

## Repronormativity and its Others: Queering Parental Love in Times of Culturally Compulsory Reproduction

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**Abstract:** We may have believed women's (sexual) agency was an established right in Southern Europe. However, the recent history of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) in Portugal provides an enlightening example of how sexuality and reproduction have remained bounded. Until 2016, women in Portugal could not access ART unless they were formally partnered with a man (married or in a different-sex de facto union).<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I start by exploring the cultural context in which the motherhood regime, understood as both reproduction and parenting, is embedded in Portugal. The motherhood regime puts forward strong expectations about becoming a parent, hence feeding the cultural imaginary that makes reproduction compulsory (Roseneil et al. 2016). Having repronormativity as its backdrop, this section of the paper is in silent dialogue with the legal framework that removed most obstacles to same-sex parenting in Portugal in December 2016. In the second section, I consider biographic narrative interviews conducted with lesbian and bisexual mothers in Lisbon between April and July 2016, with a particular focus on participants' encounters with dominant ideologies of motherhood and cultural expectations around parental love. Participants in the study often reported situations demonstrating that love was the only emotion that made it culturally acceptable for women to engage in same-sex partnering and parenting. I will advance a reading of queer that can be used in future reproductive studies. I will suggest that in Southern Europe, where reproduction and parenting have been historically constrained by strict rules around gender and sexuality (Moreira, 2018, Santos 2013, Trujillo 2016), failing to be a particular kind of (heteronormative, cisnormative, mononormative) mother may offer a fruitful way for queering parental love through embracing reproductive misfits.

**Keywords:** reproduction, repronormativity, lesbian and bisexual, Portugal, intimate.

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<sup>1</sup> The law changed in 2016 to its current formulation: "Those who can use ART are different-sex couples or couples of women, married or cohabiting, as well as any woman regardless of their marital status and sexual orientation." (article 6, law n. 17/2016, 20 June).



## Introduction

In the aftermath of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, sexuality and reproduction seemed to be, finally, two separate categories. The democratized access to contraceptives, especially the pill, together with the right to safe abortions, granted women the power to choose when and if they would become mothers, regardless of sexual practice. Partnering and parenting were no longer necessarily co-dependent. However, when the topic is same-sex parenting, the link between sexuality and reproduction seems magnified, retaining much cultural significance. The recent history of medically assisted reproduction in Portugal offers a striking example of how sexuality and reproduction remain bounded in Southern Europe. Furthermore, this bond is culturally encouraged through a gendered narrative of love as a moral duty: women are expected to love their partner/s; and women are expected to love their prospective children.

Drawing on original empirical material gathered in 2016 within the INTIMATE Research Project, in this paper I challenge the assumption that sexuality and reproduction are culturally disentangled, suggesting that love remains a moral duty stitching together women's practices of partnering and parenting. This assumption is challenged based on two apparently conflictive grounds. On the one hand, in Southern European countries sexuality has been considered an impeding factor in law for accessing reproductive and parenting rights for LGBTQ people, whose love relationships were often dismissed, silenced or prohibited. On the other hand, lesbian and bisexual mothers often report that pregnancy marked the moment when they decided to come out to relatives and other important people who managed to overcome former homophobia through the vision of the prospective loving mother-child bond. Together these two factors expose the contradictions of a legal framework which until 2016 deprived subjects of reproductive agency<sup>2</sup> based on sexuality, while at the same time the very same subjects felt culturally validated when they would join the reproductive ladder. Therefore, legitimacy to access parenting is both questioned and reinforced by sexuality and love, even if in contradictory ways.

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<sup>2</sup> By reproductive agency I mean self-determination and the freedom to make informed choices regarding reproduction and parenting without constraints stemming from prejudice. These choices include the right to access reproduction-related services regardless of sexual or relational orientation.

## 1. The motherhood regime and its ideologies

Southern European countries are described in the literature on welfare and gender regimes as epitomes of family-oriented, procreative and (hetero)normative states (Mínguez and Crespi 2017, Torres, Mendes and Lapa 2008, Flaquer 2000, Santos 2012). Even though evidence suggests significant changes in recent years, most specifically regarding legal transformation from the 2000s onwards, cultural expectations encourage linearity in intimate biographies: after reaching adulthood, one finds a partner, gets formal recognition (i.e. by marriage) and has (one's own biological) children. In previous work, together with colleagues Roseneil, Crowhurst and Stoilova, we referred to this as *the procreative norm*, to signal the powerful “assumption, expectation and cultural demand that biological procreation should occupy the center-ground of the social formation, that intimate relationships, sexuality and the wider organization of the social should be driven by, and structured around, a naturalized notion of a primary, fundamental procreative imperative” (Roseneil et al. 2016: 3).

