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Towards a queer politics of consensual non-monogamy. From queer kinship to the queer commons[1]

(Para uma política queer de não monogamia consensual. Do parentesco queer aos comuns queer)

(Por una política queer de la no monogamia consensual. Del parentesco queer a los comunes queer)

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the question how a queer perspective may inform radical and transformative political agendas around Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM). It argues that no relationships are ever truly transformative or transgressive because of their unconventional constellation alone. Rather, CNMs need to be consciously politicised in ways that tap into wider political movement agendas to fulfil their queer potential. The paper further argues that radical queer political agendas around CNM need to consider the diversity of populations engaged in CNMs. It suggests that the debates about intersectionality and positionality in Black, indigenous and decolonial feminisms and queer-of-colour critiques, and Édouard Glissant's call for a poetics of relation and the "right to opacity" can provide rich inspiration for a multi-issue politics based on an affirmation of difference and multiplicity. The paper goes on to explore some key themes within queer-inspired debates on CNM, moving from the discussion of politics of pleasure to queer kinship theory, closing with the argument that queer CNM politics are further dependent on an expansive ethics of care, as aptly theorised in social movement debates on the commons. The article utilises queer, feminist, anti-racist, decolonial and anti-capitalist critical theories to sketch a framework of concerns that may help developing transformative political agendas around CNM in different social contexts.
KEYWORDS: Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM); queer kinship; queer commons; intersectionality; opacity (*opacité*).

Resumo: Este artigo aborda a questão de como uma perspectiva *queer* pode informar agendas políticas radicais e transformadoras em torno da Não Monogamia Consensual (NMC). Ele argumenta que nenhum relacionamento é verdadeiramente transformador ou transgressor apenas por causa de sua constelação não convencional. Em vez disso, as NMCs precisam ser conscientemente politizadas, de forma a se encaixarem em agendas de movimentos políticos mais amplos, para que seu potencial *queer* seja alcançado. O artigo argumenta, ainda, que as agendas políticas *queer* radicais em torno das NMCs precisam considerar a diversidade das populações envolvidas nas NMCs. Sugere que os debates sobre interseccionalidade e posicionalidade nos feminismos negro, indígena e decolonial e nas críticas *queer of colour*, bem como o apelo de Édouard Glissant por uma poética da relação e o "direito à opacidade" podem fornecer uma rica inspiração para uma política de múltiplas questões baseada na afirmação da diferença e da multiplicidade. O artigo prossegue explorando alguns temas-chave dentro dos debates de inspiração queer sobre a NMC, passando da discussão sobre a política do prazer para a teoria do parentesco *queer*, encerrando com o argumento de que a política *queer* da NMC depende ainda mais de uma ética expansiva do cuidado, conforme apropriadamente teorizado nos debates dos movimentos sociais sobre os comuns. O artigo utiliza teorias críticas *queer*, feministas, antirracistas, decoloniais e anticapitalistas para esboçar uma estrutura de preocupações que podem ajudar a desenvolver agendas políticas transformadoras em torno da NMC em diferentes contextos sociais.
Palavras-chave: Não Monogamia Consensual (NMC); parentesco *queer*; comuns *queer*; interseccionalidade; opacidade (*opacité*).

Resumen: Este artículo aborda la cuestión de cómo una perspectiva *queer* puede informar agendas políticas radicales y transformadoras en torno a la No Monogamia Consensual (NMC). Argumenta que ninguna relación es verdaderamente transformadora o transgresora solo por su constelación no convencional. En cambio, las NMC deben ser conscientemente politizadas para encajar en agendas de movimientos políticos más amplios para que su potencial *queer* sea alcanzado. El artículo también sostiene que las agendas políticas *queer* radicales en torno a las NMC deben considerar la diversidad de las poblaciones involucradas en las NMC. Sugiere que los debates sobre interseccionalidad y posicionalidad en los feminismos negro, indígena y decolonial, así como las críticas *queer* of colour, y el llamado de Édouard Glissant por una poética de la relación y el "derecho a la opacidad" pueden proporcionar una rica inspiración para una política de múltiples cuestiones basada en la afirmación de la diferencia y la multiplicidad. El artículo continúa explorando algunos temas clave dentro de los debates de inspiración *queer* sobre la NMC, pasando de la discusión sobre la política del placer a la teoría del parentesco *queer*, concluyendo con el argumento de que la política *queer* de la NMC depende aún más de una ética expansiva del cuidado, según lo teorizado apropiadamente en los debates de los movimientos sociales sobre los comunes. El artículo utiliza teorías críticas *queer*, feministas, antirracistas, decoloniales y anticapitalistas para esbozar una estructura de preocupaciones que pueden ayudar a desarrollar agendas políticas transformadoras en torno a la NMC en diferentes contextos sociales.
Palabras clave: No Monogamia Consensual (NMC); parentesco *queer*; comunes *queer*; interseccionalidad; opacidad (*opacité*).

