

'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

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Abstract: This paper shows how amatonormativity and its attendant social pressures converge at the intersections of race, gender, romantic relationality, and sexuality to generate peculiar challenges to polyamorous African American men in American society. Contrary to the view maintained in the “slut-vs-stud” phenomenon, I maintain that the label ‘player’ when applied to polyamorous African American men functions as a pernicious stereotype and has denigrating effects. Specifically, I argue that stereotyping polyamorous African American men as players estranges them from themselves and it constrains their agency by preemptively foreclosing the set of possibilities of what one’s sexual or romantic relational identities can be.

Keywords: ethics, love, polyamory, stereotyping, race.

“I don’t wanna be a playa no more”

-Big Pun

“In the case of black men, their subordination as a racial minority has more than canceled out their advantages as males in the larger society. Any understanding of their experience will have to come from an analysis of the complex problems they face as blacks and as men.”

-Robert Staples

Introduction



On February 12th, 2014, I prepared to deliver an invited talk at the University of Arkansas on polyamory.¹ I wanted to use my position as a African American polyamorous man (AAPM) to develop a more comprehensive conversation about polyamory and queer identity.^{2,3} Given that its timing was particularly close to Valentine’s day—an American holiday that celebrates romantic monogamous dyads—I thought it perfectly appropriate to deliver a talk that would challenge the audience’s unquestioned assumptions about romantic love and relationships. However, what I wasn’t prepared for was how I’d be denigrated by a now formerly close friend:

Friend: *Did you decide what you are going to give your talk on tomorrow?*

Me: Yeah, I think I am going forward with the polyamory idea.

Friend: *Why? I can’t believe you are really going to give a Valentine’s Day talk on polyamory.*

Me: Why not? If the conversation is about romantic love, I think it’s important to expand the scope of representation for what that can look like.

Friend: *(Sighs Frustratingly) You really are going to get up there and give people an academic rationale for cheating and being a player—I really am disappointed in you.*

Me: Why?

Friend: *Because this talk is going to be a step back for black people.*

This was perhaps the first, but has certainly not been the last, time that my identification as a cisgender, heterosexual, African American, polyamorous man has been targeted and attacked for deviating from the social script for romantic love in America. My aim in this paper is to

¹ Justin Clardy, “On Polyamory Part 1”, filmed February 13th 2013 at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, video, 18:21, www.youtube.com/watch?v=uj9-YxGAe84; Justin Clardy, “On Polyamory Part 2”, filmed February 13th 2013 at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, video, 18:41, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RITMoFZPofY&t=2s.

² Melita J. Noël, “Progressive Polyamory: Considering Issues of Diversity,” *Sexualities* 9, no.5 (2006): 602-620.

³ It is important to qualify my further usage of the acronym AAPM. My perspective extends from my position as an African American cisgendered heterosexual man. As such, I will be using the term to make reference to the constellation of these identifying markers. This might seem to minimize, erase, or otherwise fail to represent the experiences of polyamorous African American men whose sexual identities are located at different points of the sexual spectrum such as African American polyamorous men who are bisexual, gay, pansexual, or asexual. My reader should keep in mind, however, that part of the methodology employed this work is autobiographical. As a result, my examination of polyqueer sexualities is not exhaustive. Given the many forms that polyamorous relationships can and do take, it needn’t be. Instead, I maintain that my experiences are theoretically useful for exploring the connections between amatonormativity and heteromascularity in producing gender and racial hierarchies.

illustrate how the label ‘player’ has harmful and denigrating effects when applied to AAPM simply because of their polyamorous lifestyles. I argue that, amidst other harms, this label functions as a stereotype and enacts a range of moral harms including the denigrating effects of estranging AAPM from themselves, and constrains their freedom.

Some feminists believe that there is an asymmetry in sanctioning non-monogamous or promiscuous behavior between men and women. I endeavor to show, however, that in amatonormative societies, sometimes AAPM have peculiar challenges generated at the intersections of their racial, romantic, and sexual identities. Amatonormativity is the default assumption that monogamous, romantic (and usually heterosexual) relationships (that lead to marriage) are the ideal form of romantic relationships and a universal goal.⁴ For example, in my own experiences as an AAPM, I have often been labeled a ‘player’ when I disclose my polyamorous identity. In African American culture, the label ‘player’ typically denotes something problematic about men’s romantic and sometimes sexual identities—namely, that the subject is a “womanizer”, “cheater”, or otherwise unethically non-monogamous. In this paper, I endeavor to show how amatonormativity and its attendant social pressures generate peculiar challenges to AAPM in American society.

Before beginning, I would like to make a few clarifications. In this paper, I understand polyamory as participation in extradyadic romantic relationships with mutual consent among those involved. Further, I understand polyamorous people as those who practice negotiating desires for consensual extradyadic romantic relationships.⁵ The slight differences in my definitions of polyamory and polyamorous, respectively, are intended to capture the fact that someone can be polyamorous without presently participating in an extradyadic romantic relationship. Although I confine myself to talking about a stereotype regarding AAPM, I do not mean to imply that polys who are not AAPM are immune. There are likely stereotypes about polys from various racial and ethnic groups and indeed especially damaging ones that deserve more of an extensive treatment

⁴ Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 88.

