

# Thinking Relationship Anarchy from a Queer Feminist Approach

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/sro](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/sro)**Roma De las Heras Gómez**

## Abstract

Since the 2000s, general and academic concern in openly non-monogamous styles of relating has increased. In Spain, the rise in the general interest toward non-monogamy, meeting groups, and activism has become apparent during the current decade. One of the practical and theoretical paradigms that has been developed within non-monogamy is relationship anarchy. In this article, I will approach relationship anarchy in three different ways: as a philosophy of love, as a way of structuring affective bonds, and as a political philosophy. I shall then focus on the last one: relationship anarchy as a political philosophy, and what can be gained from thinking relationship anarchy from a queer, feminist perspective. I intend to make a theoretical contribution to the discourse of relationship anarchy as a political philosophy from feminist criticism of monogamy and of the naturalization of love; from the premises of lesbian feminism, compulsory heterosexuality, and the erotic pyramid; and from the concept of amatonormativity and sex-centrism in asexual theory. I shall then consider the usefulness of the relationship anarchy paradigm for radical queer politics in the current Spanish context. Finally, I will raise the concepts of the pyramid of relationships and the continuum (between attractions) system to pose how the different hierarchies that relationship anarchy puts in question are linked: amatonormativity, sex-centrism, and couple privilege.

## Keywords

amatonormativity, compulsory monogamy, lesbian feminism, non-monogamies, polyamory, queer feminism, queerplatonic relationships, relationship anarchy

## Introduction

General and academic interest in openly non-monogamous styles of relating has multiplied since the 2000s (Barker and Langdridge, 2010). In Spain, a dramatic increase in

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general interest toward non-monogamy, meeting groups, and activism is apparent during the current decade, if we use as indicators events such as mainstream publishing investment in texts on non-monogamy (Easton and Hardy, 2013; Etxebarria, 2016; Taormino, 2015; Wolf, 2017), the creation of open groups related to polyamory and other non-monogamies,<sup>1</sup> the organization of communal gatherings and conferences,<sup>2</sup> and the appearance of virtual groups in social networks since 2014.<sup>3</sup>

These groups and communities are heterogeneous. In the approach to non-monogamies, Meg-John Barker and Langdridge (2010) caution ‘against taking one group of non-monogamous people, practices or ideologies as representative, and highlights the multiple meanings and understandings both between and within groups and individuals practicing openly non-monogamous relationships’ (p. 5). This is also the case in the Spanish and Catalan context. This diversity can be seen in the changes of use of concepts and in the theoretical development of the different practices and ideologies within non-monogamy. Initially, the term ‘poliamor’ (‘polyamory’) became popular in Spain as an umbrella term to cover different types of non-monogamy, but over the course of a theoretical development of different practices and ideologies, the main current groups of activists have begun to use the concept of ‘non-monogamies’ as a general term, and ‘polyamory’ in its English-speaking mainstream conception, ‘The state or practice of maintaining multiple sexual and/or romantic relationships simultaneously, with the full knowledge and consent of all the people involved’.<sup>4</sup> One of the practical and theoretical paradigms that has been developed within non-monogamy is relationship anarchy (RA) (Nordgren, 2006; in Spanish-speaking contexts, Svkát, 2011, and in Spain, De las Heras, 2013b).

The discourse of RA has a main characteristic that distinguishes it from other categories of non-monogamy: the rejection of the Romantic Sex-Based Relationship Hierarchy (The Thinking Aro, 2013), a system of classification of intimate relationships which includes three different hierarchies: romance supremacism (giving a higher status to intimate relationships with romantic elements), sexual supremacism (giving a higher status to intimate relationships with sexual elements), and hierarchically ranking romantic-sexual relationships over one another (the idea of ‘primary’ vs ‘secondary’ partners, which Andrea Zanin (2013) considers a tenet of polynormativity).

In this article, I will approach RA in three different ways: as a philosophy of love (Nordgren, 2006), as a way of structuring affective bonds (Nordgren, 2006), and as a political philosophy (De las Heras, 2013b; Skvat, 2011). I shall then focus on the last one: RA as a political philosophy, and what can be gained from thinking RA from a queer, feminist perspective.

I intend to make a theoretical contribution to the discourse of RA as a political philosophy from feminist criticism of monogamy (Chiapini, 2009; Robinson, 1997; Rosso, 2009; Vasallo, 2013, 2016) and of the naturalization of love (Esteban, 2011); from the premises of lesbian feminism, compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1986), and the erotic pyramid (Rubin, 1989); and from the concept of amatonormativity (Brake, 2012) and sex-centrism in asexual theory (Blanco and Tello, 2015).

