

Abstract Polyamory has the potential to revolutionize how people in the USA engage in and think about relationships and families at the beginning of the 21st century. However, as indicated through content analysis of 12 texts published between 1992 and 2004, polyamorists fail to meaningfully acknowledge or collaborate with others with shared interests to advocate common goals. In particular, these texts, written by and geared toward an assumed audience of white, middle-class, able-bodied, educated, American people fail to address how nationality, race, class, age and (dis)ability intersect with gender and sexuality in the theory and practice of polyamory. In order to successfully challenge systemic, intersecting oppressions, polyamorists must move beyond the limits of identity politics to build coalitions and norms of inclusivity around shared issues, such as expanding definitions of relationships, families and communities.

Keywords diversity, polyamory, progressive politics, relationships, sexuality

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Progressive Polyamory: Considering Issues of Diversity

Those who consider themselves progressive need to examine their preconceptions, update their sexual educations, and acquaint themselves with the existence and operation of sexual hierarchy. It is time to recognize the political dimensions of erotic life.
(Rubin, 1992: 310)

The theory and practice of intentional non-monogamy in the USA has developed since the early 1900s. First-wave feminists, socialists and utopian societies explored intentional non-monogamous relationships and communities while also promoting birth-control methods to allow for greater control of sexuality and reproduction. In the 1960s, the sexual revolution and a variety of rights-based social movements further expanded understandings of gender, sexuality, race and (dis)ability. In the

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1990s, polyamory emerged from this cultural context of social movements as a relationship structure where a person may choose to love and be sexual with more than one person at a time – and communicate openly about these choices.¹

I first encountered the term ‘polyamory’ in 2000. I was a young, heterosexually identified American feminist engaging in caring, respectful relationships with men. Unlike some monogamous partnerships that I witnessed, I wanted to be in relationships where I would continue to grow, feel empowered and experience sexual satisfaction and variety. I was aware of feminist critiques of marriage, which paralleled my own experiences of monogamous relationships where I felt a male partner trying to own or control my sexuality. Nor did I want to own my partner’s sexuality. From a rights perspective, when I entered into a legal marriage with my Canadian male partner, I felt the injustice that my gay and lesbian friends in international relationships did not have this option.

Additionally, as a child of a blended family whose five parents/step-parents have engaged in a dozen marriages collectively as well as other short and long-term relationships, I questioned normative understandings of marriage and monogamy. My family offered a first-hand experience of the paradigm shift from the expectation of one lifelong relationship to the current American reality where the vast majority of people have multiple partnerships during their lifetimes. This recognition led me to further question why one partnership should be inexplicably linked to so many legal and social benefits and restrictions. While living in Canada in the early 1990s when health benefits were not typically extended to domestic partners in the US, I often wondered why an American needed to be married in order to get health insurance for a partner, while Canadians linked these benefits through residency. Health insurance and citizenship appeared to be linked to marriage in the USA in a way that they are not in some other countries. How could polyamorist theory offer the potential to change these outcomes for everyone?

Inspired by reading *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Liszt, 1997) in 2000, I further explored an existing open relationship through the lens of polyamory. In the past six years, I have found that polyamory is a new concept for most people. I have spent a lot of time explaining it based on the small amount of available literature as well as my own experiences. I often felt lucky to have had partners, friends, family, and a community that tolerated, if not always respected, my unorthodox, outspoken sexual and relationship choices. And sometimes I took it for granted that I had the right to make these choices, loudly and proudly.

Exploring the literature

The limited amount of available texts written about polyamory offer an individually-based challenge to monogamy without closely examining systemic privileges and benefits, particularly around such issues as: nationality, race/ethnicity, education, class, language, ability, age, gender, and sexuality. The possibility for meaningful challenge to and systemic change around heteronormative monogamy is limited by this pervasive focus on individual choice and personal agency. The texts reveal that polyamorists also offer a short-sighted, isolationist alternative that serves to further solidify privileges for a few rather than realize an improved reality for many.

Polyamory is an emerging field where the limited number of texts are largely instructional in nature, rather than analytical or sociological. The number of available published books has more than doubled from five, as of 1999, to 13 by 2005. While there is a significant amount of information online about polyamory, much of it is based on the full-length and anthological texts, interviews of authors and practitioners, and, of course, personal experience. An analysis of these texts reveals that polyamory offers readers in-depth instruction and advice on how to implement a range of multiple-partnership models leading to fulfilling relationships, families and communities.