⁵ Here I emphasize the “practice of negotiating” desires rather than merely having the desires for or interest in consensual extradyadic romantic relationships. The reason for this is that some people experience these desires as unworthy of being endorsed or negotiated, but rather repudiated — perhaps in the service of fulfilling their commitment to a monogamous romantic relationship, or what they might take to be their own monogamous identity. In cases like these, I do not believe that the people in question are polyamorous even if they find themselves with what might, on the surface, show up as polyamorous desires. While I do not have the space to sufficiently engage this issue here, I would like to thank Liam Kofi Bright for pushing me to clarify this point.

that I can provide here. I must also stipulate that my understanding of stereotypes takes after Lawrence Blum’s definition where “stereotypes are false or misleading associations between a group and an attribute that are held in a rigid manner, resistant to counterevidence.”⁶ For Blum, stereotypes are a form of morally defective regard for persons as they necessarily fail to recognize the internal diversity of groups. On his account, stereotypes also fail to acknowledge stereotyped individuals’ identities by maintaining false or misleading associations between the individual and some group to which they are believed to belong. Insofar as I too believe stereotypes are based on false or misleading associations of this kind, I believe that these harms are present in the case of stereotyping AAPM. But my account builds on Blum’s account by drawing on Lauren Freeman’s analysis of embodied harms that stereotypes perpetuate. As such, I illustrate harms to AAPM that are outside of Blum’s scope.

The intersecting factors my account covers highlights some of the ways that various social groups are disproportionately denigrated for their polyamorous lifestyles in amatonormative societies, thereby extending the work of queer, feminist, and critical race scholars on connections between normativity, power, and privilege.

Amatonormativity

Feminist philosophers Elizabeth Brake and Carrie Jenkins have remarked on both the pervasiveness of amatonormativity and the attendant harms that people and groups who are excluded by it face—such as friends, singles, and polyamorists. In America, because amatonormativity is the dominant assumption about legitimate romantic relationships, it functions as the default backdrop against which all other romantic relationships must compare. As a result, romantic relationships that deviate from the default social script for romantic relationships are socially stigmatized and their participants come to be seen as problematic ‘others’ in discussions

⁶ Lawrence Blum, “Stereotypes and Stereotyping: A Moral Analysis,” *Philosophical Papers* 33, no.3 (2004), 288. In his forthcoming chapter “What is Sex Stereotyping and What Could Be Wrong With It?” that will appear in the *Bloomsbury Companion to Analytic Feminism*, Adam Omar Hosein urges that we should be pluralists about stereotyping in order to capture all of the relevant moral and political harms. I agree with Hosein and am, in general, a pluralist about stereotypes. However, in this paper I rely on Blum’s characterization because of the way it speaks to the normative dimensions of stereotypes and stereotyping in particular; while some accounts of stereotypes include non-defective associations, on Blum’s account, for something to count as a stereotype is for it to be defective in some way—either moral or epistemic.

about romantic love—for example, polyamorists have their relationships treated as second-rate and cannot have marriage arrangements that match their romantic arrangements.

In America, amatonormativity is prevalent and works to unduly privilege some individuals over others. Speaking both from and about the American context, Brake says that “amatonormative discrimination is widely practiced”.⁷ On the same note, Jenkins (who is polyamorous herself) writes that “amatonormativity is so pervasive as to be more or less invisible except to the people it most directly affects.”⁸ Like most forms of social privilege, the overwhelming presence of amatonormativity renders it virtually imperceptible to those who subscribe and benefit from it. For those who are adversely impacted by it, its existence is hard to ignore. According to Brake, when we discriminate based on false judgments that rest on amatonormative assumptions, we commit a moral wrong as doing so “wrongly privileges the central, dyadic, exclusive, enduring amorous relationship associated with, but not limited to, marriage.”⁹ Following these philosophers, below I review some of the privileges and costs that are associated with amatonormativity, in an effort to fine-tune our understanding of what it is and how it works in American society on a general level.

As Brake says, amatonormative relationships are dyadic, romantic, enduring, and of central importance to one’s life. They are sometimes associated with a desire for marriage but they need not be. For example, outside of marriage, monogamous romantic relationships are socially recognized with legitimacy in a way that non-monogamous romantic relationships are not. Brake states that “couples who maintain an enduring amorous relationship but refrain from sex, maintain separate domiciles, or keep their property disentangled, can still be recognized as amorous partners.”¹⁰ Importantly, the extent to which people can receive amatonormative privileges hinges on social recognition—in particular, a recognition of one’s romantic relationship by others as legitimate. As sex, living arrangements, and property entanglement can all be thought to belong to the private dimension of romantic relationships, there is a sense in which couples can still present themselves and be socially recognized as romantic partners so long as their relationship is seemingly loving, enduring, and central to the lives of its participants. Brake notes that these three conditions are jointly sufficient for receiving the benefits of amatonormativity, while none of them

⁷ Elizabeth Brake, *Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 88-9.

⁸ Carrie Jenkins, *What Love is and What it Could be* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 142.

⁹ Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

are independently sufficient for it. For example, “a brief, amorous summer fling or extramarital affair would not be privileged, and friendships may be central and enduring but not privileged.”¹¹ Again, what shows up as important is the extent to which the privilege of amatonormativity hinges on having one’s romantic relationship recognized by others.

Amatonormative relationships are unduly privileged over other forms of caring and loving relationships such as polyamorous relationships and friendships. “Friendships and adult care networks”, Brake writes, “are not accorded the social importance of marriages or marriage-like relationships”, despite being (at least) as central, loving, and caring as the relationships that amatonormativity privileges.¹² The distinction that Brake includes between friendships and other kinds of adult care networks is telling. One might think that amatonormative discrimination is fair against friendships because they are not sexual, yet clearly it’s not the presence of a sexual dimension that is the matter since it also discriminates against polyamorous relationships which may be sexual.¹³¹⁴ In failing to be extended the same social importance of amatonormative relationships, poly relationships “lack the recognition received by monogamous relationships, and participants, judged to be immoral simply for their nonconforming relationships, face discrimination.”¹⁵ In America, this discrimination is political and social.

