intimate relationships by establishing the norms against which deviancy is to be measured—in this way, they partially facilitate the distribution of what one writer calls “intimate privilege”⁴ or the special treatment of and benefits for some intimate relationship formations, but not others. It comes as little surprise, then, that cultural tokens in the social landscape—i.e., songs, television shows, movies, etc.—that portray romantic love and other intimate care giving relationships are predominantly organized around monogamous logics and ideologies; monogamy is always already presumed, thereby licensing legal monogamous marriage as the standard for legitimate and prescriptive intimate relationship arrangements. In this article, I explore media portrayals of non-monogamists marked as “Black.”⁵ I argue that many of these portrayals often reinforce harmful negative stereotypes and fail to capture the diversity and validity of Black consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships.

At present, the social landscape around intimate relationships is changing and consensually non-monogamous relationships, like polyamories, have been becoming more prevalent. Against this backdrop, there is a tendency to celebrate *any* representation of CNM in mainstream media. Thus, when HBO released the television show, *Big Love*, in 2006, folks discussed why polygamy might (or might not) be an acceptable form of relationship. On the other hand, relatively little was said about the show featuring a predominantly white cast—informing Apryl Alexander’s 2020 work that when it comes to Black folks and CNM, “We Just Don’t Do That.” The demographic profile of existing polyamorous community in the U.S., however, is diverse and resembles that of folks in monogamous relationships.^{6,7} Additionally, CNM relationships are fairly common among Black populations,⁸ despite the common take (which was echoed in season 2 of Issa Rae’s *Insecure*) that CNM is “some white people shit.”⁹

If CNM representation in the media has been scarce, Black CNM has been scarcer—often occasioning applause for the fact of representation itself instead of critiquing the shortcomings of said representations. For example, in recent years, there has been a recognizable increase in portrayals of CNM among Black folks. Black celebrities such as Will Smith; Jada Pinkett Smith; Willow Smith; Janelle

Monae; Jidenna; Lou Williams; and Mo’Nique have all admitted to participating in forms of consensual non-monogamy over the last decade. Popular shows and films like *She’s Gotta Have It*; *Insecure*; *Seeking Sister Wives*; *Couple to Throuple*; and *Supafly* represent CNM relationships among casts and characters who are racialized as Black. Top Dawg Entertainment recording artist SZA’s “The Weekend” and Pleasure P’s “Boyfriend #2” also laud seemingly CNM dynamics. Yet, as this article aims to show, many of these portrayals reinscribe problematic stereotypes of Black CNM that, if left unaddressed, (re)produce controlling images that license the oppressive treatment of Black non-monogamists, such as subjecting them to what one scholar calls hermeneutical injustice.¹⁰

In this article, I seek to trouble these waters from within. From my position as a queer polyamorous philosopher racialized as Black, I draw on existing literature on racial, sexual, and polyamorous discrimination to identify and philosophize over shortcomings in popular representations of CNM among Black folks. In my view, they reveal something of ethical relevance about the social imagination in mononormative and amatonormative societies, with lasting legacies of anti-Blackness and white supremacy. Imagination and imaginings are generally regarded as critical sources of possibility—they enable us to envision things and situations beyond or outside of our present moment. In this sense, they bear a relationship to aspirations for more just futures. However, philosophers have not discussed the ways that our imaginations might also facilitate harms, both in their content and in the possible consequences of those imaginings. For example, in some sociohistorical contexts, when the content of our imaginations imports racialized tropes, and other controlling images of already oppressed groups, it can be a site where disproportionate harm is generated and extends the weight of oppression for said groups.

This article also has the aim of showing how the quality of social life deteriorates for polyamorists in societies committed to a monogamous social order. To this end, I show how (Black) polyamorous lives (and loves) are always already troubled by a mononormative social imagination. I argue that the social landscape around non-monogamy contains a problematic nexus of social and moral attitudes that have deleterious effects on the prospects of polyamorous existence. In societies where monogamous framings of intimate relationships are assumed as the default for meaningful intimate sexual or romantic relationships—mononormativity (and

amatonormativity) creates a social landscape where the harms endured by those who practice CNM include, but are not limited to, demonization; undue stigmas and stereotyping; the reduction to socio-cultural invisibility; compromised agency; fetishization; estrangement from one's self; the obstruction of empathy; and the manufacturing of threats to monogamous, just to name a few. Generally, some of these effects might apply in broader contexts for polyamorists that are not racialized as Black. However, to the degree that portrayals of love in the social imaginary rely on mono- and amatonormative tropes complicit in anti-Black logics, they work to maintain anti-Black structures (e.g., legal monogamous marriage) and logics. Ongoing anti-Black contexts where these logics prevail, extend disproportionate harms to folks who are marked Black and are CNM identifying.

To illustrate these points, in the next section, I look at cultural products about Black love in order to demonstrate the real estate that mono- and amatonormativity has in the social imaginary. I describe how these products seek to depict idealized versions of intimate relationships, but, ultimately, rely on logics that require both the presence and demonization of non-monogamous practices. Sections III. and IV. discuss some of the social costs, both to the growing number of Black CNM folks, and to CNM folks at large. In section V., I draw on the depiction of Black CNM in the BBC show, *Trigonometry*, a show whose lead actors are Black and depicts the development of a CNM relationship as a site of possibility for how the social imaginary might be improved in regards to how it represents and treats CNM folks and their relationships.

II. Love in the Social Imaginary:

Ill-Fated Portrayals of Non-Monogamy

While the social imaginary includes a range of beliefs with various social functions, my concern is with the part of the social imaginary that concerns how we think about Black intimate relationships, in particular. In this way, it is used to describe the dominant perceptions a given society has regarding romantic love or otherwise intimate relationships. More specifically though, according to Eleanor Wilkinson, this imaginary facilitates “the societal assumption that all people are sexually and romantically desiring”¹¹ and for Hidalgo et al., portrayals of monogamous love in the imaginary “renders non-dyadic intimate and sexual relationship forms invisible

and unnatural.”¹² In both cases, however, intimate relationships in the imaginary are disaggregated from a subject’s racialized social positionality. Yet, in societies with lengthy histories culturally saturated with sexualized tropes of racialized subjects, it is reasonable to expect that imaginative representations of these subjects also include importing information about their intimate relationships from their racialized subject position.¹³ Thus, whenever I use the term social imaginary, I intend to index the part of the social imaginary that concerns how we think about Black intimate relationships, in particular.

A hallmark of mono- and amatonormative societies is their commitment to monogamy as a principle of social order and control, which are marked by the intimate privileges attaching to the nuclear family, legal monogamous marriage, and non-marital marriage-like relationships. Similar to what Adrienne Rich has called “the heterosexual imaginary,”¹⁴ these normative forces act on the social imaginary by applying normative pressures that shape people’s choices regarding the kinds of intimate relationships they choose for themselves (i.e., by incentivizing some relationship forms and not others). Thus, the imagination is a site of ideological (re)production of social norms and the pressure to uphold them.