My experience with polyamory, in the texts and in my life, has been one of excitement and hope as well as frustration and cynicism. As both a layperson and academic researcher exploring polyamory, I have hoped for a comprehensive polyamorous vision, as well as practical approaches, to help individuals create relationships, families and communities that effectively address current systemic problems, including poverty, homelessness, inadequate healthcare, childcare and education, high divorce and domestic violence rates as well as disconnection within and between communities. I have felt frustration in realizing that while the polyamorous texts sometimes offer such visions, they do not practically provide methods for realizing these abundance models for all people, but rather just for a select few.

Through my research, I began to wonder if I was one of these select few, and how that implicated me in accessing the benefits of polyamory at the expense of others. In *Loose Women, Lecherous Men* Linda LeMoncheck (1997) explores this tension:

[T]he sexual empowerment of a handful of promiscuous career women will have little or no practical meaning for those millions of women whose livelihoods continue to depend on the sexual and domestic demands of men. Many women struggling to defend themselves against men's sexual violence in the absence of the economic and legal means to prevent it will find feminists' claims

that sexual promiscuity promotes women's liberation insensitive at best, classist and racist at worst; nor will it do to encourage teenage girls to be promiscuous without teaching them about the responsibilities that accompany women's sexual agency and the contradictory and oppressive patriarchal climate in which their sexual choices are evaluated. (1997: 56)

LeMoncheck is clear to point out that, despite this tension between some women being empowered to choose 'promiscuity' and those who do not have similar sexual and social agency, it is important that some women are doing it and are being heard. How then, can polyamorists in more privileged locations, such as myself, use this fine-tuned understanding of racialized, classed promiscuity to develop a more comprehensive conversation and revolutionary, inclusive plan of action?

Shane Phelan (1994) suggests 'getting specific' about examining who we are in our discussions around identity and privilege in order to 'reveal potential linkages and possibilities for immediate action in our individual lives . . . [and as a] practice of democratic politics in a postmodern world' (1994: xx). Additionally, LeMoncheck offers a feminist philosophy of sex focusing on a 'view from somewhere different', recognizing difference without presuming superiority or trying to be all things to all people (1997: 21). These frameworks provide a path that polyamorists, and others, could follow in order to create connections through acknowledging, inviting and exploring specific partiality and difference in all of us. This would truly be a conversation in which all could engage.

Using these frameworks to explore the language and stories shared by the authors of the 12 texts published about polyamory between 1992 and 2004, I will further explore the limitations of the texts as well as their implications. I also offer suggestions for how polyamorists can explore common issues in order to connect and include rather than isolate and exclude other forms of radical politics. Using qualitative context analysis, I analyze how two cohorts of authors discuss polyamory in the context of gender and sexual identity in polyamory, while failing to meaningfully address intersections and inclusivity around issues of diversity, such as nationality, race, class, age and (dis)ability. I conclude that a re-imagined polyamory could successfully transform systemic inequities in hegemonic social structures by focusing on addressing common issues in relationships and families as well as by developing norms of inclusivity.

Points of departure

If a given person identifies with the term 'polyamorous', chances are that she or he is a citizen of the United States, raised in a middle-class household by a nominally Christian family with moderate-to-poor communication skills, where folks were loving and supportive but not great at showing how they felt . . . He

or she is most likely of high intelligence, has spent two or three years in college, is conversant in technology and the Internet. (Ravenscroft, 2004: 2)

Since the term polyamory was coined by Zell in 1990, and as further developed in more recently published literature (i.e. Heinlein and Heinlein, 2004; Ravenscroft, 2004), a homogenous portrait of polyamorists emerges. As captured by Ravenscroft in the foregoing extract, the literature demonstrates that polyamory is typically theorized for and practiced by a certain group of readers. Indeed, the literature promotes the idea that polyamory can be an effective and revolutionary relationship choice for anyone, while simultaneously focusing on a particular type of person in American culture, namely an individual who is of 'European stock', middle-class, college educated, and, though Ravenscroft does not address this, probably also able-bodied. Indeed, the issue of (dis)ability is never addressed in any of the books on polyamory, and is rarely discussed alongside issues of diversity and sexuality. These textual elisions demonstrate how racial, class, and ableist privileges underlie current polyamory.