The push for parenting is culturally stronger in relation to women who, according to religious and often political authorities, are expected to take responsibility for renewing the population, in order to prevent a shortage of labor force in the future. As recently as June 2016, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan urged women to have at least three children, and said that a woman's life was “incomplete” if she failed to reproduce. Speaking at the opening of the new building of the Turkey's Women's and Democracy Association (KADEM), Erdoğan said that “Rejecting motherhood means giving up on humanity”, further adding that “A woman who says ‘because I am working I will not be a mother’ is actually denying her femininity”. He then concluded that “A woman who rejects motherhood, who refrains from being around the house, however successful her working life is, is deficient, is incomplete”.<sup>3</sup>

Despite meeting fierce criticism, these statements feed on a historical legacy rooted both in religion and in neoliberalism, with different narratives and agents, but similar outcomes. Motherhood is central in the gendered scripts attached to women. Willing and loving motherhood – instead of autonomous, self-determined pleasure – is the ultimate goal of women's sexuality, its excuse, what makes it acceptable. Therefore, by becoming a mother, lesbian or bisexual women

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<sup>3</sup> Agence France-Presse, “Turkish president says childless women are 'deficient, incomplete'”. *The Guardian*, June 6, 2016, [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/06/turkish-president-erdogan-childless-women-deficient-incomplete](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/06/turkish-president-erdogan-childless-women-deficient-incomplete).

are – allegedly – joining (or being culturally perceived as joining) the universe of normativities they had once – allegedly – rejected, when they diverged from the heteronormative script.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, what I call *the motherhood regime* of any given country consists of a set of cultural expectations, anchored in tradition, and translated into legal, political and social practices.<sup>5</sup> According to the dominant motherhood regime in Portugal, women are primarily and above all mothers. Current or forthcoming, but certainly caring, skillful, willing, resourceful, delighted super moms.<sup>6</sup>

In the early 2000s, the exploration of relational diversity, including non-monogamies, singledom and solo-living, opened the door to the questioning of the reproductive script and what it entails, especially for women. It then became apparent that a crucial aspect of the motherhood regime was the procreative norm (Roseneil et al. 2016) and, within it, repronormativity. Repronormativity, a term coined by Katherine Franke (2001) and Lee Edelman (2004), is an ideological force that narrows down the reproductive and parental human potential by reducing it to its dominant and hegemonic version. Anna Weissman suggests that repronormativity is “a paradigm that is limited to legitimized, state-sanctioned heteronormative acts of reproduction specifically through the patriarchal heteronormative family, and service to this reproduction of the heteropatriarchal nation-state” (2016: 3).

In the INTIMATE project, our understanding of repronormativity is anchored on heteronormative expectations around intimate love, reproduction and parenting. This aspect is particularly important in the Southern European context, in which same-sex parenthood has traditionally met more resistance and backlash than the recognition of same-sex marriage or other forms of partnering. And indeed, in 2009, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) demonstrated that despite considerable differences across the European Member States, “the most negative results surface when asked if homosexuals should be allowed to adopt children” (FRA 2009: 35). Cross-national surveys reveal that supporting same-sex partnering — either

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<sup>4</sup> For an engaging and important discussion about reproduction and normativities regarding lesbian and queer motherhood in the Swedish context, see Dahl 2017 and 2018.

<sup>5</sup> An interesting example of how law and social policy are constitutive of the motherhood regime is the focus on work-life balance, embodied to a large extent by state feminism and gathering a substantial part of the scholarly feminist work in Portugal in the 1990s (Monteiro and Portugal 2013).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of mothers’ negative feelings towards motherhood and their impact in the context of online social platforms in Portugal, see César et al 2018.

marriage or other forms of legal recognition — does not necessarily equate with support to same-sex parental rights.

