



## Article

# Intimate Lovers, Legal Strangers—The Politics of Dissident Relationality in Portugal

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**Abstract:** Dominant cultural frameworks, laws, and social policy in Southern Europe often stem from and replicate a collective imaginary based on a reproductive, cohabiting, monogamous, and cis-heterosexual couple. Concomitantly, despite significant advances in legislation in recent years, LGBTQ+ intimacies continue to be subject to daily prejudice, violence, and shame. The purpose of this article is to understand how state recognition contributes to the un/doing of the abject culturally attached to LGBTQ+ intimacies; and to examine personal, sociocultural, and legal traits that shape biographies turning intimate citizens into intimate lovers and/or legal strangers. The first part of this chapter involves an outlining of developments regarding law and relational diversity in Portugal. The second part deals with the visibility of non-normative sexuality that is often a target of abject gaze, rejection, and other cultural practices of discrimination. It is suggested that legally recognized marital status can become a way to overcome the abject or the invisible, both in relation to the state and the cultural milieu. We offer the notion of relational performativity and suggest that non-monogamy (even when consensual) is a major cultural source of the relational abject, encapsulating moral panic around the promiscuous, unhealthy, and uncommitted sexual monster. The article finishes with reflections that move beyond the examples provided to dialogue with dissident relationality as a concept that describes the intimate experiences of aging LGBTQ+ people.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+; intimacies; consensual non-monogamy; aging; dissident relationality; relational performativity; Portugal



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## 1. Introduction

Southern Europe is often described as a family-oriented welfare regime (Flaquer 2000; Torres et al. 2008; Mínguez and Crespi 2017). Indeed, historically the state has endorsed dominant cultural frameworks, laws, and social policies that not only stem from but actively reinforce a collective imaginary based on the reproductive, cohabiting, monogamous, and cis-heterosexual couple. Concomitantly, LGBTQ+ intimacies face daily encounters with prejudice, violence, and shame (Gato et al. 2012; Fra 2020). Influenced by the memory of queer as an insult (Llamas 1998; Eribon 2004), the legacy of the abject is mirrored in the ways in which non-normative relationality is considered uncommitted and unnatural. Links to what is natural in the moral sense are connected to ideas of sin and cleanliness, influenced by religion and feeding the patriarchal gender-sex system. Julia Kristeva (1982) reflects extensively on the abject, why, and how the abject takes place. The author explains that what causes abjection is the loss of the meaning we use to give something. When something loses its meaning, or more specifically, the meaning we used to give to it, we are potentially losing the understanding of reality. During this process, we detach ourselves from that thing that causes us disgust; we do not want to be associated with that, and by doing that, we are defining ourselves by negation—“that is what I am not” (Ellis 2010). At this point, one might ask: why do certain things lose their meaning? Because of the process that happens in what Kristeva calls the “liminal space”. The liminal space functions as the bridge between two worlds, between two different meanings. It is the space between life

and death, between, for instance, the fruit that nourishes and the fruit that poisons. The object becomes abject when it does not respect the rules, something that disturbs systems, order, limits, places, and identities. This is what happens to sexually non-normative people; they disrupt the cis-heteronormative system and, in so doing, they shift to the margins from the compulsory cis/hetero/monogamous sexuality in which they are assumed and expected to as “normal” intimate citizens. The sexually non-normative subject crosses the liminal space and loses the meaning of “normal”.

The abject situates itself between the object—situated outside—and the subject—what I am inside. In Kristeva’s words, it refers to a reaction that happens “if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be ‘me’” (Kristeva 1982, p. 10). In abjection, there is the fear of losing the distinction between subject and object, self and other (Felluga 2015). Therefore, when someone sees, touches, or thinks about something that does not respect (their own) boundaries, it forces them to choose their identity by detaching from the abject. The abject turns out to not be an object but something that is opposed to “I”. It becomes understandable that non-normative relationalities are placed in that liminal space between what is “normal” and “abnormal”, between heteronormativity and abjection.

This article seeks to understand how state recognition contributes to undoing the abject culturally attached to LGBTQ+ intimacies, at the same time as it contributes to the construction of hierarchies of relationality (some attain state acknowledgment; the remaining ones fail that acknowledgment because/and therefore are abject); and to examine personal, sociocultural and legal traits that shape biographies by turning intimate citizens into intimate lovers and/or legal strangers. Our aim is to contribute to unpacking dissident relationality, understood as sexual intimacy that escapes the dominant script of the cis-heteronormative, monogamous, and reproductive couple. Dissident relationality is often interpreted as abject, hence triggering social mechanisms of avoidance and rejection.