Stated plainly, this social imaginary has to do with portrayals. Throughout much of the 20th and 21st centuries, popular songs, films, and books about Black love in the U.S. have portrayed love as something that is appropriate only when it is monogamous. For example, R&B music has been a kind of repository for Black artists’ portrayals of love and its woes. Early in the 20th century, Bessie Smith was singing about loves’ obstructions in her highest charting song “Downhearted Blues” and other popular songs like “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” Etta James’ 1960 classic “At Last” celebrates love’s union “at last” with their one true love. The epigraph to this article shows The Temptations imagining a monogamous love with the object of their limerence. In 1992, when popular R & B artist Mary J. Blige dropped “Real Love” she was “searching for someone to satisfy [her] every need.” By 2000, the R&B group Jagged Edge would issue the imperative “Let’s Get Married,” a message that would resound eight years later when Beyoncé (already married to husband Jay-Z four months prior) released an anthem for “all the single ladies”—affirming what many Black women felt for a long time, that “If [he] liked it, then [he] should have put a ring on it.” Keyshia Cole’s 2005 song, “Love” still has a strong grip on the social imagination and resembles James’ “At Last” as both are about achieving a

monogamous union after enduring severe longing. Scores of folks are inspired to sing Cole's "Love" with all of their might at social gatherings, including weddings. Among others, these songs establish a widely acknowledged script and social norms for intimate romantic relationships and make it more difficult to choose and live in relationships that deviate from these portrayals.

Scholars have also examined the dependency on amatonormative trajectories of Black sexuality and the idea that the only viable and sustainable dating and/or relationship schema is one that is based on the heteronormative, patriarchal, and racist institutions of marriage and heterosexuality. Films that regularly appear on lists cataloguing the so-called "best" Black romance films like *Love and Basketball* or *Love Jones* also promote monogamous relationships. In the face of obstacles intended to challenge their love, audiences root for the protagonists in these films to achieve their "happily ever after" in the form of a stable monogamous relationship. In *Love and Basketball*, Monica (Sanaa Lathan) and Quincy (Omar Epps) must overcome advances from potential suitors Shawnee (Gabrielle Union) and later Kyra (Tyra Banks) before they settle into a monogamous marriage by the end of the film. In *Love Jones*, Darius (Larenz Tate) must confront and navigate his jealousy of Marvin (Khalil Cox), Nina's (Nia Long) ex-fiancée, before he and Nina would be able to have their happily ever after. Beyond these fictional portrayals, Oprah Winfrey's television network, *OWN*, features a reality television show titled *Black Love* that "seeks to answer the burning question, 'What does it take to make a marriage work,'" and claims to offer proof that "it can happen for anyone." As I will discuss below, these portrayals are not without consequence, and they intensify a marriage-industrial complex that broadcasts legal monogamous marriage through books, magazines, and various other forms of advertising, like "dinner for two" deals at restaurants.

From the perspective of non-monogamy scholars, the promotion of monogamous marriage and marriage-like relationships shape the material and socio-ontological boundaries of intimate relationships, and which relationships get to count as being "real." Portrayals of love as monogamous and leading to legal monogamous marriage, generate controlling images that help shape the differential treatment between these and other kinds of intimate relationships, and justifies their subjugation. Others have pointed out, for example, how controlling images uphold, normalize, or license oppressive behavior and are ethically flawed. For Patricia Hill Collins, controlling images are stereotypes, symbols, and other portrayals of

oppressed social groups that define hegemonic ideologies.¹⁵ They define these ideologies (i.e., mononormativity, heteronormativity, amatonormativity, etc.) through a kind of opposition or negation—or, in other words, by defining what they are not.

Take “cheating” for example. Although we can think about non-monogamous relationships existing on a spectrum of, say, more or less ethically practiced (an egalitarian polyamorous relationship on one side, and cheating/adultery on another), most dominant portrayals of non-monogamous relationship dynamics focus on the “cheater” or otherwise non-consensual non-monogamy as if these are the only forms of non-monogamy that exist. As a result, “the mark of the cheater is used as a threat to push individuals to conform to monogamous behavior and monogamous appearances.”¹⁶

The popular trope of “Barbara and Shirley,” from Shirley Brown’s song “Woman to Woman,” illustrates how mononormative logics often conflate CNM with infidelity. In the song, Shirley reaches out to Barbara “woman to woman,” not with a direct threat, but with a message that leaves room for multiple interpretations. While mononormative interpretations suggest a zero-sum game where Shirley is warning Barbara to back off, a critical lyrical analysis reveals more ambiguity. Shirley’s repeated emphasis on her love for the man, coupled with her uncertainty about Barbara’s response, suggests a potential openness to negotiating a CNM relationship rather than a straightforward demand for Barbara’s exit. Thus, the song’s ambiguity challenges the assumption that non-consensual beginnings must result in termination rather than a transformation into a consensual dynamic. In other words, this trope masks the complexities of relationships that may transition from infidelity to CNM, limiting the discourse around the nuanced and complex realities of how some CNM relationships emerge from contexts of non-consensuality, yet evolve into ethical arrangements.

What I am suggesting is that rather than a moment of confrontation, “Woman to Woman,” can be seen as a moment of potential solidarity. When Shirley sings, “I think you’ll understand just how much I’ll do to keep him,” this could be interpreted not as a threat, but as an invitation to Barbara to recognize their shared emotional investment. The line, “I don’t want no trouble now,” further complicates a mononormative reading by suggesting that Shirley might be open to a dialogue rather than a fight. The ambiguity here opens up the possibility for a CNM

negotiation, where both women could explore a shared relationship with the man, challenging the zero-sum game often depicted in such scenarios. Instead, in a mononormative landscape, non-monogamous narratives are used as important mechanisms for sustaining the value of monogamous relationships, leaving mono- and amatonormativity as unscathed hegemonic norms. The normative force (and the attendant intimate privileges) that marriage and marriage-like relationships have is partly generated in their seeming ability to be contrasted with non-consensual non-monogamous ways of relating.

This point can be stated another way. Take the film, *Brown Sugar*, as an example. The film concludes with its main protagonists, Sidney (Sanaa Lathan) and Dre (Taye Diggs), establishing a monogamous relationship with one another. For these lovers, their relationship brings a resolution to intimate affections they have had for one another since bonding over hip-hop music in their childhood. However, in route to their ‘happily ever after’ together, each of them violates the conditions of their already existing monogamous relationships. The night before Dre was to wed Reese (Nicole Ari Parker), he and Sidney clandestinely share a kiss and approach having sex with one another before ultimately stopping short. Later in the film, after Dre and Reese marry (and then divorce over an extramarital affair had by Reese), Sidney accepts a marriage proposal from her beaux, Kelby (Boris Kodjoe). However, Sidney realizes that she is not ready to marry Kelby and calls off the wedding *after* sharing a passionate night with Dre. The point is that the narrative arc of their iconic love story situates non-monogamy as a site of conflict to be overcome in the attainment of the ‘happily ever after.’ For example, neither Dre nor Sidney considers the possibility of relating to one another *whilst* continuing to relate to their fiancés by garnering their consent to, say, polyamory, or some other form of consensual non-monogamous relationship. Instead, non-monogamy becomes a triangulated mediator in the establishment of love stories that ultimately end in monogamy rather than a possible site where we might find resolution to mono- and amatonormative conflict. Non-monogamous intimacies become a kind of counterforce that opposes monogamy instead of showing them as compatible with ‘happily ever afters.’ Through subterfuge, non-monogamy keeps monogamous understandings of romantic love intact. Thus, promoting mono- and amatonormative values is carried out at the expense of non-monogamous forms of intimacy.