This tendency to ignore cultural privileges likely makes polyamory a more feasible choice for some than others, as articulated across the range of texts. It not only serves to potentially factionalize polyamorists from other polyamorists (in particular those who do not fit the typical profile), but also precludes meaningful connection to others with a shared interest in creating a broader range of culturally acceptable, and politically enforced, relationship and family-structure options.

In the bigger picture, the literature on polyamory and practice of intentional monogamy is part of a larger cultural conversation questioning heteronormative monogamy. Feminist critiques of compulsory heterosexuality and marriage (Rich, 2003[1980]; Josephson, 2005), queer critiques of gay marriage (Lehr, 1999; Warner, 1999) and discourse on understanding cultural implications around race, class, gender and sexuality (Weber, 2001; Kivel, 2004) also illuminate the need to question the privileges of the few who fit the mold with the interests of all who live within the greater society.

For example, in her discussion of expanding queer family values beyond the immediate political and legal gains of gay marriage, Valerie Lehr offers a conceptualization of care that not only challenges hegemonic family narratives, but also creates the 'material conditions that would allow people to make decisions without their decisions resting on or reinforcing the oppression of others' (1999: 172). Lehr is careful to consider the implications that some people (i.e. monogamous gay couples) will benefit from greater legal access to marriage, while others (i.e. single people, individuals in multi-partnerships) will continue to fall outside the system of legal protection. Currently Americans' sexual choices carry enormous

impacts on their legal, economic, health and parental rights. The oppressions and hierarchies explored by these theorists are not new, which makes it even more troubling that the literature on polyamory does not meaningfully acknowledge or engage them. Indeed, through these elisions the texts may further perpetuate them.

Engaging contextually

Until I read Easton and Liszt's groundbreaking work on polyamory, *The Ethical Slut* (1997), I was not familiar with the term 'polyamory' being used to describe intentionally non-monogamous relationships. At that time, informal and formal sources about polyamory were relatively scarce – none of my friends in San Francisco and throughout the country had heard of it. At the local library, sex store and online bookstores I was able to locate only a few relevant texts: Celeste West's *Lesbian Polyfidelity*, 1996; *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader* edited by Marcia Munson and Judith P. Stelboum, 1999; and Deborah Anapol's *The New Love Without Limits*, 1997. In my own engagement with polyamory texts, from practitioner to researcher, Matik's book, *Redefining Our Relationships: Guidelines For Responsible Open Relationships* (2002), served as a bridge to a second cohort of texts examining polyamory in the new millennium, including *Plural Loves* edited by Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio (2004); Kris A. Heinlein and Rozz M. Heinlein's *The Sex and Love Handbook* (2004); Mystic Life's *Spiritual Polyamory* (2004); Robert McGarey's *Poly Communication Survival Kit* (2004); and Anthony Ravenscroft's *Polyamory: Roadmaps for the Clueless and Hopeful* (2004).

As a human sexuality studies graduate student at San Francisco State University, I researched polyamory extensively between 2002 and 2004 by conducting a thorough review of various sources of information and media using a qualitative content analysis approach (Bernard, 2000). I was particularly interested in the various intersections between the available texts, both in terms of content as well as the connections that were frequently cited between the authors. For example, magazine, newspaper and internet articles frequently focus on the connection between Ryam Nearing and Deborah Anapol as key in the development of polyamorous language and practices while *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Liszt, 1997) is regularly referred to as the 'bible of polyamory'. Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt, as well as a number of authors in *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader* (Munson and Stelboum, 1999), reference the works by Nearing (*Loving More: The Polyfidelity Primer*, 1992) as well as West (1996) and Anapol (1997). During this review, it became evident that these authors frequently cite one another and are also referenced in mainstream newspaper and magazine articles about polyamory (Potter, 1998; Mathieu, 2000; Blanding, 2003).

