RECONCILING LOVE AND HERITAGE THROUGH CULTURAL POLYAMORY IN JANE IGHARO'S *TIES THAT TETHER*[*]

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Abstract

This article examines how romance fiction engages with interracial tensions and intercultural negotiations in Jane Igharo's *Ties that Tether* (2020). Drawing on polyamory as a relational orientation that transcends rigid structures (Milona & Weindling 2024, 8) and rejects fixed expectations about love (Anapol 2010, 10), I propose the concept of cultural polyamory to analyse the diasporic identity of Azere, a Nigerian Canadian woman navigating familial expectations and her relationship with Rafael, a Spanish Canadian man. I argue that Azere's exclusive allegiance to her Nigerian identity prevents her from embracing hybridity, while her relationship with Rafael enables her to reconcile cultural affiliations. Ultimately, the novel presents cultural polyamory as a transformative model through which love becomes a space for intercultural negotiation, fostering both romantic fulfilment and self-acceptance.

Keywords: Cultural Polyamory, Nigerian Canadian Heritage, Intercultural Negotiations, Love, Reconciliation.

LA RECONCIALIZACIÓN DEL AMOR Y LA HERENCIA CULTURAL A TRAVÉS DEL POLIAMOR CULTURAL EN *TIES THAT TETHER* DE JANE IGHARO

Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo la novela romántica aborda las tensiones interraciales y las negociaciones interculturales en *Ties that Tether* (2020), de Jane Igharo. Partiendo del poliamor como una orientación relacional que trasciende las estructuras rígidas (Milona y Weindling 2024, 8) y rechaza expectativas fijas sobre el amor (Anapol 2010, 10), propongo el concepto de poliamor cultural para analizar la identidad diaspórica de Azere, una mujer nigeriano-canadiense que navega entre las expectativas familiares y su relación con Rafael, un hombre hispano-canadiense. Sostengo que la adhesión exclusiva de Azere a su identidad nigeriana le impide abrazar la hibridez, mientras que su relación con Rafael le permite reconciliar sus afiliaciones culturales. En última instancia, la novela presenta el poliamor cultural como un modelo transformador mediante el cual el amor se convierte en un espacio de negociación intercultural que favorece tanto la realización romántica como la autoaceptación.

Palabras clave: Poliamor cultural, herencia nigeriano canadiense, negociaciones interculturales, amor, reconciliación.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent news coverage has drawn attention to the increasing visibility of polyamory in Canada, a trend noted in 2024, when the Canadian national public broadcaster, CBC, published the article "Polyamorous Relationships are on the Rise in Canada. The Law is Still Catching Up!" (Stechyson 2024). In the very same year, the Canadian magazine *Maclean's* addressed the growth of polyamory in the country in an article entitled "How Polyamory Became the New Normal" (Counter 2024). Its author refers to a study carried out by North American researchers that reveals that one out of five participants have been involved in "consensual non-monogamy" practices such as polyamory, which "has become the subject of books, films, TV shows and even a reality show, *Couple to Throuple*" (2024).

In academia, polyamory has also been widely studied, and researchers have provided different definitions of the term. In her work *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners* (2010), Deborah Anapol refers to The Oxford Dictionary's definition of polyamory, which is introduced as "the fact of having simultaneous close emotional relationships with two or more other individuals, viewed as an alternative to monogamy, esp. in regard to matters of sexual fidelity" (2-3). Christian Klesse goes back to the roots of the term and argues that "with the Latin part of the word polyamory meaning 'love' and the Greek part meaning 'many', polyamory literally translates into 'many loves' or 'more than one love'" (2006, 568). Lorenzo Montali, Alessandra Frigerio, Federica Spina, and Edoardo Zulato study polyamory as a legitimate alternative to monogamy and recall its description "as a personal identity, a sexual orientation, a relationship structure, and a relational orientation" (Jordan et al. 2017 qtd Montali et al. 2023, 896). On their part, Michael Milona and Lauren Weindling describe polyamory not as "just an openness to multiple loving relationships [but] as a form of ethical non-monogamy" (2024, 1) arguing that "polyamory is about *love*, but love can take many forms" (4).

Taking these definitions as a point of departure, I propose a metaphorical notion of the term, the concept of "cultural polyamory," which I read as an individual's love or emotional attachment to multiple cultures. Considering the understanding of polyamory as an identity category and a way to structure our relationships and relate with others (Montali et al. 2023, 896), I argue that polyamory serves both as a useful practice for diasporic subjects to relate to their different cultural backgrounds and as a label to define themselves. In cultural terms, for diasporic people, describing themselves as polyamorous implies that they have –borrowing Klesse's words– "many loves," that is, they love more than one culture. Leaving aside the sexual dimension, I adapt the meaning of polyamory that Anapol uses and define cultural polyamory as the capacity to maintain close emotional relationships with two or more cultures,

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leaving behind the idea of authenticity or faithfulness to a single culture. This metaphorical understanding of polyamory becomes particularly meaningful within multicultural contexts such as the Canadian one. Indeed, Canada is marked by its ethnic heterogeneity due to the diverse countries of origin and cultural background of its citizens, which explains the deployment of the term "mosaic" to refer to the country as a multicultural society (Government of Canada 2022). Multiculturalism was institutionalised with the ratification of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* in 1988, making Canada the first country worldwide to introduce a legislating policy and "recognizing multiculturalism as a defining characteristic of Canadian identity" (Government of Canada 2024). Such a heterogeneous background makes individuals more likely to be attached to multiple cultures at the same time, in line with Anapol's claim about polyamory that "these days, it's increasingly unusual to find anyone who has only had one 'significant other' throughout his or her life" (2010, IX). Anapol's reflection can be applied to my notion of cultural polyamory, for people, particularly diasporic subjects, and those living in multicultural contexts such as Canada, may also have more than one "significant other" culturally speaking, that is, they may embrace and love more than one culture simultaneously. Such a situation is reflected in the novel under analysis, *Ties that Tether* (2020), written by the Nigerian Canadian Jane Igharo, which has received little scholarly attention to date. This article contributes to addressing this gap by offering one of the first critical examinations of the novel through the lens of cultural polyamory. Igharo resorts to a romance novel to highlight the identity issues faced by diasporic subjects through a protagonist mirroring her own background.[1]