I shall then consider the usefulness of the RA paradigm for radical queer politics in the current Spanish context, where non-cis and non-straight people are gradually gaining legal access to monogamous structures, as couple recognition and child rearing in

nuclear family structures, after regulations were passed allowing for marriage between people regardless of their gender and access to adoption for same-gender couples (Law 13/2005), and additional regulations (Law 14/2006) on assisted reproduction which granted access to artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization to any woman able to become pregnant, regardless of their marital status or sexual orientation.

Finally, I draw upon the categories of romantic attraction and sexual attraction in asexual and aromantic communities (Avenitas, 2017), and I lay out the system of continuity of attraction as another element of this system of *loving thinking* (Esteban, 2011).

This is a theoretical article which stems from my work in politics as a member of an RA community and as a lesbian feminist. The concept of RA was translated into Spanish for the first time in 2011 (Skvat, 2011), and in 2013, the first Spanish translation of the manifesto was published (De las Heras, 2013a). The term RA started spreading within the non-monogamous community in Spain and Catalonia, which was mainly an intimate and/or online community in 2013, except for the monthly public meetings held by Golfxx con Principios in Madrid (in which RA was addressed in November, 2014). As part of my work, since 2013, I have been moderating debates and workshops regarding intimate relationships, including RA and non-monogamous relationships, from a lesbian feminist perspective (De las Heras, 2013). In 2015, we began to talk about AR in shared political spaces within the context of activism and the non-monogamous community (first and second Amors Plurals conferences, in Barcelona). In 2016, the first Relationship Anarchy Gathering in Spain took place,<sup>5</sup> in which an RA concept map was collectively created from a political perspective (Desmadejados et al., 2018). Due to my participation in different political communities, the knowledge gathered in this article is the result of this collective construction. Therefore, I will use the pronoun ‘we’ to refer to this collective knowledge.

### *RA – three ways of understanding it*

RA was originally developed as a philosophy of love by Andi Nordgren, who also coined the term in Swedish in *The short instructional manifesto for relationship anarchy* (Nordgren, 2006). According to the Manifesto, RA is a philosophy that questions the idea of love as a limited resource that only becomes authentic if it is confined to one person. This idea is shared with polyamory<sup>6</sup> as well. In addition, RA understands that there is not only one way to build relationships so that love is real, the structure of a couple, but that every bond is built in a particular way between the people involved, not fitting well either in the norms or in the pre-established expectations. That is to say, it rejects categories such as ‘couple’, ‘lover’, or ‘just friends’, in which the hegemonic relationships model compartmentalizes emotional bonds, and separates them according to their content: sexual, romantic, both of them, or neither of them. In this sense, RA rejects two aspects: on one hand, the meanings and contents that the hegemonic relationship hierarchy attributes to the personal bonds (what fits into each box: ‘friends’, ‘lovers’, ‘couple’, etc.);<sup>7</sup> on the other hand, the distribution of social roles (prestige and structural function) that are assigned to each bond according to the category where they fit (the place in hegemonic social structure for a couple, friends, etc.).

Instead, RA goes for a redistribution of the physical, sexual, and emotional intimacy depending on the particular desires and needs from those involved in establishing their own affective bonds. Furthermore, it breaks with the idea that the compromises upon which we build our lives (for instance, cohabitation, joint responsibility or caregiving agreements, a shared economy, the integration within the biological family, or parenting) have to be both erected upon romantic feelings and exclusively reserved for couple relationships. Therefore, it rejects the hierarchy of relationships based on the type of connection, which gives romantic relationships a higher status than the ones that are not considered as such.

This hierarchy that The Thinking Aro (2013) calls romance supremacism is not only a personal choice and a concrete practice, but it is correlated with a normative social structure that Elisabeth Brake (2012) coined as amatonormativity:

the assumption that a romantic, central and exclusive relationship is normal for human beings, to the extent that it is a universally shared goal, and that this type of relationship is normative, in the sense that you should aspire to it in preference to other types of relationship.

On the other hand, RA rejects the hierarchy based on sex or sexual supremacism following The Thinking Aro (2013). In the same way as with romance supremacism, sexual supremacism is not just a personal practice either. The dynamics of giving a higher status to intimate relationships with a sexual connection occurs in a sex-centric context, following Irene Blanco and Alex Tello (2015). The authors use the term ‘sexocentrismo’ (sex-centrism) in Spanish to refer to ‘the hegemonic position sex has in our societies [establishing] a hierarchy between bonds’, based on the idea that everybody experiences sexual attraction to other individuals, and that it is a universal experience and an essential part of affective relationships for everybody.