Ill-Fated Portrayals of Consensual Non-Monogamy

In addition to ill-fated portrayals of non-monogamy, broadly speaking (i.e., those portrayals of non-monogamy as “cheating” or otherwise non-consensual), there has been an increase in portrayals of Black CNM in recent years. The 2018 film, *Superfly*, features a Black protagonist, Priest (Trevor Jackson), who is in a CNM relationship. The 2017 remake of Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* into a Netflix series drummed up a lot of social discourse and think pieces from popular media outlets. Willow Smith admitted to being polyamorous during an episode of *The Red Table Talk* and Issa Rae’s *Insecure* also featured a non-monogamous marriage and deliberation about participation in CNM among two of the show’s characters, Molly (Yvonne Orji) and Dro (Sarunas Jackson).¹⁷ Recording artist SZA’s “The Weekend” also generated polarizing perspectives about CNM relationships, particularly among Black women in social discourse. Ray Lavender’s song “My Girl Gotta Girlfriend” is about a man discovering that his girlfriend has a sexual relationship with another woman, which initially surprises him, but ultimately excites him leading to a consensual and playful exploration of their non-monogamous situation.¹⁸ Against the backdrop of gross underrepresentation, Black non-monogamists tend to embrace any depictions of Black CNM, even when flawed, and have demonstrated a reluctance to critique these portrayals in the service of refusing to ‘air dirty laundry,’ so to speak. Thus, many are complacent with the mere attempts to tell a new story about Black love.

Taking a closer look at Black CNM portrayals, however, reveals how many of these portrayals reinscribe problematic stereotypes and tropes of Black CNM. For example, the television shows, *Seeking Sister Wives* and *From Couple to Throuple*, perversely frame Black non-monogamists as ‘hunters’ by focusing on the ‘search’ for third parties whether for romantic, relational, (but usually) sexual purposes. Specifically, *Seeking Sister Wives* frames Black non-monogamy in an exclusively polygynous context where it is acceptable for a man to have multiple wives, but wives cannot take on additional husbands (i.e., polyandry). *Couple to Throuple* frames CNM exclusively as a kind of monogamy plus one (i.e., ‘throuple’) practice, thereby masking a multitude of CNM relationship styles that Blacks can (and do) practice.

SZA’s “The Weekend” is commonly read as a tale of sexual empowerment for Black women because it seemingly depicts decentering the importance of male satisfaction in favor of Black women prioritizing their own sexual desires and

satisfaction instead. Over the course of the song, listeners get the impression that she is generally aware of her sexual object's participation in other relationships as she sings, "My man is my man, is your man, heard it's her man too/ My man is my man, is your man heard that's her man Tuesday and Wednesday, Thursday and Friday/ I just keep him satisfied through the weekend/." As "long as [he's] there by 10:30, no later" ready to "drop them drawers" and "give [her] what [she] wants," SZA consents to non-monogamous relationship dynamics in her involvement with the object of her sexual desire.

However, sexual empowerment in "The Weekend" comes at the expense of presenting more progressive forms of non-monogamy. For example, while SZA decentralizes men from her sexual desire, we do not see or hear her talking about having additional relationships of her own. To this extent, we also do not learn this about the other women either. Thus, it can be said that "The Weekend" perpetuates gender-based tropes of heterosexual men who are presumed to be monogamous. As a result, while the song portrays a kind of CNM, it does so by preserving dyadic models of intimate relationships (i.e., relationships between two and only two people at a time). The project of sexual reclamation and empowerment rests on gendered assumptions along with monogamous and monogamous-like dynamics. This observation is supported by SZA's second verse where she longs to spend more dedicated time outside of the weekend—"What kind of tease is two days?," she sings, "I need me least 'bout four of them more of them."

Pleasure P's "Boyfriend #2" improves upon the suggestion that CNM relationships are such that it is fine for men (and not women) to have multiple partners, as the song's title suggests, Pleasure P is involved in a CNM relationship with a woman he knows to be in an additional intimate relationship (with another man). To this degree, he contributes a CNM narrative that opens up space for reconfiguring heteromascularity by disrupting the relationship between homosocial bonding and male dominance over women ('s sexuality).¹⁹ The non-monogamous configuration of Woman-Man-Man brings us to confront our mononormative assumptions about sexuality as a mechanism of men's control over, and access to, women's sexual desires. This confrontation forges a pathway for men to identify (and/or better empathize?) with women as sexually desiring subjects rather than mere sexual objects; it also forges a homosocial relationship between men devoid of homoeroticism and distinct from homosexuality, as they come to see one another as

sexually desirable objects.

At the same time, however, Pleasure P views his role as “Boyfriend #2” primarily being one of sexual satisfaction. He’s Boyfriend #2 because “the first one, he don’t really seem like he know what to do,” and he knows she “likes it freaky, so [he’s] gotta give it to [her].” After all, he continues, “second place always got a whole lot to prove,” so whenever she gets in the mood, she can “call boyfriend #2.” As a result, the song unreflexively reinscribes mononormative logics that view non-monogamists as being sex crazed or hypersexual, thereby flattening the experiences of CNM practitioners who are asexual,²⁰ or those whose CNM practices are not centered on sex.²¹

To this degree, the hit Netflix show, *She’s Gotta Have It* (produced by Spike Lee), echo’s this shortcoming. Nola Darling (DeWanda Wise) is a Black woman who has ongoing and overlapping sexual relationships throughout the series with three men, Mars Blackmon (Anthony Ramos), Greer Childs (Cleo Anthony), and Jamie Overstreet (Lyriq Bent)—leaving viewers with little imaginative room for the ‘it’ she’s gotta have. Importantly, the series is based on Spike Lee’s 1986 debut film by the same title. Responding to Nola Darling’s (Tracy Camilla Johns) 1986 portrayal, bell hooks argues that Lee’s attempt at portraying a sexually liberated woman was informed by “the tendency to see liberated women as sexually loose.”²² While sex-positivity offers critiques of sexual conservatism and respectability politics worth taking seriously, suffice it to say that Lee’s 2017 portrayal of Nola does little to meet hooks’ 1996 critique. Although there are, perhaps, more progressive pathways for conveying sexual liberation, such as casting Nola as someone who is non-monogamous and asexual (or single, etc.), “Nola expresses again and again her eagerness to be sexual with men as well as her right to have numerous partners.”²³ For hooks, these portrayals reflect early feminist waves where “feminist liberation was often equated with sexual liberation,” where said liberation was to be found in thinking about women as being desiring subjects themselves rather than merely being the desired objects by men.²⁴

While both of Nola’s portrayals satisfactorily depict her as a sexually desiring subject, these portrayals align with tropes in the social imagination that have framed Black women as sexually assertive, incapable of chastity or monogamy, and responsible for the robbery of “the [alleged] male right to initiate sexual contact in [Black] culture.”²⁵ Arguably, through subterfuge, Nola’s sexual assertiveness

facilitates her subjugation in both portrayals. The series omits a scene some take to be one of the key markers of the film's gender and sexual politics²⁶ where Nola is punished for her assertiveness and has it weaponized against her as she is raped by Jamie.²⁷ Also in the series, Nola is subjected to the logics of mononormativity as the stigma of being promiscuous follows her throughout.