Marriage law sustains amatonormativity as it functions compulsorily because dyadic relationships are socially, politically, and economically incentivized through marriage. Socially, amatonormativity is sustained through the propagation of representations of romantic love as being between two people. For example, all of the films on a list published in 2013 by BET (Black Entertainment Television) claiming to list the “Top 25 Black Love films” are about heterosexual dyads.¹⁶ A 2018 list published by Blavity.com, a digital media outlet that aims to “economically

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ I owe thanks to the issue’s editor, Daniela Cutas, for helping me clarify this point.

¹⁴ As the topic of my paper is polyamory, I restrict my comments in the main body for this purpose. However, I would like to point out that rendering friendships unimportant on the basis that they are not romantic or sexual relationships is perhaps the most blunt and blatant display of amatonormativity one could offer as friendships can be and often are meaningful, important and loving relationships without romantic feelings or sex. Without reflection, this objection dismisses this possibility out of hand in the service of unconsciously promoting amatonormativity. Ultimately, this amounts to an argument for the importance of amatonormative relationships on the basis that friendship is not an amatonormative relationship.

¹⁵ Ibid. More on this in the coming section.

¹⁶ “Top 25 Best Black Love Films,” BET, accessed May 15, 2018, www.bet.com/shows/bet-star-cinema/photos/2013/10/top-25-best-black-love-films.html.

and creatively support Black millennials across the African Diaspora,” that claims to catalog “14 of the Greatest Black Love Movies of All Time” similarly only represents heterosexual dyads.¹⁷ On Twitter and Instagram, the hashtags #BlackLove and #Relationshipgoals remind us that social media is not exempt from this charge either as each of the tags are largely populated by images and narratives of romantic dyads as the ideal towards which we all should strive. These media representations become controlling images of how African American heteromascularity is defined. In so doing, they also define what forms of African American heteromascularity are marginal.¹⁸

Many forms of legal discrimination are attached to the institution of marriage which, in its present state, only exists to protect dyads. The protections that dyads are afforded through marriage come at a cost to polys. These costs cover a wide range from discriminatory housing policies to legally imposed penalties for adultery, and they work to perpetuate systemic disadvantages for people who are polyamorous.¹⁹ In America, “cheating” in a marriage is punishable by fine or jail time in 21 states.²⁰ Polys also have their economic opportunities squandered as “married or formerly married persons qualify for U.S. Social Security payments based on their spouse’s employment [and] married workers receive significantly benefits packages when these include spousal health insurance at a reduced rate”.²¹

Another aspect of the discrimination that polys face is social. It includes stereotyping and evaluative judgments regarding their relationships. Because poly relationships are not treated as socially significant in the way that amatonormative relationships are, they are often “not seen as providing good social reasons” for recognizing their relationships as legitimate.²² Jenkins speaks to these judgments from her own experiences when she says, “for us, the stigma and social rejection that surround nonmonogamy carry costs that are hard to count. My boyfriend’s father refuses to talk to him about anything except the weather until he breaks up with me. We’ve been together for years, and I’ve never met any of his family.”²³ Jenkins talks about the psychological

¹⁷ Valerie Robinson, “14 of the Greatest Black Love Movies of All Time,” Blavity, accessed May 15, 2018, <https://blavity.com/14-of-the-greatest-black-love-movies-of-all-time>.

¹⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 161-66.

¹⁹ Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 94.

²⁰ Joli Lee, “In Which States is Cheating on Your Spouse Illegal?,” Detroit Free Press, accessed May 15, 2018, www.freep.com/story/life/family/2014/04/17/in-which-states-is-cheating-on-your-spouse-illegal/28936155.

²¹ Brake, *Minimizing Marriage*, 94.

²² Ibid.

²³ Carrie Jenkins, *What Love is*, 134.

costs as well. She says “it is impossible to avoid the psychological impact of amatonormativity—the idea that if you’re not in romantic love, or at least looking for it, then you’re doing life wrong. While I don’t agree with that on an intellectual level, the internalized attitude is hard to dislodge.”²⁴

In my own experiences, I have been labeled as being immature, having commitment issues, or as being promiscuous, on the basis of my polyamorous identity. Furthermore, family members and friends have failed to recognize the significance of breaking-up with partners by refusing to accept these events as reasons for sadness or grief in the way that they have for my amatonormative counterparts. Instead of empathizing with the experience of love loss, I have been normatively instructed that I “should not feel bad” because I (may) have other partners to “fall back” on. The reader can take away a few things from this particular attitude. First, for some lovers, to love is to exist in a relationship of shared experiences of a certain quality with their partner(s), which fosters intimacy. Because love requires openness and vulnerability, any time we love we open up to the possibility of experiencing the agonizing grief of losing our beloveds whether through death or the termination of a relationship. The belief that polys should be impervious to this experience of grief because they have multiple romantic relationships is at the very least insensitive²⁵; even more, the insensitivity expresses an impossible imperative by reducing the humanity of people who are polyamorous while simultaneously summoning us to be so much more than human. Notice also that I am not the only person affected by this: the assumption that another partner can or even wants to conduct emotional labor on a former partner’s behalf reduces their agency by treating them as fungible objects whose function is to be nothing other than a partner in this capacity.

Pertaining to the stereotypes that are imposed on people who are perceived to be non-monogamous, Jenkins talks about the ways that women who violate “the norm of romantic monogamy are commonly policed via the mechanism of slut shaming”.²⁶ She goes on to introduce a perceived asymmetry between the penalties imposed on women against those imposed on men for violations of the romantic norm of monogamy. She writes that:

[slut shaming] carries a higher penalty for women than for men, I call this the “slut-versus-stud phenomenon.” It’s not hard to come up with a long and colorful list of words that

²⁴ Carrie Jenkins, *What Love is*, 103.