By last, the practice of ranking romantic-sexual relationships (the idea of ‘primary’ vs ‘secondary’ partners that Andrea Zanin (2013) considers a tenet of polynormativity) resonates with the concept of couple privilege, which Amy Gahran (2013) defines as

the presumption that socially sanctioned pair-bond relationships involving only two people (such as marriage, long-term boyfriend/girlfriend, or other forms of conventional intimate/life partnerships) are inherently more important, ‘real’ and valid than other types of intimate, romantic or sexual relationships. Such primary couples (or partnerships that are clearly riding society’s standard relationship escalator<sup>8</sup> toward that goal) are widely presumed – even within many non-monogamous communities – to warrant more recognition and support than other types of intimate relationships [:] more generally, couple privilege also manifests in the body of social, legal, and financial advantages.

Amatomormativity, sex-centrism, and couple privilege combine in modern Western culture, giving rise to a hierarchical normative system, which is symbolic, legal, and material. I call it *the pyramid of relationships*, drawing a parallel with the concept of erotic pyramid by Gayle Rubin (1989).

Gayle Rubin (1989) develops the concept of erotic pyramid, by which she refers to the symbolic stratification of sexual practices between ‘acceptable sex’ and ‘inacceptable sex’. On top of the pyramid we find heterosexual, marital, monogamous, and

reproductive sexual relationships. After these, in order of descending value we find not married heterosexual couples, heterosexual promiscuity, masturbation, stable non-heterosexual relations, unstable non-heterosexual relations, and so on; in the lower part we find sexual practices in which money is exchanged, transvestism, fetishism, sado-masochism, being intergenerational relationships the least acceptable ones. Applying this concept to bonds, the pyramid of relationships would build a symbolic stratification of intimate relations, which also implies a material stratification, a concentration of resources (of economic, care, emotional, and time sort). On top of all, we would find the exclusive couple, in sexual and romantic terms, then we would find familial and friendship bonds and, finally, in the lowest place only-sexual bonds. The pyramid also materializes in material terms, for example, in Spain an exclusive romantic couple relationship can access marriage, and with it legal recognition, tax benefits, and so on, while there is no legal form designed to protect a relationship non-romantic (right to a widow's pension, e.g., or inheritance). Non-conventional relationships (polyamorous relationships, romantic non-sexual relations, non-romantic non-sexual relationships) would be looking for their place in the pyramid. What is more, I would place next to the quality of the bond the following types of relations: first, polyamorous relationships would be symbolically closer to the top of the pyramid because the romantic bond is understood by society as more meaningful than the rest (i.e. amatonormativity, referred to as the base of romantic privilege), at a legal level they do not have recognition; second, reference relationships or non-romantic couple relationships, by affinity, would be socially read and placed closer to friendship, below the romantic-sexual couple, even though the internal structure is the same – in terms of mutual, emotional, economic, and cohabitation commitment. In legal terms, another example would be the upbringing in non-romantic relationships; there is no way to establish filiation for a second adult that is not through a romantic relationship (for two women, it is even required to be married).

As a practice of structuring affective bonds outside of the pyramid of relationships, RA is an umbrella that encompasses diverse experiences. I would say that a common thread is that we do not agree with the idea that the natural way of building our affective bonds and our life projects is around an exclusively romantic-sexual connection, that a relationship of romantic nature becomes more vitally significant, and that, as a consequence, what is considered natural takes up the center of our life projects.

To some of us, RA is a relational orientation, a tendency toward the need of defining affective bonds in a particular way throughout our lives. When I say tendency, I mean that those who have this orientation have not chosen it, likewise some mono-amorous people and some others polyamorous. As a relational orientation, people with any sexual orientation, including asexuality and allosexual orientations, can feel identified with it, as well as people with any romantic orientation, including both aromantic people and those with different romantic orientations. Moreover, RA is also a way to organize bonds and, in this sense, it becomes a choice, since there are lesbians for whom the fact of establishing relationships with women is a sexual and romantic orientation, and there are lesbians with diverse sexual and romantic relationships who have decided to set their affective bonds exclusively with women or people of any gender except cis-men as a vital and/or political choice.

In this way, RA is also a political philosophy, since it rejects not only the hierarchical organization of bonds based on a romantic-sexual differentiation but also the romantic privilege upon other types of connections, and the privilege of the couple as opposed to other types of personal bonds. Instead, it supports a horizontal conception of affective bonds and a self-organized experience, built by the people who establish the bonds. It also has a community perspective, in the sense of being conscious that our bonds make us interrelate and our affective relationships weave a web, and highlights interdependence.

It is a political philosophy because these movements pose the rearrangement of care and life-sustaining work outside the exclusive romantic couple and traditional family; broadening this mindset also brings forth a change in the way we establish familial relationships, offering other ways in addition to blood ties and romantic bonds. This connects with queer practices and politics around family and kinship relationships (Butler, 2004; Weston, 1991) and with the emotional and material relevance that friendship relations have for queer people (Roseneil, 2004). A political analysis of the movements of these rearrangements in affective networks will allow us to understand RA as a tool theoretically capable of building alternatives to the social organization based on the nuclear family, which relies on compulsory monogamy and heterosexuality, and these, in turn, on the sex–gender system, and also to recognize the practices that already build alternative life organizations. This is why, from a feminist perspective, RA is a political philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

Even though not all relationship anarchists share the political approach of RA (RA paradigm can be only applied to the way we manage our intimate relationships), in the context of activism in the state of Spain and in Catalonia, I would say the paradigm of RA *is* being approached with this political perspective in mind, and this is the work I do from a queer, feminist approach, within the movement known in Spain and Catalonia as transfeminism (Solá and Missé, 2011), and from lesbian, non-essentialist feminism.