The ways that CNM relationships are framed in popular media reinforces mononormative (and, in some cases, amatonormative) logics that facilitate harmful consequences for CNM relationships and their practitioners. As I will show in the coming sections, individuals in CNM relationships face a range of consequences (read as punishments) for their lifestyles in mononormative societies.

III. The Harmful Consequences of Ill-Fated Portrayals

These portrayals of love saturate the social landscape around love and loving. When the dominant portrayals of love tend toward mononormative tellings, unjust consequences fall on those who practice CNM. CNM folks report feeling stigmatized and discriminated against due to their relationship choices. Consider what polyamorous philosopher, Carrie Jenkins, says about these judgments when she writes “for us, the stigma and social rejection that surround nonmonogamy carry costs that are hard to count.”²⁸

I have pointed out how mononormative portrayals of love generate controlling images that help shape differential treatment between CNM and other kinds of intimate relationships and serve as justification of their subjugation. For instance, in their choices to participate CNM relationships, non-monogamists become seen as problematic others in love discourse and often have their relationships treated as second-rate. In mononormative societies, the social discrimination that CNM folks face involves stereotyping and passing evaluative judgements regarding non-monogamous relationships and their participants. In what follows, I provide more details about how their differential treatment can have deleterious impacts that are objectionable on epistemic, moral, and political grounds.

Controlling Images, Stigma, and Stereotyping

When we depict love according to mononormative logics, it contours the bounds of what love is and what love is not. An unwelcomed result is that folks who

participate in relationships outside of monogamous norms are subjected to pervasive negative stereotyping. In some cases, CNM folks are judged as being cheaters; side-chicks; sluts; ho's; incomplete; immature; and irresponsible because they relate in ways that deviate from mononormative scripts. Understood as “false or misleading associations between a group and an attribute that are held in a rigid manner, resistant to counterevidence,” stereotypes constitute a form of morally defective regard for persons because they fail to honor the internal diversity that groups have.²⁹ When non-monogamous folks are subjected to being stereotyped as “cheaters,” the mark of the cheater disregards the fact that non-monogamies can take on a variety of forms that need not include cheating like CNM, for instance. These stereotypes devalue CNM relationships and individuals, and maintain the false or misleading association between cheating as, say, the group of non-monogamists they are believed to belong.

One might think that non-monogamous stigmas and stereotypes are covert and inconspicuous. After all, ill-fated portrayals of non-monogamy are so pervasive that they can be hard to spot at first from the standpoint of mononormativity. In part, this may be due to a lack of CNM stories in mainstream narratives about love. As Paul Taylor and Anika Simpson point out, appeals to (in)visibility are a familiar resource for analyzing and criticizing the forms oppression that assumes.³⁰ In some cases, CNM possibilities are easily dismissed when they are brought to bear on portrayals of love, and this dismissal is thought appropriate.

Recall the non-monogamous possibilities I mention above about how the film, *Brown Sugar*, could have ended. Dismissive responses resembling the thought that “The movie just isn't about non-monogamy,” might go unchallenged under mononormative logics, despite the employment of non-monogamy in service of providing the monogamous ‘happily ever after’ with meaningfulness. Assertions that the film is, on the contrary, all about non-monogamy (and its undesirability), or questions about why the film is not about non-monogamy, fall outside the bounds of reasonable assertions or questions, and are rendered otherwise illegitimate. At once, non-monogamy is both invisible (under mononormative logics) and hypervisible to a non-monogamous perceiving subject. Thus, the degree to which non-monogamous stigmas and stereotypes are covert and inconspicuous is contentious at best.

Insofar as mononormativity shapes (read as constrains) the love stories we can tell, it performs a discriminatory function in discourses about intimate

relationships—artificially distinguishing between which ones are, and are not, worthwhile. These normative undertones uphold the belief that all non-monogamy is bad or deplorable, thereby mistakenly rendering CNM forms like polyamory as illegitimate, unethical, and second-class. A posture of irrelevance toward non-monogamies positions them “as the inferior and immoral opposite of monogamy, as if the binary monogamy/cheating [is] the mutually exclusive and exhaustive range”³¹ of intimate relationship formations and styles.

Mononormative portrayals of love also uphold gender specific stigmas attaching to non-monogamy as well, such as the “player,” the “slut,” or the “ho.” However, the sanctions and penalties imposed on women and men for their violations of monogamous norms might differ, or be asymmetrical, depending on the context. Jenkins has pointed out that white polyamorous women are asymmetrically subjected to sanctions—like shaming—for violating monogamous norms compared to men. “It’s not hard to come up with a long and colorful list of words that specifically denigrate promiscuous women... And I don’t know of any words generally used to praise promiscuous women in a manner comparable to the way “stud” is used for men.”³² Another scholar has pointed out how the term “player” functions as a denigrating stereotype when applied to African American polyamorous men,³³ and how Black polyamorous women are stigmatized as being dumb, having low self-esteem, or being controlled.³⁴ These observations provide insight, not only into the gendered effects of non-monogamous stigma and stereotyping, but also to equally pressing concerns regarding the racialized impacts of these stereotypes.

The stigma attaching to polyamory and other non-monogamies has been associated with a certain kind of powerlessness in mononormative (and amatonormative) societies to the extent that folks engaging with CNM have reported severe consequences like losing their friends, being alienated from their families, and being ostracized from spiritual and other communities as a result of their involvement with CNM. One study reports that, “forty-three percent of [polyamorous folks] reported having directly experienced prejudice as a result of being [polyamorous] and about a quarter of the responded had experienced verbal abuse based on their [involvement with polyamory].”³⁵ As Collins reminds us, our social practices are “shaped by gender, race, and sexuality that frame all men’s and women’s treatment of one another, as well as how individual men and women are

treated by others.”³⁶ “Because African Americans have been so profoundly affected by racism,” she continues, “grappling with racism occupies a prominent place within black sexual politics.”³⁷ Therefore, while non-monogamous stigma and stereotypes may be applicable to CNM folks, regardless of how they are racialized, CNM folks who are unprotected by social advantages that whiteness provides, are more vulnerable to the discriminatory effects of non-monogamous stigmatization than those who may be protected by racial privileges such as “white privilege,” as some writers have pointed out.³⁸

Monogamy, mononormativity, and amatonormativity have also been crucial instruments in the implementation of anti-Blackness. Historical depictions of non-monogamy have used racist anti-Black tropes and images in establishing a mononormative social order.³⁹ Going a bit further, in step with St. Vil et. al, “racialised [sic] stereotypes of Black women and men have historically revolved around their supposed hyper sexuality and [have been] used to demean them as animalistic and amoral.”⁴⁰ They write that “Racialised [sic] sexual stereotypes are not simply the offshoot of racial oppression, but instead are some of its key devices...[it] is integral to their oppression at their respective race*gender position.”⁴¹ While the demographics of non-monogamous relationships may not vary along racial lines, the effects of racialized sexual stereotypes of Black women and men will. For example, to the extent that Black women and men have historically had their bodies and intimate relationship practices hypersurveilled and hypersexualized in ways that their non-Black counterparts have not, the harms incurred by them, as a result of being marked “Black” in a society with racist legacies would seem to extend particularized harms that do not extend to their non-Black counterparts.