For ease of analysis and discussion, I organize these texts into two cohorts. The first cohort of texts (Nearing, 1992; Lano and Parry, 1995; West, 1996; Anapol, 1997; Easton and Liszt, 1997; Munson and Stelboun, 1999; Matik, 2002) introduce polyamory in language, practice and historical context. The second cohort expands the conversation to include a greater focus on spirituality (Heinlein and Heinlein, 2004; Life, 2004) as well as reflections on a variety of ways to meet relational needs through polyamory (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, ed., 2004; Heinlein and Heinlein, 2004; McGarey, 2004; Ravenscroft, 2004). The nine full-length texts are primarily classified as self-help or instructional in nature, and are specifically written to support readers exploring polyamory. The three anthologies are a mixture of personal experience and scholarly essays. All of the texts present polyamory favorably, with little critical analysis. This is a format that proved helpful for me as a layperson, but presented significant challenges for me as a researcher.

Engaging as a researcher

As a researcher looking for broad concepts and themes between the texts, one of main elisions that I discovered through my content analysis process is that most of the authors fail to meaningfully move the discussion beyond a discourse of individual agency. Even the anthologies, two of which were simultaneously published as journals (Munson and Stelboun, 1999; Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004), offer little in the way of critical analysis and instead are primarily focused on personal accounts about polyamory and related sexual identities, particularly lesbianism and bisexuality. Indeed, the texts' authors appear more interested in promoting successful representations of polyamory than a range of critical analysis and experiences.

This homogeneity may be an inherent flaw in that polyamory is so newly defined, and perhaps thus more fiercely protected from criticism and open debate. It may also be a function of the authors closing ranks to protect the perceived marginalized status of its participants, as Ravenscroft alludes to in his chapter 'Toward a Culture of Polyamory' (2004: 274–7). However, such tightly drawn boundaries indicate exclusions that may lead to a lack of rigor and to a potential for complacency, and suggest broader areas for future research and scholarship. Recent scholarship, such as Klesse's article 'Bisexual Women, Non-Monogamy and Differentialist Anti-Promiscuity Discourses' (2005) as well as this special edition of *Sexualities* focusing on non-monogamy and polyamory, suggest that such critical analysis is now under way.

As a researcher working with limited texts in a relatively new field of study, I used these full-length books and anthologies to examine how the

individually focused narratives could suggest more broadly imagined cultural goals. My process consisted of conducting qualitative content analysis where I re-read and color-coded the texts, searching for common phrases and themes. Then I wrote numerous free response essays, also known as ‘notes-on-notes’ (Kleinman and Copp, 1993), to help me clarify both the evident as well as elusive concepts. Analyzing these notes-on-notes allowed me to extract the themes running throughout the texts where the authors used quite different language for similar ideas. This process revealed the elisions and limitations of the format of self-help texts, particularly around discussions of diversity.

The researcher

As Yvonna S. Lincoln (1990) suggests in her discussion of constructivism, my personal involvement with polyamory may allow me to more meaningfully engage with the research. Indeed, I see myself as a ‘passionate participant’ with an ‘emotional and social commitment’ (Lincoln, 1990: 86) to critically and meaningfully research polyamory. However, my participant-observer role may also limit my ability to see the bigger picture in that I might take things for granted that non-participant researchers might question. Additionally, there might be a tendency to shy away from critical or challenging discussion. Indeed, these are limitations that I noticed in the texts written by self-identified polyamorous authors. Conversely, texts written about polyamory by non-polyamorous authors often felt superficial and repetitive. It is in light of these potential benefits and drawbacks that I share my own location in relation to this research.

As with the majority of the authors of the 12 texts, I am also an American, white, middle-class, college educated, able-bodied person with a number of cultural privileges associated with these identities.² Additionally, as with 11 of the 16 authors and editors, I also identify as a woman. I believe that these factors made the texts more accessible to me as both a practitioner and a researcher.

However, at least seven of the authors (Nearing, 1992; West, 1996; Anapol, 1997; Easton and Liszt, 1997; Munson and Stelboum, 1999), appear to be from my mother’s generation of second-wave feminists who came of age in the 1960s. Born in 1973, I identify as a third-wave feminist. Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, as well as the music of Sweet Honey in the Rock influenced my generation with their womanist, multi-cultural theories and practices. In addition to growing up in an interracial, urban family and community, I continued to explore connections around nationality, race, class, (dis)ability, gender and sexuality in a class focusing on queer communities of color, with particularly memorable interactions with the works of Essex Hemphill and Marlon Riggs. These

influential thinkers and artists consistently highlighted the concept of intersectionality and promoted the development of meaningful, collaborative social justice strategies.