## Thinking RA from a queer feminist perspective

The concept of transfeminism in Spain is currently being debated in social networks and in the activist context. I understand it as Miquel Missé and Miriam Solá put it forward in the first place, during the Feminist State Conferences in Granada, 2009 (published in 2011). Since then, other perspectives on the term have raised the discussion of what and whom it represents, which its political objects are, and thus, who can legitimately speak of transfeminism. Here, I use transfeminist perspective to refer to the theoretical and political alliance between feminism and the trans movement (Solá and Missé, 2011).

Transfeminism is a non-essentialist paradigm of social transformation. It is a stream of feminism that is supported, among other things, by criticism from different branches of the naturalization of social structures of gender and sexuality, such as criticism of the naturalization of heterosexuality (Rich, 1986; Wittig, 1992), of the sex–gender system (Rubin, 1975), or of the binary opposition of man–woman from the perspective of gender as a performative action (Butler, 1990; Preciado, 2002; and others). It also includes an intersectional perspective that suggests these structures do not work separately from

other social structures such as class, race, or functional diversity, to state a few, but are linked together with other structures.

Thinking RA from a queer feminist perspective means, among other things, bearing in mind the approach that focuses on social structures, on the way they are constructed and on the way they are reproduced (on a large scale, through discourse, symbols, and institutions; and on a smaller scale, through what we do in our intimate sphere). To think RA, we need to start off from analysis and evaluation of compulsory monogamy as a form of social organization and of the structures intertwined in the *monogamous thinking* (Vasallo, 2016).

It also means understanding love and emotional bonds (i.e. meanings, feelings, and practices) as realities which are not universal or detached from history, but part of a contextualized and specific cultural mindset, what Mari Luz Esteban (2011) has called *loving thinking*, and keeping in mind the denaturalizing approach.

### **Feminisms thinking about love and its structures**

From its different branches, feminisms have thought, analyzed, and theorized about love as space and social power (Jónasdóttir, 2010), its relation with gender constructions, compulsory heterosexuality, and the sexual division of labor (Esteban, 2011; Rubin, 1975), with monogamy and its structural function (Chiapini, 2009). Furthermore, feminisms have made proposals to subvert the structures that are sustained by their discourses, such as lesbian existence as a political decision (Rich, 1986), love decentralization (Esteban, 2011), or the break with compulsory monogamy (Neri, 2009; Rosso, 2009; Vasallo, 2013, 2016)

It is no wonder that love and monogamy have been topics of special interest for non-heterosexual feminisms, following the intersectional logic that structures are linked together, considering monogamy not only as a personal practice but also as a social institution, as a political, ideological, and economic regime (Robinson, 1997; Vasallo, 2013, 2016) as we can find in the compilation 'Desobedientes: Experiencias y reflexiones sobre poliamor, relaciones abiertas y sexo casual entre lesbianas latinoamericanas', in the essay by Diana Marina Neri (2009):

The first battle is against alienation. Power is not only outside ourselves, it is deeply ingrained within. [...] From polyamory, we resist the univocal expression of a single heterosexual body and of heteronormativity. We resist a machine-body that marches with the reproductive function of the system. We resist an exclusive way of loving, thinking, feeling, relating, living, growing, sucking, being. We resist a binary logic in sex, in gender, things and ideas. (p. 15)

Or in the introduction (of the compilation) by the de-colonial feminist Yuderkis Espinosa (2009):

If our open desire of experimentation, of enjoyment, of encounters with women, was already born marked by major disobedience to any limit and attempt of normalization, in our experience, the possibility of living as lesbians opened us to the possibility of breaking also with other limits and obligations that, although they have also affected men, have specifically and viciously

affected women. Thus, I do not know a lesbian community in which the free experience of sexuality is not a major concern. (p. 7)

Clarisse Chiapini, a libertarian feminist lesbian from the generation of May 1968, borrows the concept of compulsory monogamy from the Marxist analysis of monogamy as a structure ‘One of the basic institutions of the capitalist and patriarchal system is the hetero-monogamous family. The cornerstone for the maintenance of the hetero-monogamous family is the loyalty of women. Lesbian families reproduce that norm’ (Chiapini, 2009: 53).