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1 Introduction

This article looks at Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) from a queer perspective. Specifically, it aims to identify key concerns within a queer, radical transformative political agenda around CNM ways of life. Politics constantly touches upon the lives of people who practice CNM, namely because of stigmatization and marginalization, and the pervasive non-intelligibility imposed by mono-normative and heteronormative regimes of knowledge (Rambukkana, 2015; Schippers, 2016). I argue that if we[3] wish to change anything about this, we will need to consciously analyse and politicise the social relations we are part of. The paper argues that is not obvious at all how CNMs operate in politics, how they figure in class, gender, racial, and sexual discourses politics, the construction nations and nation states, transnational dynamics, and geopolitics, as well as wider economic processes. Resultantly, we need to avoid the temptation of any quick identity-political reasoning, and the reliance upon singular one-dimensional rights claims. Attempts to forge a radical queer agenda around CNM need to continuously address a range of difficult questions: what do we want to achieve, in any given context we are working in? What are the wider implications of our demands, for ourselves and for others? Whom do we want to work with? Who do we want to be, and what kind of society do we want to live in? CNM lives are exciting and challenging at the same time. Any attempt to do justice to them, and to develop a political language around them, too, is exciting and challenging.

The discussion that follows is primarily theoretical and speculative, rather than empirical, informed by my knowledge of social movements in Europe, namely those who were engaged in developing forms of CNM and LGBTQIAPN+ activism. I hope that its references to transnational debates and contexts render the matters and questions discussed also relevant for people who work in different contexts.

The paper is structured as follows: In the first section, I engage with some key terminologies and concepts around CNM and Queer and explain from what kind of position I have approached these themes. I then go on to discuss different positions on the interconnections between queer and CNM and argue that CNM is in the need of conscious politicisation, suggesting that any meaningful queer politics of CNM needs to be concerned with difference. In the following section, I show that this can be achieved by embracing intersectionality perspectives and/or succumbing to a poetics of relation (the sense of Édouard Glissant), recognising what Glissant called the ‘right to opacity’. I then discuss what I consider to be key elements within truly transformative queer politics of CNM,

3 When I use the word “we” in this article, I refer to the contingent, temporary, and coalitional assemblage of all those who are inclined to think about queer politics regarding to CNM, rather than to an identity-based group or collective.

namely pleasure, kinship, care, and a concern with the common. In the conclusion, I reinforce my argument for an intersectional, multi-issue politics around CNM that develops an expansive ethics of care beyond the boundaries of kinship towards a wider social sphere of communal or public concerns that can be named 'the common' (Federici, 2019).

2 Terminologies, Concepts, and Positionality

In this section, I briefly explain key concepts (such as CNM and queer) and specify in which contexts I have encountered them and why I consider them to be useful for discussing political and ethics projects around dissident intimacies and sexualities. Two thoughts guide my discussion in this section: terminologies are in flux and our own positionality matters.

Consensual Non-monogamy

CNM functions as an umbrella term, standing for manifold relations that are not monogamous by consensus (e.g., based on shared knowledge, transparency, and a conscious commitment to tackle dependencies and inequalities in the concerned relationship or network). Using this term signals that we acknowledge the inherent diversity of intimate and sexual cultures and movements. Like in any context, people tend to draw different boundaries. For me, CNM potentially includes multiple relationships with and without children, polyamory, relationship anarchy, open couple relations, swingers, BDSM play circles, fuck- and cuddle buddies, erotic friendships, as well as certain forms of group marriage (polygamy) and sex work (Cardoso and Klesse, 2022; Rambukkana, 2015). Most researchers into CNM acknowledge that there are major conceptual and cultural differences between many of these practices but are nonetheless convinced that it is worthwhile to explore common grounds (among individual manifestations within these groupings) to show up extensive genealogies of power, and to elicit possibilities for joint political action.

Queer

Queer denotes a political disposition to challenge normativity. The concept had its origins in Anglo-lingual debates in intellectual and activist settings concerned with undoing the normativities around sexuality and gender (such as heteronormativity, and cis-normativity) (Warner, 1993, 1999; Seidman, 1997; Sedgwick, 1991; Butler, 2006, 2011). Debates about queer have broadened since the 1990s, and queer theory is more inclined nowadays to engage with body-related and emotional normativities on larger scale, pushed by e.g., Black and indigenous feminist and queer and trans

people of colour (QTPOC) critiques to recognise and tackle the central role of race and colonialism in the construction of intimacy and sexuality, by Queer Crip theory to realise the pervasive power of ablism, neuro-normativity and normative beauty standards, and by trans* studies to recognise that cis-normativity or trans*-fetishism structured much of the early queer debates (Eng *et al.* 2004; Eng, 2010; Ferguson, 2004, Mcruer, 2006, 2018; Eng and Puar, 2020).