However, whilst we are willing to acknowledge that heteronormative cultural norms and expectations play a significant role in the intimate biographies we construct, we somehow lack the same type of robust theoretical resources to explore repronormativity along similar lines. To put it differently, the inevitability of (heteronormative) reproduction has not received the same kind of scholarly and political attention as compulsory heterosexuality.

In 2001, Katherine Franke suggested that we “reconceptualize procreation as a cultural preference rather than a biological imperative, and then explore ways in which to lessen or at least modify the demand to conform to that preference” (2001: 185). She further argues that “repronormativity remains in the closet even while heteronormativity has stepped more into the light of the theoretical and political day. Reproduction has been so taken for granted that only women who are not parents are regarded as having made a choice—a choice that is constructed as nontraditional, nonconventional, and for some, non-natural.” (2001: 186).

To reiterate, the normalcy of the reproductive status for cisgender women is overwhelming and it occupies, unchallenged, legal, political and cultural spaces. In countries with a strong familistic tradition, of which Portugal is an example, the ideologies around motherhood are powerful and highly gendered. But reality is telling us a more nuanced story. 30,3 – this is the average age at which women in Portugal become mothers (Pordata 2016). Official statistical data from 2013 reveals that 35% of all women aged between 18 and 49 did not have biological children (INE, 2013). If we consider women aged between 30 and 49, we see that nearly 13% of women (12,7%) did not have biological children. This challenges gendered expectations around women’s self-fulfillment and parenting, as well as the ‘natural’ link between women and motherhood, opening the space for reappraising the cultural features of procreation, as suggested by Franke in 2001.

## **2. Mums strike back! Voices of lesbian and bisexual mothers in Lisbon**

Between April and July 2016 we conducted 30 in-depth interviews with self-identified LGBTQ people living in Portugal, Spain and Italy at the time. Using the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf and Chamberlayne, 2006), the focus of the interviews was their reproductive and parenting experiences. This section draws heavily on the narratives and

practices of self-identified lesbian and bisexual women, aged between 35 and 45, living in Lisbon at the time. All participants had a university degree, were partnered and parenting had been a couple-based decision.<sup>7</sup>

Some themes emerged from the narrative interviews as particularly significant. These were a) age and gendered ageism; b) reproductive materialities (including the material impact of reproduction and parenting); and c) reproductive misfits. These themes will be considered within the wider framework of the dominant ideologies of motherhood.

### ***2.1. Overaged for the job? Age, gendered ageism and temporal linearity***

In October 2016, Lina Alvarez, a Spanish medical doctor, gave birth to her third child. This event would not have hit the headlines of newspapers if not for the dominant reproductive regime and its ideology around good mothering. Lina Alvarez was then 62 years old. Reactions, both to her and to the doctor who conducted the treatment, were fierce. These reactions emerged from both the medical community and the wider public, who accused Lina of being selfish, irresponsible and unable to nurture her children until they reach adulthood.<sup>8</sup>

Ageism in relation to parenting offers a productive analytical ground to discuss the limits of parental love as a strong cultural script. Often concerns in terms of age become internalized, acting as starters or blockers of reproduction and parenting. Lesbian and bisexual mothers we interviewed displayed strong concerns with age, and these acquired different formats. First, the age of the prospective gestational and/or genetic parent plays a significant role in the decision-making process. This is often referred to as something banal, self-evident, internalized as natural:

*Soon I would no longer be in the right age to... [...] I am **in a hurry!** (Joana, 45-49yrs)*

*Suddenly I was already 36 and I figured I **couldn't wait anymore**. I spoke to Isabel [her partner] and told her "Look, I don't think I can wait any longer!" (Alice, 40-44yrs)*

*We were getting older and it was a bit like '**it's now or never**'. [...] It was not a very romantic process, I guess it was more for the very pragmatic issue of knowing **we are almost reaching expiry***

<sup>7</sup> Even though fieldwork coincided with the time ART Law was discussed and changed in Parliament, all of our participants reported experiences which were prior to the legal change.

<sup>8</sup> There are striking similarities between the aftermath of Lina's case and that of Adriana Iliescu in Romania in 2005: both women have faced an almost identical backlash. For more details on Lina's story, please refer to ZAP, "Médica espanhola foi mãe aos 62 anos de idade", October 22, 2016, [zap.aeiou.pt/medica-espanhola-mae-aos-62-anos-idade-135022](http://zap.aeiou.pt/medica-espanhola-mae-aos-62-anos-idade-135022). For a discussion of the Adriana Iliescu's case, see Cutaş 2007.