Following Chiapini’s analyses, the structural function of monogamy has a twofold objective: inheritance succession (which has a specific meaning for non-heterosexual communities when access to marriage is claimed during and after the 1980’s AIDS crisis, as a strategy against the lack of protection that implied the fact, among others, that the material goods of the deceased couple became property of their birth family) and the reproduction of surplus value: inasmuch as work performed by women within family structures is unpaid, the reproduction cost of labor force decreases.

Mari Luz Esteban (2011) develops this idea by suggesting how, through the *loving thought* (in a parallel with Monique Wittig’s straight mind), the sexual division of labor becomes naturalized, being a woman becomes a question of assuming caregiving tasks ‘for love’, which means doing them voluntarily, without expecting anything in return (without reciprocity, one of the fundamental concepts in her theory about the need to transform that loving thought), without being paid and becoming invisible. ‘Love is a trap for women, it is a deception’ (Esteban, 2011: 53).

However, for Esteban, love is much more than a set of cultural tales that build up the gender difference and naturalizes the sexual division of labor. For Esteban, love becomes the natural basis for social, family, and kinship organization.

Continuing with the dialogue between Esteban and Chiapini’s thoughts, the latter asks: ‘Why does the monogamous family structure persist in time?’ No doubt, it persists thanks to its ideological function, its symbolism of happiness, as the only possible form of well-being.

‘The ideology of the “happy monogamous family” is as powerful as other social representations’ (Chiapini, 2009: 55), a response that finds continuity in Esteban’s (2011) theory, for whom in the social system that the *loving thought* represents, love is understood as

the most genuine, the most sublime, the absolute, the transcendent, the solution to the supposed emotional deficiency that human beings would have for the mere fact of being ... an absolutely cultural and western reading that turns love into the natural basis of this social organization, family, kinship, which is not just not the only possible, but which is also not even the fairest. (p. 24)

That is, monogamy does not refer only to the area of sexual and romantic exclusivity in a couple. Monogamy is a form of social organization as the family unit is based on the couple and also establishes what constitutes kinship: after blood (of the family of origin), the romantic bond (the basis on which to form a new family) reproduces the social

organization, through the idea of love (Esteban, 2011). Carlos Yela (2000) estimates it was toward the end of the 19th century that love started to be associated with marriage and sexuality, a moment in which marriage went from being arranged to being for love, and romantic love became normative.

Here, 'love' makes/becomes a metonymy with 'monogamy', and it is a two-way metonymy: love implies monogamy and monogamy implies love, 'It is likely that the greatest obstacle for debate is this acceptance of monogamy as a natural system that links it inevitably to love, as if they were synonyms. Criticising monogamy means doubting love, calling it into question' (Vasallo, 2013, own translation). In that sense, we speak about compulsory monogamy, in parallel with compulsory heterosexuality.

The way in which the *loving thought* naturalizes this form of social organization is through the idea that love (understood as the sentiment of corresponded romantic attraction) is the most significant thing that a human being can experience, what is going to bring true happiness (limiting other kinds of happiness and bonds in that capacity to generate a sense of personal fulfillment). Therefore, it is only logical to organize life around that romantic bond. This set of ideas that give rise to romantic privilege over other types of ties are the correlates of amatonormativity. The idea that one should aspire to a romantic, central, and exclusive relationship because it is the way to be happy, the ideology of the monogamous family as the symbol of Chiapini's happiness (Chiapini, 2009), as the only possible form of well-being.

This is why, from a queer feminist perspective, one of the things we need to do to offer alternatives to monogamy is denaturalize love. We need to 'unveil' which structures and ways of functioning are sustaining those images of love and those discourses, which type of lifestyle they enable and what type of social organization they sustain (a symbolic organization which is also material, legal, etc.), to create alternatives to this organization and social distribution of resources.

## **Compulsory monogamy and some queer people**

But, what happens to queer people who do not basically fit into this cis-heterosexual structure of compulsory monogamy? In Spain, a law was passed in 2005 which regulated marriage between people regardless of their gender, which included access to adoption for same-sex couples (Law 13/2005), and in 2006, laws regulating assisted reproduction techniques were passed, which allowed access to artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization to any woman capable of becoming pregnant, regardless of their civil status or sexual orientation (Law 14/2006). These changes gradually and partially allow queer people access to monogamous structures and nuclear families and to this unique way of recognition and social validation. This is something that we need to integrate in the non-monogamous activism: the specifically vulnerable positions that we, LGTB/queer people, come from and how monogamy has been and is an option that diminishes this vulnerability. We have other strategies to empower ourselves regarding those vulnerabilities. However, other sexual-affective models of relationships can't give us the acknowledgment and the social and legal recognition that monogamy has.

Nevertheless, queer people have historically been creating other types of family (Weston, 1991). One reason is because of family abandonment due to homophobia,

transphobia, lesbophobia, in a context in which the nuclear family is and has been the main economical and care supporting network. So, we needed to build other kinship relationships not based on blood ties or marriage but as equally essential for life as the others.

