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ARTIGO

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## Non-monogamous Activisms in Contemporary Brazil: The Controversy Polyamory – Relações Livres

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**Abstract:** This article aims to analyze the tensions and disputes between polyamorists and *RLis – Relações Livres* (Free Relationships), the two main non-monogamous identities in Brazil, responsible for the rise of militancy around the legitimation of sexual-affective multiplicity in the years 2000-2010. What distinctions and hierarchies are mobilized from their interactions? Is it possible and desirable for them to consolidate an identity politics that subtracts or disguises their differences in favor of the “non-monogamy” category? The research was conducted on websites and groups in social media dedicated to the theme, in addition to in-depth interviews and participation in non-monogamous events. Even if they see themselves as allies in the struggle against compulsory monogamy, RLis and polyamorists disputed hegemony and control of the non-monogamous movement, diverging around the principles that should guide affective-sexual relationships.

**Keywords:** conjugality; monogamy; polyamory; relações livres; non-monogamy.

#### **Ativismos não-monogâmicos no Brasil contemporâneo: a controvérsia poliamor – relações livres**

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa as tensões e disputas entre poliamoristas e RLis (Relações Livres), as duas principais identidades não-monogâmicas no Brasil, nos anos 2000-2010, e aquelas responsáveis pela construção de uma militância em torno da multiplicidade afetiva e sexual. Que distinções e hierarquias são mobilizadas a partir de suas interações? É possível e desejável para ambos a consolidação de uma política identitária que subtraia ou invisibilize as suas diferenças em prol da categoria “não-monogamia”? A pesquisa foi realizada com base na análise de publicações em sites e grupos em redes sociais dedicados ao tema, além de entrevistas em profundidade e da participação em eventos não-monogâmicos. Apesar de aliados no combate à norma monogâmica, RLis e poliamoristas disputaram a hegemonia do movimento não-monogâmico, divergindo em torno dos princípios que devem nortear os relacionamentos afetivo-sexuais.

**Palavras-chave:** conjugalidade; monogamia; poliamor; relações livres, não-monogamia.

#### **Activismo no monógamo en el Brasil contemporáneo: la controversia poliamor – relações livres**

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza las tensiones y disputas entre poliamorosos y RLis (Relações Livres), las dos principales identidades no monógamas en Brasil y las responsables del surgimiento de militancias en torno a la legitimación de la multiplicidad afectiva y sexual en los años 2000-2010. ¿Qué distinciones y jerarquías se movilizan a partir de sus interacciones? ¿Es posible y deseable que ambos consoliden una política identitaria que renuncie o invisibilice sus diferencias a favor de la categoría “no monogamia”? La investigación se realizó a partir del análisis de publicaciones en páginas web y grupos en redes sociales dedicados al tema, además de entrevistas en profundidad y participación en eventos no monógamos. Si bien se ven como aliados en la lucha contra la norma monógama, RLis y poliamorosos se disputaron la hegemonía y el control del movimiento no monógamo, divergiendo en torno a los principios que deben guiar las relaciones afectivo-sexuales.

**Palabras clave:** conyugalidad; monogamia; poliamor; relações livres; no monogamia.

## Non-monogamous Activisms in Contemporary Brazil: The Controversy Polyamory – Relações Livres

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Ellis (1911) shows that, many times, monogamy has been seen as a non-natural condition, difficult to be pursued, leading ideologists throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to defend legalizing polygyny, that is, the possibility of a man having more than one wife. Among these defenses, the author refers to the pamphlet published in London in 1658 titled “A Remedy for Uncleaness” which, in order to avoid adultery and infanticide, proposes a reform in marriage based on polygyny. In 1780, also in London, reverend Martin Madan published the book “*Theltpthora*”, arguing that the harms produced by prostitution and by sex outside of marriage could be solved by the acceptance of more than one concurrent relationship.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under stark ascension of socialism and anarchism, some criticism to monogamous marriage, connected to the motto of “free love”, were based on the ideal of equality between men and women (Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, Frances Wright, among others). Such formulations influenced a heterogeneous set of utopian communities in the United States, which distanced themselves from the traditional model of monogamous and indissoluble marriage. They are, for example, New Harmony and Nashoba, started, respectively, by Owen and Wright themselves (Guarneri, 1991; Bederman, 2005), besides Modern Times and Oneida, which have received the greatest academic attention and which were the most emphatic and sustainable in proposing overcoming monogamy (Foster, 1984; Carrara, 2000).

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a spread of concepts relative to non-monogamous manifestations, consolidating the withdrawal from the polygynous model, in which only the man has more than one partner or wife. Swing-ing (“couple swapping”) is marked by the multiplicity of sexual partners, preserving the idea of a formal and affective monogamy. According to Silvério (2014: 71), its origin is related to the so-called “key parties” from the 1950s, in which wives would be randomly “exchanged” for one night. As pointed by von der Weid

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(2015), current practitioners diverge from the old denomination “wife exchange”, considering it an androcentric and outdated term, since it does not encompass the whole range of sexual activities in which swingers may participate, such as “exhibitionism”, “voyeurism”, “couple swap” and “group sex” (*ibidem*: 61).

The expression “open marriage” was initially formulated by O’Neill and O’Neill in the best seller “Open Marriage: a New Lifestyle for Couples”, published in 1972. According to Macklin (1980), open marriages are characterized by the couples’ decision to nurture other relationships, regardless of the original partnership. These relationships are different from swinging, as they are not exclusively sexual, and do not depend on the presence of both spouses to happen<sup>2</sup>.