Queer is a travelling concept. This means, it has been adapted and elaborated in many parts of the world (Mesquita *et al.*, 2012). While it may have a certain surface resonance with local and indigenous practices and philosophies, it does not necessarily provide an adequate tool to analyse and fully understand any of them. The word may not even be translatable in adequate ways into certain languages, as Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba (2016) and David William Foster (2018) argue with regards to Spanish or Portuguese. The concept of queer is in global circulation, and queer theory is in a constant flux, and has been subject to creolisation (Glissant, 2010; 2018). This means, queer is also subject to translation, and as such involves the 'staging of tensions, resonances, and contradictions' (Pierce *et al.*, 2021, p. 322). Queer itself is shaped by the cultural form of the 'Coloniality of Power', to adopt the terminology of decolonial scholars (see, Quijano, 2000; Lugones, 2007; 2010). Moreover, being in flux and dislocation, the concept queer may in fact need even further conscious efforts of dislocation to prevent it from closure, orthodoxy, and a pull towards universalism (Pérez Navarro, 2023). Yet rejecting universalism inadvertently brings to the fore the question of positionality.

Positionality – where do I come from?

It is also important to say a few words about myself in this context. I am a queer-identified man with a life-long attachment to CNM ways of life, a white person of German origin living in the UK, teaching sociology at a UK university (Manchester Met), researching gender and sexual politics and contemporary intimacies in Europe. I turned to queer studies working on LGBTQ and CNM issues in the 1990s, reading the work of primarily US and UK based queerly minded scholars such as Michael Warner, Jon Binnie, Anna-Marie-Smith, Davina Cooper, Judith Butler, and many others, always concerned with approaching queer from an intersectional point of view. I had encountered and learnt to value intersectional perspectives through engagement with US and UK debates on Black feminism and Queer of Colour Critiques, such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, The Combahee River Collective, Avtar Brah, Nira Yuval-Davis, Floya Anthias, Jin Haritaworn, Cathy J. Cohen, and many others (Erel *et al.*, 2010; Salem, 2018). I have curiously witnessed the metamorphoses of queer theory ever since. In my early encounters,

I appreciated queer because it provided a critical paradigm (concerned with undoing power), as a radical paradigm (aiming at the change not only of individuals or individual issues, but of society as a whole), always thinking the private /public and the micro/macro within a single move.

I hope that these brief thoughts and reflections provided enough background for me now to start exploring the potential links and connections between queer and CNM in the following section.

3 What is Queer About Consensual Nonmonogamy Now? Towards a Politics of Articulation

CNM has been a persistent item on the agenda of many social justice movements, including feminism, gay liberation, trans liberation, as well as many currents of – usually non-party based - radical left-wing socialist, communist or anarchist politics (Bauer and Pieper, 2005; Klesse, 2018a). There has been a long history of critiques of the couple form, the bourgeois nuclear family, and the gender relations and sexual orders sustained by them. This has often been linked with explorations along the ideas of communal living, collective childcare, etc., as it is evidenced by the manifold counter-cultural currents bound up with the movements around the revolutionary moment of 1968 (and the subsequent years), but also in urban and rural social justice movements (e.g., squatting and commune movements) (Rubin, 2001).

Ambivalence

At the same time, the political validation of CNM in social movements has also always been met by critiques, for example by feminists who have complained about oppressive gender ideologies that have sustained 'free love discourses', implying cultural pressures on women in heteronormative or heterosexist activist social movements contexts to make themselves available to men (Bührmann, 1995; Kreutzer, 2004). In brief, there has been suspicion that CNM enshrines male privilege in heterosexual gender relations or fosters the (usually male) objectification of bodies. Likewise, Black feminists and queer scholars who have suggested the legacy of colonial domination and the Transatlantic Slave Trade have shaped the construction of what intimacy and sexuality means today, implying heavily racialized representation, frames of imagination and structures of feelings (Williams, 1977; Moon, 2008) that undermine any utopian vision of queer transgression (Holland, 2012; Wekker, 2016).

We should also not forget, that apart from being articulated from within resistant ideologies, non-monogamy has also been part and partial of conventional adaptions of cultural traditions and

religious frameworks, that have often underscored heteronormative and hetero-patriarchal ideas about gender, sexuality, intimacy, and family life, as it is the case with many gender-exclusive practices within polygynous forms of polygamy (Stacey and Meadow, 2009). At the same time, scholars like Wilkinson (2010) have argued that many advocates of polyamory present an image of their relations as being fully compatible with white middle class reproductive family values that can rightly be called polynormative. As many may have noticed, the title of this section included a reference to her influential article on that subject matter.