Framing dissident relationality as a central aspect of new (and old) directions in gender research and acknowledging the gendered impacts of “good” and “bad” intimate citizenship, the article starts with a brief outlining of major developments regarding law and relational diversity in Portugal, from cohabiting with friends in 2001 to same-sex marriage in 2010 and parenting rights in 2016, within a broader sociocultural context that reinforces the heteronormative “compulsory conjugality” (Walker 2009). In the second part, we focus on injunctions between law, culture, and non-normative relationality. Our main dataset draws on biographic narratives produced by lesbian couples and polyamorous people in 2015 and 2017. An additional dataset of in-depth qualitative interviews with older LGBTQ+ adults in Portugal will also inform the analysis in the last section of this article.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, the quest for legal and cultural recognition of non-normative stable relations has had two sets of opposite outcomes. Culturally, whereas lesbian-coupled interviewees described their expectations and experiences of broader social acceptance when their couple status became visible—especially through a legally recognized relationship—non-monogamous participants experienced increased discrimination when their relational status became known; and legally, lesbian couples are now fully recognized by the state as intimate citizens whereas non-monogamous partners remain legal strangers. To explain the differences we encountered, we offer the notion of relational performativity and suggest that non-monogamy (even when consensual) remains a major cultural source of the relational abject, encapsulating moral panic around the promiscuous, unhealthy and uncommitted sexual monster, a process which resonates with the moral panic against gay sexual practices in the 1980s. As such, the formal recognition of lesbian coupledness overcomes the relational abject in ways that meet no correspondence in non-monogamous constellations. In so doing, it makes apparent the processes through which the abject creates state-endorsed models of good and bad intimate citizens. Finally, we recuperate the idea of dissident relationality to move beyond the examples provided and engage with the living experiences of aging LGBTQ+ intimate citizens as a source of unwanted and often demonized practice of relationality.

## 2. Relational Diversity in the Portuguese Context—An Overview

Until 1982, homosexual acts were illegal in Portugal. The criminalization of homosexuality dates back to 1912 and enabled police raids and detention camps targeting gay people throughout the longest dictatorship in Southern Europe, between 1926 and 1974 (Almeida 2010; A. C. Santos 2013a). It took the legislator 8 years in the context of a democratic regime to finally overturn the homophobic legal provision. This delay already illustrates the resilience of prejudice based on sexual orientation and gender identity, even in contexts in which legal change was urgent and contemplated women's rights. Such a delay between the establishment of democracy and the decriminalization of homosexuality becomes more striking when we consider the time span between that first legal change in 1982 and others that came after regarding LGBTQ+ people in Portugal.

In 2001, nineteen years after decriminalizing homosexuality, the Portuguese Parliament approved two laws that changed the face of sexual politics in the country. One of these was the law on the shared economy that recognized the legal status of cohabitants regardless of their number, gender, or existence of blood ties (Decreto Lei n° 6/01). This law was particularly promising in the fields of friendship and consensual non-monogamy, as recognition of partners was not limited in number nor by the existence of sexual bonds between them (A. C. Santos 2013a). However, LGBTQ+ people do not seem to be aware of this benefit (A. L. Santos 2023). The second important legal change in 2001 was the de facto union law, which granted the same rights to different-sex and same-sex cohabiting couples regarding next-of-kin, health, and housing, amongst other legal aspects (Decreto Lei n° 7/01).

The legal changes enacted in 2001 interrupted a 19-year period of stillness during which, after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1982, LGBTQ+ issues remained marginal to the political agenda, despite the increasing consolidation of collective action and cultural expectations around the topic. Indeed, the sociocultural and political events leading to these changes were, in itself, interesting from the point of collective action and the impact of social movements (A. C. Santos 2013a). Following the approval of these two laws, other changes occurred, and LGBTQ+ legal demands slowly but steadily occupied the Constitution, the penal Code, and the Civil Code.

In 2004, Portugal became the first European country and the fourth worldwide to introduce the prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation in the Constitution. Such a change offered the political and symbolic grounds for further claims in the spheres of anti-discrimination, protection against violence, and recognition of same-sex parenthood, amongst others. Hence, in 2007 same-sex domestic violence was acknowledged and sanctioned, following a fascinating debate about gender-based violence and cultural expectations regarding asymmetrical strength and bodily differences in the context of coupledness. Furthermore, in 2007 age of consent became the same for both different-sex and same-sex relationships, responding to one of the earliest claims of LGBTQ+ organizations.