The expressive meaning of the term “player” is one example. Speaking generally, expressive meanings are socially constructed meanings that emerge from the ways our actions align with (or deviate from) other meaningful norms and practices in a particular (linguistic) community, in a racially ordered world. The expressive meaning of the term “player,” and particularly among Black speakers, is generally that of womanizing and philandering (i.e., engaging in excessive sexual activities). Thus, portrayals of non-monogamy as antithetical to love and loving relationships buttress the conditions of unacceptability of Black CNM lifestyles. Even though not all non-monogamies involve cheating, lying, manipulating, and

promiscuous sex, the term “player” makes no distinction between non-monogamies that involve ethical breaches and ones that do not—such as CNM relationships predicated on equal and free agreement to have multiple intimate romantic or sexual relationships. Again, through subterfuge, the term reinforces the thought that acceptable intimacies are monogamous ones (that lead to marriage). From the perspective of some Black CNM men, as long as the term carries an expressive meaning that is based on the valorization of womanizing or philandering, it is based on mistaken assumptions about inappropriate intimate relationships or encounters, when applied to their style of relating. Importantly, stereotyping Black CNM practitioners as players is in step with tropes of African American men as inferior, hypersexual beasts, incapable of meeting the superior ideals of whiteness and marital monogamy. Familiar experiences of anti-black dehumanization are thus exacted through attributions of excessive sexuality.

Although men are the primary target of the derogatory term, the effects are not bore by them alone. It also has a stigmatic impact on women who are categorized as the ‘played’ or the ‘womanized’—they are represented as having little to no agency. For example, they are not afforded the consideration of possibly having consented to CNM relationships of their own accord. By the same token, polyamorous women come to occupy a dimension of social invisibility lacking social recognition altogether. When they *are* recognized, they are subjected to pervasive gender specific stereotypes as well, such as being labeled a hoochie, ho, or side-chicks as *She’s Gotta Have It* evidences.

In mononormative societies, wives are atop the social hierarchy of respectability and value, relative to discourses on Black womanhood; wives are morally and socially superior, and their status is to be protected against those who seek out married (or partnered) men, and destroy homes and relationships—the mistresses and the side-chicks—sustaining a hierarchy among Black women that positions Black CNM women at the bottom of scales of desirability. This positionality mediates desires for participation in legal monogamous marriage and is marked by its powerlessness in social, sexual, and intimate relationship economies. Black women who covet this kind of power are left to consider legal monogamous marriage as a way of accessing it.

For Black folks in the U.S., the logic of mononormativity also contains partial explanations about why legal monogamous marriage shows up as desirable in the

first place. Blacks' relationship with legal monogamous marriage must be viewed through the lens of racism, white supremacy, and their legacies in the social context. Historically, monogamous marriage has been a proxy for whiteness. After all, it is thought that a married Black man undermines the controlling image of Black men as incapable of monogamy and having uncontrollable sexual urges—detailing the degree to which mononormativity and amatonormative standards are tethered to a kind of Black respectability politics. In the wake of emancipation, the road to citizenship was paved by assimilation to white values, with legal monogamous marriage being no exception. On this point, Darlene Goring writes that the “recognition of slaves’ right to marry was an integral part of their transformation in to legally recognized personhood.”⁴² Sexual regulation through marriage solidified and sustained “a sexual hierarchy with approved sexual expression installed at the top and forbidden sexualities regulated to the bottom.”⁴³ Black CNM positions its practitioners as deficient before the respectable norms of a whitewashed American social imagination.

IV. More Harmful Consequences of Ill-Fated Portrayals

In “Imagining in Oppressive Contexts or What’s Wrong with Blackface?,” Robin Zheng explains how controlling images are especially objectionable when they place disproportionate burdens on racially sexualized individuals. According to Zheng, when these images derive from a pernicious system of racial meanings, the expressive social meanings they take extend deleterious harm to individuals racialized as non-white, when compared to their white counterparts. In societies like the U.S. that are arranged according to a mononormative and racially stratified social order, Black CNM folks are subjected to undue and disproportionate psychological burdens deriving from the part that non-monogamy plays as a racialized antithesis of a monogamous happily ever after. Zheng writes, “It is morally problematic, indeed unjust, when some people suffer disproportionate harms or burdens on the basis of their race and when they are wrongly represented in their sexual capacities.”⁴⁴ In other words, misrepresentation of CNM is a source of psychological strain that requires “significant and disproportionate emotional [and psychological] labor to fulfill, resist, or otherwise negotiate those stereotypes.”⁴⁵ This applies whether or not the controlling image was caused by a racial stereotype.⁴⁶ “Even without

stereotypical content,” she writes, these images in effect “depersonalize and otherize their target, subjecting them to disproportionate psychological burdens of doubt, suspicion, and insecurity on account of their race,”⁴⁷ and I add, their intimate relationship style. This occurs because despite their origin, racially sexualized images, in a racially stratified society, still express racially stereotypic meanings.⁴⁸

Relevant to our present inquiry, controlling images of Black CNM folks as promiscuous philanderers or hypersexual ho’s derive from negative racial stereotypes, and thus have disproportionate effects on them, whether or not an individual themselves harbors abhorrent racial views. Zheng writes, “Just as the meanings of words are not wholly up to the individual, such that some words take on an expressive meaning even if the individual did not intent to offend,”⁴⁹ these kinds of controlling images “express racially stereotypical social meanings even if not caused by them and even if individuals”⁵⁰ who are employing them do not endorse them at an individual level. Thus, the effects of racially sexualized stereotypes (i.e., Black non-monogamists as being only or primarily interested in sex) are unacceptable in societies aspiring toward anti-racist and anti-sexist social orders.