Ties that Tether follows Azere, a Nigerian woman living in Canada who, before her father's death, promised him that she would preserve her cultural heritage by marrying a Nigerian Edo man. Conditioned by this oath and by her pressuring mother, Azere dates the suitors that her mother appoints for her, willing to fulfil that promise and not to disappoint her mother. Azere's personal aspirations and familial expectations regarding love and culture become conflicted when she meets and starts dating Rafael Castellano, whose Spanish heritage brings forward conflicts underlining the complexities of cultural loyalty. As the novel unfolds, Azere's journey to juggle the love for her family, culture, and traditions with her feelings for Rafael becomes more challenging. However, she manages to successfully overcome such tensions thanks to the power of love, since it is her love for Rafael that motivates her to confront the uncertainties derived from her diasporic position. Building on this narrative outline, this article explores the potential of romance to engage with interracial tensions and intercultural negotiations in *Ties that Tether*. Such tensions

[1] Igharo's other works are also categorised as romances and feature Nigerian American or Nigerian Canadian protagonists negotiating their diasporic identities. This pattern suggests how she relies on the genre to deal with issues of heritage, belonging, and cultural expectations and, in turn, reveals how diasporic authors, among others, have used the romance genre to share their stories and reflect on the tensions derived from their hybrid condition (Teo 2021; Young 2021).

will be explored through the lens of polyamory, which has been described as a relational orientation that transcends rigid structures (Milona & Weindling 2024, 8) and allows individuals to "[let] love evolve without expectations or demands" (Anapol 2010, 10). My metaphorical understanding of polyamory allows me to examine how Azere's diasporic identity evolves from cultural monogamy to cultural polyamory, where love for multiple cultures can coexist without hierarchies.

Just as polyamorous relationships require negotiation, agreement, commitment, and emotional work (Klesse 2006, 572; Milona & Weindling 2024, 6-7), Azere's evolution involves an ongoing process of coming to terms with her binary heritage rather than privileging her Nigerian upbringing over her Canadian background, as it is expected by her family. In this context, Azere's involvement with Rafael is presented as the catalyst for these internal tensions to arise. For this, I first analyse how Azere initially conforms to a monogamous allegiance to her Nigerian identity, symbolized by the promise that she made to her late father. This parallels the experiences of polyamorous subjects, who face external constraints such as those imposed by their family and society (Milona & Weindling 2024, 11). Therefore, I argue that Azere's transition towards cultural polyamory is hindered, since her parents' expectations condition her choices. Yet, as Anapol suggests, polyamory entails surrendering to love rather than conforming to cultural conditioning (2010, X), which is what Azere demonstrates by challenging the familial barriers that she faces and allowing her relationship with Rafael to develop. Thus, in the second section, I discuss that her love for Rafael is what instigates Azere's transformation from cultural monogamy into cultural polyamory as she is open and willing to commit to her twofold cultural identity. Ultimately, this article intends to illustrate that *Ties that Tether* presents polyamory "as a revolutionary and systemic change" (Montali et al. 2023, 896), for the protagonist's embracement of cultural polyamory enables her to accept her diasporic identity without having to sacrifice either her personal choices or her cultural background. This model of cultural polyamory allows for a happily ever after both in romantic terms and at a personal level, since Azere not only consolidates her relationship with Rafael but also reconciles herself with her diasporic identity. In this sense, Azere's journey can be read in relation to the Canadian "mosaic" model of multiculturalism. While this model supports the coexistence of cultural diversity as a key trait of the nation, Azere's experience highlights the tensions that arise when such plurality is lived, as her sense of cultural belonging is constantly mediated by family obligations and expectations of loyalty and authenticity. Cultural polyamory, thus, not only aligns with the mosaic ideal, but also reframes it emphasising an affective, negotiated and non-hierarchical engagement with multiple cultures that goes beyond mere coexistence.

2. CULTURAL MONOGAMY AND FAMILIAL CONDITIONING

This section examines how Azere, determined by her father's expectations, initially conforms to cultural monogamy until she experiences the tensions that lead her to begin her journey into cultural polyamory. The novel opens with Azere's

declaration of intentions: "Culture is important. Preserving it, even more important. It's the reason I've always abided by one simple dating rule" (2020, 1). Such a rule –dating Nigerian Edo men only– symbolises her commitment to what I refer to as cultural monogamy, that is, the exclusive attachment to her Nigerian roots. The expectation that Azere marries not just a Nigerian man but, more specifically, an Edo man reveals a wider reality within the Nigerian context, where, as Smith claims, interethnic marriage is still relatively uncommon (2001, 149). The rule is thus not merely the result of a personal promise or familial choice, but of broader sociocultural norms. Azere's family has internalised such norms in relation to marriage, which in Nigerian culture is directly linked to "obligations to extended family and community, privileging fertility and the social roles of mother and father" (132). From this perspective, the expectations imposed on Azere can be understood as a form of cultural exclusivity that mirrors the logic of monogamy. Milona and Weindling argue that, in its literal sense, monogamy entails exclusivity between two lovers, mainly in romantic and sexual terms, and add that breaking it implies cheating (2024, 2). When understood in cultural terms, exclusivity translates to loyalty to a single cultural identity. In the context of the novel, Azere confesses to having broken the rule of exclusively dating Nigerians for the first time (1). After a failed date with what her mother would consider "husband material" (1-2), Azere casually meets Rafael Castellano, a Spanish Canadian man with whom she is sexually involved. She describes her one-night stand with Rafael as "sweet and forbidden [and as] everything [she] wanted and couldn't have" (8). Thus, her sexual encounter with a non-Nigerian man metaphorically constitutes an act of cultural rather than romantic infidelity, as she deviates from the exclusivity to her Nigerian heritage.