²⁵ I would like to note that it is plausible that some people may feel this way when parents lose one or two or more siblings, yet it I am highly doubtful that they would go as far as to say this out loud. I am grateful for comments from Daniela Cutas, the editor, that helped me see this point.

²⁶ Jenkins, *What Love is*, 138.

specifically denigrate promiscuous women. But what words denigrate promiscuous men? A “rake” or “cad” sounds like the dashing antihero in a P.G. Wodehouse story. A “playboy” or “player” sounds like somebody who has a lot of fun. A “pimp” is a man who controls or manages sex workers, not someone who is himself promiscuous. I have never heard anyone use the word “gigolo” in real life. “Man-whore” is explicitly a masculinized version of a feminine word. “Womanizer” might be the best candidate, but while derogatory it lacks the vitriolic punch of “slut” (partly because it points to an activity rather than an identity). 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.²⁷

What Jenkins calls the “slut-versus-stud phenomenon” suggests that there is no word that denigrates the non-monogamous behavior of men. In the next section, I focus on one, ‘player’, that has a different social meaning when interpreted in a different linguistic community. Looking at African American English (AAE),²⁸ we can access the social meaning of player from a vantage point within the African American community—a vantage point outside of the scope of this slut-versus-stud phenomenon as Jenkins describes it. On my view, the word “player” actually does function to denigrate AAPM for violations of the norm of romantic monogamy. Focusing on how the word ‘player’ functions amongst African American speakers raises larger questions about whether there are more stereotypes that are peculiarly generated at the intersection of racial, romantic relational, gendered, and sexual identity.

I don’t Want to be a Playa No More

Both Mimi Schippers and Pepper Mint talk about the tenuous relationship between cheating and monogamy. In America, cheating can plausibly be understood as a transgression against an expectation for exclusivity across some dimension of one’s romantic relationship (usually sexual or romantic). For Mint, “monogamy needs cheating in a fundamental way. In addition to serving as the demonized opposite of monogamy, the mark of the cheater is used as a threat to push individuals to conform to monogamous behavior and monogamous appearances.”²⁹ As photo negatives function on photographic paper, cheating narratives—morally unacceptable

²⁷ Ibid, 139. Emphasis added.

²⁸ See H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman, *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.* (New York: Oxford UP, 2012); Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifying: The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin); Lisa J. Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (United Kingdom: Cambridge, 2002).

²⁹ Pepper Mint, “The Power Dynamics of Cheating,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 4, no. 3-4: 59-60.

portrayals of one partner having an extrarelational affair (sexual or otherwise) without the knowledge or consent of the other partner—serve as the negative image against which the positive image is cast. They affix cheaters as characters in a “morality play” where the cheater “plays the common cultural part of the demonized other, a yardstick that normal people can measure their morals against.”³⁰ For Schippers, these narratives perpetuate hegemonic power as those who deviate from the socially accepted structures of romantic relationships “are collectively and publicly punished, [and] others are discouraged from engaging in the behavior.”³¹ Cheating narratives, then, become important mechanisms for sustaining amatonormativity, leaving monogamy as the unscathed hegemonic norm.³²

In AAE the term ‘player’ typically denotes something problematic about men’s romantic and sometimes sexual identities.³³ The prevalence of its usage in African American culture has been documented by dictionaries of AAE. For example, in *African American Slang: A Linguistic Description*, Maciej Widawski lists two variations of the word, ‘playa’ and ‘player’ and defines them as “a womanizer who takes advantage of women”.³⁴ Contrary to what the slut-vs-stud phenomenon would lead us to believe, ‘player’ is an identity made through ‘womanizing’.³⁵ Before moving on, however, I would like to point out that connotations associated with the word’s usage in AAE are also recorded on *Urban Dictionary*, an internet crowdsourcing tool for gathering social meaning which allows readers to post their own entries and vote on existing ones. It lists 49 definitions ranging from ‘cheaters’ to ‘rapists’.³⁶ The 3rd ranked entry for ‘playa’ (which is the 1st entry for the word that addresses romantic relationships), has more than 1500 “thumbs up” votes and it reads:

a male who uses women for sex or other favors usually by charming the girl till they fall in love with them. A lot of guys do this in order to be a “playa” because in our modern society

³⁰ Ibid, p. 58-9.

³¹ Mimi Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 43.

³² Ibid, 42.

³³ The reason that I say sometimes sexual is because it is important to note that sex is not essential to romance. Some people no longer have sex with their partners; others never had sex with their romantic partners to begin with, as is sometimes the case with people who are asexual.

³⁴ Maciej Widawski, *African American Slang: A Linguistic Description* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 238.

³⁵ My analysis focuses on Widawski’s definition because in linguistic work on AAE, Widawski’s work is fundamental. See Sharese King, “African American slang: A Linguistic Description”, *Language* 92, no. 2, June 2016, 480.

³⁶ “Playa,” Urban Dictionary, accessed May 15, 2018, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=playa>.

it is (by idiotic dickheads) “cool” and “hip” to be labeled as a “playa”. A female version of this would be a slut.³⁷

Being labeled a player is also associated with being a “love offender”, “scandalous”, “impulsively flirtatious”, self-interestedly “manipulative”, as “having multiple illegitimate children”, as “having multiple romantic partners”, as “having sex with many people”, “promiscuous”, “ladies man”, “playboy”, “flirtatious”, and a “dog”.³⁸ The social meaning of “player,” is thus negatively valenced as a ‘womanizing man’ and is relatively widespread.