Polyamory is a term coined in the 1990s to name several “ethic” or “responsible” forms of non-monogamy (Anapol, 1997; Klesse, 2006; Cardoso, 2010). It designates the possibility of establishing multiple concurrent and consensual sexual-affective relationships (Pilão, 2019). Among polyamorists, the defense for gender equality becomes evident (Barker and Langdrige, 2010; Klesse, 2010; Pilão, 2015), as well as the criticism of heteronormativity (Rubin et al., 2014; Silvério, 2018) and the appreciation of bisexuality (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004; Pilão, 2012a).

Polyamory differs from swinging by not surrounding exclusively the sexual dimension and open marriage, for considering more than one stable and profound marital bond. Besides the fact that polyamorist relationships are significantly diverse, they might be simplified into two models: “group” relationships, in which more than two people are involved with each other, and “pair” relationships, in which a polyamorist has more than one dyadic partnership. (Pilão, 2015). These arrangements are usually divided into “open” and “closed”. In the first one, there is a possibility of new relationships and, in the second, “polyfidelity” is practiced<sup>3</sup>.

*Relações livres*– *RLi* (“free relationships<sup>4</sup>”) is the only concept of non-mo-

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<sup>2</sup> In the past years, the expression “open relationship” has been more utilized than “open marriage”. Some researchers state that, like swinging, the open relationship characterizes an agreement of the couple to establish only other sexual relationships, and not sexual-affective interactions (see Silvério, 2018). Still, I believe that it is necessary to differentiate them, considering that, while the practice of swinging usually happens in closed places aimed at the sexual practice, in open relationships the “extramarital” encounters can happen at parties and public spaces, without the same emphasis on the sexual contact.

<sup>3</sup> The term polyfidelity means fidelity to several partners. Its origin refers to the Kerista community in San Francisco (1971-1991) and the increase in its circulation is connected to the publication of Ryam Nearing’s (Loving More) newsletter in 1984.

<sup>4</sup> We have opted to keep this concept in its original language, Portuguese, because it identifies a group of Brazilian people and a practice within Brazil, without a conceptual equivalent in other countries.

nogamy originally created in Brazil, more precisely in Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul), in the 2000s. Its formulation has been connected to militant groups and to discussions about family, feminism and sexual liberation (Barbosa, 2011). In *relações livres*, the subjects are seen as autonomous for the expression and realization of their affective and sexual desires, and they can have casual relationships or create lasting bonds, despite their other relationships (Bornia Junior, 2018). The RLi was established based on the refusal for polyamory, a word which, in addition to being international, is prior to and more widespread than *relações livres*. In the 2010s, with the growth in fame of the RLi and its expansion to other capital cities, the relationships between the groups and questionings about their similarities and contrasts increased.

This article proposes to analyze the controversy between polyamorists and RLis, the two main non-monogamous identities in Brazil in the 2000-2010s, which have developed an activism around sexual and affective multiplicity and against compulsory monogamy (Barbosa, 2011; Pilão, 2017a; Bornia Junior, 2018). Hence, both groups aimed to make their practices visible, fight against prejudice and offer support to those with non-monogamous relationships<sup>5</sup>. Which distinctions, hierarchies and tensions have been mobilized from the interactions among groups and individuals that recognize themselves as polyamorists or as RLis? Is it possible and desirable for both groups to build an identity politics that subtracts or makes their differences and disputes, as specific groups, invisible to favor the “non-monogamy” category?

Through a “cartography of controversies” (Venturini, 2010), I intend to reveal the tensions that form the non-monogamous activism, highlighting the plurality of conflicts and divergent opinions so that those involved, besides agreeing within disagreeing, cannot ignore one another (Venturini, 2010: 261). The controversy refers to constituting political subjects and the emergence of a social movement (Taylor, 2000) that transgresses and challenges values, institutions and social structures in order to act against a common opponent (Gamson, 1999 *apud* Taylor, 2000: 222). In this case, the monogamous norm.

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<sup>5</sup> Inspired in other contemporary movements of great public repercussion in the debate about gender and sexuality, noticeably the feminist and the LGBT (lesbians, gays, bisexual, transvestites and transsexuals), polyamorists and RLis have tried to problematize the monogamous norm in order to recognize it not as a choice or an individual problem, but in its social, coercive and oppressive dimensions. The terms “militancy” and “activism” are employed here indistinctly to refer to building collectives that have the goal to contribute with legitimizing non-monogamous relationships even though, as will be possible to observe throughout the article, only the first appears as an emic category. For a critical and historical analysis about the propagation of the terms militancy and activism in Brazil, see Sales (2019).

The option to analyze the relationship between polyamorists and RLis is because of its prominent role, mobilizing countless publications, online discussions and offline encounters<sup>6</sup>. Thus, besides generating conflicts, they are important sources to elaborate individual and collective identities. For a more thorough understanding of the experiences and discourses of Brazilian RLis and polyamorists about love, sexuality and monogamy, I suggest reading other productions indicated throughout this article and the recently published dossier (“*Afetos, Políticas e Sexualidades não-monogâmicas*”) (Pilão et al., 2021).