When I engaged these lenses for my research, I became aware of the polyamorous texts' silences, erasures and statements regarding the potentially revolutionary concepts that I had noted as a practitioner. As a result, I experienced a growing frustration and disillusionment with current research, scholarship and potential for political action around polyamory. It is in this context that I reconnected with my emotional and social commitment to deepen my own research in order to meaningfully present and further open discussion about the trouble with polyamory, namely its problems with diversity and lack of progressive coalition building around common issues.

Exposing the elisions, exploring the potential

You never barred us from participating in envisioning a new world. You only asked that we be brave, we be strong, we be committed to working for a joint liberation for the oppressed, a joint liberation for us all. You reminded us that new worlds do not come delivered on silver platters. New worlds, new ways of living do require getting the hands dirty. New worlds require more than lip-service and appearances . . . There is a way to build a bridge, forge a bond, help one another. (Hemphill, 1993)

Essex Hemphill's 'Letter to Audre Lorde' speaks powerfully of bridging across differences in order to move beyond the personal to challenge oppressive cultural norms and expand options for all. Like Lorde and Hemphill, I believe that such revolutionary realization is possible through doing the 'dirty' work of self-examination to move beyond tokenistic shows of 'lip service and appearances'. Such critical examination creates opportunities to challenge hegemonic understandings of nationality, race, class, (dis)ability, age, gender and sexuality. An analysis of polyamorous texts reveals that polyamory is one arena where such self-examination is warranted.

The first cohort: Personal revolutions, intersectional negations

In the seven texts comprising the first cohort, many of the authors write about their own experiences with polyamory as a revolutionary force in their lives. Three of the authors (West, 1996; Anapol, 1997; Easton in Easton and Liszt, 1997) explicitly indicate that they experienced the compulsory demands of heterosexuality and monogamy as abusive and alienating in their own lives and now relish the freedoms of polyamory.

These personal stories of struggles around power in a nuclear-family-oriented society highlight domestic and societal violence against women. They also illustrate the challenges around creating new paradigms for communities without simultaneously deploying racist, colonialist and classist language and strategies.

For example, Deborah Anapol explains that her own marriages had issues of ‘domination, control, jealousy and dependency’ (1997: 123) that she had previously observed in the abusive marriages she was studying. In response she decided to research alternatives to monogamy and nuclear family structures by looking at non-western polytheistic and evolutionary models. At the time of writing, Anapol (1997) indicates that she had created ‘tribes’ or expanded intimate networks and a larger polyamorous community where she and other polyamorists challenged norms around monogamy by:

break[ing] down cultural patterns of control, as well as ownership and property rights between persons, and replac[ing] them with a family milieu of unconditional love, trust and respect, provid[ing] an avenue to the creation of a more just and peaceful world. (Anapol, 1997: 152)

Anapol notes that she not only experiences the benefits of creating this intimate network, but also benefits indirectly as others begin to create their own multi-partner relationships, families, tribes and communities. Here, Anapol makes a clear link between issues of power in marriage and nuclear families within a capitalistic culture, and yet does not acknowledge or examine her own racialized, colonialist use of the term ‘tribe’ or superficial appropriation of basing her polyamorous model on other cultural paradigms. In *Racist Culture*, David Goldberg (1993) discusses how such racial references serve to normalize and naturalize racial dynamics and exclusions.

Thyme Siegel (1999) also uses tribal language to explain the practice of polyamory in the ‘Matriarchal Village’, located in rural Oregon the 1970s:

[T]hese Amazon women, the gypsy dykes and country women . . . formed traveling bands and caravans. They were visible in beads, feathers, and bare feet. They held workshops on non-monogamy, masturbation, class, and race, while encouraging each other to share money as if they were part of the same tribe. (Siegel, 1999: 126)

This language gives a sense of the women in the Matriarchal Village making themselves visible, in ways they would not normally be visible by virtue of their race and class, through adopting tribal adornment. West’s glib heading ‘Community: A Harem of Friends’ (1996: 299) echoes the casual use of racialized and colonialist language throughout the texts. This theme continues into the new millennium, where Raven Kaldera perpetuates the use of ‘tribe’ in the title of his book *Pagan Polyamory: Becoming a Tribe of Hearts*.³

'Slut' is also imbued with racialized – as well as gendered – implications. Dossie Easton, one of the authors of *The Ethical Slut* (1997), writes about her own negative experiences with monogamy and the term 'slut'.