*date because even the clinics would not inseminate someone who is over 44 years old... (Amelia, 40-44yrs)*

*I guess age was a crucial element, either we would have a child then, or we would never have a child (Catarina, 35-39yrs).*

Some of these concerns stem from the perceived relation between age and success rates regarding pregnancy. But reflections about one's age are also sometimes accompanied by evaluations on good or bad parenting. And according to the repronormative script, a good mother should not be too old:

*I felt that, at 36, I couldn't wait much more coz... I mean, not only for the physical process but also coz... I mean, I want to have a child, not a grandchild, right? I don't want to have a child being 70 and him being 20. I wanted to have some quality of life with him still. (Alice, 40-44Yrs)*

Other questions emerging from the interviews were related to who was perceived by the couple as being fit to become a mother, who presented the highest chances of being successfully pregnant at first attempt and what was the age limit to access assisted reproduction techniques (ART) according to formal or tacit rules:

*Even the clinics would not inseminate someone who is over 44 years old... [...] They could not guarantee anything, as we were both over 30, they said the chances of having good enough eggs was very low, so why didn't we decide for someone else's eggs instead? And we replied, 'well, in that case we might as well adopt!', because the idea was to have our own child! (Amelia, 40-44yrs)*

There are several interesting layers in this excerpt. These include displays of what can partially be interpreted as institutional ageism and, in relation to prospective mothers themselves, the reproductive hierarchy that withholds biological kinship as more important than social ties (e.g. adoption).

Moving from an individually-based evaluation, to a couple-oriented decision, the duration and quality of the relationship seemed to be crucial aspects when deciding to become a parent through ART.

*We've been together for nearly 10 years now. We got married 4 years ago. When Daniel was born, yeah, we got married. The parenting project... I've always wanted to be a mum. I wasn't*



*sure how, it depended on finding the right person, and when Isabel and I got together, the possibility of becoming mothers started to emerge. (Alice, 40-44yrs)*

*I am with a woman for almost 9 years, it seemed natural that we would try to constitute a family and so we started evaluating different possibilities last year. (Catarina, 35-39yrs)*

*We were living together for some years... cohabiting was already a.., hum, there was a symbiosis... It was like a dance, right? (Catarina, 35-39yrs)*

This connection between partnering and parenting highlights the structured character of coupledom, with a tendency to replicate linear times of intimacy (“we were together already for X years, it seemed the right time...”; “it was the next logical step”).

## **2.2. Reproductive materialities**

The material aspects of reproduction were very central in the narratives produced by the participants. Most of the time, reference to materiality stemmed from concerns with costs associated with the reproductive displacement and the health procedures involved. At other times, interviewees identified certain moments as turning points in the process of becoming mothers:

*We started to be mothers when we first spoke about him. I told my partner: “There’s a room missing” [in the house they were considering renting at the time]. There was a room missing. And I asked myself, “But why would I want another room? Ah, I want a child! I soooo want a child!” That’s why I tell you that my son started there. This son, who was never born, started when I first saw that house, the house I never rented because it lacked one room for him. (Joana, 45-49Yrs)*

For several women, the parental project acquires a new materiality / becomes more real through the contact with the health unit, namely with the request for price quotes for treatment:

*She sent them (the clinic) and email, asking for a quotation. There is this awkward thing, right, there is this awkward thing for people who are trying to get pregnant, but, yes, there are budgets. (Alice, 40-44Yrs)*

For others, the insemination and the sonogram represented the moment in which the child had become real, and hence are described as the key starting moment of parental loving:



*I did the sonogram and to me that was the moment. When I say my child inside my womb, I believed in it, I cried, I stopped smoking on that day. And that was when I became a mother, that day in hospital! (Joana, 45-49Yrs)*

*We still keep the sonogram, we want to put it in a frame on the wall, because that was really the beginning!' (Amelia, 40-44yrs)*

And in other cases, the birth becomes the moment of reproductive and/or parental materialization:

*The nurse turned to me and said 'Take your child', and I was sort of surprised staring at her, 'My child?' It was the first time anyone was calling her my child. (Catarina, 35-39yrs)*

Such reproductive materialization can also be found in the symbolic objects mentioned during the interviews as powerful tokens of motherhood. These objects varied widely, from scans and baby clothes to pregnancy tests kept as powerful reminders of achievement.