The first encounter with Rafael reproduces the prototypical "love at first sight" scene of romantic novels, for Azere already sees potential in him although she is aware that a one-night affair is all she can allow herself. Yet, she confesses to having "felt the rise of defiance" (8) and let herself go: "tonight I belong to no one but myself, driven by my desires and impulses despite any consequences that might follow" (10). Her perception of the night with Rafael as an act of rebellion reveals that, as is the case for some monogamous people, the cultural monogamy she aligns with is not "freely and consciously chosen [but] demanded as a condition for love or enforced by legal codes, religious strictures, financial considerations, or social pressure" (Anapol 2010, XIII). In Azere's case, the allegiance to cultural monogamy is imposed by her family's cultural and religious background, particularly by her mother, something Azere makes clear from the very beginning: "for one night only, I am not the obedient daughter of a conservative woman who is adamant on preserving her Nigerian heritage. Nor am I the daughter of a patriotic man who feared his family's departure to a foreign country more than the cancer that was killing him" (10). Such a statement recalls the strong stigma surrounding polyamorous relationships, which frequently arises in socio-cultural environments marked by traditional norms, and often manifests among conservative and religious people, particularly women, who tend to be more devout than men (Hutzler et al., 2015 qtd Grigoropoulos et al. 2023, 1267). Azere compares her mother to a Nollywood actress, Patience Ozokwor, who typically embodies "the harsh, nagging, mean and sometimes outright wicked

mother or mother-in-law" (112). She embodies the "mononormativity" that Anapol describes, which is the result of the cultural prejudice towards polyamory and the incapacity to recognise it as a feasible alternative to monogamy (2010, X). Anapol's reflection on such a perception of polyamory can be extended to my notion of cultural polyamory, since the mother's "discourse is framed as monogamy and infidelity" (X).

Such framing manifests in several ways, not only in reference to Azere's relationships, but also in remarks about her physical appearance and her personal goals. For instance, Azere's mother criticises her for not wearing clothes that clearly reveal the shape of her body and even accuses her daughter of having got rid of her Nigerian outfits: "What is the meaning of this nonsense? Your figure is not even showing at all. What kind of *wahala* is this? It looks like your breasts play hide and seek. ... In fact, why aren't you wearing Nigerian clothes? Or did you throw them away to make room in your closet for jeans and T-shirts? (29-30; italics in original). Just as Azere's mother interprets her daughter's attire as a betrayal of her Nigerian heritage, she also condemns her eating habits, claiming that Azere looked healthier when she lived under her roof and ate only Nigerian food. Her daughter's betrayal of Nigerian food has taken its toll, as it is implied by the following reprimand: "Now you are on your own, eating those *yeye* Canadian food every single day. Quinoa salad, avocado toast, smoothie bowl" ... If you were eating Nigerian food, you would be more robust and have enough flesh to cover your bones" (30; italics in original). The mother also criticises Azere for not pursuing and fulfilling what, according to her, are the goals expected of a truly Nigerian woman, and questions the fact that she is still single:

> I don't know what's wrong with you, I have introduced you to several eligible men, and yet, here you are. Maybe you are being influenced by these modern women-no husband, no children. All they want is their career. You want to be a feminist. ... If you want to be a feminist, fine. But please be a married feminist with at least three children. In our country, a women's honor is her husband and her children. A career means nothing. (39)

Amidst all these judgemental declarations, Azere remembers an episode in which her mother replaced a poster of Antonio Banderas with one of the Nigerian actor Kim Iyke. This memory reaffirms her mother's determination to maintain Azere and her sister "rooted in [their] culture" (37); an attitude which has persisted since they moved to Canada, as she has been "shoving [Azere's] culture down [her] throat, so [she doesn't] forget where she come[s] from" (37). Azere's mother, thus, clearly embodies the mentality of those who favour a mononormative lifestyle, for she also perceives polyamory "as indecent and corrupt, creating feelings of shame" (Montali et al. 2023, 894). Her posture is constantly reflected in the novel through reproaches such as: "I have allowed you and your sister to reap all the benefits of this country. It's time to honor your own country. Zere, it's time to honor your culture. Or have you forgotten the promise you made to your father?" (40). Such criticisms expose a clear hierarchy of cultural violations, which can be metaphorically understood as forms of "cheating." Apparently minor transgressions, such as clothing and food

choices, are considered reversible and ultimately acceptable, whereas romantic attachment is presented as a much more significant boundary not to be crossed. Azere's mother may reluctantly tolerate superficial forms of cultural "deviation" as long as her daughter eventually fulfils what is expected of her and marries within her community, since marrying someone from a different culture is perceived as a deeper form of betrayal. Azere's love for a non-Nigerian man and the consolidation of that relationship are conceived as her and her prospective descendants' loss of Nigerian culture. Romantic love, therefore, becomes the ultimate barrier to cultural loyalty, as it involves not just personal attachment but also the potential reconfiguration of lineage, belonging and cultural continuity.

On her part, Azere shares the "uncertainty and the feeling of being suspended" experienced by polyamorous subjects navigating mononormative environments (Montali et al. 2023, 894). The fact that she presents her identity as Canadian as "both empowering and demanding" (18) illustrates her initial reservations towards fully accepting cultural polyamory. As she affirms: "it requires me to give up portions of my Nigerian culture so I can fit into my Western setting. And I've been doing that for years –compromising, losing bits and pieces of my original identity in an attempt to reinvent myself" (18). In spite of adapting to the Canadian context, Azere does not entirely renounce her Nigerian heritage. This is reflected in her visit to a Nigerian restaurant, where she eats *eba* and *egusi soup* (94); in her choice of clothing, such as her favourite dress "made of *ankara,* an African wax fabric designed with vibrant colors and bold prints" (83), and in her engagement with Nigerian storytelling and Nollywood movies such as *Isoken*, whose plot mirrors her own life (103). She also embraces her Nigerian accent when she is with her family, and, as she confesses, the feeling of being suspended often associated with polyamory (Montali et al. 2023, 894), disappears.