In addition to the disproportionate psychological toll borne onto Black non-monogamists, these stereotypes have other effects, including what Zheng calls “depersonalization.” The common association of being antithetical to monogamy can, and does have, enduring effects on Black folks engaged in CNM. For example, existing in racially stratified mononormative societies that stereotype non-monogamists as hypersexual can heighten one’s awareness of their body as an object to oneself, or as Lauren Freeman writes, “one becomes like an object to oneself, seeing experiencing and understanding oneself through the lens of harmful stereotypes.”⁵¹ When non-monogamists are subjected to harmful stereotypes of non-monogamy, their experience of themselves as others, is externally imposed, and this is what constitutes the harm. The ease with which one might expect to navigate the world is fundamentally altered, as Black non-monogamists have stereotypes “foisted upon [them] by the world they inhabit: by the social norms, attitudes, and stereotypes that are ubiquitous, all of which provide one with a different understanding of themselves than they’d have if they occupied a dominant social position.”⁵²

The estrangement is facilitated by a kind of depersonalization or homogenization of non-monogamists, as all being of the same sort, without regard

for the particular nuances that may set them apart. In addition to estrangement on the basis of their non-monogamous practices, the racial depersonalization attaching to Black CNM folks extends the reach of racial objectification. The racialized body is the point of origin for subjective experience and plays a role in the ways we attempt to construct our subjective standpoint. When Black non-monogamists are stereotyped on the basis of their preferences regarding sex, intimate relationships, or their non-monogamous identities, they are denied a capacity to exist as fully embodied beings because their subjective experiences with intimate relationships become invalidated. Self-identity and self-worth come under assault as they are forced to take stock of their experiences and existence as subordinate and inferior to monogamous others. Insofar as the social imagination is replete with ill-fated representations of non-monogamy, they become “incorporated into one’s day-to-day life and identity such that [it becomes] a background horizon against which or lens through which one experiences one’s self and the world.”⁵³ What results is a kind of hermeneutical injustice where Black non-monogamists face an inability to make sense of their own experiences due to marginalization from the dominant framework of understanding.⁵⁴

Hermeneutical injustices reappear when we consider the ways that ill-fated representations of non-monogamy also contribute to a perverse kind of fetishization that Black polyamorists face. While soi-disant moral failings of cheaters intend to repel lovers from non-monogamy, through subterfuge, in the social imaginary it becomes a kind of “forbidden fruit” with a fetishizing effect. Non-monogamous sex becomes more desirable by being cast as seemingly unavailable to us and as that-which-should-be-avoided. Stats on the most popular searches published by Pornhub in 2022 are telling. Pornhub, a pornography website consistently among the most trafficked websites in the U.S. (who is the world’s leading consumer of pornography), listed “Group Sex” as the 3rd most searched genre in America; it also reported a 34% & 133% growth in searches for the categories of “Threesomes” and “Orgy,” respectively, making “Group Sex” the 4th most popular category worldwide. These consumption patterns suggest that even in (and perhaps especially in) mononormative societies, a desire for so-called non-monogamous sexual deviancy is strong. Importantly, these patterns are in step with controlling images of non-monogamists as hypersexual nymphos who crave sex over and above all else.

Non-monogamous sexual fantasies obscure the social landscape and

invalidate the actual relationship(s) to sex that non-monogamists have. In spite of the self-reporting of asexual non-monogamists (i.e., non-monogamists who experience little to no sexual drive or attraction) have self-reported that polyamory has become the main relationship model for romantic asexuals; however, the close affiliation of non-monogamy with sex and sexuality is reported on as a frequent problem and a deep source of anxiety for non-monogamists, and especially non-monogamous women.⁵⁵ Additionally, by situating the promise of endless sex as the main or primary motivation for non-monogamy, these fantasies also obscure the actual investments of time, energy, and attention that it takes to participate in and sustain CNM relationships.

Portrayals of non-monogamists as hypersexual and sex-crazed also render non-monogamists vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence by people who target them on that basis. So, we can understand why non-monogamists might suffer disproportionate sexual harm including objectification, harassment, domestic violence, and rape, because their sexualities are misrepresented as always desiring sex. Existence in this climate is unjust insofar as non-monogamists are less able to make sense of their own experience due to marginalization from the collective understanding. This sense can be hard to dislodge and detrimental to a person's sexual self-respect and self-esteem. These attitudes can impact an individual's ability to foster intimate relationships, for example. Even when they do not, these doubts and suspicions constitute harms themselves, in that they reflect the systemic disadvantages that non-monogamists suffer under mononormativity. Further, estrangement from one's own experience is also unfair, insofar as their monogamous counterparts are spared from it, in societies where monogamous narratives of love and sex are imposed by mononormative social orders and rule the day. In this case, non-monogamists mobilize "valuable psychic and emotional resources on negotiating the problem of constant doubt as they move through it."⁵⁶ Similar to the experiences of folks who are the objects of people's sexual racial fetishes, racialized non-monogamists "must decide whether or not to question it, ignore it, analyze it, challenge it, file a complaint, seek others' opinion and validation,"⁵⁷ in ways that it cannot be assumed is shared by their monogamous counterparts.

Finally, non-monogamous stigma also works at the relational level to disincentivize Black folks from engaging in CNM relationships and compromise empathy between Black monogamists and non-monogamists.⁵⁸ For instance,

representations of non-monogamy as antithetical to true or real Black love, limits the space of possible intimacies that may be had among Black folks, by creating a standard expectation of monogamy, by which folks measure the normality of their own experiences with love, loving, and intimate relationships. The narrow frame of acceptable intimacies that mononormativity offers, forecloses the space of being and becoming for Black CNM relationships and the folks that comprise them. Mononormativity disallows the space for readily conceiving of oneself as desiring CNM relationships. In addition to constraining the full scope of intimate possibilities, precluding the formation of CNM relationships also threatens monogamous intimacies themselves, as roughly a quarter of all marriages experience cheating or infidelity at some point. We might reasonably wonder whether these rates would decline in societies where CNM relationships are legible and treated equally in relation to their marriage and marriage-like counterparts.

Admittedly, my discussion of harms enacted on Black non-monogamists stemming from the social imagination is not exhaustive. For example, more time could be spent on detailing how Black non-monogamists are more vulnerable to experiencing sexual assault⁵⁹ or about the range of unjust material consequences non-monogamists face politically.⁶⁰ I limit my discussion on the range of social harms confronting Black non-monogamists for the sake of space. Suffice it to say that although portrayals of Black CNM are on the rise, it is no longer true that just any such portrayal will do. CNM portrayals sometimes function to expand the range of intimacies available, however, they do this at the expense of reinscribing social harms already confronting Black CNM folks. At this point, I turn to a discussion of *Trigonometry* as a site of possibility for more just portrayals of CNM in the social imagination.

Trigonometry as a Window to a more Just Imagination

My discussion of *Trigonometry* as a site of possibility for more just portrayals of CNM in the social imagination must be qualified. I do not understand the imagination as a place of limitless possibilities. The social imagination is always already constrained by our existing states of affairs and thereby the status quo. Thus, while the imagination provides a space for thinking about how we might move beyond present injustices, the content of our imaginings will always already be contrasted by these existing arrangements, insofar as they seek legibility to folks

existing within these arrangements. No imagination is pure or perfect. To this degree, *Trigonometry* has some shortcomings of its own. However, we do well to elevate portrayals of CNM that work to upend unjust mechanisms of social control and maintenance to the degree that they work to resist reinscribing social injustice. To my knowledge, *Trigonometry* achieves this to a high degree despite its few imperfections.