This article ensues from the research built throughout the Masters and Ph.D. at the Graduation Program in Sociology and Anthropology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (PPGSA-UFRJ) between the years 2011 and 2017. The investigation was conducted based on the analysis of publications in websites and online groups dedicated to polyamory and to *relações livres*<sup>7</sup>. I also used six in-depth interviews with organizers of the *Rede Pratique Poliamor Brasil* (Practice Polyamory Brazil Network) and the *Rede Relações Livres* (Free Relationships Network)<sup>8</sup>. The observations and conversations held since 2011 with interlocutors in non-monogamous events (meetings, debates, support circles, parties etc.) have also helped develop my view upon the topic.

The article is structured in three parts. In the first one, I briefly present how the emergence of the non-monogamous activism happened in Brazil. Then, I analyze how RLis and polyamorists perceive their frontiers and intersections. Finally, I address the efforts and challenges in order to put together a movement that withdraws from its fragmentation and politically potentiate narratives about alternatives to monogamous relationships.

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<sup>6</sup> I follow a tendency, dear to social anthropology (Miller & Slater, 2004; Rifiotis, 2016; Hine, 2017, among others), that refuses to take the distinction “virtual” and “real” as a methodological starting point. In this sense, there are multiple ways through which subjects articulate what happens in and outside social media, where there is no stable and unsurmountable boundary between them. In the context of this research, the idea of a continuum on/offline (Beleli, 2015) is pertinent to allude to the way how ideas, relationships, emotions and conflicts around non-monogamy do not limit to one of these axes, but intertwine.

<sup>7</sup> Among the pages analyzed: <http://Poliamorbrasil.org/> and <http://relacoeslivres.com.br/>. Among discussion groups: the community “*Poliamor Brasil*”, in the social media Orkut and Facebook groups: “*Pratique Poliamor Brasil*” and “*Relações Livres*”. Further information available in Pilão (2012b, 2017b).

<sup>8</sup> The interviews were held by me and had a semi-structured script, lasting for between one and four hours. Five of them interviewed polyamorists and four, RLis. Further information about the interviewees can be consulted in Pilão (2012b, 2017b).

## Forming non-monogamous militancy networks in Brazil

In May 2004 the group “*Poliamor Brasil*” (“Polyamory Brazil”) was created on Orkut<sup>9</sup>, which was the main communication channel among Brazilian polyamorists until 2011, adding up to 1,791 members. In that year, the *Rede Pratique Poliamor Brasil* (RPPB) and an homonymous Facebook group were built<sup>10</sup>. The goal of RPPB was to turn polyamory into a social movement, in order not to restrict it to the private scope, creating a “network of support, knowledge and militancy”<sup>11</sup>. Thus, it would be possible to increase the visibility of polyamory, to break with their negative meanings and to encourage other people to adopt this relationship model (Pilão, 2017c). Between 2011 and 2012, it was divided between two headquarters, one in Rio de Janeiro and another in São Paulo. The intention to expand to other states was not achieved, and there was a decay of the organization in the following years. Up until 2017, only the group in Rio de Janeiro remained active, which varied between moments of greater and smaller regularity in the activities<sup>12</sup>.

One of the initiatives of some of the network members was to seek legal support to recognize “poly” triad unions, that is, registering civil unions involving three people. The first of them was acknowledged on February 13, 2012, at the Notary’s Office in Tupã (São Paulo), definitely contributing to popularize the term polyamory in the country (Pilão, 2021a). With the repercussion that ensued, the number of journalistic stories, academic researches and discussions in social movements increased drastically (Pilão, 2017c). As a consequence, a “polymeeting” promoted by coordinators of the *Rede Pratique Poliamor RJ* (24.08.2014), publicized by the media (Vanini, 2014), counted with more than two hundred people, a number much greater than the meetings held in previous years.

The creation of the *Rede Relações Livres* preceded RPPB, and referred to the

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<sup>9</sup> Orkut was a social media network created in 2004 and extinguished in 2014. It was the most popular one in Brazil, amounting to 54 million users (Roncolato and Peralva, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Although it has become the most relevant group in 2012, starting 2013, with the proliferation of Facebook groups, it stopped being the most active and numerous one.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to emphasize that the concept of polyamory has never been restricted to RPPB or to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, so that other online groups integrated polyamorists from different regions in the country, but without having the militancy in favor of polyamory as a central purpose.

<sup>12</sup> Pilão and Goldenberg (2012) reveal that there are differences regarding the elaboration of an “identity politics” around polyamory in Brazil, so that it is possible to recognize different stances from those of the RPPB, that is, more “private”, focused on the resolution of practical problems of relationships, and which depreciate building a collective identity.



fusion of two groups interested in non-monogamous relationships in Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul). One of them, called “*Família e Feminismo*” (“Family and Feminism”), originated in the first World Social Forum, in 2001. The other group constituted the *Movimento Esquerda Socialista* (Socialist Left Movement) that originated from the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers Party) (PT) in 2004 and participated in the foundation of the *Partido Socialismo e Liberdade* (Socialism and Freedom Party) (PSOL). The contact between them happened, on the internet, at the end of 2005, and the joint activities went in the direction of getting information about the existing alternatives for marital relationship models, such as: open marriage, swinging and polyamory. The conclusion that none of these embraced them would lead to the creation of a new term in 2006.