> The accent, the one I tried hard to hide after my move to Canada, forces its way out [when] I'm at home with my family, when I don't feel the complete pressure of being wedged between two worlds, when I'm not a Nigerian Canadian. When I'm just Nigerian. Then I speak freely, mixing pidgin English with Edo or simply speaking fluent English but with a Nigerian intonation, altering the rhythm of each word. (29)

However, even in these moments of belonging, the promise to her father remains unbroken, for Azere repeatedly refers to the voice in her head reminding her "the one thing [she] can't compromise on is the ethnicity of [her] future husband" (18). Therefore, instead of adopting the philosophy of polyamory, "allowing love to dictate the form rather than attempting to force love into whatever mold the mind has decided is right" (Anapol 2010, IX-X), Azere claims that she feels "sentenced to live cautiously and love selectively" (41). In doing so, she initially conforms to cultural monogamy –symbolised by the social expectation to love and marry a Nigerian Edo man– which would tie her to her Nigerian roots. Yet, after meeting Rafael, becoming pregnant with his child, and later discovering that he works at the same company as she does, she realises that cultural monogamy can constrain personal desires, for she yearns for a relationship with Rafael that she cannot have. Azere affirms that "he

has brought sensible chaos into [her] life that has inspired [her] to reenvision [her] future" (138). Her statement suggests that Rafael and the feelings that she has for him become the catalyst for Azere's journey towards embracing cultural polyamory, which might help her reconcile her multiple cultural identities and her emotional allegiances.

Azere seems to be aware of the key to succeed in her journey towards polyamory as it is metaphorically conveyed by a work project. Azere works as a Creative Director at an advertising agency, and when developing a promotional campaign for an energy drink, she suggests using a Nigerian actress and a Western actress to highlight their commonalities despite their apparent differences; to illustrate how they depend on the same product to get the boost they need. To defend her idea, she argues that "this method will help the product transition well into its new environment while remaining true to its origin" (61). Azere's proposal can be read as a metaphor for her own cultural journey, suggesting that transitioning towards cultural polyamory does not entail losing or forgetting her Nigerian heritage. However, when it comes to her personal life, she struggles to put that understanding into practice, develop her cultural transition and recognise her state as a polyamorous subject, experiencing the tensions derived from her diasporic condition. Like many individuals in the realm of love and sex, Azere is "struggling to reconcile conflicting urges toward monogamy and polyamory," though in her case, these urges operate in a cultural rather than purely romantic context (Anapol 2010, XI). Azere, thus, faces the challenge of reconciling the expectations of her family –for Azere to conform to cultural monogamy– with her desire and predisposition to a model of cultural polyamory, which will allow her to pursue a relationship with the man she loves while preserving her Nigerian identity. Azere manifests such tensions when verbalising how overwhelmed she feels as she is expecting a baby with Rafael, the man she likes, but her family expects her to marry Elijah, her first Nigerian boyfriend, who seems to be the ideal suitor:

> the haze that impaired my judgment clears, and everything hits me at once—my pregnancy, which Rafael is clueless about; my date with Elijah; my overbearing mother. The pressure, the expectations, the secret I'm keeping, the promise I've broken. I'm suddenly aware of everything, and it's all too much. (121)

The "haze" that Azere refers to suggests that she got swept up in passion, and the fact that she presents the tensions that she is exposed to as being "too much" reflects that she is not ready to handle them without feeling guilty. Her statement, in turn, echoes Milona and Weindling's reflection that "while polyamory allows for indulging in passion, up to a point, it favors readiness to actively manage it through emotional work (2024, 7-8). Their implication is that transitioning to polyamory is not just an election but requires a conscious effort to manage the social and affective obstacles that arise in practicing it, through communication and emotional work, and an ethic of care, understood as a relational mode based on love, empathy, compromise and responsiveness (Gilligan 2003). Cultural polyamory demands the same ethical and relational engagement, requiring Azere to communicate openly with both her

mother and Rafael, "cultivating caring relationships" (Held 2006, 15) that enable her to embrace her condition as a cultural polyamorist.

While Rafael empathises with Azere and supports her transformation toward cultural polyamory, Azere's mother maintains a punitive and judgmental attitude, which restrains her development. Rafael can relate to Azere's conflicting urges due to his Spanish roots, as he refers to "the pressure to succeed as *the other* in their new home coupled with the fear of disappointing their family back at home" (87; italics in original). Although her mother experienced the same pressure when she arrived in Canada, Azere declares that she has neither shared nor understood her predisposition to embrace a Nigerian Canadian identity but has rather blamed her for it:

> My mother didn't understand the struggle of trying to reconcile my heritage with my new environment at such a young age. She didn't understand I had to survive middle school and high school, not as a Nigerian but as a Canadian. To her, I compromised and lost parts of my identity. To myself, I made room in my life for two distinct words. I redefined myself, created a new identity. And my mother resents me for that. (179)

This statement suggests that since arriving in Canada, Azere has sought not to be perceived as "the other," but to accept her hybrid background, which is what embracing cultural polyamory would entail. Her mother, however, does not see what cultural polyamory represents in a positive light but as a threat to her daughter's Nigerian heritage. Her anxieties surface most clearly when she questions Azere's willingness to let her feelings for Rafael outweigh the promise to her father, fearing this would mean fully embracing a model of cultural polyamory: "Azere, you came to this country a Nigerian. Thirteen years later, you are barely that. What do you think will happen when you date or even marry a man who isn't Nigerian? Will you lose more of your culture? Will you still know who you are, where you come from?" (179). This reproach echoes what Anapol observes about polyamorous relationships when arguing that "multipartner relating prevents attachment" (2010, XIII), for Azere's mother transfers that same anxiety onto culture, assuming that embracing a multicultural identity would weaken her daughter's ties to her Nigerian heritage.