The 2020 BBC series, *Trigonometry*, features two Black leads who struggle to make ends meet, Gemma (Thalissa Teixeira)—a bisexual chef in London—and her beaux, Kieran (Gary Carr). Gemma and Kieran take in a lodger, Ray (Ariane Laped), a former synchronized swimmer looking to gain separation from her overbearing parents. As the three characters navigate their new living arrangements, they forge deep emotional and romantic connections with each other that establish the basis for what would become a CNM relationship later in the series. The pace at which the relationship develops is slow—throughout the first few episodes we see Gemma and Kieran become engaged and begin to plan a very small, intimate, and economically efficient wedding for themselves. Ray’s involvement is important throughout this process as she eagerly helps Kieran stage a surprise proposal for Gemma (who, for what it’s worth, had reservations about marrying) and later helps Gemma decide on a wedding dress.

The night before their wedding, Ray expresses to both Gemma and Kieran that she is in love with them—stunning them both—before scurrying away from them, realizing that her disclosure may have been inappropriate. On the wedding night, Gemma and Kieran discuss Ray’s heartfelt declaration from the night before and both admit to being in love with her, too. This same evening, the show implies that they engage in a threesome—the only such implication throughout the show’s 8-episode season—where they share intimate erotic space with one another. As the story plays out, the emotional bonds across each of their relationships deepen as they work out where Ray might fit in and they become the objects of non-monogamous vitriol from Gemma’s father and Ray’s best friend Moira. Ultimately, the triad is able to save Gemma’s restaurant from foreclosure after Ray makes a significant financial contribution to their relationship and, to Ray and Kieran’s delight, they find out that Gemma has become pregnant despite being told earlier in the season that she was unable to have children.

In my view, *Trigonometry* deserves praise for its nuanced portrayal of CNM

relationships. For example, the show's depiction of Gemma and Kieran grappling with the decision to accept Ray's financial contribution to save Gemma's restaurant, carefully invites viewers to think critically about structural inequalities and economic disparity within certain CNM dynamics. Further, the show subverts common portrayals of CNM by presenting Gemma as more proactive in facilitating their relationship, challenging the stereotype that such arrangements are predominantly desired and driven by men.

The show's portrayal of the triad emerging from initially platonic friendships that gradually deepened in emotional intimacy, offers a refreshingly authentic narrative. It underscores the nuances of their relationships by illustrating how the three of them navigate explaining their relationship to others, including their family, friends, and a random banker who was interviewing them for a loan. While depictions of triads or "throuples" are among the more common portrayals of CNM, the show captures at least 7 distinct relational dynamics within the triad (i.e., the perspective from each character regarding their triad and each dyadic dynamic), thus preserving the complexity of possible relationship dynamics within a triad.

Throughout the series, viewers cannot help but notice how Athina Rachel Tsangari and Stella Corradi, the show's directors, artfully use mirrors in various scenes. These scenes invite viewers to reflect on evolving relationship dynamics—including their interracial dynamics as Ray is racialized white—in a way that mirrors the characters' introspections and changes. Further, their choices to emphasize the emotion of compersion⁶¹—or the joy in a partner's happiness—instead of jealousy, also communicates a level of intentionality in the directors' approach to the series that is worthy of remark. The presence of sex in the series is sparse and when it is there, care and intentional intimacy is emphasized over brute eroticism. It is my view that the series' thematic depth, and its careful approach to telling CNM stories, has much to contribute to a growing archive of CNM portrayals featuring Black relata.

V. Conclusion

In the social imagination, non-monogamy is often portrayed as antithetical to "love" and thereby, establishes a baseline for judging marriage and marriage-like relationships as valid and others such as CNM relationships as deviant threats to love. A primary mode of this production is the dissemination of non-monogamous

portrayals as cheaters, players, philanderers, ho's, etc. The void of non-stigmatized images of non-monogamists also speaks volumes when juxtaposed to monogamous love stories in the social imaginary—the void allows monogamous love stories to function as a baseline for all intimate relationships.

The effects of racialization make a demonstrable difference in our intimate lives as well including how we approach and think about intimate relationships. For Black non-monogamists, their intimate lives and loves are degraded in step with entrenched anti-Black and anti-non-monogamous stigmas and stereotypes. Their love styles are often described in terms of deviance, deficiency, and antithetical to true love. In this article, I demonstrated a range of effects from ill-fated portrayals of Black CNM in the media on Black CNM relationships including introducing a disproportionate psychological toll on Black non-monogamists; obscuring the ability of non-monogamists to understand their lives and loves in a social landscape dominated by the unargued assumption that love is something only befitting marriage and marriage-like relationships, fetishization, disproportionate vulnerability to the possibility of sexual assault; and the preclusion of non-monogamous intimate formation. Finally, I close this article with a discussion of the series, *Trigonometry*, as a site of possibility for how more just portrayals of Black CNM relationships might take shape.

What I have argued in this writing may have excavated the familiar longing for an account of how we might rehabilitate the social imaginary in the service of establishing more just futures for Black non-monogamists. How can media producers use this information to create more accurate and nuanced portrayals of Black non-monogamy, we might ask. While it is possible that media producers could draw on this and other scholarship to enhance their representations, whether they will do so remains uncertain. Thus, I approach the potential implications of these findings with measured hesitation. Here, I am reminded of insights from Afropessimists who caution of the dangers that lie in allegorizing justice for Blacks (non-monogamous or otherwise) as an attainable narrative arc, when true hope for more equitable futures is both distant and elusive.⁶² The challenge remains to translate these theoretical analyses into meaningful, tangible change without falling into the trap of offering a simplistic or unrealistic horizon of justice. After all, regarding those marked Black, history has shown that “progress” often unfolds incrementally with absolute liberation yet to come.

Notes

¹ Discourses on both “ideology” and the “social imaginary” can be found discussing similar themes. Interested readers should see Tommie Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory,” *Philosophical Forum* 34, no. 2 (2003); Robin Zheng and Nils-Hennes Stear, “Imagining in Oppressive Contexts, or What’s Wrong with Blackface?,” *Ethics* 133, no.3 (2023); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990); Eleanor Wilkinson, “The Romantic Imaginary: Compulsory Coupledness and Single Existence,” in *Sexualities: Past Reflections, Future Directions*, ed. Hines, Sally, and Yvette Taylor (2012).

² Mononormative societies are societies whose dominant discourses on love and intimate relationships reflect the belief that monogamy is normal or natural. Interested readers should see Marianne Pieper and Robin Bauer, “Polyamory and mono-normativity: Results of an empirical study of non- monogamous patterns of intimacy,” Unpublished manuscript, (2005).