In the first three years, the group meetings were face-to-face and regular, focused on theoretical debates around the definition of *relações livres*, of monogamy and of other forms of non-monogamy. Marx and Engels were central references (Barbosa, 2011; Bornia Junior, 2018) in a way that the founders of the group recognized each other as “materialists”, and saw the monogamous marriage as a social institution connected to forming private property and to distributing inheritance. Besides internal activities, the group published online texts and promoted countless public events, such as leafleting, lectures and parties.

These actions favored the expansion of the term, leading, after 2009, to the fact that *relações livres* stopped being a face-to-face group and became the “*Rede Relações Livres*”. They believed that the theoretical and political differences, arising from the movement’s growth, would be solved with the creation of the network, maintaining the leading role of the group from Porto Alegre, but accepting the plurality of positions<sup>13</sup>. At the beginning, they desired to integrate the regional organizations (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Curitiba, Salvador etc.). For such, RLIs from Porto Alegre traveled to these and other cities in order to help the local formation.

Internal conflicts, and other struggles among regional groups, contributed to dissolve several of them in 2014. In the following year, the group from Rio de Janeiro was the only one to sustain regular activities. In Porto Alegre, the increasing disagreements led to a separation within the founding group. Some organizers declared, in interviews, that the reason was the dispute for leadership. Others

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<sup>13</sup> According to an interlocutor of Barbosa (2011: 76): “the group was like a political party, the person was or was not RLI [...]” but, as a network, it would be more “fluid”, including non-militants and people who wanted to practice or to get to know the movement.



attributed the disagreements as related to feminism<sup>14</sup>. Since then, some activities have been done by part of the group<sup>15</sup>, such as the publication of a book about RLi (Rodrigues et al., 2017), and the creation of an arts and studies space in Porto Alegre (Atelier 130) (Bornia Junior, 2018). Due to the new Coronavirus (Covid-19) epidemics, between 2020 and 2021 face-to-face activities were suspended, becoming restricted to online debates.

### The controversy between RLis and polyamorists

The effort of RLis to state their identity and ideological autonomy can be understood considering the movement's history. To create a terminology, the RLi learned the concept polyamory, and then refused it. There are several strategies of comparison employed by RLis in relation to polyamory, which, as I have shown, is an older category circulating internationally. The effort to build their singularity is notable, but tense, in as much as for this, it is necessary to determine what polyamory is. As it will be possible to observe, the arguments used to build the separation are, usually, rejected by polyamorists, which creates a paradox. While RLis need to differentiate themselves in order to have their own existence, for polyamorists, accepting the RLi identity involves recognizing a definition of polyamory which they do not agree with<sup>16</sup>.

Below, I analyze each one of the three main forms of distinction elaborated by RLis, and how they were contested by polyamorists.

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<sup>14</sup> In another moment (Pilão, 2019), I analyzed feminist discourses that state that *relações livres* and polyamory are forms of male privilege. Such criticism contributed to a growing suspicion of women in relation to non-monogamous men. In that regard, Bornia Junior (2018) states that older RLis, particularly identified with the non-monogamous agenda, differed from the group of women who submitted this agenda to feminism, and reported sexist practices within it.

<sup>15</sup> To represent a new collective, instead of the old RLi denomination they opted for RLi-E, treating that category as a generic expression of a form of sexual-affective relationship. The new terminology would allow promoting a differentiation in relation to RLis that were not connected to the group, that is, those who would not be RLi-E. The option to employ the addition "E" (which means "and" in Portuguese) would serve the purpose of alluding to the wish to overcome oppositions: love x friendship; love x sex, with the intention to combine them in their relationships.

<sup>16</sup> Although the process of homogenization and stereotyping of "others" is not a particularity of the RLi identity, it is necessary to highlight that the distinction RLi/polyamory is more fundamental to the former than to the latter. Thus, Brazilian polyamorists make greater effort to establish boundaries between polyamory, monogamy and non-monogamies, seen as not loving, and/or promiscuous (Pilão, 2013; Silvério, 2018).

## Polyfidelity

One of the paramount means with which RLis have separated themselves from polyamorists consists in the declaration that polyamory requires polyfidelity:

Polyamory is the possibility of having two or more sexual-affective relationships including the clause of “polyfidelity”, that is: the duty of sexual exclusivity to partners who are acknowledged and have interference rights in the possibilities and options in relation to one another (*Rede Relações Livres*, 2011).

The definition of polyamory that includes both “open” and “closed” arrangements is disregarded by RLis, or refused as a conceptual defect. By trying to restrict polyamory to polyfidelity, they aim to stabilize the delimitating frontiers, preventing the definition of polyamory from encompassing other non-monogamy forms. Since, as a whole, the RLi rejects polyfidelity, they would not accept belonging to the polyamory “umbrella”, being incorporated into a term that does not mandatorily presumes unrestricted and nonnegotiable loving and sexual “freedom”.

It is necessary to highlight that polyfidelity is constantly disapproved of by Brazilian polyamorists<sup>17</sup> for being seen as an extension of monogamy. Therefore, less worthy and libertarian than the open polyamorist relationships (Pilão, 2013). This criticism is so recurrent that a polyamorist adept to polyfidelity decided to leave a “*Pratique Poliamor*” (“Practice Polyamory”) group due to the consecutive negative comments about her relationship: “I can’t feel comfortable within the concept of polyfidelity bec it’s absurd in the eyes of the majority of polyamory practitioners (...) I withdrawn from the group and wish, as ironic as it may be, more love and understanding in your lives.”