The mother figure, thus, embodies the prejudice and stigma surrounding cultural polyamory. Her attitude recalls the positioning of those who view "polyamorous relationships [as] less committed and less trusting" (Grigoropoulos et al. 2023, 1267), a stance she takes to the cultural terrain. She perceives her daughter's potential relationship with a non-Nigerian man as a threat to Azere's commitment to her Nigerian roots, a concern she explicitly expresses: "Don't you see that being with a man who isn't Nigerian threatens our culture–puts it at risk of being diluted?" (276). Her discourse reflects that she is the epitome of mononormativity, a term applied to "the institutionalized arrangements and cultural narratives that situate the monogamous dyad as the only legitimate, natural, or desirable relationship form" (Pieper and Bauer 2005 in Schippers 2016, 17). In her work, Schippers (2016) adds that mononormativity favours those in monogamous relations and penalises those in non-monogamous ones. Similarly, Azere's mother conceives her daughter's exclusive

attachment to her Nigerian heritage as the only valid cultural one and blames her for considering a complete transformation to cultural polyamory, symbolised by the pursuit and consolidation of a relationship with Rafael. Such an idea is reflected in the novel when Azere refers to her mother's reproof: "The disdain in her dark eyes is so vile, she almost doesn't look like my mother"; and later recalls her mother's own reprimand: "You imagine a future with him. Okey, Fine. But ask yourself: How much more of yourself, of your culture will you lose to accommodate him in your life?'" (180). At this point, she is dissatisfied with and ashamed of her daughter because she is unmarried and pregnant with Rafael's child. Yet, she is willing to forgive her as long as she chooses Elijah, the Nigerian suitor that she appointed for her, over Rafael, as she conveys when threatening Azere's status as her daughter: "If you don't do as I have asked, I am no longer your mother. And you are not my daughter .... If you are with that man, then I cannot have anything to do with you. I cannot be your mother, Azere. I won't" (181). Despite the weight of her mother's words, Azere chooses Rafael. That the mother disavows Azere reflects the extent to which she condemns cultural polyamory and, in turn, echoes Montali et al.'s reflection that favouring monogamy can create not only shame but also social isolation (2023, 894), as Azere's choice results in her estrangement from her family.

3. FROM FORBIDDEN LOVE TO CULTURAL POLYAMORY

The following section explores how Azere's evolving relationship with Rafael becomes the means through which she negotiates her cultural and emotional allegiances. I analyse Azere's struggle to come to terms with both her identity as a diasporic Nigerian Canadian woman and her love for Rafael. More specifically, I focus on her journey from cultural monogamy to cultural polyamory, which is motivated by what bell hooks conceptualises as the transformative and emancipatory force of love (1994, 2000). hooks does not understand love in romantic terms, but as an ethical posture against "the culture of domination" (1994, 244). Seen through this lens, Azere's trajectory can be read as an enactment of such a liberatory understanding of love, for she shares the experience of polyamorous subjects who, as Anapol argues, shift from internalising monogamous ideals to embracing non-monogamous ones (2010, 4). Her move from attempting to fulfil her father's promise by marrying a Nigerian man to accepting her love for Rafael symbolises her transition from fidelity to her Nigerian heritage towards an embracement of her diasporic Nigerian Canadian identity.

Azere's decision to pursue a relation with Rafael reflects her inclination towards cultural polyamory, because unlike her mother, she does not perceive it as a threat to her Nigerian heritage. Azere demonstrates her willingness to engage in the intercultural negotiations required to fully embrace cultural polyamory. In the same way as polyamorous subjects, whose "relationship journey involves finding a way to resolve what is commonly known as the power struggle" between those involved (Anapol 2010, 103), Azere must navigate the tensions derived from her diasporic position as a Nigerian woman living in Toronto who falls in love with a

Spanish Canadian. The intercultural negotiations Azere faces as a Nigerian Canadian become more complex once Rafael's Spanish background comes into play given that they expect a child who will embody the convergence of Nigerian, Spanish, and Canadian identities. Azere recognises that, as the product of a cross-cultural relationship situated within the Canadian multicultural mosaic, her future child will inevitably experience the cultural negotiations that have shaped her identity; said negotiations are conditioned by the asymmetrical relations of power and privilege that characterise intercultural interactions.

As Rambukkana observes in the context of non-monogamous relations, privilege often operates by "taking up space –as materially, practically, or conceptually taking up so much space that there is not enough left for others to inhabit" (2015, 29). The idea of "taking up too much space" is relevant in the novel, for Azere is afraid that Rafael's Spanish culture takes up too much space within their intercultural union, potentially overshadowing Azere's Nigerian identity and influencing the cultural formation of their future child. Azere's concern is made explicit when her mother-in-law's speech at the baby shower makes Azere feel "slightly nervous" as Rafael's mother plans to teach her grandchild "what it means to be a Spaniard. A true Spaniard," prompting Azere to wonder "[w]hat will that mean for [her] culture– what place will it have in [her] child's life? Will [her] child get a chance to visit Nigeria, or will he or she spend the summers in Spain as Rafael did?" (217). Such moments demonstrate how racialised and cultural hierarchies of privilege, which have historically been associated with whiteness and European ancestry, influence the identity negotiations of the following generation within Canada's multicultural context.