Moreover, as research into CNM and Multi-Parenting (MP) shows: Even those who intent to resist dominant relational patterns and problematic gender roles many only manage to 'stretch' the norms, rather than to create something radically new (Roodsaz, 2021). They may only be able to be 'resistant' and 'counter-normative' temporarily, while resorting to mainstream divisions of labour in more stressful periods (Schadler, 2021). Others may hold contradictory views, inventing new parenting practices and roles, while at the same time reproducing deeply engrained ideas about biological parenting, namely motherhood (Raab, 2022). In brief, if it is not so clear at all what is radical, queer and transformative about CNM, there can be no complacency and we have to ask ourselves a range of challenging questions.

Queer Articulations

This means that we must analyse carefully how particular practices of CNM relate the wider landscape of power relations. In these regards, I have always been inspired by the critical work of thinkers such as Stuart Hall (see Hall, 1985; 1986, Grossberg, 1986, Hay *et al*., 2013) or Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2014; Smith, 1998), whose poststructuralist adaptations of hegemony theory suggested that to effectively critique dominant discourses we need to focus on the terms and conditions of 'articulation'. In this line of reasoning, resistant or transformative politics of CNM need to address questions, such as the following: How exactly are hegemonic and activist interpretations of CNM connected with other discourses, paradigms, practices, forms of power or practices of freedom? How is CNM articulated with ideas about citizenship, national belonging, dissidence, respectability, maturity, normative and counter-normative temporalities, dominant practices of racialization, value generation and determination, equality, justice etc. Challenging such articulations or devising alternative ones calls for defining closely the possible connections between CNMs and concrete forms of struggle. This is a creative and collective challenge, a challenge of thinking, envisioning, doing, and action. It invites reflection upon the following questions: What are our goals? What kind of people do we want to be? What kind of

relations to we wish to create? What society do we wish to live in? Addressing these questions, inevitably will have an impact on what kind of struggles we may wish to take on, what coalitions we may want to consider for creating the conditions for true relational diversity to blossom.

4 Opacity, Intersectionality and Positionality. Towards a Politics of Location

Diversity is a loaded and over-worked term. If I talk about relational diversity here, I do not refer to the power-insensitive discourse of individual liberalism but posits diversity either as a given or as a simple matter choice, but to the idea of difference as opacity *(Opacité*), as it has been elaborated by the Martiniquan poet and theorist Édouard Glissant in his thoughts on the poetics of relation (*poétique de la relation*) that flows from cultural processes of creolisation (Glissant, 2011; 2018).

Opacity and Creolisation

Glissant suggests that that creolization has been a specific feature of the cultural dynamics underpinning the (Afro-)Caribbean experiences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the plantation regime. These experiences were shaped by destruction, dispossession, and displacement, but also creative adaptations and practices of cultural mixing that completely did away with any meaningful assumption of cultural essence, purity, or boundedness (Glissant, 2010 see Hall, 2003a, 2003b). The cultures that emerged from these encounters and survival struggles display a radical openness and fluidity, displaying a profound connectivity and opacity. As such, they are radically different from, and provide an alternative to, the imperial 'concept of the One' (Glissant, 2011, p. 12). According to Glissant, the histories of the slave trade and displacement have also implicated the cultural landscapes of the Americas into these experiences of creolization.

Creolization is and unpredictable and convivial process, implying the chance for a new ethical relation to Others, transcending common obsessions with ownership, boundaries, and autonomy. 'I can change by exchanging with the other, without losing or distorting myself', he explains in an article published in *Callaloo* (Glissant, 2013, p. 857). Beauty emerges in the engagement with the other – it is part of the negotiation with difference and the resulting tension. 'Beauty is to be found at this meeting point' (2013, p. 858). This exactly is the poetics of relation. 'Relation is the fundamental frontier, which is open passage', he argues (*ibid*., p. 861). Opacity in this context stands for radical difference, non-translatability, and unknowability, a presence that refuses to be understood and remains thus uncontrollable and unassimilable.

In his later work, Glissant (2017) suggests that globalisation works towards expanding

the process of creolization, resulting in opacity a possibility and ethical option in different (trans) cultural encounters and contexts, across the globe. This emphasis on transversalism has facilitated an engagement with the concept by authors from within the Global North, often driven by artists, scholars and activists of a diasporic position, who often have been adopting Glissant's argument for a 'right for opacity' as a means of advocating for an inclusive politics against pressures of assimilation and the explicit hierarchisation of cultures that goes hand in hand with national absolutism, white supremacy, and racism (Hall, 2003a, 2003b; El-Tayeb, 2011; Gutiérrez Rodriguez and Tate, 2015; Klesse, 2015).