In patriarchal societies, being a player carries positive evaluative judgments as well. For example, some men might very well want to be a ‘player’ as some people find being a player “cool” (as the author of the quote mentions). Here we find a complexity that we do not find with the term slut. This observation provides a unique opportunity to parse out how amatonormativity, patriarchy, and heteronormativity converge to create the conditions for such an aspiration.

Heteronormativity and amatonormativity bolster the thought that the appropriate relationship between men and women is dyadic, romantically and sexually exclusive—one man to one woman. Deviance thus becomes characterized by violating these norms and as a result, there is a felt need to conceal violations when they occur. Furthermore, patriarchies are socially organized to favor men and wield power over women. As Jenkins points out, in relation to non-monogamy and promiscuity (and not to conflate the two), when women violate these norms, they are sanctioned by negative moral attitudes (i.e. “slut”). However, patriarchy enables men to remain unsanctioned for what women are sanctioned for. This asymmetry is reflected in how ‘player’ situates men in relation to women. The power distinction is between “the player” and “the played” (where a man is the “player” and a woman is the “played”). This language suggests competition where men are the ones who get to compete in “the game” and women are merely “played with”—which also has disrespectful connotations of manipulating many women. Men, then, are gratified by playing it “successfully”—deceiving and manipulating women without being found out—and flaunting this male privilege.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ I am indebted to the comments from an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I explicitly engage this point.

Aside from aspiring to be one, some people do engage in practices rightly associated with the label ‘player’. That is, non-monogamous practice or extradyadic involvement can sometimes be inappropriate. For people who subscribe to amatonormative norms and are in monogamous romantic relationships, there is a widespread expectation for exclusivity across different dimensions of one’s relationship (usually sexual and emotional). Expectations for exclusivity come about in different ways. Sometimes people considering a romantic relationship with one another explicitly co-create the boundaries for the relationship through conversation. Far more commonly, however, these boundaries are not discussed and, by default, we rely on our society’s dating norms to “fill in the blanks”.⁴⁰ To transgress against a mutually recognized expectation for exclusivity in one’s romantic relationship is to cheat—to engage in non-monogamous practice or otherwise extradyadic involvement in a non-consensual way. However, it is precisely the garnering of this consent that is paramount to polyamory.

Widawski’s glossary provides the following examples in order to contextualize the word:

- “*I’m a bad man, I’m a player.*”
- “*Lamar is such a playa, I seen him with Nikki last night but I know he’s still with Amber, Latasha thinks she’s his girl. He’s playin’ them all.*”
- “*Do you continue with a guy knowing he’s a player?*”⁴¹

Notice first that the examples that Widawski provides to contextualize the term are at once gendered, amatonormative, and heteronormative. In each of the examples, the person being referred to is a man. Although in practice people of any gender can be a player,⁴² the term and the images typically used to represent it are commonly gendered and usually refer to heterosexual men. Keeping with the gendered association, in a section on controlling images of black masculinity, Patricia Hill Collins remarks that players often target and prey upon women by trading sexuality for other kinds of self-interested benefits.⁴³ When I have disclosed my polyamorous identity to friends, potential partners, and strangers alike, I have often been met with a range of the denigrating associations listed on the *Urban Dictionary*, yet the most common of these has been

⁴⁰ I am grateful for my colleague Zach Biondi for pushing me to see this point.

⁴¹ Widawski, *African American Slang*, 238.

⁴² Geneva Smitherman, *African-American English: From the Hood to the Amen Corner* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 232.

⁴³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 162.

‘player’. The point, then, is that for African American men the label ‘player’ is commonly used as a means of disapproval and policing of their sexual and romantic lives. Its main use functions as the enforcement of sexual and romantic norms by way of branding non-monogamous African American men in ways that, in an amatonormative society, make them (among many other things) less desirable romantic partners (as is evidenced in the third example).

In the first example, we learn that the word sometimes carries evaluative judgments about a man’s character. That is, in some cases the label of ‘player’ comes with attendant moral judgments that one is a ‘bad’ person. Although the first example does not explicitly refer to romantic relationships, the label carries negative moral judgments when referring to African American men’s sexual or romantic lifestyles as well. The truth is, amatonormative assumptions shape and constrain what we take the central features of romantic love to be. As such, the assumptions serve a discriminatory function in discussions about romantic love, artificially distinguishing “legitimate” romantic relationships from “illegitimate” ones. If you are not going about looking for love in a (serial) monogamous way that leads to marriage (and in some cases procreation), then you are not “doing it right”.⁴⁴ Non-monogamous practice becomes wrong, its practitioners “bad”. These normative undertones of amatonormativity, then, uphold the belief that non-monogamy is unethical, mistakenly rendering consensually non-monogamous romantic relationships illegitimate, unethical and second-class. Through labeling others as players, “cheating is positioned as the inferior and immoral opposite of monogamy, as if the binary monogamy/cheating were the mutually exclusive and exhaustive range of sexual behavior.”⁴⁵

Whatever else cheating may involve, this form of betrayal often involves dishonesty and concealment. Both the dishonesty and concealment associated with cheating are tethered to amatonormativity in ways that give rise to the association of “playa” as “a womanizer who takes advantage of women.”⁴⁶ In a society where amatonormative relationships are valued, prioritized, and legally protected (via the institution of marriage), there are overwhelming social and political incentives to present as conforming to the amatonormative script. This can create (sometimes insurmountable) social pressure for people to perform and present their love lives amatonormatively by any means necessary. Communicating non-monogamous desires, then,

⁴⁴ Jenkins, *What Love is*, 38.

⁴⁵ Mimi Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy*, 43.