Through Azere's anxiety about the possible reproduction of cultural hierarchies within her own family, *Ties that Tether* makes tangible the notion of privilege that Rambukkana theorises. Rambukkana argues that the concept of privilege has evolved from early Marxian discussions of class privilege, through feminist critiques of male privilege, and critical race analyses of white or pale-skin privilege, to encompass other dimensions of power such as heterosexuality and cultural dominance (2015, 30). This framework is particularly relevant because Rafael embodies many of these forms of privilege: he is a white, upper-class, heterosexual man. Azere's reflections reveal how these intersecting dynamics of privilege operate within everyday negotiations of love, culture, and identity, for she feels like "a puzzle piece being forced where it doesn't belong" and confesses to Rafael: "I'm starting to wonder where my culture will stand in our child's life. Will it be secondary or maybe nonexistent while yours is front and center?" (230). Her fear intensifies when she asks Rafael: "How am I sure you won't impose your culture on our child and push mine to the sidelines? How am I sure you won't eventually do the same to me"? (231). Rafael reassures her by saying: "I'll learn and adopt some of your culture and you'll learn and adopt some of mine. For the sake of our child and our own relationship, we'll compromise and make it work" (231). Once again, he demonstrates his willingness to foster Azere's development towards cultural polyamory, for he is capable of "effectively negotiat[ing] win-win solutions to conflicts" (Anapol 2010, 101).

Anapol argues that a key trait of polyamorous relations is communication, claiming that those involved must be able to "express desires, needs, resentments,

appreciation, and hurt feelings" and find solutions to disagreements (101). In the context of cultural polyamory, such communication is key to negotiating cultural differences. Although Azere expresses her concerns to Rafael, her response reveals that she cannot envision a positive outcome, because her Nigerian heritage is positioned as unprivileged compared to Rafael's Spanish background, and because she remains influenced by her mother's warnings. Here, the limits of polyamory are tested when Azere must not only contemplate the idea of loving someone from a different culture but must consider the extent to which she herself and her child will have to engage in Rafael's cultural practices for their love to remain strong: "I've been compromising for thirteen years, rearranging things so I can exist in two different worlds. Now, he wants me to exist in a third-his. ... I'm terrified that adopting Rafael's culture will put me at a greater risk of losing mine. After all, my mother warned me of the possibility" (231). This conversation marks a turning point because Azere fears losing her Nigerian identity –by no longer eating Edo food or speaking her language– while raising her child, and, consequently, tells Rafael that breaking her father's promise has been a mistake, and decides to end her relationship with him (232). Igharo's dramatization of Azere and Rafael's intercultural and romantic discussions, thus, illustrates how cultural polyamory entails a continuous negotiation of power, belonging, and identity.

Azere's decision to break her relationship with Rafael implies that the transition to cultural polyamory that their union would represent is being withheld. Her reluctance to continue developing as a culturally polyamorous subject stems from the insecurity she feels in relation to Rafael's cultural background. She fears that his Spanish roots will prevail over her Nigerian heritage, even though Rafael has shown determination to prevent that from happening by embracing Azere's culture. Rafael's supportive attitude is not enough because she lacks the self-confidence needed to manage the power struggle that polyamorous relationships require. Azere becomes a reflection of Anapol's observation that "[a]ny intimate relationship is difficult without a sense of self-worth, which is not dependent on validation from someone else" (2010, 100). Her progression towards cultural polyamory is hindered both by the cultural power imbalance between Rafael's Spanish roots and her Nigerian background, as well as by her own lack of confidence.

This insecurity is what leads her to reconsider a relationship with Elijah instead, because, as she tells Rafael, "[he]'s the man I was always supposed to be with" (239). Azere claims that Elijah is "the pass that grants [her] full access to [her] family" (243), since once her mother knows she is not with Rafael anymore and is willing to marry Elijah, she forgives her, and the mother-daughter relationship is restored. Both Azere and her mother see Elijah as the guarantee of Azere's loyalty and exclusiveness to her Nigerian heritage. Her mother's response is particularly revealing, as she thanks God that "Azere finally came to her senses" (245). The fact that Azere renounces her love for Rafael and settles into a relation with a Nigerian man whom she does not love to preserve her heritage reveals that "polyamory tends to put people in the fire of uncertainty" (Anapol 2010, 100). Anapol's discussion of the instability that accompanies polyamorous relations can be read metaphorically in terms of cultural polyamory, insofar as maintaining bonds with multiple cultures

may produce a similar sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. Elijah, in this sense, represents the "security, predictability, and control" (100) traditionally associated with monogamy; indeed, Azere perceives him as the tie that will secure her attachment to her Nigerian roots.

Although Azere's mother applauds her decision, not everyone around her supports it. Both her sister Effe and her friend Christina question her choice, prompting her to reflect on the contradictions of trying to secure her identity through Elijah. Confronted by her sister's indignation, Azere argues that choosing Elijah is a way to please her father. Effe, however, refutes her reasoning, insisting that it is impossible to please someone who is dead. When Azere argues that marrying Elijah honours her father's memory, Effe convincingly replies: "and dishonour yourself" (246), later reminding her that she has "thoughts and desires separate from Mom's" (248). Her friend Christina also questions Azere's preference for Elijah, criticising her lack of independence: "you're a puppet and your mom your master [;] you believe being with someone outside your ethnicity will make you less of a Nigerian –a notion I believe was somehow planted into your brain by your mother" (255). Although both interventions are relevant to make Azere realise that she misses Rafael, Christina's influence is particularly relevant. She arranges a weekend getaway with Azere in a holidays house her family has in Muskoka, Ontario. To Azere's surprise, Chris's parents are there. Chris's plan is to help Azere confront her uncertainties about cultural polyamory by talking to her parents, for her mother is Nigerian and her father Italian. She wants to make her best friend realise that interracial couples can thrive without compromising their respective heritage, since they have lived happily together for twenty years without renouncing their roots.