It is important to highlight the effort of RLis in keeping this definition of polyamory even when polyamorists continually reject it, and even depreciate, those who opt for polyfidelity. I believe the quest is in “fixing” the differences, establishing accurate and stable frontiers between concepts that are not easily distinguishable. To state their autonomy, RLis build oppositions in which polyamory takes on the place of a complete other, without ambiguities, from a safe and unequivocal classification, based on the lack of conciliation between the sexual-affective autonomy (RLi) and the polyfidelity (polyamory).

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<sup>17</sup> Associating polyamory to polyfidelity makes sense if we consider that, at the moment *Relações Livres* were created, the word polyamory was still poorly spread around the country. In fact, in the formulations about the topic in the United States, it has greater relevance than in the Brazilian context (Pilão, 2015).

It can be useful to think of this process of distinction from the concept of abjection (Miskolci, 2012), since there is an attempt to create dissimilarities when attributing to the other what is considered by the group as impure, incorrect and not normal. From the RLi perspective, being abject is, quintessentially, being monogamous, in a way that bringing monogamy closer to polyamory implies pushing it from oneself. Polyamory, by incorporating polyfidelity and consequently connecting to monogamy, is feared and rejected, since its impurity and hybridization is seen as potentially contaminating.

The attempt of RLis to establish what polyamory is crashes with the way polyamorists define their own practice. What is a contradiction for RLis, that is, encompassing under one single term the fight against monogamy and the acceptance of a certain type of control over partners (polyfidelity), is part of the multiplicity of possible polyamorous arrangements, and expresses the tension between the emphasis on freedom or on mutuality, a characteristic of the polyamorist ideology (Pilão, 2015).

The effort to embody opposites (restriction and autonomy; reciprocity and spontaneity), is interpreted by RLis as a means for polyamorist not to take a clear stand of which side they are at. Since polyamorists tolerate these ambiguities, instead of collectively opting for one of the extremes, the RLis would try to solve the dilemma, sustaining that polyamory is a way to fight against monogamy that does not break with its logic, since it is not in fact free, giving partners the power to control them.

## Freedom

The perspective that polyamory requires polyfidelity, important in the oldest RLi formulations, was slowly modified, mostly because of the refusal of polyamorists to accept this restrictive comprehension of polyamory. Thus, although RLis started to reconcile with the idea that polyamory does not require polyfidelity, they reinforced other aspects of differentiation. The main one refers to the affirmation that RLis do not accept any “interference” of partners over their autonomy, in order not to follow “moral obligations” or “exercise rights” over them:

The only imperative of our relationships is the desire (sexual and/or affective) and, thus, there are no rules or agreements of any type (...) We do not share or subtract anything from anyone, we do not demand that partners complete us or handle our anguish. (Amores Livres, 2013).

An RLi organizer adds that “The Polyamory fight is the affective multiplicity, the RLi fight is sexual and affective freedom. There can be affective multiplicity without freedom, and there can be freedom without [affective] multiplicity. They are not the same thing.” Although this characterization is better accepted in the polyamorist groups, it is also a target of disagreements. This can be explained by the fact that there are polyamorists that, as well as RLis, defend a complete individual autonomy, opposing the establishment of agreements and restrictions (Pilão, 2015). In that sense, one coordinator of the *Rede Pratique Poliamor Brasil*, equally contradicted by this differentiation, reinforces the thesis that RLi is only one way of practicing polyamory, being, therefore, contained in it:

They put it as if POLYAMORY was something restrictive and full of little rules X, Y and Z...when NO: Polyamory is a social movement with a range of possibilities, of arrangements, of ways of relating to one another, it is so broad that in it fits both the closed poly and the RLi.

The idea that *relações livres* are only one form of polyamory is not rarely followed by the affirmation that that is a bad version. Among polyamorists, it is considered that RLi is an excessively individualized practice, selfish and unconcerned with partners. Having a relationship based on agreements is then seen not only as possibility, but as a fundamental ethical matter<sup>18</sup>. According to the coordinator mentioned above, the *relações livres* would be marked by the mandatory fact that the individual and the autonomy are prioritized over partners and companionships, which would make it a type of “neoliberal” non-monogamy.

This evaluation reappears in a publication in which it is considered that the appreciation of individual autonomy among RLis would push off collectivism and concerning attitudes towards others. This way, the desired freedom would depend on an emotional and financial autonomy that excludes the most vulnerable people<sup>19</sup>:

The demand that people are economically autonomous – to say the least – excludes the economically less privileged layers of worker classes, making RLi accessible only to the middle class. [...] Therefore, RLi’s way of life is, at best, an open door for the capitalist cooptation, for being ready to serve the mercantile way of life that we live in these senses. It follows the political direction of strengthening the private at the expense of the public. A

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<sup>18</sup> About this, see Klesse (2006, 2011); Haritaworn et al. (2006) and Wosick-Correa (2010).

<sup>19</sup> This criticism is also recurrent among feminists (Pilão, 2019), transsexual and non-heterosexuals (Bornia Junior, 2018).

pathway that we are already going through in great speed, unfortunately, with neoliberalism. (Burden, 2014).