⁴⁶ Widawski, *African American Slang*, 238.

presents a grave risk of loss—of a relationship, a lover, or potential romantic partner—for people who subscribe to amatonormative norms and are in monogamous romantic relationships. As a result, these pressures frequently take the form of manipulation and lying; especially lying about non-monogamous desires and practices. This is what prompts Deborah Anapol to write that “lies, deceit, guilt, unilateral decisions and broken commitments are so commonplace in classic American-style monogamy that responsible monogamy may sound like an oxymoron.”⁴⁷ Ultimately, players womanize by manipulating the field of play—the romantic game, if I may call it that—by lying and concealing their non-monogamous desires and practices in order to satisfy both their desires for a continuous romantic relationship with their partner and their non-monogamous desires. In other words, so that they may have their “cake and eat it too.”

This womanization is alleged in Widawski’s second example. It would be uncontroversial to assume that the second example is expressed within a context of romantic relationships. As such, it is this example that is most pertinent. In the second example, the speaker’s third-person perspective reinforces the sense that romantic love is important in our society. Even though Lamar is not present, the speaker concerns themselves with Lamar’s love life thus demonstrating a societal concern about matters of romantic love even when they are not our own matters—we are obsessed with love affairs and *love affairs*. In this case, Lamar is labeled a ‘playa’ because he is presumed to have more than one romantic relationship—a violation of the norm of romantic monogamy. The speaker implies that, to their knowledge, Lamar and Amber are in a mutually recognized monogamous romantic relationship with one another.⁴⁸ Further, the speaker implies that something about Lamar’s extradyadic involvement with Latasha has led Latasha to believe that she and Lamar are in a mutually recognized romantic relationship with one another. I would like to point out that the alleged normative weight associated with the label playa is present here; in identifying Lamar as a playa, the speaker is transmitting socially significant information—the belief that Lamar is a dishonest man. The speaker’s explanation makes reference to what they

⁴⁷ Deborah Anapol, *Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits: Secrets of Sustainable Intimate Relationships* (San Rafael: IntiNet Resource Center, 1997), 3.

⁴⁸ The language of ‘mutual recognition’ employed here is meant to index the extent to which in attitude-dependent relationships the parties adopt shared attitudes about the mode of relationship they have with one another. For a thorough discussion of attitude-dependent relationships, see Niko Kolodny, “Love as Valuing a Relationship,” *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 2 (April, 2003): 135-189.

believe to be inappropriate extradyadic involvement between Lamar and Nikki, in addition to Lamar and Latasha.

Notice that dishonesty plays a central role for players. That is, Lamar’s extradyadic involvement with Latasha and with Nikki is inappropriate because it is involvement that he is keeping from Amber.⁴⁹ As a consequence, Lamar is taken to be deceiving Amber about how he and Latasha and how he and Nikki relate to one another. I maintain, however, because ‘player’ connotes dishonesty, it is simply incorrect and misleading to apply it to polys.

Inappropriate extradyadic involvement is what animates the ‘womanizing’ part of the definition. The assumption that Lamar is in a relationship with Amber amounts to amatonormative assumptions about its structure—namely, that it is an exclusive, dyadic, romantic relationship—and that Lamar is violating the norm of romantic monogamy across one or more dimensions (i.e. sexual, emotional, etc.). In Lamar’s case, apparently the violation partly consists in being seen in public spaces with a woman irrespective of whether the woman is or is not a romantic partner of his. Working in the background, amatonormativity functions to sustain a default assumption that something morally problematic is going on with Nikki. Notice that this assumption needn’t be true; men and women meet-up with one another for a variety of reasons including friendship maintenance, business relationships, etc. Despite men being the primary targets of the derogatory term, the totality of denigrating effects borne by being labeled a player is not solely borne by them. For example, when the speaker states that “*he’s playin’ them all*”, we learn that the definition has bidirectional stigmatic impact as the women who get categorized as the ‘played’ or the ‘womanized’ are presented as having no agency: Amber is not afforded consideration of possibly having consented to a non-monogamous relationship.⁵⁰ Agency is male and the woman is defined relative to him, à la Simone De Beauvoir.⁵¹

In labeling AAPM players, womanization of this sort is erroneously applied. When organizing and explaining the contours of polyamorous relationships, scholars of polyamory

⁴⁹ Since I realize that some might maintain that lies are carried out by speech acts and ignore “lies by omission”, I should be explicit about my assumption that concealment counts as lying.

⁵⁰ In conversations with black polyamorous women it has been brought to my attention that having their agency stripped in this way is further denigrating as they also are stigmatized as dumb, having low self-esteem or as being controlled (another way of saying without agency). As a result, the stigma of player also works to disincentivize black women from engaging in non-monogamous relationships.

⁵¹ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovny-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

regularly invoke honesty and enthusiastic informed consent based on full disclosure as foundational principles of poly theory and practice.⁵² In the words of Elizabeth Emens, “for many polys, honesty is so central to polyamory that they would object to the use of the term polyamory independent of honesty, protesting that honesty is a definitional element of polyamory.”⁵³ Polyamorists, myself included, “privilege honesty as the foundation of positive [polyamorous] relationships.”⁵⁴ Further, because the default norm is one of monogamy in America, polys must emphasize honest communication about their poly lifestyles. Given that dishonesty is a hallmark of being a ‘player’, AAPM are thus, not players.