Another reason is because some queer people have been looking for ways to have descendants. From a non-cis-heterosexual reality, some of the people or couples whose sexual practices do not result in conception have been looking for different strategies to have descendants. These strategies can include other people with whom the person does not have a romantic connection, like the classic ‘test-tube dad’, a donor friend with whom you can make an agreement on the kind of bond he is going to have with the child: from just donor to co-parent, taking part of the family unit, or somewhere in between.

Nowadays, as we recalled, laws regarding assisted reproduction techniques were passed, and the process is funded by the public health system under the same conditions, even though access to the public service is not homogeneous throughout the state.<sup>10</sup> Although women in relationships with other women can access assisted reproduction techniques, marriage is required in order to recognize the filiation of the non-pregnant mother.

Regarding surrogacy or surrogate maternity, it is currently illegal in Spain (unless the process takes place in another country where it is regulated).<sup>11</sup> At the present time, there are several civic associations demanding its regulation,<sup>12</sup> as well as associations which have been positioned against.<sup>13</sup> In 2015, the parliamentary group UPyD presented before the Spanish Parliament the first legislative proposal to regulate surrogacy in Spain, which was rejected.<sup>14</sup> In 2017, a different parliamentary group, Ciudadanos, presented a second proposed law, which is still being debated.<sup>15</sup>

With increasing access to assisted reproduction techniques that implemented queer people to be able to construct monogamous family units, the question arises as to whether or not this is the only place where we want to go. Looking back with perspective to the process of homologation of the Civil Law for non-heterosexual unions through the Equal Marriage Act, passed in 2005, thanks to the demands of the LGTB associative network, as activists we have learned two things: on one hand, it has had a positive impact on social acceptance of gays and lesbians and has become a tool to contain our specifically vulnerable situations; on the other hand, it also produces an assimilationist movement of the sexual-affective diversity toward the hegemonic model of the couple and the family (Trujillo, 2016).

The RA paradigm, in its proposal to decentralize romantic bonds as the only way to build a family structure, provides a framework from which to resist and to think of other bonds able to maintain a family unit and affective and caregiving networks. It comes together with queer approaches to kinship relationships, such as the definition proposed by Judith Butler (2004): ‘kinship practices will be those that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death’ (pp. 102–103). This call into question two ideas: that only one family model can offer a healthy environment for nurturing, and that other models always will have dysfunctional aspects, becoming more dysfunctional as they take distance from the hegemonic model. Instead

of that, it allows us to think of a ‘diverse family culture’ (Luengo and Rodríguez, 2010) in which the model of nuclear family constructed on a romantic-sexual connection in monogamy and with biological descendants would be one more among others, and not the model to assimilate our families to.

To conclude, we do not only need other models to incorporate into the collective imaginary in conditions of equity, which means recognition and social prestige: they are already part of our collective imaginaries because we already live in these realities, but they don’t have legal recognition. Moreover, in that process of assimilation of affective and family diversity, I wonder if those other models of non-romantic relationships are going to be less significant.<sup>16</sup> We also need a legal framework that recognizes other kinds of bonds, legal civil union forms not based on a romantic bond, and other kinds of filiations not based on blood ties or marriage.

### **Unveiling love to think other material alternatives, unveiling love to think other symbolic alternatives**

We also need to unveil love as generosity, altruism, giving without expecting anything in return, so we can see what is behind those images. When Brigitte Vasallo (2016) talks about breaking up with monogamy as a political project, she warns that monogamy ‘is not a practice, but a framework of thought: the monogamous thinking. It is not about numbers, about how many people you sleep with, but about interactional dynamics’. She analyzes three of these dynamics: hierarchy, exclusivity (that goes hand in hand with exclusion), and confrontation – three interactional dynamics that also appear in other power structures like sexism, racism, and so on (Vasallo, 2016). These dynamics are part of our cultural discourse about love; they are the counterparts of the myths of romantic love (Yela, 2003). If we do not question that discourse of love, we will reproduce the monogamous thinking and will probably reproduce the same interactional dynamics in our own non-monogamous relationships.

Also, as *queer-relational people*,<sup>17</sup> we need to unveil the discourse of love to rename a different frame of thought that questions our life experiences: the continuum between attractions. Here, I am using the categories of romantic attraction and sexual attraction from the asexual and aromantic communities (Avenitas, 2017),<sup>18</sup> drawing a parallel between this continuum and the sex–gender system:

Gender is not only an identification with one sex; it also entails that sexual desire be directed toward the other sex. The sexual division of labor is implicated in both aspects of gender – male and female it creates them, and it creates them heterosexual. (Rubin, 1975: 115)

In the same way the sex–gender system assumes a continuum between genital sex, gender identity (together with its gender roles), and sexual orientation, the continuum between orientation assumes

1. Experimenting sexual attraction and romantic attraction is a universal experience (everyone experiences it and in the same way);
2. There must be sexual attraction in order to feel romantic attraction;

3. There must be a mutual sexual and romantic connection in order to create a stable, functional, and fulfilling relationship/partnership. And inside the Love Discourse, that monogamous romantic relationship is the only accepted way to create a family that includes long-term partnership, cohabitation, joint economic responsibility, and potential child raising.