The most controversial change took place in 2010 when, after a long period of fierce social debate involving religious leaders, politicians, and activists, the Portuguese Parliament agreed to change the legal definition of marriage, hence approving a gender-neutral marriage law. Since same-sex marriage had been approved in neighboring Spain 5 years earlier, this became the central demand and also the one which attracted more resistance and backlash. Despite the progress made, Portugal did not include parenting rights for same-sex people by the time it legislated same-sex marriage, differently from Spain, which guaranteed both rights (same-sex marriage and parenthood) at the same time. Parenting rights in Portugal would only become partly universal in 2016.

In 2011, a law on gender identity was approved and, at the time, was described by national media as the most advanced worldwide, as a bodily change was not a mandatory criterion for a new gender identity. This law has been the object of critique ever since due to its age restrictions and the role ascribed to medical doctors in defining the transgender status of a person (Hines and Santos 2018). A revised version of the law based on the self-determination of trans people over 16 years old was approved in Parliament in April 2018,

despite facing fierce contestation amongst the most conservative sectors. The revised law on gender identity included the protection of sex characteristics of intersex people and the prohibition of medical intervention on the bodily and sex characteristic of infants without their consent. Finally, in 2016, same-sex parenthood received extensive legal recognition, including adoption, co-adoption, medically assisted reproduction, and even a restrictive version of surrogacy which, however, is not yet accessible to intended parents who are male-identified (A. L. Santos 2017).

This overview of LGBTQ+ rights in Portugal offers a contextualization of a highly dynamic field primarily and foremost focused on legal change. If we compare it to other geographical contexts, even in Southern Europe, 15 years is a relatively short period between having absolutely no rights ascribed to LGBTQ+ citizens (before 2001) to the current context in which most rights have been formally granted (2016). Secondly, this overview gives the reader a clear sense of the extent to which the law is invested in disciplining the intimate citizen by turning (once) sexual dissidents into respectable husbands, wives, partners, and parents (A. C. Santos 2013b). In fact, the cycle of legal recognition started in 2001 with partnering and finished in 2016 with parenting (considering the gender identity law of 2018 aimed at correcting aspects of the 2011 original law). Arguably, such a context of proper and respectable claims reinforces the binary that opposes ‘good’ and ‘bad’—e.g., abject—intimate citizenship. This paradigm of good versus bad intimate citizen is also evident when unpacking the mononormative underpinnings of the marriage law, the two-person model of child filiation, the couple-oriented measures during COVID-19 lockdowns and the overturn only in 2019 of the so-called inter-marriage deadlines (*prazo internupcial*) as a perfect example of the strong (and legally enforced) links between monogamy, repronormativity, and gender.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the ways in which state recognition contributes to the undoing of the abject culturally attached to LGBTQ+ intimacies, the embodied biographic narratives we gathered to tell us a different, much more nuanced story, highlighting the contrast between a progressive legal framework and a predominantly heteronormative cultural milieu. In fact, legal change has failed to prevent homophobic bullying and trans street harassment, and reports on abject gaze, hate speech, and silent shame are more common than what one would expect in a time when formal rights have been ascribed. The experience of our interviewees denounces state-sponsored discourses on freedom and appreciation of sexual diversity, which are often conveniently used to portray “the nation” in contrast with more conservative countries (Duggan 2002; Puar 2007). The next section examines some of the themes that emerged from our thematic analysis to biographic narrative interviews with lesbian couples and non-monogamous LGBTQ+ people living in Lisbon between 2015 and 2017.

### 3. Non-Normative Relationality under the (Abject) Radar

When non-normative relationality becomes visible, it is often a target of abject gaze, shame, hate, and other cultural practices of discrimination. In our analysis, we want to suggest a contrast between the ways in which lesbian coupledness and non-monogamous relationships are (legally) recognized by the state and (culturally) addressed by mainstream society.