The prioritization of honesty in poly relationships form a basis for consensual non-monogamy.⁵⁵ Emens remarks that “the ideal of consent—that partners in a relationship or sexual encounter make an informed decision to participate in the relationship or encounter, including knowing its polyamorous context – pervades poly writing, both implicitly and explicitly.”⁵⁶ A caveat, however, is that “though individual poly relationships may not always embody true consent, this ideal is a vital part of the relationship models to which polys aspire.”⁵⁷ Still, the poly emphasis on consent enables a more robust sense of agency as it enhances the freedom to choose for one’s self the relationship norms one would like to be governed by and it prioritizes individual rather than social expectations for romantic love.⁵⁸ More importantly, the culture of disclosure and

⁵² See Elizabeth F. Emens, “Monogamy’s Law: Compulsory Monogamy and Polyamorous Existence,” *New York University Review of Law and Social Change* 29, (2004): 277-376; Luke Brunning, “The Distinctiveness of Polyamory,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 4, (2016): 1-19; Jenkins, *What Love is and What it Could Be*; Justin Clardy, “The Dissolution of Cheating: Kevin’s Heart,” accessed May 18, 2018, www.urfavilosopher.me/single-post/2018/04/25/The-Dissolution-of-Cheating-Kevins-Heart; Justin Clardy, “Insecure... About Open Relationships,” accessed May 18, 2018, www.urfavilosopher.me/single-post/2017/08/15/Insecure-About-Open-Relationships; Justin Clardy, “Marriage and Commitment,” accessed May 18, 2018, <https://ethnografis.com/2014/09/01/justin-clardy-marriage-and-commitment/>; Deborah Anapol, *Polyamory: The New Love*; Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy, *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Other Adventures*, (New York: Random House, 2011); Ann Tweedy, “Polyamory as Sexual Orientation,” *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 79, no. 4, (2011): 1461-1515; Jin Haritaworn, Chin-ju Lin, and Christian Klesse, “Poly/logue: A Critical Introduction to Polyamory,” *Sexualities* 9, no. 5 (2006): 515-29; Elisabeth Sheff and Corie Hammers, “The Privilege of perversities: race, class, and education among polyamorists and kinksters,” *Psychology and Sexuality* 2, no. 3 (2011): 198-223; Mimi Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

⁵³ Elizabeth F. Emens, “Monogamy’s Law,” 322.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 323.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 324.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

consent that is explicitly encouraged in polyamory assuages pressures to conceal one's non-monogamous desires and practices—behaviors that are characteristic of 'players'.

While being labeled a player might sound like a person who “womanizes” and “has a lot of fun” doing so, when understood from the perspective of a different linguistic community and African American poly men are its target, it is based on a mistaken assumption about “inappropriate” extradyadic relationships or encounters and it can have denigrating effects. In what follows, I describe a few of these effects for the purpose of contributing to a more nuanced view of stereotyping.

Estrangement from oneself

For AAPM, the stereotype of 'player' can and does have enduring effects. One of these is that its use heightens their awareness of their body as an object to oneself. Lauren Freeman elaborates at length about the effects of this enduring harm in her analysis of stereotype threat. When stereotyped as “players”, AAPM are “othered” in a way that “one becomes like an object to oneself, seeing, experiencing, and understanding oneself through the lens of harmful stereotypes.”⁵⁹ When AAPM are stereotyped as players, they experience this heightened awareness of themselves as others in a way that is forced and not voluntary and this is what constitutes the harm.⁶⁰ This experience of being stereotyped is involuntary, as AAPM do not choose to have themselves viewed and treated as mere objects. In this way, it resembles the harms incurred by othering African American men under other stereotypes. Further, the pervasiveness of amatonormativity removes their power to change this harmful state of affairs themselves. AAPM have this stereotype “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

⁵⁹ Lauren Freeman, “Embodied Harm: A Phenomenological Engagement with Stereotype Threat,” *Human Studies* 40, no. 4 (2017), 649.

⁶⁰ There might be a question here about how this 'othering' is different from othering a straight white polyamorous man. The comparative point between black polys being othered and white polys similarly being othered is orthogonal to the point I am making here. Whether white men are or are not harmed in this way does seemingly little to delegitimize the experiences of AAPM who are. However, insofar as black men have historically had their bodies hypersurveilled and hypersexualized in ways that white men have not, the harms incurred by them because of this stereotype would seem to extend racist practices in ways that it does not if it is applied to straight white poly men.

themselves than they'd have if they occupied a dominant social position."⁶¹ This estrangement from one's self hinders the ease with which one is able to navigate the world.

The estrangement occurs because to exist as fully embodied is to take seriously the body understood as a living subject—"the reference point from which perceptions and experiences occur and upon which they depend for their significance."⁶² The body, in other words, is the point of origin for subjective experience and plays a role in how we constitute our subjectivity. When AAPM are stereotyped on the basis of their preferences regarding sex, romantic relationships, or their polyamorous identities, they are denied the capacity to exist as fully embodied beings, as their subjective experiences of love become invalidated. AAPM are forced to take stock of their existence as subordinate and inferior to others. This hampers one's self-identity and self-worth. Encounters with the stereotype are not merely one-off occurrences but, in the amatonormative American society, they are more commonly persisting experiences with which we must grapple in ways that those who subscribe to amatonormativity do not. The social denigration pervades the lives of AAPM as it becomes "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."⁶³

Restricted Agency

Labeling AAPM as 'players' exemplifies the struggle to redefine African American masculine identity in specific and non-traditional terms⁶⁴—specifically, one that does not conform to the socially acceptable script for romantic love and sex. As a result, the label of 'playa' restricts, no matter how slightly, the agency of AAPM. However, this is no small harm. As Freeman writes, "to exist in the world as a human being is to have possibilities open to one."⁶⁵ When confronted with stereotypes like 'playa', the possibilities for what one can be(come) are preemptively foreclosed and one is not able to navigate the world on one's own terms. AAPM become oriented

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, 640.

⁶³ Ibid, 654.

⁶⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 161-66.