The connection between freedom and neoliberalism, and also the growth of feminist readings that attribute to non-monogamy the oppression of women (Pilão, 2019), has made many RLi start to recognize freedom as a problematic view. Before these criticisms, I had noticed a change in the way of referring to the issue of agreements and negotiations in relationships, as to state more constantly that freedom cannot be practiced without “affective responsibility<sup>20</sup>”.

In an interview, one of the organizers of the RLi group from Porto Alegre said he considered the concept of freedom to be “doubtful” for allowing an interpretation of opposing to care. He explains that this idea is the result of the growth of RLi and of its decontextualization, getting out of the restricted leftwing circles, where freedom would require equality, to reach a broader public, in which freedom would receive this “liberal” sense, of lack of commitment, of “everyone for themselves”. In this defense, the aim is to argue that the proposal of *relações livres* is originally anticapitalistic and antioppressions, since the freedom wanted for oneself would be extended to the partners: “Wanting to be free and also wanting others to be free”, states another RLi.

Thus, the accusation that RLi is “neoliberal” is rebutted by the affirmation that polyamorists are “apolitical<sup>21</sup>”: “Poly seeks an individual way out for the monogamy issue, without questioning that there isn’t an end to monogamy within capitalism, without fighting against oppression” (*Amores Livres*, 2013). By considering RLi as an anticapitalistic movement, and polyamory not, one attributes to it the perpetuation of social inequalities, while the proposal for *relações livres*, unlike all of the others, is political in the first place, deriving directly from the opposition to patriarchy and to private property” (*Amores Livres*, 2014)<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, both seek to define themselves politically as “leftist” and, by characterizing the other as “capitalist”, “neoliberal”, “apolitical” or “oppressor”, they would lead to their delegitimization, refuting these criticisms on themselves.

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<sup>20</sup> This concern, which intensified after 2015, can be observed in *Amores Livres* (2016).

<sup>21</sup> In fact, there are polyamorists who defend “privatizing” the debate about non-monogamy, not recognizing their political dimension and the need to criticize social structures or to combat oppressions. Nonetheless, other positions go in the direction of linking monogamy to capitalism, to patriarchy and heteronormativity. (Wilkinson, 2010; Pilão and Goldenberg, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Despite that, Bornia Junior (2018) points to the perpetuation of asymmetries in the non-monogamous circles, where prevail people who are cisgender, white, young, graduated and with predominantly heterosexual relationships; tendencies that I could also observe among my own research interlocutors (Pilão, 2012b).

## Love

Another distinguishing element of *relações livres* refers to the disagreement of the use of love as a means to legitimize sexuality and conjugality. RLis claim to be able to keep relationships with several degrees of emotional involvement, which would include as a possibility the absence of this feeling. Thus, a founder of the group from Rio Grande do Sul defends that: “freedom without love is not a polyamorous marker, and love without freedom is not an RLi marker.” It is interesting to observe that when polyamory is considered to break with “emotional” monogamy, but not completely with the “sexual” one, RLis argue that polyamory is contained within RLi:

RLis do not need love to justify their relationships. In this sense, the title “polyamory” only encompasses part of what it means to be RLi (...) Sex and love can walk together or separately in the same relationship; an RLi has freedom in both (...) *Relações livres* exists when the person maintains autonomy and plain personal freedom no matter the sexual/affective relationship, and in any circumstance of stability. (Rede Relações Livres [s.d.]).

Reading like this, polyamory would only free love from the monogamous control, but it would maintain restrictions on the free expression of sexuality, since sex would only be well seen and accepted if connected to love<sup>23</sup>. Thus, the way polyamory, as a generic term, used to encompass *relações livres*, as a specific relational model, is inverted. Under this perspective, the *relações livres* are much more comprehensive than the polyamorists, for not limiting itself to love, although being able to include it. Being RLi, under this optic, is to be polyamorist, but going beyond.

As I have shown, the effort for making distinctions come from RLis, while polyamorists question the criteria used by them: “It’s very funny how, at every argument we give saying why polyamory is not what they define, they invent a new definition to ‘allocate’ polyamory.” Another comment reinforces the discomfort: “and worse, they say we are things we are not”. The affirmation that if a relationship does not have love it is not polyamorist is seen as a very shallow understanding of the meaning of polyamory. The justification employed by polyamorists is that this vision does not take into consideration that what differentiates polyamory from other forms of non-monogamy is that loving more than one

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<sup>23</sup> This criticism to polyamory is broadly shared in researches about the topic (among others, Klesse, 2006; Cardoso, 2010; Pilão, 2013, 2021b).



person is equally possible, not implying the obligation to love many in order to be included under this label.

If the distinction of monogamy tends to be simpler, once both groups conceive a plain opposition towards it, the definition of frontiers between RLis and polyamorists is more tense, insofar as the proximity between the concepts demands greater effort in its elaboration. It may be possible to recognize in this distinction process what Freud (1995) has called “narcissism of small differences”, an action of shifting the internal hostility to the nearest otherness, seen as a threat. With this, criticisms inside each group are attenuated, making it easier to be cohesive, so that hostilities come back more severe in intergroup relationships.

### **The organization of a non-monogamous movement in Brazil**

The permanent confrontations and divergences in non-monogamous groups also bring the aspiration and defense to forget contradictions, organizing themselves together: “In my point of view, people would unite and militate together”; “I’ve already said several times that I don’t like this divide in non-monogamous little churches fighting for believers. I understand that one seeks a conceptual differentiation, but I think the militancy should be just one”; “If you look at the polyamory and rli groups, you’ll see it’s the same people! So why not admit that everybody is together for non-monogamy, leave the labels aside and militate together?”.