Intersectionality

Radical Queer CNM politics that are worth their name thus need to be concerned with difference. This means, it needs to exceed what Jin Haritaworn (2008, 2015) has criticised as a 'single issue identity politics,' that all-too-often govern LGBTQ+ political agendas, including those that mobilise the label queer. I think that the concept of intersectionality that has been elaborated in Black feminist politics in the USA and elsewhere (see Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2006) provides a good starting point for developing a coalitional multi-issue political agenda that allows for tackling what the Combahee River Collective (2017) has called the 'simultaneity of interlocking oppressions'. Shirley Ann Tate (2023) has pointed to the mutual resonances of critical thinking upon the multiple sources of oppression in feminist politics across the wider anti-racist and decolonial spectrum, thereby bringing Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian perspectives right at the centre of the genealogy of intersectional thinking. Tate suggests that 'intersectionality developed over centuries of activism and theorizing within a Western Hemispheric post-enslavement white settler colonial space which meant that decolonization was already implicated in its emergence' (2023, p. 39).

I consider intersectional perspectives to be compatible with Glissant's ideas on opacity, creolization, and poetics of relation. At the heart of both approaches is the validity of unassimilable difference, addressed through a critical theory of power.

Of course, there are also differences. Black feminist intersectional thought of the 1980s and 1990s tended to operate within more structuralist analytical frameworks, with Marxist anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, radical feminism, and anti-racism providing key concepts for the debate. On the other hand, Glissant's (2010) work has been influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's (2009) rhizomatic thinking, i.e., and approach that is wary of structuralism's investment in firmly defined (and to this extent 'closed') categories, systematicity, and a tendency towards generalisation

and abstraction. For example, Jasbir Puar (2005, 2012) has underscored the differences between a Deleuzian/Guattarian assemblage approach to difference and intersectionality thought. 'Intersectionality privileges naming, visuality, epistemology, representation, and meaning, while assemblage underscores feeling, tactility, ontology, affect, and information,' she argues (2005, p. 128). While intersectionality allegedly is wedded to an 'unrelenting epistemological will to truth' (*ibid*., 128), thereby presupposing identity and disavowing futurity. For Puar, assemblage thinking's concern with ontology renders it much more susceptible to questions of becoming and the unknown, both of which are related to our understanding of futurity (*ibid*., p. 128). While I do not want to play down these different theoretical commitments, I see merit in Avtar Brah's (2022) pragmatic approach to appreciate both concepts as suitable tools for understanding complexity within people's experiences within the world and of themselves. I therefore suggest that both intersectionality and relation provide intellectual methods and critical concepts for understanding CNM experiences and orientation for a political ethics around multi-issue coalitional politics.

While intersectionality has informed some critical work on CNM, explicitly or implicitly (see Haritaworn *et al*., 2006, Klesse, 2007; Rambukkana, 2015; Willey, 2016; Tallbear, 2021), too much of the writing on CNM lacks a critical engagement with intersectional power relations. This matters, because it does not only diminish the complexity of political thought within CNM scholarship and activism, but also reduces the ability of CNM activist communities to address power issues within the political movements, and within the affective bonds of community, intimate and sexual relationships.

CNM Positionalities and the 'politics of location'

Acknowledging this, taking on this challenge, means to realise that our positionality, our location in the wider landscapes of power matters profoundly. Positionality is an ethical-political framework developed by Black and decolonial feminists (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994; Mohanty, 2006). There is a close interconnection of the idea of location/positionality with intersectional political theory. Floya Anthias (2005; p. 44) defines the term as follows: '*Positionality* is a term that references the interplay between *position* within each of the divisions (such as ethnicity/nation, class and gender) and its representation, and *positioning*, the intersubjectively experientially constituted placing that the individual makes in specific contexts.'

I argue that a radical, transformative queer politics of CNM needs to be based on a 'politics of location' (Kaplan, 1994; Brah, 2022). It needs to be sensitive to the differences among those who practice CNM or those who are habitually attacked as being over-sexed or promiscuous,

in irresponsible or non-dignified ways. For example, Black people, people of colour and first Nation people have been placed outside the category of (white) respectable monogamy in colonial contexts. Women within these groups, in particular those women who conduct themselves as autonomous erotic subjects, have been subjected to the whore stigma, sexual shaming, and sexual violence (Collins, 2006; Tallbear, 2021). Queer men and sex workers of different genders, too, suffer from misrepresentation along these lines.

Anti-promiscuity discourses, a chief ideological weapon for those striving to enshrine compulsory monogamy and a hetero-patriarchal gender order have been used differentially to target different populations in different ways (Klesse, 2007). CNM ways of life and CNM public identification thus comes at a different price for different people, depending on our social location within the context of different axis of oppression.

Yet social location also matters with regards to access to safe and adequate housing, reproductive health services and technologies, education, and work, all of which play a key role in facilitating or undermining the ability of construct CNM lives building CNM Kinship. Again, race and class, race, ability, and many other factors do not only impact on representation (ideological framing), but materially translate into inequality and stratification. Our political concerns, needs, strategies depend on our social location. There is no universal and homogenous CNM community. Our political strategies therefore need being worked out in coalitional projects (Carastathis, 2013).