Chris's parents serve as a model for cultural polyamory, having successfully embraced and maintained an intercultural marriage. To help her friend overcome her doubts, Chris recounts how her own mother faced a similar situation: she too loved a non-Nigerian man but, under family pressure and the threat of disownment, agreed to marry a Nigerian instead. This episode reflects that within Nigerian culture "considerable social pressure is exerted on people to marry, produce children, and fulfil their obligations to their extended families and communities" (Smith 2001, 147). Yet, as Chris reveals, her mother ultimately fled through the emergency exit on her wedding day (256). Chris's intention is to show Azere that her mother eventually broke free from external constraints and surrendered to love –an idea that echoes Anapol's view of love as the driving force of polyamorous relationships (2010, IX-X). Chris's mother chose the option that was, at that time, more inconvenient but, as she argues, "truth is, love is hardly ever convenient" (256). The reference to "convenience" here recalls Anapol's observations that, in contrast with polyamory, monogamy is often linked to security and control (2010, 100). Azere's perception of Elijah as the convenient choice therefore reflects her willingness to situate herself within cultural monogamy, prioritising predictability and security over the unpredictable demands of love associated with cultural polyamory.

The conversation with Chris's parents, however, makes Azere rethink her priorities. When she asks them how they make their relationship work, Chris's mother attributes it to "[l]ove, patience, respect, trust [and] acceptance", adding that:

"I accept his differences, and he accepts mine" (257). Such a statement illustrates that they both embody the key traits that Anapol relates to polyamory. One of its crucial aspects is appreciating diversity, "recognizing and supporting each person's unique qualities" (Anapol 2010, 101). This trait aligns with my understanding of cultural polyamory, as achieving it also requires acknowledging and valuing cultural difference. Another defining characteristic of polyamory is the ability to juggle several intimate relationships (100). In the context of cultural polyamory, this represents the capacity to embrace multiple cultures simultaneously, which Chris's parents have been successfully doing for years. They have learnt each other's culture and language without losing their own roots; as Chris's mother explains, "it just means our world expanded, became richer" (259).

Chris's mother's reflection, in turn, resonates with another relevant feature of polyamory: Anapol's emphasis on teamwork, that is, on "working for the good of the whole group" to generate positive outcomes for all the members involved in the relationship (2010, 102). Through mutual respect and cooperation, Chris's parents have built a shared space in which both heritages coexist harmoniously. Their collaboration has been based on "compassion, ... integrity, and goodwill" (XIII), which shows that the same principles of romantic polyamory also sustain and apply to cultural polyamory. Chris's parents prove that they have been collaborating to achieve what is best for both: to preserve their heritage while accepting each other's. In this way, they have created a shared space in which both cultures are appreciated, and their lives are enriched. Such an outcome has been possible thanks to their cooperation and the perception of each other's heritage with respect, which as Anapol notes, together with "compassion, [...] integrity, and goodwill" constitute the basis of polyamory (XIII). The same principles that make polyamory successful are not exclusive to romantic polyamory, but I argue that they also characterise cultural polyamory. In this sense, respect and integrity are crucial for polyamorous subjects to embrace multiple cultures in a balanced and enriching way.

The conversation with Chris's parents proves to be fruitful, as their relationship helps Azere overcome her fears and insecurities about cultural polyamory. After this encounter, she reconsiders Rafael as her one and only. Yet, the real turning point in Azere's journey towards cultural polyamory comes when she unexpectedly finds her mother and uncle in bed. She discovers that they have been in a relationship for a year and reprimands her mother for dishonouring her father with his own brother. Her mother defends herself by explaining that she had never been with any other man until her feelings for her brother-in-law developed, claiming that she could no longer live her life for her dead husband. This episode complicates the rigid framework of cultural expectations previously mentioned, especially those related to marriage duties, family responsibility and loyalty in Nigerian culture. As Smith argues, courtship tends to prioritise "individual choice, emotional intimacy, and romance" but, once married, the couple's relationship becomes "community property" (2001, 144). In this light, Azere's mother seems to have returned to this pre-marital stage, as she confesses her feelings for Azere's uncle, implying that, once released from the impositions of marriage, she can privilege her emotional desires. However, the fact that her new partner is her brother-in-law illustrates that she has

not completely broken with social expectations but reconfigured them instead, as she prioritises personal desire while remaining faithful to the principle of endogamy and marriage within one's ethnic group rooted in Nigerian culture.

Azere, in turn, reproaches her for having made her do precisely that –live for her father's memory, and the promise that she made to him– and presents this confrontation as a "life-altering moment of realization" (274). This marks a crucial point in the narrative because, for the first time, Azere challenges her mother without guilt, and presents this experience as "incredible, exhilarating, emancipating in every sense" (275). She blames her mother for abandoning her during her pregnancy and for forcing her to give up Rafael, finally admitting that she loves him. Azere's sense of emancipation symbolises her liberation from her mother's control and, metaphorically, from the cultural monogamy imposed upon her. Just as Anapol observes that nowadays "lifelong monogamy is more myth than actuality" (2010, XV), Azere recognises that for diasporic subjects, cultural monogamy is equally illusory. This realisation becomes explicit when she tells her mother:

> if this country is such a threat to our culture, you shouldn't have brought me here. But you did. You brought me to a country that has a culture of its own, a country that's also home to people from all around the world, and you've expected me to ignore these facts for years ... Do you have any idea of how crazy that is? (276)

By acknowledging that cultural monogamy is no longer an option, Azere completes her transition towards cultural polyamory.