It is not uncommon that polyamorists see the search for RLis to affirm their autonomy as “separatism”, “sectarianism”, or a way to divide the non-monogamous movement and defame polyamory. This position is supported by a coordinator of the *Rede Pratique Poliamor*, who considers “all this need for self-affirmation to be a selfish thing, petty and irrational”. Despite declaring his disbelief on the viability of a joint organization, there have been many initiatives in this direction.

The main project to approach was the creation of the Meeting of the Non-Monogamous Manifestations (or Cultures), whose first edition was held in Porto Alegre in June 2011. This encounter was preceded by an organizational meeting held in February of the same year, in São Paulo, which counted with twelve polyamorists and one of the main leaderships of RLi, who came from Porto Alegre. In the RLi’s website were disclosed some of the propositions and resolutions relative to the encounter:

(...) The building of a general non-mono identity and that our differences as specific currents could remain, but without destroying a general unity. For us it was already clear that the theme “currents” should not initiate

our relationship. (...) We have proposed a cumulative sequence of agreements that was careful to avoid the **precipitation of themes that opposed the non-monogamous currents** (such as the disputes of the concepts RLi x Poly). And we proposed a **logical accumulation**: 1) Our first debate should be about what we primarily oppose together: monogamy (for 2011); 2) After that, it would be useful to make a consistent assessment of the current situation of monogamy (for 2012); 3) And only after, debating what the alternative forms to monogamy are (for 2013) (...) For our happiness, observe: Do you know which was the focal theme of the 1<sup>st</sup> National Non-Monogamous Meeting (2011)? “What is monogamy – perspectives” (...) [original highlights] (*Rede Relações Livres*, 2012a).

The initiative and the discussion agenda were proposed by the *Rede Relações Livres*. This protagonism was followed by tensions, since polyamorists felt they were in the background, and RLis resented that they depreciated the meetings. The latter also criticized the former for diverging from the planned topic: “We regret that participants of the first national meeting have come hungry for ‘currents’; and correspondingly unprepared for the agreed agenda, ‘monogamy’” (*Rede Relações Livres*, 2012b). The meeting, which was supposedly created targeting the consolidation of the non-monogamous unity, seems to have produced the opposite effect, increasing rivalries. Therefore, already in 2011, with the approximation of the groups, it became evident that there was a possibility of disagreements and conflicts around their distinctions.

The difference of posture in relation to the meetings can be understood taking into consideration the operating dynamics of each of them. In this period, the *relações livres* were organized in Rio Grande do Sul as a face-to-face movement, in which all of the members knew each other and had accumulated political and theoretical positions. On the other hand polyamorists were more connected to social media, interacting with hundreds of people from different regions in the country, and without a centralized structure that allowed speaking on behalf of others. Inspired by the collective organization of RLi, they created, in 2011, their own association, the already mentioned RPPB, favoring the clash with RLi, and the dispute for non-monogamous protagonism.

The following meeting happened in Rio de Janeiro, in November 2012<sup>24</sup>, and went in the direction of rupture and failure in building a joint militancy and an identity unity between RLis and polyamorists. The event was promoted only by the former, since the latter gave up on being part of the organization, arguing that

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<sup>24</sup> The schedule and resolutions of the second meeting are available in *Rede Relações Livres* (2012a).

they were not consulted about the decisions concerning the meeting. The RLis, on their turn, questioned the lack of responsibility and involvement of RPPB.

During the period of the two Meetings of the Non-Monogamous Manifestations (2011 and 2012), the face-to-face activities of polyamory were more regular in Rio de Janeiro and in São Paulo, while those of RLi prevailed in Rio Grande do Sul. In the following years, with the increasing nationalization of both, the interaction and tensions between the groups intensified.

In Rio de Janeiro, a significant number of people began to attend events of both groups. The convergences generated between them led to a new attempt of union in 2015, this time restricted to the state. The proximity intensified when one founder of RPPB started to integrate the RLi organization (Machado, 2015). He sought, unsuccessfully, for the activities developed by RLi to start to be considered together, due to his participation, which generated friction, resistance and a new withdrawal.

It is important to highlight that, even if polyamory was a better known concept, *relações livres* gained great identity adhesion and, in Rio de Janeiro, in 2015, they were established as a solid group. This growth awoke preoccupation among polyamorists, as we can observe in a comment in an online group dedicated to polyamory, in which is stated that a great number of people “has a completely misinformed and distorted idea about what polyamory is (...) Or the militancy is too weak, or the counter-militancy is stronger.”

The aim to unify non-monogamous events in Rio de Janeiro may be understood as one of the attempts of polyamorists to contain the growth of *relações livres* and, subsequently, of the criticisms on polyamory. With that, RLi's identity would be weakened, starting to be made invisible or to be contained within polyamory. I believe that declaring that both are the same, or that the term polyamory encompasses that of *relações livres*, are initiatives that aim at convincing that the expression “*relações livres*” is unnecessary and unproductive in the struggle against monogamy.

Thus, the proximity between the groups did not conduct only towards the stated purpose, that is, to strengthen bonds and to articulate non-monogamous activism. One can notice in this process the intention to erase RLi, and their effort in declaring their singularity and superiority as an ideology and relationship model.