⁶⁵ Lauren Freeman, "Embodied Harm," 655.

to the world in ways that compromise their potential as “the possibility of experiencing a world that is made present to one as an open set of possibilities is impeded.”⁶⁶

Labeling AAPM as players also restricts the scope of sexual and romantic acts and identities that they can have and perform.⁶⁷ The social audience is unable to interpret this performance, which results in a performative failure on behalf of AAPM. The power of Patricia Hill Collins’ controlling images comes into sharp focus here. Labeling AAPM as players speaks to the image of African American men as inferior, hyper-heterosexual beasts incapable of meeting the superior ideals of whiteness and marital monogamy.⁶⁸ I believe this is what philosopher Tommy Curry has in mind when he describes the misattributions of White patriarchy to black men creating a peculiar kind of distortion in understanding the access African American men have to powers often attributed to White masculinity. Capturing the thought that black men are “mimetic (white) patriarchs”, Curry writes that “the Black male is not born a patriarchal male. He is raced and sexed peculiarly, configured as barbaric and savage, imagined to be a violent animal, not a human being.”⁶⁹

Schippers describes how “monogamy is implicated in and productive of gender, race, and sexual hierarchies or the role of monogamy as an organizing rationale for regimes of normalcy and social structures of inequality.”⁷⁰ More than restricting the agency of AAPM, the gendered and racialized narratives that we tell ourselves about being a ‘player’ in relation to cheating and womanizing conjoins “black,” “heterosexual,” “polyamorous relationships,” and “polyamorous identity,” at a point of intersection where black respectability and amatonormativity create the conditions of unacceptability of AAPM poly lifestyles.⁷¹ Respectable intimate relationships for African American men are monogamous ones that lead to marriage.⁷² A married African American

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ For a thorough discussion of identity performance and socially constructed identity, interested readers should see Judith Butler “Performative acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theater Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.

⁶⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 161-66.

⁶⁹ Tommy Curry, “Michael Brown and the need for a genre study of Black male death and dying,” *Theory and Event* 17, no. 3 (2014).

⁷⁰ Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy*, 10.

⁷¹ Mimi Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 113.

⁷² It is worth mentioning here that many of the West African nations that most African Americans are descended from had non-monogamous romantic norms for quite some time. The fact that marriage has come to be a path to respectability is a direct result of colonial violence.

man undermines the controlling image of African American men as being incapable of monogamy and as having uncontrollable sexual urges. As such, amatonormativity is tethered to a politics of Black respectability.⁷³ Polyamory positions AAPM as deficient before the respectable norms of whitewashed American society. Labeling AAPM players mistakenly positions them as subscribers to amatonormative norms, and thereby implicates a failure at both whiteness and respectability—not allowing them the space to be anything more. Imposing a politics of respectability on to AAPM obscures their own sexual politics—the set of ideas and social practices lying at the heart of beliefs about black masculinity shaped by gender, race, and sexuality, that shape how people relate to African American men.⁷⁴

This prioritization of respectability politics in love and sex relationships not only works to further marginalize AAPM, but it also does not take the transformative potential of African American (intra- or inter-racial) polyamorous relationships seriously enough. These polyamorous relationships have the potential to motivate reorientation to race, gender, and romantic relations.⁷⁵ A polyamorous triad comprised of one woman and two men, for example, calls us to not only rethink our amatonormative assumptions, but also sexuality as a mechanism of men’s control over and access to women by engaging the double standard that it is only acceptable for men—and not for women- to have multiple partners.

We are also prompted to rethink AAPM’s participation in hegemonic heteromascularity. Insofar as heteronormativity is understood as “the social, cultural, and institutionalized meanings and practices that systematically confer privilege in the forms of status, authority, and material resources on heterosexual people who conform to societal norms,”⁷⁶ it might be said that being poly is, instead of a stereotype, an hegemonic heteromasculine emblem of pride in American society. However, AAPM, again, do not admit of participation. AAPM are not afforded access to the institution of marriage. The legitimacy of their perspectives in social discussions about “real love” is often invalidated.⁷⁷ Culturally, they become pariahs and are disregarded as less desirable

⁷³ For one example of this tethering see, Kaila Adia Story, “On the Cusp of Deviance,” in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, ed. E Patrick Johnson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁷⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*.

⁷⁵ Mimi Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy*, 4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

⁷⁷ Carrie Jenkins, *What Love Is*.

romantic partners (as is evidenced in the third example: “*Do you continue with a guy knowing he’s a player?*”). AAPM men, then, queer our understanding of what it means to be heteromascuine.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The slut-vs-stud phenomenon maintains that there is no word that denigrates the promiscuous behavior of men. Throughout this paper, I challenge this characterization of the phenomenon as the label of player tends to have denigrating impact on AAPM. I showed how the pervasiveness of amatonormativity in the American context converges at the intersection of men’s racialized, gendered, sexual, and romantic identities, to create peculiar challenges for AAPM’s love lives. My analysis confronts the need to “account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.”⁷⁹ In discussions of polyamory and polyamorous identity, when we do not account for these intersections we constrain the rigor of conversations about polyamory and thereby limit its transformative potential. In this particular case, I argue that labeling AAPM as players is based on misplaced assumptions about AAPM and as a result it denigrates them by estranging them from themselves, and it constrains their ability to exist as fully embodied subjects.

⁷⁸ There is a further point that I would like to call attention to here. On my view, people who identify as polyamorous are queer insofar as their choice to identify as such has the effects of subverting our more normalized binary ways of understanding one’s romantic status as either “single” or “in a relationship”. Polyqueerness enables the further possibility of being “in many relationships” in ways that monogamous identity does not. Substantiation of this point, however, would take us too far afield and so shall be left for another time.

⁷⁹ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed A Movement* (New York: The New Press), 358.

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