This continuum system offers the ‘natural’ script for affective relationships: sexual attraction → romantic attraction → monogamous couple relationship → meaningful life project. Any alternative way of living those steps will be a non-conventional relationship: a romantic relationship in which one or both members are asexual, any project of aromantic partnership, cohabitation, or child rearing within a non-romantic relationship, a family project began by more than two people.

That ‘natural’ script is part of the discourse that says that romantic intimacy is what ‘allows us to be our true selves more than any other space in life’ (Esteban, 2011: 53). That is why any other kind of relationship will not allow us to be fully ourselves, because non-romantic relationships will always be just a substitute (as it was said in the past about homosexual relationships, that couldn’t be as important as the ‘natural’ ones, the heterosexual ones) and because sex must be always the key to physical and emotional intimacy, as reproduced by the narrative of sex-centrism.

## Conclusion

We – the ones who live, feel, experience relationships and attraction outside amatonormativity – need to unveil love too, so we can understand that being ‘the other’, ‘the different’, when talking about relationships does not mean that we are broken, that there is anything wrong with us or that our emotional bonds will be always dysfunctional because we are ‘the ones who bring the problem’. We need to unveil to fight the stigma, to build alternatives that make sense from our own perspective. I suggest that RA can offer us a place from which to look, and, without overlooking the impact of stigma,<sup>19</sup> maybe questioning the very idea of happiness from a queer perspective (Ahmed, 2009) can be an empowering strategy for us.

But although in this article I have proposed that AR has a discourse with the potential to challenge normativities while rejecting hierarchies, I suggest that it also has the risk of being assimilated from liberal thinking.

Setting on the debate about if non-monogamies have the potential to challenge gendered power relations (Robinson, 1997) and ‘to break down or transcend either/or dualities around sexuality and gender (for those in relationships with people of more than one gender) and romantic love and friendship (e.g. Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995; Robinson, 1997) [or] they may reproduce and reinforce hetero- and mono-normativity in various ways rather than challenging them (e.g. Finn and Malson, 2008; Jamieson, 2004)’ (Barker and Langdridge, 2010: 4), I argue that a liberal conception of RA is possible, which addresses the construction of intimate relationships solely from a personal choice perspective. Although personal choice may constitute an act of agency, the rhetoric of free choice negates the social context (Robinson, 1997) and the dominant structures.

I uphold that in order to develop this radical potential, RA needs to be understood as a political philosophy. From this perspective, RA places the focus on social structures. In this article, I have tried to make a theoretical contribution to the RA paradigm as a political philosophy, from the feminist critiques of monogamy and the naturalization of love. In addition, I have raised the concepts of the pyramid of relationships and the continuum (between attractions) system to pose how the different hierarchies that RA puts in question are linked: amatonormativity, sex-centrism, and couple privilege. To conclude, I defend that in order for RA to be critical, it has to focus on interdependence and the deconstruction of hierarchies (not only these three), moving away from the rhetoric of free choice. And for this, it needs to have a feminist perspective.

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### Notes

1. Poliamor Madrid, constituted as an association in 2013, but with origin in 2004; Golfxs con Principios, Madrid, in 2008; Amors Plurals, Catalonia, in 2015; Poliamor Valencia in 2016; Zorras No Monógamas, Madrid, specifically LGTB+, in 2017, among others.
2. OpenCon Catalonia, annual gathering, since 2012; Amors Plurals' conferences, annual, since 2015; OpenCon Madrid, annual gathering, since 2015; Eixams, annual gathering, Catalunya, since 2016; first Relationship Anarchy Gathering, in 2016.
3. There is a list of the existing groups available at the Golfxs con Principios website, 2016: <http://www.golfxscnprincipios.com/lamoscacojonera/grupos-poliamor-en-facebook-espana/>
4. <https://www.morethantwo.com/polyglossary.html>
5. First Relationship Anarchy Gathering, Albacete (Spain), 16 and 17 July 2016.
6. Polyamory is a polysemic concept. A basic definition of polyamory can be established in order to identify points that differ from other ways of creating bonds, for instance, the definition of More than two quoted above, but that conceptual difference is based on one specific literature on polyamory. In the context of Spanish non-monogamies' activism, I find it useful to draw a conceptual distinction, but we have to bear in mind that there are many ways of understanding polyamory, some of which may include non-romantic relationships or perspectives attempting to avoid hierarchy of bonds on the basis of sex or romance (see, for example, Diana Marina, Neri, 2009).
7. Silvia Valle (2015) uses the metaphor of the boxes for different affective relationships. The box of friendship, the box of the lover, the box of the partner, 'and I wonder: what causes movement from one box to another? Is it sex that causes promotion? Does the box of friendship need to be placed below the box of lover just because there is a sexual bond?' (own translation). And, she suggests an affective DIY (Do It Yourself): customizing boxes for each relation.