I have hated monogamy for twenty-seven years, since I left my daughter's violent father, fighting my way out the door, bruised and pregnant . . . Joe was very possessive. Initially I found this attractive, proof positive that he really cared about me . . . He would beat me, screaming imprecations, 'You slut!' when another man looked at me. After I left, I decided he was right – I am a slut, I want to be a slut, I will never promise monogamy again. (Easton and Liszt, 1997: 9–10)

Easton's assertion that she 'wants to be a slut' shows how she reclaims the pejorative language that Joe hurled at her. In reclaiming this epithet, Easton claimed her sexuality as her own – not the possession of another.

In this case, Easton committed herself to being single and finding support networks that would enable her to transform what it means to be a slut. However, there are further cultural underpinnings to this story. Drawing on Linda LeMoncheck's work, Klesse (2005) argues that '[a]ccusing a person of being promiscuous is part and parcel of a highly gendered, classed and racialized discourse on sexuality' (2005: 449). This discourse is not mentioned, let alone explored, by Easton and Liszt in *The Ethical Slut* (1997), or in the other texts' mention of promiscuity (West, 1996), casual sex (Munson and Stelboun, 1999), sex addiction (Nearing, 1992) or sport-fucking (Matik, 2002).

In her essay, 'Choosing Not to Choose: Beyond Monogamy, Beyond Duality', Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli explores the potential for exploitive, coerced non-monogamy in a patriarchal society. Conversely, she also notes 'how women are ill-prepared, as gendered subjects raised in this society, to deal with the potential losses – personally, socially, economically' in choosing to become nonmonogamous (1995: 51). Indeed, Pallotta-Chiarolli, who has essays in both cohorts (1995, 2004), is one of the few authors to specifically address intersecting economic, racial, structural and cultural oppressions facing polyamorists she describes as inhabiting a 'multiplicity of marginalities' (1995: 58).

As opposed to the pervasive underlying issues outlined by Pallotta-Chiarolli, Matik (2002) blithely suggests that there is 'nothing' stopping the reader from

finding the courage to love as many people as possible and inviting them to help you raise a family, form friendships with your children, live in separate rooms, share lovers, share laundry, set boundaries, and start a mini-revolution in the privacy of your own home. (Matik, 2002: 81)

Here Matik echoes Nearing's assertion that anyone with an 'open mind' can 'consciously choose' their own lifestyle (1992: 7) without recognizing

existing systemic political, legal and social barriers. The second cohort continues these themes.

The second cohort: Two steps forward, one step back

In the preface to his book *Polyamory: Roadmaps for the Clueless and Hopeful* (2004), Anthony Ravenscroft, self-identifies as an American, white, middle-class heterosexual male and acknowledges that he writes about polyamory for others with similar identities as 'being more widely inclusive would have added greatly to the potential complexities of the discussion'. As with the polyamorous authors before him, and as continued in this second cohort, Ravenscroft feels most competent to write for a small sub-group of American society. Namely, people like him.

Incongruently, a few pages later, Ravenscroft (2004) asserts that:

Polyamory is not a lifestyle. We cover just about every imaginable combination of economic level, social class, education, upbringing, religion, age, race, political affiliation, gender preference, technological comfort, physical type, living situation, and preferred urban milieu. All in all, we look pretty much like any monogamous or promiscuous person. (Ravenscroft, 2004: 1)

Ravenscroft does not offer information on how he came to his conclusions about polyamorous lifestyle and demographics. Indeed, it is unclear if he believes it, as a few paragraphs later he contradicts himself once again when he describes polyamorous demographics as American, white, middle-class, and well-educated. He also adds his unsubstantiated view that 'not so long ago' he would have stated that 95 percent of polyamorous people were of 'purebred European stock' and now feels it is 'relatively safe to guess 75%' (2004: 2).