5 Key Themes in a Framework for a Queer Politics of CNM

In the section to follow, I will reflect upon what I consider to be important themes for developing a queer political agenda for social change around CNM. I focus on the politics of queer kinship, pleasure and the defence and expansion of the common. In the light of the discussions so far, it ought to be obvious that I consider these themes to be neither exhaustive nor universally applicable to every context.

Queer Politics of Kinship

A lot of CNM life has been about building intimate relationships outside of the confines of monogamy and the rigid logics of biologically defined reproductive kinship (Sheff, 2014; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020, Klesse, 2019). In these regards, we can think about CNM relationships and families from within the paradigm of queer kinship (Mizielińska, 2022; Brady and Freeman, 2022; Klesse and schippers, 2024).

The ‘families of choice’ discourse (Weston, 1991, 1995; Weeks *et al*., 2001; Jones-Wild

2012), originally designed to talk about LGBTQ+ families, has also been used to talk about enduring, intimate relational networks around variable CNM practices (Weston, 2022; Klesse *et al.*, 2022). CNM families frequently sidestep or undo biology focused kinship practices by either not planning to reproduce and parent, or alternately through the quite common involvement of non-biological parents or non-parenting carers in the care of children (Bennion, 2020; Paine, 2020; Pallotta-Chiarolli *et al*., 2013; Klesse, 2019; Klesse *et al*. 2024).

That notwithstanding, queer researchers often look at the terms family and kinship have with distance and suspicion. The very notion of families has been over-determined by heteronormative assumptions, couple centric feeling rules, and biological connotations (Morgan, 2011; Roseneil, 2007). Many of those disposed to draw upon queer thought therefore avoid the term. Elsewhere, I have myself proposed the concept 'queer bonds' of CNM kinship for similar reasons (Klesse, 2019; see Rodriguez, 2011; Weiner and Young, 2011). Moreover, rather than reclaiming families or inscribing oneself or one's relations in a family discourse, family abolitionist voices have become more powerful in queer- and trans-feminist movements on the Left (Lewis, 2021, 2022; O'brien *et al*., 2021). The basic idea behind family abolitionism is that the family is non-redeemably steeped into exclusivist ideologies, competitive and privatised notions of care and responsibility. It may seem shocking on the first sight that movements concerned with liberation, well-being and equal access to resources for all may want to abolish with the family an institution that is so strongly charged with hope for belonging, support, and safety, often, of course, against all the evidence of one's own experience, as an expression of 'cruel optimism' so to speak (Berlant, 2011; Lewis, 2022). Yet it is important to remember that the political theory of abolitionism (as it has been developed, for example, with regards to the police and prisons) has always proposed a complex and nuanced theory for change, in which certain roles, functions, and values are meant to be remodelled, transposed, and collectivised (see, davis *et al*., 2022). Abolitionism in the family context, too, is not simply about doing away with or destroying the family. It is about building communal ties that allow for different modalities of intimacy and care to emerge outside and beyond structures of privilege.

We can thus see that queer theory has displayed a profound ambivalence regarding the idea of kinship. On the one hand, it has been aiming to transform kinship into a 'radical and open-ended field of relational experimentation' (Brady and Freeman, 2022, p. 2). At the same time, there has also been a pronounced tendency to shy away from its terminology, because of its association with structuralist modes of anthropological theory, its implication in colonial, anti-Black politics of white settler societies, proposing alternative terms, 'such as *relationality, belonging, intimacy,*

and sodality' (ibid., 2).

The wary-ness of regarding the terminology of kinship within certain currents of queer theory has been further nourished by the 'anti-social turn' in queer theorising in the USA, with authors, such as, for example, Leo Bersani (1987, 1995) and Lee Edelman (2004) pushing an interpretation of queerness as a radical negation of identity, belonging, as an undoing of the social itself. In particular, the work of Edelman (2004) identifies and contests 'reproductive futurism' at the heart of heteronormative and antiqueer culture. Queer alterity thus consists in the refusal of a reproductive imperative, and by extension a future-oriented social politics.

While Edelman (2004) is certainly right when he highlights normative ideas about reproduction, child rearing and intergenerational kinship ideologies as key elements in many heteronormative cultural formations, others have pointed out that queer anti-social theory tends to abstract from the cultural and geo-political context and is implicitly US-centric. For example, commenting on LGBTQ+ politics and family practices in Poland, Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa (Kulpa and Mizielińska, 2011; Mizielińska, 2022) have suggested that Edelman's political strategies do not resonate with, and are in fact not adequate to, the specific context of queer resistance and survival in Poland. Despite such contradictions it appears valid to suggest that a critical theory families and kinship has been at the heart of the critical queer enterprise. Yet these concepts remain contested, fraught with ambivalence, used with hesitation.

