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UNUSUAL SUBJECTS: FINDING MODEL COMMUNITIES AMONG MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogues' theme "Ecofeminism" could not have come at a more timely moment. From the publishing success of Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*, to the huge turnout at the Climate March for Justice, signs are accumulating that decades of inertia and climate change denial are coming to an end. Or are they? While with every passing year we get a clearer picture of the dire scenario that awaits humanity unless major polluters change the way they produce and consume, in the United States a few climate skeptics still exercise political power out of proportion to their numbers.

This paper is inspired by the questions that we have asked ourselves since we first met at Schenectady County Community College. What is it, we wondered, that keeps so many of our fellow Americans seemingly wedded to a political economy that is sustainable only at great cost? Could we use our academic work to help spread awareness about people who dared to demand different lives? And might our studies suggest strategies to work for change?

We currently each pursue different projects, but we share a belief that one obstacle to progressive change in the United States is our investment into an ideology that posits individualism and consumer

capitalism as the only real pathway to success and happiness. Visions of a society based on solidarity, community, and a more sustainable economy, by contrast, are cast as naïve and unachievable pipe dreams.

In this paper we argue that one does not have to search for long to find examples of communities that have rejected the status quo, embraced counter-hegemonic values, and thrived in spite of scarce resources and adversity. By drawing on our research on an urban squat, African-American beauty culture, and polyamorous families, we hope to contribute to a dialogue about how we today can work constructively for progressive social change.

PART I.

BABETTE FAEHMEL

“THE HAMBURG HAFENSTRASSE SQUAT”

As the first of three separate case studies, this essay will take the reader outside the United States and back to the 1980s. As a teacher of politics and history in a community college, I am often astonished by my students’ skepticism about the potential of especially socio-economically under-privileged people like themselves to mount a successful challenge to entrenched economic and political interests. Wondering where my own contrasting outlook comes from, I found the answer in the fact that, when I was young, I saw precisely such a case unfold in my hometown of Hamburg, Germany. Having by now spent two summers conducting research in archives and libraries and interviewing witnesses, I believe that the case offers intriguing insights into the dynamics of social movements.¹

The story in brief: In the early 1980s, in the midst of a severe economic recession, a group of about one hundred youth and young

¹ With the notable exception of Katsiaficas, the case of the *Hafenstrasse* is not yet well documented in the English literature about urban squatting. Most of my research is therefore based on German language publications, my research in local archives in Hamburg, Germany, and on oral history interviews with participants in the squat.

adults took possession of a block of houses on one of Hamburg's major commercial arteries, the "Hafenstrasse" (harbor street). This was a diverse group of people, composed of single mothers, gays, lesbians, punks, a few foreign-born, and political radicals. Thrown together by happenstance, they were united mostly by the fact that they had problems. Almost all were unemployed, and many had a history of addiction and delinquency (Anonymous Participant, Personal Interview, 26 July 2012; Küllmer 75-76.).

To say that this diverse group became a community easily would be an overstatement. There were frequent outbursts of verbal and physical violence sparked by clashing views on gender, sexuality, ethnicity and politics. In the process of negotiating the challenges of poverty and of life in a squat, however, these diverse people learned to appreciate what each of them in their own way was able to contribute. They formed a fierce attachment to the houses they occupied and demanded from the city the autonomy to live here as a self-managed community (Borgstede 128-130; Anonymous Participants, Personal Interview, 14 June 2012).

For the city of Hamburg, the squat created a problem right away. As the economy was in recession, the center-left mayor was under great pressure to present an economic recovery plan. Struggling to hold on to a fragile majority, the governing coalition adopted key elements of so-called "neo-liberal economics" that include the privatization of public services, cuts to social programs, and the opening of domestic markets to foreign capital. Most importantly for this case study, this economic turn also had profound consequences for urban planning (Schütte and Süß 15-25).

The way in which urban development figured in Hamburg's economic recovery was part of a transatlantic pattern. From Hamburg to Berlin, New York to Detroit, municipalities offered generous tax benefits to keep businesses from relocating elsewhere, and to attract new ones. But corporations also expect access to real estate in appealing locations; their executives and employees demand modern condominiums. And in Hamburg such space was not just limited, the neighborhoods of greatest interest to developers were still dominated by public housing built after

the Second World War. Originally built for skilled German workers and their families, these tenements had become home to students, the working poor, and the foreign born. This low-income population would need to move to make room for a financially more affluent class (Sippel 49-57; Twickel 16-18, 27-30). But as West-German law featured strong tenant protections and allowed for the demolition of old housing stock only if the costs for preservation exceed a certain threshold, this was quite a challenge. It was possible to circumvent existing law, however, by adopting a policy of “planned shrinkage,” which entailed the withholding of essential repairs to speed up the progressive dilapidation of old housing stock and to create incentives for current tenants to leave.