## Final considerations

Anthropology, since its institutionalization in the 19th century, has addressed different forms of family and marriage, and has pointed towards the process of

consolidating monogamy in the modern western world (John McLennan, Lewis Morgan, Robert Briffault, among others). Manifesting opposition to monogamy, a diverse array of concepts has been mobilized. Among the older ones, “free love” and, among the currently most widespread, “open relationship”.

As well as these terminologies, polyamory and *relações livres* categorize practices and feelings, but go beyond, also classifying people. This way, the terms “RLi” and “polyamorist” constitute as possible “places of subject”, analogue to that occupied by sexual and gender identities. They are, therefore, powerful mechanisms of distinction and identification, in a way that certain groups build a vision of themselves and of others guided by these categories.

RLi and polyamory were, throughout the research (2011-2017) the only non-monogamous groups with public defenders and organized militancy in Brazil. This implies stating that the political arena about non-monogamy in the country has been centrally linked to them. In this sense, even though they saw each other as allies in the fight against compulsory monogamy, their voices disputed hegemony and control in the non-monogamous movement, aiming to demonstrate having the best solution to overcome the sexual-affective exclusivity.

The attempt to disqualify the other is noticeable, in order to attribute to oneself the most efficient and politically engaged path of resistance to monogamy. Although part of the polyamorist initiatives has been to refuse RLi's autonomy, considering it a specific polyamorous modality, they did not stop depreciating it, corroborating with the separation. Thus, they directed severe criticism to “neo-liberalism” and the “affective irresponsibility” of RLis, presenting themselves as ethically superior. On their turn, RLis accused and disqualified polyamorists for perpetuating monogamous principles, highlighting love, accepting marriage, polyfidelity and the control of freedom.

In common, they have the fact that polyamorists and RLis face compulsory monogamy from a remoralizing premise, making clear the desire to build other normativities. Therefore, there has been an aspiration to delimit precise borders among several relationship arrangements, between good and evil, pure and impure, applying an eminently binary logic. As a consequence of this essentialist dynamic, the maintenance of spaces of abjection and discrimination of people and practices that escape from the model prescribed by the group, attributing unrepeatable qualities to themselves and reinforcing what is the most despicable in the other. The condemnation of polyfidelity and the dispute for the relational emphasis in consent or in the individual freedom were the most explicit symptoms of this moral crusade.

Such reflections refer to what Carrara (2015) calls a “new geography of evil”, and “sexual danger”, which already does not have as a supporting basis the ideal

of monogamous, heterosexual and reproductive couple. In the “new sexuality regime”, any manifestations of consented sexuality that does not put themselves or third parties at risk, are seen as worthy of pleading citizenship (Carrara, 2015: 332). Thus, the valued assumptions are those of freedom and consent, highlighting the ideology of “liberation” and of sexual “democracy”. As a consequence, criticisms turn towards non-consented and asymmetric practices, and towards the absence of pleasure and sexual arousal, pathologizing “absences” and “deficiencies” (*Ibidem*: 339).

What the non-monogamous controversy seems to reveal is that the ideals of freedom and consent, which mark the “new device of sexuality”, keep among themselves a relationship of tension and even of contradiction. This way, while RLis took freedom and individual satisfaction as primary values, polyamorists confronted this preeminence from the defense of affective responsibility and the need to build relationships based on the principles of mutuality and consent. Thus, the emphasis on “sexual liberation” has collided with the search for a “sexual democracy”, so that freedom and equality have shown to be antithetical concepts.

I would like to finish by suggesting that if the non-monogamous political unity was compromised by the tension between polyamorists and RLis, these distinctions have lost power in the realm of individual identities, increasing the use of the common “non-monogamy” category. The conflicts between the groups have also contributed to weaken the influence of their militancy networks, in a way that a tendency for privatization and even depoliticization of the debate about non-monogamous relationships in Brazil became noticeable. This way, one can observe, in the second half of the 2010s, the retreat of the non-monogamy association with leftist political ideologies, as well as of the preoccupation with choosing one of these terminologies (RLi or polyamory)<sup>25</sup>.

The idea that there is a relationship model that expresses the truth about themselves has been giving place to understanding practices as more contingent and, therefore, variable. Their only certainty seems to be about what they are not, or what they do not want, that is, “monogamy”. The inclination to acknowledge themselves and their relationships as “non-monogamous” instead of “polyamorist” or “RLi”, promotes a feeling of greater autonomy and flexibility. With that, they would escape from the crossroads of polyamory *versus relações livres*, per-

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<sup>25</sup> In the past years, Gonçalves (2021) has pointed towards the appearance of new non-monogamous political actors in the country, such as the indigenous activist Geni Nuñez and the project “Non-Monogamy in Focus” (“*Não-Monogamia em Foco*”). Differently from the founders of RLi and RPPB, Marxism and militancy in political parties have not constituted the most outstanding influences, but anticolonialism and intersectionality.

mitting the incorporation to their possibilities other sexual practices, relationship arrangements and moralities.

Due to the weakening of these political actors, their networks of militancy and identities, it seems that we have moved towards closing the controversy between RLis and polyamorists. Despite that, the moral clashes between freedom and responsibility continue guiding the debates about non-monogamy, but based on other languages and discussion forums. To what extent the non-monogamous identity will be able to, really, balance these tensions, appeasing controversies, is still an open question.

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