Azere reconciles herself with cultural polyamory once she is no longer conditioned by familial expectations and can accept her love for Rafael, thus embodying what Anapol describes as "the freedom of surrendering to love and allowing love ... to determine the shape our intimate relationships take" (2010, 5). Although Anapol's reflection concerns polyamory in its literal sense, the same logic applies to my concept of cultural polyamory. By acknowledging her love for Rafael, she comes to realise what Anapol identifies as "the false connection many people make between monogamy and fidelity" and the association of monogamous structures with commitment (13). This reflection acquires a cultural dimension, since Azere no longer identifies faithfulness and commitment as exclusive loyalty to her Nigerian roots; she now understands that embracing cultural polyamory does not imply being unfaithful or less committed to her heritage. Building on Anapol's conception of fidelity as rooted in "honesty, respect, and loyalty" rather than sexual exclusiveness (13), Azere also realises that cultural fidelity is defined not by exclusiveness but by those same values in relation to both of her cultures. This insight becomes apparent when she tells her mother: "The daughter in front of you is proudly Nigerian and proudly Canadian. She isn't choosing one over the other. She's both. And it's okay" (296). This declaration marks Azere's full reconciliation with and embrace of cultural polyamory.

Such a reconciliation allows her to consolidate her relationship with Rafael, something which, following the conventions of romance novels, occurs after "the point of ritual death", an episode in which the heroine faces danger (Regis 2003,

15). Azere almost dies while giving birth as she explains that she was "suspended by a single string" (291), but then adds that she was rescued by "something . . . someone else at the end of this string –another heart tethered securely to [hers], calling [her] out of death by the sheer force of love" (292). The force of love could refer to her future daughter, to whom she is literally tied through the umbilical cord, or to Rafael, implying that her connection to him and love for him are what metaphorically sustain her.[2] After this episode comes "the declaration of love" (Regis 2003, 14), for Azere confesses her love for him for the first time, and he reciprocates. When reflecting on such a positive outcome for their love story, Azere claims that although fate has played its part, she and Rafael have also had a great deal to do about it (298). Azere's recognition of their role in the success of their relationship, and, in turn, in her transition to cultural polyamory, recalls Anapol's argument that "team spirit" is crucial in polyamorous relationships (2010, 102). Anapol argues that "when independence is combined with a team spirit, it sets the stage for a win–win style, which can create a powerful synergy with others" (102). This reasoning applies to the novel because, once Azere claims that "for the first time in ages, [she doesn't] hear [her] mother's voice" (277), she gains the autonomy necessary to negotiate with Rafael the way for a positive resolution of their love story. Azere and Rafael's compromise, in turn, reveals "the commitment to emotional work" that Milona and Windling link to polyamory (2024, 11). In the same way that "a healthy polyamorous relationship requires efforts to manage one's attention in order to nurture multiple loving relationships" (9), Azere and Rafael try to manage the tensions and challenges arising from their diverse cultural backgrounds. It is through empathy, communication, and emotional reflection that they secure a healthy and balanced relationship.

Cultural polyamory ultimately enables Azere to come to terms with what she calls her "culture-clash love story" (306). Borrowing from Anapol's assertion that "some find in polyamory an effective way to address personal issues that might make monogamy difficult or impossible" (2010, 94), Azere's journey can be read as one in which cultural polyamory becomes a vehicle for reconciling her diasporic identity. In Azere's case, the cultural monogamy embodied in her exclusive attachment to her Nigerian heritage had previously meant repressing her feelings for Rafael. However, as Milona and Weindling observe, polyamory "favors openness toward love's possibilities ... and rejects embracing hierarchies of lovers" (2024, 8). In the context of the novel, cultural polyamory also entails embracing one's own cultures equally. Rafael's genuine interest in Azere's Nigerian heritage, together with their ongoing communication and negotiation, is crucial for her reconciliation with her identity as a Nigerian Canadian. This reconciliation is symbolised by the reestablishment of her relationship with her mother and her betrothal to Rafael, both of which occur

[2] This moment resonates with the novel's title, and highlights the ambivalence nature of bonds, which suggest both constraint and attachment, for the ties that restrain Azere are also those that sustain her. Her emotional connection to Rafael is initially presented as a threat to Azere's loyalty to her culture, but it is eventually perceived as what holds her up.

at the very end of the novel. Azere's mother visits her in the hospital to meet her newborn granddaughter and to apologise to both her and Rafael for having stood in the way of their relationship.

After this moment of relief for Azere, the story concludes with Rafael's proposal, offering the prototypical 'betrothal' scene of romances (Regis 2003, 22) and fulfilling the genre's conventional ending. The novel thus offers a happy ending for the protagonist not only in romantic but also in personal terms. Azere's progression to cultural polyamory has allowed her to prove Anapol's argument that "love cannot be forced to flow or be prevented from flowing in any particular direction" (2010, 1) and to show that it "can be shared with more than one significant other" (XIII). In Azere's case, this understanding translates into her equal acceptance of both cultures. The reconciliation with her diasporic identity is ultimately symbolised by her and Rafael's daughter, Hope, whose name metaphorically suggests a future in which she will no longer have to question her hybrid identity. Raised in a context of cultural polyamory, Hope will learn from her parents to value both her cultural roots and to embrace her multiple identities non-hierarchically.

4. CONCLUSION

Ties that Tether reimagines the romance genre through the lens of cultural polyamory, a concept that embraces the possibility of loving and accepting multiple cultures equally. The openness and reconciliation promoted by, and inherent in, this model of cultural polyamory challenge the traditional binaries between conservative or traditional values and modernity, and between social or familial expectations and love or personal interests. Azere's journey demonstrates that embracing more than one culture does not entail betrayal or loss of heritage, but integration and enrichment, suggesting that polyamory –when read culturally– becomes a valid mechanism for diasporic subjects to embrace their hybrid identities. Ultimately, the novel reaffirms that love can manifest in different ways and serve as a transformative force for intercultural dialogue and self-acceptance. Hence, through her engagement with love, identity, and cultural negotiation, Igharo promotes ongoing conversations about how diasporic individuals navigate the tensions between personal desire and collective belonging. In this context, love is placed at the service of intercultural negotiation without compromising the prototypical happily-ever-after of the genre, as the novel offers a positive outcome for Azere both culturally and romantically.

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