Another related topic emerging in the interviews was the emotional impact of reproduction on partnering, namely on the couple relationship. Impact on coupledom was enhanced by the strict reproductive (medicalized) procedures, pressures around the 'right time' and the considerable financial strain.

### **2.3. Reproductive misfits join the reproductive ladder**

Despite speaking from the position of intended parents, the feeling of inadequacy or perplexity when faced with parental roles and expectations emerged at times. For the purposes of this paper, I borrow the notion of misfit, originally coined by Garland-Thomson (2011) in the context of feminist disability theory. It describes someone who does not seem to belong to a group or is not accepted by a group, because of being different in some way. Interviewees referred to moments in which they felt – or were out in the position of feeling – as reproductive misfits.

Such feelings were sometimes connected to the resilience of biology, namely blood ties, that authorized relatives, friends, co-workers or neighbors to act according to a tacit hierarchy according to which the gestational mother (and her parents) was the *real* mother (and grandparents) – regardless of whether she was also the genetic mother. Other times, the misfit seemed to be caused or aggravated by the absence of adequate conceptual tools which could better describe the non-gestational mother or the grand-parents:

*Our families [...] obviously struggle in calling me mother. And even me, I understand that mother is the one who gives birth, but there is no alternative name for me, therefore it is difficult to explain to them... What other name is there for me, since I am a woman? It would be interesting if there was another name, but there isn't. And so we are two mothers. [...] We attended childbirth classes and it was hard for me because [...] the instructor kept repeating the dad, the dad, the dad. [...] There was one occasion in which he asked the dads to leave the room and only the mums could stay. It was so weird, having to leave the room with all of those men who completely ignored me. At first I wasn't too sure whether I should leave the room, and when I did I felt awkward. I think it was one of the few times in which I felt awkward as a parent. (Catarina, 35-39yrs)*

On other occasions, participants described situations in which they were caught at the heart of the repronormative paradigm and how that surprised them. Joana reports the time in which for the first time she met a lesbian couple who had a child. Later on in the interview Joana returns to that event and explains a bit further her amazement whilst observing the pictures displayed in the house:

*And I remember staring at the picture frames and seeing two women only, and the baby, right?!? And I looked like someone who's searching for a man. I was indeed looking for a man. [...] And I realized I was looking at the house, browsing, searching for something I was missing. (Joana, 45-49yrs)*

On other narratives, the feeling of misfit is linked to disclosure of origins to children:

*And so it worries me, in a few years from now, when he asks 'who's my dad? How did I come to be?' (Amelia, 40-44yrs)*

Finally, there were also reports that link the idea of reproductive misfits to sexual orientation, most specifically to how having a lesbian relationship was considered an impeding factor for mothering:

*The idea of having a kid never crossed our mind. Even if we would both like it, enjoyed the idea, but we never really thought about it because at the time it was unthinkable. (Amelia, 40-44yrs)*

*We both wanted to be mums, we always did... we realized it was going to be difficult, as we were both women [...] There was this boy who fancied her and, in a very rational way, she started seeing him more often and I could see why and there was this weird time in which we*

*went a bit astray because the desire to become a mother was stronger and we thought she could have someone else's child and then we would get back together and raise that child together. (Catarina, 35-39yrs)*

*[referring to her partner whose job is highly male oriented] To have all of those men surrounding her and then to have to justify the existence of a child when none of them ever saw her dating anyone, ever, nothing... It would have been very difficult to manage all of that information. (Amelia, 40-44yrs)*

In dominant heteronormative contexts, the decision to become a parent when you self-identify as a lesbian or bisexual is already a queer act of defiance, as Moreira (2018) aptly demonstrates regarding the Spanish context. These themes offer an important opportunity to discuss the cultural entanglements between sexuality and reproduction, one of the assumptions that this paper takes issue with.