By 1981, the tenements in the Hafenstrasse were on the brink of being declared uninhabitable. The management company in charge of the buildings had long been neglecting repairs, and deteriorating conditions had caused most legal tenants to move out. Planning was already underway to turn the highway into a promenade lined with high-end condos and business buildings. But when squatters moved in, this plan, which the city expected to yield significant economic benefits, was derailed. As even official housing inspectors admitted later, the repairs they conducted saved the houses for future occupancy (Herrman et al. 17-23). This not only made it a lot harder for the city to justify demolition, it also became the basis on which the squatters claimed to have acquired a right to the buildings. By investing their sweat and labor into repairs, they argued on a pamphlet, they had earned just as much of a right to the property as if they had made a financial investment (“Frieden den Hütten”).

Whatever one might think about the squatters’ argument, the odds were not in their favor. Their claim, while based on their sense of justice, lacked the force of law. Hamburg’s conservative media and politicians

² “Planned shrinkage” seems to have first been applied as an urban planning strategy by New York City’s housing commissioner Roger Starr in the 1970s (Berman 62) I was unable to ascertain whether or not the city of Hamburg drew inspiration from this, or developed a similar policy by itself.

missed no opportunity to label them criminals, thugs, and violence-prone radicals, thereby creating pressure on the center-left government to assume an uncompromising stance. But in spite of the fact that urban renewal plans were backed by powerful interest groups, the occupation did succeed. After a prolonged struggle lasting more than a decade, the city sold the houses to a cooperative controlled by the former squatters and sympathizers. The plans for a promenade lined by shiny corporate headquarters and condos are still not realized, and radical activists across Europe regard the houses as visible reminders that resistance to the combined power of political and economic elites is possible (Katsiaficas 124-128).

While space constraints do not allow a detailed analysis of how this outcome was possible, I want to highlight two factors. The first one is the role of militant resistance. At the height of the conflict, the occupants defended their right to remain in the houses with a ferocity that astonished observers. In the winter of 1987 the squatters faced eviction by more than 4,000 police. Bulldozers to tear down the contested buildings stood ready. In response, the occupants erected barricades, set them aflame, and fortified the houses with barbed wire and nets. Public commentators foresaw casualties should the city proceed with the eviction. This willingness of the squatters to put their bodies on the line is all the more astonishing considering that they had repeatedly been offered substitute housing on the outskirts of the city. By that time, however, housing itself was no longer the issue. Rather, it was the desire to continue living under the conditions that they had themselves created that motivated the occupiers (Katsiaficas 126-128; Anonymous Participants, Personal Interview, 14 June 2012).

To understand this willingness to defend the houses at all costs, we need to look at the life created by the people within. Early on, the squatters established a communal kitchen. Non-profit bars, a café, and various workshops followed. As long as children were present (parents with children moved out when the fight for the houses escalated) the responsibility for their care was shared. In addition, the squatters also established a radically democratic and inclusive form of self-government

that gave every individual a voice and equal share of responsibility. As a public forum to plan protests and political strategies, and to organize day-to-day operations in the houses, they created a “plenum.” Having never felt adequately represented by West Germany’s representative democratic system they adopted direct democracy and a horizontal, leaderless, structure of self-government (Küllmer 77-78).

Life inside the houses thus bore little resemblance to that outside. At a time when conservatives blamed the nation’s economic woes on escalating costs for social and welfare programs, and, ultimately, on their beneficiaries, Hafenstrasse squatters took care of one another’s existential needs without judgment which enabled everyone, regardless of means and personal circumstances, to participate fully in the life of the community. The political institutions created by the squatters gave each individual an active and equal voice in decision-making. Moreover, as members collectively met basic needs like food, drink, shelter, and entertainment, they eliminated economic pressures that ordinarily would have forced them to accept monotonous or otherwise unfulfilling work to survive. The political institutions they created thus empowered the squatters on an individual level, while their communal organization gave them the time and the freedom to discuss politics and to engage in activism. It should thus no longer surprise us, that the squatters were fiercely committed to defending their control over the space that enabled them to live as fully empowered and equal members of a community.