Many CNM researchers, such as for example Leehee Rothschild in their research on Queer and CNM Kinship in Israel, are adamant that people who practice CNM are proactively engaged in queering kinship in manyfold ways, (Rothschild, 2018; Klesse *et al*., 2022a).

Personally, I understand the ambivalence many feel with regards to the family and kinship terminology. At the same time, I agree with Bradly and Freeman (2022) that queer theory needs to continue theorising kinship in all its fluid and historically changing manifestations, in particular because of the deployment of kinship in racist and colonial governance, the dispossession and genocide of indigenous populations, and the racist casting of groups that have been marginalised in nation building processes, as it is so clearly illustrated in the histories of settler colonialism and white supremacy in the Americas (Spillers, 1987; Cohen, 2001; Rifkin, 2022; Klesse, 2018b; Lenon, 2016; Ertman, 2010; Rambukkana, 2015; Tallbear, 2021; Mogrovejo, 2019). Queer CNM politics therefore needs to build a critical practice and knowledge of kinship, if it wishes to challenge heteronormative, cis-normative and racist nationalist policies. Queer CNM kinship can be both, the motor of radical change, and the retreat into privatised visions of the happy life. Because of these reasons, queer CNM politics needs to invest in an expansive notion of caring

responsibility, and issue to which I will turn to later. Before, I will do this, I would like to reflect more on the theme of a 'happy life'.

Queer Politics of Pleasure

We should not too quickly denigrate the wish for happiness. I do not think there is anything wrong with wanting to lead a happy life or the urge to experience joy, bliss, and pleasure. In fact, the will to do away with the things that make us unhappy and miserable, is often a powerful motor for social change (Segal, 2017; Ehrenreich, 2008; Holloway, 2010; MarcusE, 1972a).

In the USA and UK, currents of queer theory and activism in the 1990s strongly embraced pleasure as a key aspect of creating queer bonds and community. This has included a strong commitment to sexual dissidence and sex-positivity (Warner, 2000; Smith, 1993; Bell and Binnie, 2000; Califia-Rice, 2000), aiming to recapture the moment of playful collective sexual experimentation that had marked early gay liberation politics (Gay Liberation Front, 1971; Altman, 1993; Bronski, 2000; Berlant and Warner, 1998). 'Queers have always known pleasure is a resource', argues Benjamin Shepard (2009, p. 21) in his study of play, pleasure, and performance in protest culture. As the writing of Herbert Marcuse (1972a, 1972b) illustrates, liberationist politics in the post-68 years in general put a strong emphasis on desire, play and pleasure, valuing the subjective, and paying attention to personal needs and feelings, dimensions of human experience that were usually banished from the sphere of organised politics, civil institutions, and economics. Currents of recent queer theorising have foregrounded the playfulness at the heart of sex (Paasonen, 2018; Bem and Paasonen, 2023).

adrienne maree brown's (2019) volume on pleasure activism, too, revitalises this political tradition. brown urges the reader to 'recognize that pleasure is a measure of freedom' (2019, p. 1), and that it is time for beginning 'to understand the liberation possible when we collectively orient around pleasure and longing' (ibid., p. 1). For brown, pleasure activism posits pleasure to be a key element in social justice activism. She highlights the primary significance of pleasure in the lives of Black and brown people – and locates her approach in the traditions of movements towards Black Joy, love, and liberation, drawing further firm links with queer, trans* and non-binary activism. For brown, pleasure is not outside of power, rather the opposite: 'Pleasure activism asserts that we all need and deserve pleasure and that our social structures must reflect this. In this moment, we must prioritize the pleasure of those most impacted by oppression', she asserts (ibid, p. 13). As a result of this, sex, the erotic, food, cooking and eating, humour, drugs, music, and the arts, reading, etc. come to the fore as key activities within activism (Binnie and Klesse, 2024). Some chapters in

her book also deal with non-monogamy and relationship anarchy. A radical queer politics of CNM can take inspiration of this long legacy of pleasure activism in social justice, Black feminist, and queer politics. A queer politics of pleasure does not frame pleasure as the opposite of a politics of care. In the ideal case, these emphases are manifested alongside each other in an organic manner.

Queer Politics of Care

CNM intimacies, like any intimacies must tackle questions of vulnerability and interdependence. This is even more urgent in the face of on-going attacks on health care, social security, welfare, decent wages, and the rights to strike and protest by right-wing and authoritarian governments across the globe (Rosa, 2023).