8. Amy Gahran (2012) coined the term *relationship escalator* and defined it as the default set of societal customs for the proper conduct of intimate relationships. Progressive steps with clearly visible markers and a presumed structural goal of permanently monogamous (sexually and romantically exclusive), cohabitating marriage – legally sanctioned if possible. The social standard by which most people gauge whether a developing intimate relationship is significant, ‘serious’, good, healthy, committed or worth pursuing or continuing.
9. As a feminist political theory, it is a paradigm unable to claim universality. My standpoint is a particular reality privileged by eurocentrism, racism, ethnocentrism, or imperialism. And from there, I use among others the analytic categories of nuclear families, monogamy and compulsory heterosexuality, and the couple privilege. These categories make sense within that reality and revolve around those axes. The political importance of kinship based on blood ties or marriage, community, motherhood, or women’s identity are complex categories with more meanings. For instance, if you belong to a community to which the State tried to apply sterilization policies, the biological bond within it might have meanings not shared by those that are not threatened by this structural violence.
10. The law regulating assisted human reproductive procedures (Law 14/2006) allows access to these procedures to any woman irrespective of their civil status and sexual orientation. In 2014, the Order 2065/2014 of 31 October requires as a condition to benefit from these assisted techniques in the public health service a period of minimum 12 months of vaginal intercourse, which excludes single women and those engaged in a relationship with another cis-woman. This regulation is of a lower rank to the above Law and has been applied in a non-homogeneous way in the different administrative regions. The administration of some of these regions establish particular legislations allowing access and some courts have decided to force regional governments to provide couples formed by women with that service since the Order contradicts a higher law.
11. The same Law 14/2006 establishes that the parentage of children born by surrogacy will be determined by the birth, that is, the surrogate mother cannot renounce to maternal filiation, and that any contract in which she refuses in favor of third parties will be null and void. However, it is allowed to officially register children born under this technique in countries applying regulations on this issue but with some restrictions. Among these, one parent should hold Spanish citizenship and there must be a court decision ensuring the rights of the surrogate mother. In these cases, the surrogate mother won’t be listed in the registry (Instruction of 5 October 2010, by the General Direction of Registry and Notaries Public).
12. Asociación Son Nuestros Hijos (<http://sonnuestroshijos.blogspot.com.es>) Asociación por la Gestación Subrogada en España (<http://xn-gestacionsubrogadaenEspaa-woc.es/>).
13. Campaign No somos vasijas (<http://nosomosvasijas.eu/>), Red Estatal contra el Alquiler de Ventres (<http://www.noalquilesvientres.com/>).
14. <http://www.europapress.es/sociedad/noticia-rechazada-congreso-propuesta-upyd-gestacion-subrogada-altruista-20151020144810.html>
15. 122/000117 *Proposición de Ley reguladora del derecho a la gestación por subrogación* (Proposed Law regulating the right to gestation by subrogation), BOE 8 September 2017, 145-1.
16. Living aside unintentional reasons as a result of economic recession, migration, or poverty, for example.
17. Queer-relational people are those who experience romantic or sexual attraction in no conventional ways, people in the aromantic spectrum, in the asexual spectrum, or those for whom a relationship is not always more significant because of romantic elements.
18. I use the model that theoretically conceptualizes attraction in a differentiated way from asexual communities and aromantic communities online (AVEN, Spanish-speaking AVEN,

several blogs, and websites for the dissemination of information) and talks by the association Asexual Community Spain. These communities are heterogeneous and categories are under revision. Some are useful for some people, others are not, some people agree with all of them, and some people revise them. To me, personally, the categories of sexual attraction, romantic attraction, sensual attraction, aesthetic attraction, and platonic attraction have been quite useful as analytic categories both theoretically and experientially based.

19. For further reading about the negative impact on the psychological well-being arising from being part of a minority group, and on minority stress in LGB people, see Brooks (1981) and Meyer (2003):

There exists an incongruity in the center of the minority stress condition between culture, needs and experiences of the minority group members and the dominant social structures, which reflects features and needs of the majority group. Minority stress is a constant experience in a society in which the dominant group has defined norms and values of superiority and exclusion. (Antonelli and Dèttore, 2013; own translation)

It would be relevant to research in which way this experience affects queer-relational people.

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## Author biography

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