³ Amatonormative societies are societies whose default assumptions reflect the belief that a central, monogamous, romantic (and usually heterosexual) relationship that leads to marriage, is the ideal form of intimate relationship, and is a goal shared by all. Interested readers should see Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage Morality and the Law* (2011). The disjunction between mononormativity and amatonormativity is meant to be inclusive. I do not mean to imply that societies might contain either mononormativity or amatonormativity, but not both. On the contrary, both can (and often do) exist in the same society.

⁴ Nathan Rambukkana, *Fraught Intimacies: Non/monogamy in the Public Sphere* (2015).

⁵ Throughout my discussion in this article, I used ‘those marked Black’ to refer to a process of racialization that facilitates the categorization of particular bodies into the racial category of ‘Black’.

⁶ Rhonda Balzarini, et al., “Demographic Comparison of American Individuals in Polyamorous and Monogamous Relationships,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 56, no. 6 (2019), 682.

⁷ Ronald Den Otter, *In Defense of Plural Marriage* (2015), 44.

⁸ Apryl Alexander, ““We Don’t Do That!”: Consensual Non-Monogamy in HBO’s *Insecure*,” *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* 6, no. 2 (2020), 6.

⁹ Alexander, “We Don’t Do That!,” 6.

¹⁰ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, (2007).

¹¹ Wilkinson, “The Romantic Imaginary,” 131.

¹² Danielle Hidalgo, et al. “The Dyadic Imaginary: Troubling the Perception of Love as Dyadic,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 7, no.3-4 (2008), 173.

¹³ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and Robin Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever Isn’t Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2, no. 3 (2016).

¹⁴ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 5, no. 4, (1980).

¹⁵ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, (2004).

¹⁶ Pepper Mint, “The Power Dynamics of Cheating: Effects on Polyamory and Bisexuality,” in *Plural Loves: Designs for Bi and Poly Living*, ed. Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio (2014), 59-60.

¹⁷ Readers that are interested in a more detailed analysis of “Insecure” should read Alexander “We Don’t Do That!”

¹⁸ While the portrayal of CNM in hop-hop music is a significant cultural facet worthy of attention, a thorough analysis of this topic cannot be given in our present inquiry for the sake of space. This subject deserves its own dedicated exploration, and future research might delve into how these representations in hip hop contribute to or challenge societal perceptions of CNM.

¹⁹ Mimi Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities*, (2016), 34. Colloquially consensual non-monogamists refer to this as ‘OPP’ or the ‘one penis policy.’

²⁰ Luke Brunning and Natasha McKeever, “Asexuality,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 38, no. 3, (2021).

²¹ For the sake of clarity, the claim here is intended to be descriptive and not evaluative. This is to say that there are some practitioners of CNM whose practice does center on sex such as ‘swingers’, ‘unicorns’, ‘hotwives’, and ‘stags’. Providing an exhaustive evaluation on the ethics of these practices would take us too far afield here. Instead, my point is that there exist at least some CNM practitioners from whom sex is not an organizing principle for their non-monogamous lifestyles or practices.

²² bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, (1996), 293.

²³ hooks, *Reel to Real*, 294.

²⁴ hooks, *Reel to Real*, 293.

²⁵ hooks, *Reel to Real*, 294.

²⁶ Alexandria Smith, “Rewriting the Queer Potential of She’s Gotta Have It,” *Cultural Studies* 38, no.3 (2024). Readers that are interested in a more detailed analysis of “She’s Gotta Have It” should read Alexandria Smith’s chapter titled “Rewriting the Queer Potential of She’s Gotta Have It.”

²⁷ hooks, *Reel to Real*.

²⁸ Carrie Jenkins, *What Love Is: And What it Could Be*, (2017), 134.

²⁹ Lawrence Blum, "Stereotypes and Stereotyping: A Moral Analysis," *Philosophical Papers* 33, no. 3 (2004).

³⁰ Anika Simpson and Paul Taylor, "Marital Shade: Studies in Intersectional Visibility," *Philosophical Topics* 49, no.1 (2021).

³¹ Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy*, 43.

³² Jenkins, *What Love Is*, 139

³³ Justin Clardy, "I Don't Want to be a Playa No More': An Exploration of the Denigrating Effects of 'Player' as a Stereotype Against African American Polyamorous Men." *AnALize: Revista de studii feministe* 11, no. 25 (2018).

³⁴ Justin Clardy, "Toward a Progressive Black Sexual Politics: Reading African American Polyamorous Women in Patricia Hill Collins' 'Black Feminist Thought' in *The Routledge Companion to Romantic Love*, ed. Ann Brooks (2021).

³⁵ Ann Tweedy, "Polyamory as a Sexual Orientation," *U. Cin L. Rev.* 79 (2011), 1490.

³⁶ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 6.

³⁷ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 6.

³⁸ Lawrence Blum, "White Privilege: A Mild Critique." *Theory and Research in Education* 6, no. 3, (2008).

³⁹ Justin Clardy, "Polyamory in Black: A Companion Justification for Minimal Marriage." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12749>.

⁴⁰ Noelle M. St. Vil and Kelly N. Giles, "Attitudes Toward and Willingness to Engage in Consensual Non-monogamy (CNM) among African Americans Who Have Never Engaged in CNM." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 51, no. 3 (2022), 109.

⁴¹ St. Vil et al., "Attitudes," 110.

⁴² Darlene Goring, "'The History of Slave Marriage in the United States.'" *J. Marshall L. Rev.* 39 (2005), 305.

⁴³ Goring, "Slave Marriage," 305.

⁴⁴ Robin Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever Isn’t Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes.” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2, no.3 (2016), 407.

⁴⁵ Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever,” 405.

⁴⁶ Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever,” 405.

⁴⁷ Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever,” 412.

⁴⁸ Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever,” 412.

⁴⁹ Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever,” 411.

⁵⁰ Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever,” 411.

⁵¹ Lauren Freeman, “Embodied Harm: A Phenomenological Engagement with Stereotype Threat.” *Human Studies* 40, no.4 (2017), 649.

⁵² Freeman, “Embodied Harm,” 649.

⁵³ Freeman, “Embodied Harm,” 649.

⁵⁴ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

⁵⁵ Dan Copulsky, “Asexual Polyamory: Potential Challenges and Benefits,” *Journal of Positive Sexuality* 2, no.1 (2016).

⁵⁶ Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever,” 409.

⁵⁷ Zheng, “Why Yellow Fever,” 409.

⁵⁸ Justin Clardy, “Monogamies, Non-Monogamies, and the Moral Impermissibility of Intimacy Confining Constraints,” *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* 6, no. 2, (2020).

⁵⁹ Interested readers should see Alexandria Smith’s “Rewriting the Queer Potential of She’s Gotta Have It” and bell hooks’ “Who’s Pussy is This: A Feminist Comment” for thoughtful discussions of portrayals of black non-monogamy and its relation to the rape of Nola Darling.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Emens, “Monogamy’s Law: Compulsory Monogamy and Polyamorous Existence,” *NYU Rev. L. & Soc. Change* 29 (2004).

⁶¹ Luke Brunning, “Compersion: An Alternative to Jealousy?,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6, no. 2, (2020).

⁶² David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, (2004) and Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, (2010).

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