### **3. Queer in Reproductive Studies, or the queer art of failed mothering**

In the 2016 Hollywood blockbuster *Bad Moms*, Amy – a 32-year-old, recently divorced and exhausted mother of two – decides she has had enough and starts a revolution. Backed up by Carla, a seductive single mum, and Kiki, a shy woman with 4 children and who describes herself as not having any friends –, Amy runs for Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) President against impeccable, rich and never late Gwendolyn, someone who is depicted as a perfect mother, and who had been re-elected PTA president in the past 6 years. In her final statement just before election, Amy makes a decisive speech:

*The truth is, when it comes to being a mum, I have no clue as to what I'm doing. And you know what, I don't think anyone does. I think we're all bad moms, and you know why? Because being a mum today is i-m-p-o-s-s-i-b-l-e. [crowd cheers in support] So can we all please stop pretending like we have it figured out, and stop judging each other for once.*

The crowd is surprisingly supportive. And one by one, other mothers attending the meeting stand up and confess things they did or did not do and that could be considered as bad mothering according to dominant standards, from junk food to excessive TV-time. Two of those bad-motherish statements stand out as particularly challenging and unexpected in the line of testimonials, and these are the ones chosen to end the series. One mother says “I like my nanny better than I like my

husband”, to her husband’s dismay, sitting beside her (“No, really??”), and the women burst in applause. Another woman stands up and declares that “I don’t even have kids, I just come to PTA meetings ‘cause I’m lonely”, followed by shy and embarrassed applause. Amy wins the election for PTA President against Gwendolyn. And her motto throughout the campaign was mothers’ (and children’s) right to do less – fewer meetings, less homework, fewer hours. The ability to make mistakes, to get it wrong, to not having it all figured out.

In a ten-hour flight between Madrid and Bogotá in November, Avianca Airlines advertised the movie as a comedy: “When three overworked and under-appreciated moms are pushed beyond their limits, they ditch their conventional responsibilities for a jolt of long overdue freedom, fun, and comedic self-indulgence”. Arguably, this simplistic description misrepresents what could be seen as a queer feminist aim of the movie, dismissing women’s rightful critique of repronormativity as a mere jolt of fun and comedic self-indulgence. Fun and indulgence is not what serious, committed mothers do; ditching your responsibilities for a bit of fun and indulgence is for spoiled, selfish and reckless adults; or kids. But the movie is more than its poor description. The scene of an admittedly imperfect mother running against the woman who epitomizes all the normativities attached to good motherhood is striking on many levels. For the purposes of this paper, I want to use this scene to prompt our thoughts around the queer art of failed mothering.

In a context in which reproduction and parenting are constrained by a set of rules around gender and sexuality, challenging the grounds through which one reproduces and/or parents on a daily basis can be interpreted as a queer stance. As such, failing to be a mother or failing to be a particular kind of (heteronormative, cisnormative, mononormative) mother, is as queer as failing to fulfil other dominant expectations.

If we return to Amy, her supporters and the two final statements during the election night –the lesbian mother and the lonely ‘fake’ mother –, we see how the many levels of queer intersect through the failure of parenting. In that scene we have a recently divorced mother, a single mother, a lesbian or bisexual mother, a lonely woman who attends parents meetings, women with precarious jobs, women who have uncommitted sex and women who put an end to unfulfilling relationships, women who are in the process of becoming, of traveling away from the fixed position normative motherhood had ascribed to them. These women capture the queer that stems from not having it all figured out. Or from being reproductive dissidents, or misfits.

*We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. [...] the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness (Muñoz 2009).*

The daily encounters with ideologies of motherhood that many of our interviewees shared with us contain maps of the “utopia that is queerness”. Indeed, queer teaches us to value experience. And in so doing queer creates the space for rejecting ageism and temporal linearity, reframing the material aspects of parenting, and for embracing reproductive misfits which may include single parents, surrogates, trans-parents, multi-parents and ART mothers.

## **Conclusion**

In a context of limited visibility of LGBTQ parenting in relation to heteronormative parental roles, the focus of this article was placed on the experiences of motherhood by lesbian and bisexual women in Southern Europe. Particular attention was given to biographic accounts and experiences of the everyday (Hicks 2011), and how parenting is shaped by norms and expectations around age, material constraints and ideas around good (and bad) mothering. On the one hand, the stories we gathered demonstrate that however dissident lesbian and bisexual reproductive practices may be – and may be represented as – in Southern European countries, repronormativity is also a significant part of the doings of pregnancy, bonding and parental love. On the other hand, our biographical accounts also show how lesbian and bisexual mothers are occupying a space which is already disrupting the procreative norm (Roseneil et al 2016) and queering parenting in times of compulsory reproduction, hence engaging with theories and politics around critical kinship (Krolekke et al eds, 2016).