In the anthology *Plural Loves* (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004), Suzann Robins acknowledges the prevalence of white, middle-class identity as well as early and continued intersection with gay culture. She writes:

While the current idea of polyamory was established in the context of a movement prevalently of white, middle-class people, a great deal of overlap with the gay communities was there from the beginning, which now allows more room for growth in all directions. (Robins, 2004: 107)

Heinlein and Heinlein (2004) also acknowledge the potential for overlapping identities in that they view polyamory along with other race, gender and sexual minority rights movements. They write:

The overall trend toward human liberation is unmistakable. For every issue from minority rights to women's rights to gay rights, reactionary forces have always lost out to the power of the social innovators. (Heinlein and Heinlein, 2004: 11)

More so than the first cohort, these authors are orienting polyamory within the larger cultural context.

Within the second cohort, most of the authors claimed a general awareness that polyamory intersects with other identities and attempt inclusivity. However, their efforts remain general, vague and sometimes contradictory. As with Ravenscroft's oscillation outlined earlier, there seemed very little understanding of how to effectively address and include these intersections. For example, Heinlein and Heinlein (2004) write:

This book is written for you [as a straight monogamist] as well. First of all, the book's insights into relationships are general and universal in nature and can help you interact more effectively with all people in your life . . . All human beings should be familiar with all of their options so they may best understand who they really are. (Heinlein and Heinlein, 2004: 13)

In trying to be inclusive, the authors use language that suggests that relationships are general and universal, and that 'all human beings' have equal access to make relationship choices, seemingly without regard for historical and cultural context. Ravenscroft even goes so far as to suggest that:

There are no experts on polyamory . . . this isn't a bad thing; far from it. Rather than trending toward a narrow set of standards, this makes polyamory inherently inclusive, allowing for . . . an amazing set of people. (2004: 3)

In suggesting that polyamory is 'inherently inclusive' and generally applicable to 'all' people, these authors continue the theme of erasing cultural context and realities while assuming greater cultural applicability than they can demonstrate or is in evidence.

For instance, as with first-cohort authors, such as Nearing (1992), Anapol (1997), and Easton and Liszt (1999), Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio, the editor of *Plural Loves* (2004), suggests that polyamory has emerged as a potential panacea, even on a global scale. She writes:

Compared to 1970s-style polyfidelity, polyamory today is not only more gender and sexual orientation aware, but also more adaptable to a globalizing world, and more effective in rendering this world more harmonious through its workshops and education to love. (2004: 4)

Mystic Life (2004) echoes her words when he outlines his vision of polyamorous community to include: 'underlying values [of] peace, unconditional love, harmony, joy, healing, personal and societal evolution, abundance, transcendence of shame, etc' (2004: 60). These authors invoke a polyamorous theory and practice that is capable of great things. After all, who can argue a rhetoric of peace and harmony? However, this seems a missed opportunity to explore ways in which to achieve these goals for all rather than the few.

In his *Poly Communication Survival Kit* (2004), Robert McGarey offers communication tools for polyamorous readers, but does not define who might be in that audience. Are we to assume, then, that his communication tools will be effective for all people on a national or global scale? If so, how might a diversity of readers respond to the tribalized image of 'jungle' in the chapter heading 'Welcome to the Communication Jungle' (McGarey, 2004: 3)? Indeed, writing for a specific audience is once again apparent in the second cohort of texts.

Moving beyond

Despite my criticisms, I do believe that the 12 texts outlining the theory and practice of polyamory discussed in this article do offer a powerful opportunity to challenge heteronormative monogamy. However, as articulated in these texts, polyamory falls short of realizing its revolutionary potential to build coalitions and inclusive norms across identity groups in order to transform oppressive systemic relationship and family structures. Most notably, the majority of these writers limit polyamory's revolutionary potential by primarily addressing the concerns of white, middle-class, college-educated individuals and fail to meaningfully collaborate with others around common goals.

In isolating around common identity and evading a thorough examination of cultural privilege, current polyamorous theory and practice greatly limits its potential to transform relationships, families and communities currently rooted in systemic oppressions. A number of theorists have articulated their concern about the tendency for separation by identity between progressive groups rather than connection around commonly held goals. For instance, in her writing about the necessity for building coalitions across identities, Bernice Johnson Reagon cautions, 'we have just finished with that kind of isolating. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. It's over. Give it up' (1983: 357). Barbara Smith argues that in order for social justice movements to create meaningful change they must work from 'a multi-issue revolutionary agenda' (1998: 184) that includes issues relevant across identities. Kimberle Crenshaw notes that successful alliances for political change must rally around such intersections in order to 'highlight the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed' (1996: 358). Additionally, Weldon (2006) advocates the overarching development of norms of inclusivity in order to address issues of power and domination between activists working for change around a common issue.