The question remains what this case study suggests about the dynamics of social protest. I believe that several lessons can be drawn. For one, the dynamics of the squat suggest the political potential of radically inclusive and participatory democracy. In spite of the problems that affected this community, its members realized that they had been given an opportunity to build on their own experiences to create a different kind of society than the one in which they – as minorities, delinquents, misfits, and welfare recipients – had been marginalized, ostracized, and regimented. Left to their own devices, they took care not to reproduce the same structures they had found at home, in schools or jails, at low wage jobs, or in the welfare office. Knowing that by leaving

the houses they would have to return to the status quo ante, they stood together against seemingly overwhelming force. Hafenstrasse squatters were thus willing to put their bodies on the line because once they had gained control over the conditions of their existence they were unwilling to surrender it again.

The case also, however, suggests that in confrontation with a state that puts the interests of economic and political elites before the existential needs of people, militancy might be necessary. This is a disquieting prospect for a country like the United States where the use of deadly force by law enforcement, especially against racial minorities in the inner cities, is not uncommon. It will thus be all the more important, I would argue, for us to create broad alliances of the poor, the discontented, and the alienated, and to give all the people affected by policies a role in shaping the conditions of their existence.

PART II

TIOMBÉ FARLEY

“RACE AND SUSTAINABILITY SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S HAIR”

Being a non-conformist has its challenges, especially when it’s perceived as a threat to the status quo. As the previous case study of urban squatters has shown, however, a nontraditional way of living and behaving may open up new possibilities of sustainable community building. This brings me to another topic that is controversial at its core, African American women and their choice in favor of natural hair. This subject historically is deeply rooted in racism that is pervasive to this day.

The exploration of African American women’s perspective on hair that follows was inspired by the dialogue that ensued after my girlfriends and I viewed the documentary “Good Hair” (2009). This film, along with the data it presented, inspired us to “go natural” and led me to conduct further research. In doing so, I pondered the ecological implications of racism through the lens of African American women’s hair, and focused specifically on how normative assumptions about “good

hair” have been used to destabilize communities, by dehumanizing Black women and limiting their access to upward economic mobility.

Social and economic mobility has long been regarded as central to notions of American citizenship. However, as my focus on black women’s hair reveals, in African American communities, this type of mobility often remains elusive. Instead, many African American women have to navigate structural racism and sexism in their daily lives. Moreover, they oftentimes confront an added degree of stratification based on the texture of their hair. The consequences of this can be isolation and internalized racism.

In what follows, I will offer a brief historical overview of African American women and their relationship with their hair. The “good hair” issues date back to the time of slavery. African Americans were classified/categorized by the color of their skin (lighter or darker complexion), which determined where they would work and how they were treated. For example the darker complexioned slaves usually worked in the fields doing hard manual labor, unprotected from the sun, and exposed to the environment, while the lighter complexioned slaves worked in the masters’ homes, where they cooked and tended to the masters’ children. These latter tasks were still highly demoralizing, but they did not entail the same degree of exposure to environmental hazards as fieldwork.

A darker complexion typically meant that a woman’s hair would be “kinky,” “coiled,” or “nappy,” terms often used to describe natural or non-chemically altered hair. A lighter complexion, by contrast, not only suggested white blood, but also tended to mean finer and softer hair (Tate 301). Appearance translated into privilege. Slaves who had the lighter skin tone were able to work in the homes shielded from sun and other cruel environmental factors. This treatment reflected a racist assumption that they were better than those with darker complexion because their lighter skin tone resembled that of their enslavers. Standards of beauty based on a dominant European American patriarchal culture in African American communities already suffering from oppression created the aggravating factor of classism (Tate 307).

In the context of a society deeply invested in maintenance of a racist and sexist system, phenotype became just another handy justification for the idea that Africans were an uncivilized primitive population that needed to be ruled. Cultural anthropologist Agustin Fuentes, author of *Race, Monogamy, and Other Lies They Told You: Busting Myths about Human Nature*, reminds his readers of the work of the early taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus, who believed there were different species within the human population, and that these were evolutionary differences that occurred on different continents. On this assumption Linnaeus developed the taxonomy for human segregation or so-called different races. According to Fuentes, Linnaeus' taxonomy was ranked from purebred humans to the primitive humans; in other words, white is pure and civilized, while black is impure and primitive:

[h]omo sapiens americanus [was] "red", ill-tempered, subjugated... paints himself with red lines, ruled by custom....Homo sapiens europeus [was] "white", serious, strong, hair blond, flowing, eyes blue, and active, very smart, inventive, and covered by tight clothing, ruled by laws....Homo sapiens Asiatic [was] "yellow", melancholy, greedy, haughty, desirous, ruled by opinion" (Fuentes 74).