One important conclusion to be extracted is that reproduction and parenting are taken very seriously by lesbian and bisexual women who start their reproductive journey through ART. The decision to become a parent is thoughtful and discussed thoroughly, often for years before being enacted. They do not become parents by accident. The intended character of reproduction influences the narratives we gathered.

*With us it needs to be very well planned, right? It is not as it is with a heterosexual couple for whom it just happens, right? Not with us. (Alice, 40-44yrs)*

*We are fortunate because we do know the exact day in which our child was conceived! (Amelia, 40-44yrs)*

Some participants reported moments in which their reproductive happiness became a tool for visibility and alliance, eliciting empathy from health professionals (e.g. one interviewee described nurses volunteering to take pictures of the couple together with the baby), relatives, friends (e.g. volunteering to become donors) and extended networks of care. Therefore, legitimacy to access parenting was both questioned and reinforced by sexuality, as the stories gathered demonstrated.

The official story of reproduction as a natural drive is deeply ableist, racialized, ageist and heterosexist. Within what we called *the motherhood regime* of a given country, to become a mother one must comply with a set of tacit – when not explicit – rules (Roseneil et al. 2016). Mothers are expected to belong to a particular type of category: not too old, not too young; not too reproductive, not too sexually active; not too sick, not too poor, not too jobless<sup>9</sup> (McClain 1996). Mothers are expected to be cisgendered women, monogamous, fertile and able-bodied. Mothers are expected to be happily married to their cohabiting male partner. The heterosexist character of “natural reproduction” dismissed the reproductive demands of an army of potential parents such as single people, transgender or gay men, lesbian and bisexual women, polyamorous and other relationally diverse families.

Under the constraining repronormative lens, lesbians, bisexuals and other sexual dissidents continue to have an identity understood as non-reproductive in nature. They are reproductive misfits. As such, taking into sociological consideration same-sex parenting is already a step forward towards the undoing of the dominant heteropatriarchal matrix of reproduction. If Franke is right, and reproduction continues to be regarded as more inevitable and natural than heterosexuality, then taking into account biographical narratives of women who self-identify as lesbian and bisexual, and who became parents within a same-sex relationship, can contribute to dismantling a key premise of both hetero and repronormativity: motherhood as natural.

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<sup>9</sup> Queen of Benefits Cheryl Prudham dubbed 'Britain's most shameless mum – read more [www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/queen-benefits-cheryl-prudham-dubbed-8370786](http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/queen-benefits-cheryl-prudham-dubbed-8370786) and [www.thesun.co.uk/news/2908640/cheryl-prudham-child-13-jail/](http://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2908640/cheryl-prudham-child-13-jail/) (February 2017).

Moreover, the topic of sexual dissidence and parenting can also fulfil an important theoretical and political call for decolonizing motherhood. More than two decades ago, Martha Fineman has said that the practice of motherhood is a symbolic space that has been occupied by patriarchal norms. According to Fineman, “[m]otherhood [is] a colonized concept—an event physically practiced and experienced by women, but occupied and defined, given content and value, by the core concepts of patriarchal ideology” (Fineman 1991: 290). In line with Fineman’s call, this article is a contribution into the “futures of belonging and recognition” (Mamo 2007) that queering reproduction entails, taking seriously the responsibility of exploring the gendered specificities within the diversity of LGBTQ parenting (Ryain-Flood, 2009, Taylor, 2009).

Finally, the narratives we collected for this study demonstrate the need to deconstruct the ideology of the biological super-mum. This call is shared with other struggles in the realm of reproductive citizenship such as compulsory breastfeeding or the increasing visibility of politically regretful mothers. Furthermore, lesbian and bisexual practices of motherhood can play a significant role in desacralizing nature – nature is mutable, diverse, a work in progress. And so is the mother-child bond and so is parental love. There is nothing intrinsically natural in the decision to have (or not to have) children, in as much as there is nothing intrinsically natural in remaining partnered, single, straight or relationally diverse.

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