Research has shown that cuts and austerity measures, reductions in of crisis related break downs in services affect certain groups of people (women, trans* and queer people, people of colour) in even harsher ways (Taylor, 2023; Bassel and Emejulu, 2018). The shrinking of supporting public state functions, and the *a priori* exclusion of access to services on the grounds of systemic racism or lack of formal citizenship overburdens the families or the personal networks of those who are in need. Neo-liberal imperatives and modes of subjectification further install responsibility for care within such close personal networks. Again, social location impacts upon who is likely to take up caring roles and tasks, bringing the significance of class, gender, and racial divisions within CNM communities to the fore (Klesse, 2014). The feminization and racialization of care work in capitalist societies reinforces divisions of labour also in CNM relational contexts (Dalla Costa, 2008; Federici, 2012, 2021; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010). Nat Raha (2021, p. 106) highlights the devaluation of the labour of feminised, racialised, queer, trans*, disabled, and/or migrant workers in these contexts, resulting in precarity, and the shifting of under-paid or non-paid labour to those who are already overworked and/or unemployed.

To address such injustices a truly transformative queer CNM politics needs consider care also as matter of labour and to zoom in onto queer social reproduction as a complex process within a wider economic and policy context. To detach care obligations or expectations from certain subjects and bodies, and from preventing the closure of responsibility around a familial core circle, care practices need to be socialised. The UK based Care Collective (Chatzidakis *et al*., 2020) makes this point, suggesting that care needs to extend beyond small circles, reaching out, assuming a truly transversal character. Their talk of 'promiscuous care' illustrates this nicely and clearly in particular for CNM contexts. 'For us, promiscuous care is an ethics that proliferates outwards to redefine caring relations from the most intimate to the most distant' (2020, p. 43). These claims

draw on a long and extensive debate on care and activism in different feminist contexts (see, for example, Tronto, 1993; Winker, 2015; Precarias A La Deriva, 2004). CNM is an expansive mode of intimacy and kinship production. As such it provides a good ground for developing expansive practices of care, in the sense of the 'promiscuous care', imagined by the Care Collective. By consciously embracing a politics of the common we can enhance this potential, as I will show in the following sub-section.

Queer Politics of the Common

In the vision of the Care Collective (Chatzidakis *et al*., 2020), 'promiscuous care' posits a queer care ethics beyond the boundaries of kinship. Due to this quality, the concept strongly resonates with the ethical and political values that have underpinned ideas about the common. Care for the common has been re-emphasised in radical social movements against capitalist extraction, ecological crisis, labour exploitation, and the global war against the poor, such as for example in eco-feminism, materialist/autonomist Marxist feminism, and the alter-globalization movements (Mies *et al*. 2014, Federici and Linebaugh, 2019; Hardt and Negri, 2009).

Definitions of the common vary. In the traditional definition it referred to natural resources beyond and out of the reach of private property (such as, for example, air, water, land, and nature) that have been used, cultivated and cared for in communal or collective manners (Standing, 2019). In political debates since the late 1990s, the term has been more broadly applied to key practices of social production and reproduction, including knowledge, information, symbolic interaction, etc. (Hardt and Negri, 2009). According to Federici and Linebaugh (2019, p. 166), the politics of commons 'aims to reproduce our lives in ways that strengthen mutual bonds and set limits to capital accumulation'. The commons are based on cooperation among concerned groups and individuals, and do not rely upon the state. In contradistinction, it has been failure and the crises of states to provide basic public services that have rendered debates about the common ever more important. In Federici's vision, the commons are contingent upon practices of everyday life, aiming at the creation of community and cultivate practices of care, based on interdependency. As such, they provide the ground for autonomy and freedom beyond capital accumulation and state control, functioning as the seeds for community formation.

I suggest that to the extent that CNM communities and movements embrace the politics of the common, they act truly politically against the 'system of monogamy', as it has been so insightfully described by Brigitte Vasallo (2018, 2019).

6 Conclusion

'Challenging Monogamy Is a Political Act' argues S.K. Rosa (2022) in a recent online article for Novara Media – and in a more elaborated way in her book *Radical Intimacy* (2023). It is not any specific relationship constellation, rather it is conscious collective action against the system of monogamy (or 'anti-monogamy' as B. Rosa (1994) has called it in her famous article on non-monogamy in lesbian-feminist politics, (see, Willey, 2016; Rothschild, 2018) which renders CNM queer and transformative. In manifold ways, this system of monogamy (Vasallo, 2018) is entangled with the histories of colonialism, white supremacy, racism, capitalism, ableism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and hierarchical gender binarism.

The politicisation of CNM through an intersectional analysis to unleash the potential for struggles along these front lines of simultaneously interacting oppressions. It also allows for a reflexive practice of coalition building. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the meanings of monogamy and non-monogamy are shifting, just as 'queer' is a constantly floating signifier, in need of continuous working over. CNM populations, too, are inherently diverse. We only can ever do justice to the phenomenon of CNM, if we acknowledge and truly appreciate their inherent difference. Glissant's (2010) work on the poetics of relation can inspire us conceive of CNM through attention to this multiplicity and to enact in our activism and everyday life the 'right of opacity' of those whom to understand, whom we may want to share our lives with, …. and – possibly – struggle with together.

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