And last (and obviously least)

homo sapiens africanus: "black", impassive, lazy, hair kinked, skin silky, nose flat, lips thick, women with genital flap; breasts large, crafty, slow, and foolish, anoints himself with grease, ruled by caprice (74).

This ideology became deep-rooted in American psyches and mores. It has been and it continues to be part of the fabric of perception for European and African Americans, as can be seen in the recent police killings of unarmed men in Ferguson and New York City. It appears as if Linnaeus's taxonomy for human segregation can be linked to the justification for slavery and the idea that "white" is superior to "black;" in other words, Europeans are superior to Africans and other non-Europeans. Therefore, it is understandable that under such conditions, some slaves may have believed this to be so. Post slavery, these

circumstances laid the path for many generations to desire, and work towards, becoming and looking similar to images that have been deemed socially acceptable, which in essence translates into a mandate to alter one's physical appearance, such as one's natural hair.

Today's media continue to reinforce the value of "finer" (straight) hair. For instance, a recent article, "Good Hair Days" by Kathy Davis, discussed the meaning of hair in the African American community and how it differs from that of Caucasian women. Davis refers to two different books that she had recently read, *Styling Jim Crow* by Julia Kirk Blackwelder and *Rapunzel's Daughters* by Rose Weitz. In *Styling Jim Crow*, the author offered a historical perspective of African American hairstyling techniques and methods used to care for it. Many of these hair styling techniques were shared among African American women in each other's kitchens because of limited resources. This was unlike the European American counterparts who had access to beauty salons.

Understanding that desire to achieve "good hair", black entrepreneurs like Madame C.J. Walker (born Sarah Breedlove) and Annie Turnbo developed hair care products for black hair and thereby achieved economic success as pioneers (Davis 14). Their individual success came, however, at a social cost. Although black entrepreneurship helped the growth of a small albeit significant middle-class, African American women learned from an early age and from members of their own community, that their natural hair was undesirable and socially unacceptable. Internalizing these racist assumptions, they learned, and may have even perfected, the art of straightening their hair to get rid of all "naps" and "kinks," and to approach a look that was considered visually pleasing.

In modern times, African American women continue to alter their appearance in hopes to achieve an unrealistic ideal of beauty and by extension, perpetuate self-loathing. This is reinforced by Davis's point when she stated that it is not uncommon that beauty industry promoted the use of their product for well-kept hair, code word for straightened hair, because it would help women avoid racial insults or slurs, so to

“embodying black women’s sense of identity and what they could accomplish in their lives” (14). This is a direct contradiction to self-love and acceptance.

There are authors who have argued that black women’s relationship with their hair and outer appearance is no different from that of other women. Rose Weitz, for instance, addresses this issue in her book *Rapunzel’s Daughters: What Women’s Hair Tells Us about Women’s Lives* and argues that (regardless of race or ethnicity) women have been socialized to strive to achieve unachievable standards of beauty. Weitz explains that any woman’s relationship to her hair reflects “internal struggles and external pressures” (xi). Although this may be true, I would argue that Weitz failed to understand the historical and racist origins of African American women’s struggles that differ profoundly from those of their European American counterparts.

The difficulties faced by those black women who refuse to conform to white standards of beauty illustrate my point. Historically, many African Americans who have embraced their natural hair have been marginalized. Images of strong empowered African Americans were, and are, seen as threatening to the dominant population. Factors such as these can adversely impact the economic, educational, and social mobility of African Americans and by extension their community. African Americans have learned, and history has shown, that conforming to what is socially acceptable and non-threatening to the dominant culture allows you to, as the saying goes, play it safe and stay under the radar.

The politics of black hair remain an issue today. Currently, the black hair industry grosses over \$185 million yearly with many of the products used for altering the state of natural hair (Harris-Perry). The individual health and environmental risks pose great concerns as well. Ongoing studies suggest chemicals such as sodium hydroxide, calcium hydroxide, lithium hydroxide, thioglycolic acid, and carbonate are detrimental to the endocrine system, disruptive to the fertility process, and are possible contributors to cancer (Chimerunga). The environmental implications are grave as well. These chemicals are released into the air when applied

to a person's hair and they leak into the ground, polluting the water supply.