However, making political alliance work in practice is a difficult enterprise and depends on a self-critical awareness of individuals who want to

enter alliances from privileged positions. Klesse, for example, acknowledges that these difficulties around creating inclusive social movement persist and are unlikely to shift unless 'communities built around dominant homogenous identities overcome their self-complacency, actively welcome and enable diversity, and move towards a 'politics of difference' (Klesse, 2005: 460). What changes might occur if polyamorists were to engage with these cultural intersections and bridge-building strategies in order to create a more inclusive and issue-based agenda?

Polyamorists could successfully build coalitions at the crossroads of various social justice issues that affect people across the range of nationality, race, class, (dis)ability, age, gender and sexual identities. In particular, in the 21st century, western (and other) cultures are in the midst of questioning and reconceptualizing relationship and families, particularly around marriage.

For example, Lisa Duggan (2004) compares how conservative politicians in the United States are currently pushing to create marriage incentives for some citizens (such as welfare recipients), while simultaneously denying others (such as gays and lesbians) from access to marriage. Relationship and family structure may affect these two groups differently, but may also be common ground for resistance and systemic change. Rather than focusing on marriage, currently defined as individuals in dyadic, monogamous relationships, Valerie Lehr (1999) outlines a broader, more encompassing vision of relationship and families. Lehr envisions a culture that secures adequate resources for all and centralizes care as an expanded community, rather than family or governmental, concern. Such a vision connects neatly with those articulated by the polyamorous texts, particularly around sharing resources and creating expanded community networks.

Duggan (2004) also suggests moving from a marriage-based argument to a more 'flexible menu of options' that redistributes the '1,049 automatic federal and additional state protections' to all persons, not just those who are heterosexually married (2004: 2). This 'flexible menu' would separate private commitments between people from benefits granted by the government and ensure that 'progressive equality . . . could happen . . . if all statuses could be opened to all without exclusions, allowing different kinds of households to fit state benefits to their changing needs' (Duggan, 2005: 2). Josephson more broadly articulates that the argument around marriage is ultimately one about citizenship where 'full status as citizens for all persons marked as sexual "deviants" will require major changes and a wide-ranging conversation' (Josephson, 2005: 278). Separating private commitments from public benefits serves the interests of a variety of people unduly affected by governmental policies around marriage and access to a fully realized citizenship.

When current polyamorists, as theorists, practitioners and activists, commit to connecting troubling issues about relationships and families with issues of systemic inequity and oppression in these areas, then a more collaborative, progressive polyamory could emerge. Such a polyamory could collectively transform the social, political and legal structures that regulate relationship and family structures in the United States. These intersectional collaborations will change and challenge polyamory as currently defined and practiced, and may promote unexpected coalitions as well as foreclose others. Eve Sedgwick suggests,

A real measure of the success of such an analysis would lie in its ability, in the hands of the inquirer with different needs, talents, or positionings, to clarify the distinctive kinds of resistance offered to it from different spaces on the social map, even though such projects might require revisions or rupturings of the analysis as first proffered. (Sedgwick, 1990: 14)

This work to revise, and even rupture, what it means to be polyamorous may be challenging and uncomfortable. It may also be the bridge to systemic change.

Now is the time for polyamorists to reflect on their privileged positions and move beyond the limits of 20th-century identity politics to engage in challenging and critical work around systemic racial, economic, and other inequalities. Only then can polyamorists join with others to challenge current systemic oppressions to revolutionize how all of us engage in creating sustainable relationships, families and communities.

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Notes

1. The term 'polyamory' is most often credited to Morning Glory Zell (1990). Although the concepts around polyamory appear to have emerged in discourse in the 1970s, the specific terminology appears more frequently in literature beginning in the 1990s and, according to Daum (2001), was only recently included in the Oxford English Dictionary.
2. I do not claim to know each author's race, class, educational background, (dis)ability, gender or sexual orientation. However, through photos, interviews and self-disclosure, it is possible to get a sense of the overwhelming similarity in cultural lens of the current authors writing about polyamory.

3. I had hoped to include Raven Kaldera's *Pagan Polyamory: Becoming a Tribe of Hearts* (2005) in my analysis, but was not able to locate it before going to press.

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