While the history I have sketched here does not give grounds for optimism on first sight, I would still argue that increasingly, African American women are coming together in their communities to clear the path for a broader embrace of natural hair and beauty. Like my own circle of girlfriends, more and more black women today are arguing in favor of natural looks on the basis of a growing awareness of the long-term history and the ecological significance of the topic. Although there are still members of the black community who perceive going natural as negative and question why anyone would voluntarily choose “nappy” or “kinky” hair, the popularity of going natural is picking up momentum. By doing so, we are not only releasing fewer pollutants into the environment, we are also preserving resources to benefit our own communities and contributing to the necessary social and economic mobility of future generations.

PART III

VASHTI MA'AT

“LIVING AND LOVING IN A TIME OF SCARCITY”

As suggested by the previous two sections of this essay, individuals who have been subjected to marginal social and economic positions because of their race, ethnicity, politics, or their age, are also among the most vulnerable members of society when a new crisis, such as an environmental disaster or an economic recession, occurs. Yet what is also suggested by my two co-authors is that this very marginality can be a fountain from which individuals draw strategies and inspiration to create new forms of communities, centered on solidarity and mutual care. In this essay I will discuss two communities whose members were, and still are, relegated to a marginal social position on account of their sexual orientation and intimate relationship choices. The first of these is the nineteenth-century Oneida community created around the idea of “complex marriages.” The second example shall consist of the twenty-first century community of polyamorous living people. The goal of this

piece is to contrast polyamory, which is a non-monogamous, non-traditional family and intimate relationship, to monogamy, which is the traditional intimate and familial construct, and to discuss the former as a viable alternative to the latter at a time of limited natural resources. The plethora of social, legal, and financial benefits available exclusively to couples conforming to monogamous relationship structures suggests that cultural norms, the legal code, and the tax code serve as socio-cultural control mechanisms that marginalize a segment of the population. Many of these benefits have been ensconced in a singular ideology of monogamous marriage and family. The United States General Accounting Office stated that there are over 1000 “federal laws classified to the United States Code in which marital status is a factor” (Bedrick). These benefits are only available through traditional monogamous marriages and families. This reward and benefit structure, which reinforces traditional relationship models, must also be seen as part of a system that puts strains on our limited natural resources, and challenged ecosystem. A significant number of people desire to transcend the traditional monogamous family paradigm. It has been documented as early as the nineteenth century that the Oneida Community is a precursor to today’s polyamorous communities.

The Oneida Community complex marriage began with Humphrey Noyes, a nineteenth century religious and sexual radical. As documented in Lawrence Foster’s book, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community*, Noyes might today be viewed as ahead of his time due to his keen understanding of human nature. His political and religious views were unlike other evangelical Protestants of his era, who tended to be pro-slavery (Noyes was not) and morally and secularly conservative. Noyes, by contrast, developed ideas and theories of “free love, including his concept that ‘God could not expect the impossible’ from humanity” (77). There is no data to suggest that he had any scientific basis to support his position that monogamy was “impossible” and contradicted “human nature”. However, he concluded that “there must be a harmonious relationship among people’s nature, their spirituality and social truths” (79), and intimate relationships

“between males and females must be greater than the traditional institution of marriage, which assigns the exclusive possession of one woman to one man” (91).

Noyes theorized that the “earthly” institution of monogamous marriage dishonored women and treated them as property. In essence, wives were the property of their husbands. He believed that the concept of monogamy breeds a selfish possessiveness and the psychological effect could be harmful for both the wife and husband. He believed the institution of marriage was illogical and it did not connect to human nature; for that matter, he felt the institution of marriage was the antithesis of human nature (91). Noyes went on to state in one of his writings that “all experience testifies...that sexual love is not naturally restricted to pairs...the secret history of the human heart will bear out the assertion that it is, capable of loving any number of times and any number of persons, and that the more it loves the more it can love” (91).

The Oneida community built around Noyes’ teachings embraced this theory that the normative binary configuration of marriage was in direct opposition to human nature and also to Biblical teachings. It undermined the essence of society’s social structure, and fragmented families into minute units - the nuclear family. It contributed to the economic and psychological disparity between a husband and wife. For instance, within the nuclear family, “mother[s] were held in an almost slave-like bondage at home, while the father toiled in a hectic and uncertain world outside” the home. The theory states that “[t]he father must be reintegrated into the spiritual and economic leadership of the home and home economy, and the sexes must work side by side in vital and rewarding labor” (92).

With everyone’s participation, the Oneida community became financially self-sufficient. This was highlighted in the business section of Constance Noyes Robertson’s autobiography, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography 1851-1876*. The community developed and maintained several businesses including the Oneida flatware. By 1861, they were well vested in different businesses. They made and sold several products including, traps, shoes, silk thread and materials, clothing and produce

from their farm and garden. Remnants from this family business can be found today in Oneida, Anchor Hocking Company (214).

Although the Oneida family model officially ended, this egalitarian model and theory of relationships has continued in the form of polyamory. Robyn Trask, the executive director of *Loving More*, a national not-for-profit organization for polyamory awareness, states that the organization is committed to educating and supporting polyamory as a valid relationship choice. Likewise, Alan M., from *Polyamory in the News Blog* reminds his readers that open, loving, intimate relationships are not a new idea, but built on and transcending preexisting models for relationship choices, as constituted by the nineteenth-century “free love” movement that was “led by such figures as John Humphrey Noyes and Victoria Woodhull.”

Some societal benefits of polyamory have been outlined in Elisabeth Sheff’s qualitative research described in *The Polyamorists Next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families*. Participant family members who identify as polyamorous highlighted some benefits as, “honesty and emotional intimacy among family members..., [and] the increased resources that come with multiple-adult families” (191) such as financial stability, easy access to stable child care, elderly and disability networks within the community. Other common themes from the participants were increases in sharing resources, personal and family time. These options are the foundation “to build relationships outside the conventional [monogamous] framework” (206). Similar to monogamous families, polyamorous families’ time is spent sharing household chores, food shopping, carpooling, and caring for family members who need additional care. Sex is not the focus of these relationship structures and “without positive emotional relationships, a sexual relationship alone is often insufficient to sustain a complex, long-term relationship... The nonsexual emotional ties [are] far more important to the overall family connections than is any sexual connection between and among adults” (207).

Primatologist and biological anthropologist Agustín Fuentes’ body of research on human and non-human primate interactions has also

indicated that humans are non-monogamous by nature. However, society continues to reinforce morals that govern monogamous relationships even though it does work for many people. This may explain why non-traditional intimate relationships continue to be practiced covertly.

Cultural psychologist Steven J. Heine's research has shown that non-monogamy is not gender specific (191) however it has been genderized as a male-oriented behavior. This finding is similar to Noyes' earlier assertion regarding the possible psychological effect to men and women in monogamous relationships. Likewise, Elizabeth Fee makes a cogent argument in her essay, "The Sexual Politics of Victorian Social Anthropology," exposing the fallacy of moralizing monogamy as the only relationship choice. Her research looks at scholarly historical and anthropological theories on monogamy, and it reveals how these theories laid the foundation for many of our current culture's mores regarding intimate relationship choice and the social construction of monogamy.

Additional data from Agustin Fuentes' *Race, Monogamy, and Other Lies They Told You: Busting Myths about Human Nature* back up Fee's research. His research looks at several biological arguments including the sex-gender system, hetero-normative constructions of monogamous bonding, and the United States' (US) concept of a family unit. For instance, the US concept of family is structured around the exclusivity between male-female bonds with children. The assumption is that the heterosexual monogamous bond is part of human nature and the foundation on which the "basic unit of humanity" is formed (187). He also argues that a common myth about intimate relationships is that "humans are naturally monogamous and marriage is a reflection of evolutionary origins" (188). Based on my own research on polyamorous communities, I would posit that these claims show a normative bias and ignore scientific findings to the contrary. However, monogamy is still presented as a natural norm, and theories that ignore the existing body of research are constantly referenced to support established biases, which usually benefit the dominant group at the expense of gender or sexual non-conformists.

Relationships, familial structures, and community models such as the “Hamburg Hafenstrass Squat”, the “a la natural African hair” movement, the Oneida family, and twenty-first century polyamorous relationships, can be used as templates for other types of non-traditional communities that want to address the growing limits of natural resources and taxed ecosystems. There are many lessons that can be learned from these evolving communities and kinships, lessons of caring for each other in meaningful ways that can facilitate people’s well-being. When people’s basic well-being is secured, it is possible that the type of social capital gained can contribute and facilitate the growth of ecofriendly communities. These types of models can be balanced and may provide the space that encourages its members to be co-creators within an environment that can be sustainable for future generations, irrespective of longstanding traditions, mores and folkways.

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