This section is based on an original dataset of 15 in-depth, biographic narrative interviews with self-identified lesbian coupled women and/or non-monogamous LGBTQ+ people living in Lisbon between 2015 and 2017. Participants were between 25 and 45 years old, and they were all invited to choose their pseudonyms. Interview length ranged between 1 h 30 and 4 h 50 and always included two sessions following the interview protocol for the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, fully anonymized, and analyzed using NVivo following a thematic analysis approach. The core themes were related to the central concerns of our research, which revolved around issues of partnering, parenting, and friendship, as well as citizenship, care and choice. Within each of these themes, subthemes were identified whenever they emerged in more

than one interview. The analytical insights and consubstantiated interpretation of data were based on the contents of this thematic, empirically-based grid. Following this initial step, an integrated analysis was conducted, aiming at exploring more theoretically-based paths. This section dialogues with three of those major themes: disgust, shame, and hate. These themes are often intertwined in the same excerpt. For this reason, we chose to focus our analytical attention on particular moments of intimate citizenship that became turning points in the biographical narratives we gathered—coming out, partnering, and parenting. Each of these turning points will be described in light of the absence it encapsulates: coming out as a result of the absence of (proper) coupledom; partnering in the absence of the (proper) wedding; and parenting in the context of an inexistent father.

### 3.1. Coming Out, and the Ghost of the Missing Couple

In contexts in which being sexually dissident triggers more disgust than celebration (Ahmed 2004, 2010, 2017; Halberstam 2011), this section deals with the crucial question of “when to reveal what to whom?” (Borneman 2013, p. 118). Our data indicate that there is a general assumption about the best moment to come out, which ideally seems to coincide with the existence of a stable relationship. For Dory, a lesbian woman in her early 30s cohabiting with her child and partner, coming out happened at the end of a long process. During the 1990s, in Portugal, there was not much choice of places for LGBTI+ people to hang out. Dory met several women in what she described as a suspicious nightclub, she became intimately involved with some of them, but no one was considered worthy of being presented to her parents as her girlfriend:

*I would only tell my parents about all of this trouble [about being a lesbian] when I would be with someone who was worth it. [...] I think it is better for a young person not to say it out of the blue “look, I like girls” or “I like boys” in the case of a boy, because if parents don’t associate it with a real face, they will imagine bad things. [...] It is like the imaginary friend, but in this case, it is the imaginary enemy. (Dory, lesbian, 30–35 years old)*

Dory’s narrative illustrates that coming out as a “single” lesbian was not an option during the 1990s, and this unspoken link between coming out and having what is considered a serious relationship is still in operation today. Describing her current relationship, Dory says:

*When I was sure things were serious and when we decided to move in together, that was the moment when I spoke to my parents. (Dory, lesbian, 30–35 years old)*

Like Dory, Amy, a lesbian woman in her late 20s engaged in a living-apart-together relationship for 7 years, considered it more appropriate to come out to her extended family in a context of a relationship. However, unlike Dory, for Amy, the prospect of coming out is accompanied by the wish to have her relationship legally recognized:

*If I tell them I’m with a girl, it doesn’t look like it’s something real. But being married is different. For those who will listen to this for the first time, it will be different. I think that will be the moment when both of us will come out to our [extended] families. I think that before that it will never happen. That’s one of the reasons why we want to get married. (Amy, lesbian, 25–29 years old)*

The connection between coming out and being partnered is also applicable to Alice’s story during the 1990s. The moment of coming out to her mother in the kitchen was followed by a difficult dialogue in which she was advised to search for psychological help and then asked to leave the parental home. It was at that moment that Alice decided to cohabit with her partner at the time. She describes that relationship as having been significant “because it made me leave home, it made me acquire some degree of independence” (Alice, lesbian, 40–44 years old).

Our interviewees’ decision to come out about their sexual orientation based on their relational status may stem from the increased visibility implied in having a relationship,



but it can also result from cultural features attached to mainstream compulsory conjugality (Roseneil et al. 2020; Walker 2009). The ghost of the missing couple captures precisely the double-pronged idea that (1) to become a proper adult, one must escape the ghost of abject singledom (Roseneil et al. 2020); and (2) in the absence of a (visible) partner it gets more difficult to achieve or grant recognition to a non-normative sexual orientation. In other words, there cannot be single lesbian, gay, or bisexual people in the context of coupled heterosexuality by default. The mainstream sexuality regime expects intimate citizens to escape abjection by becoming (adequately) partnered. This takes us into the next section, which explores the topic of partnering.

### 3.2. Partnering, and the Ghost of the Missing (Legitimate) Wedding

To reiterate, Southern European countries are described in literature on welfare and gender regimes as embodiments of family-oriented, procreative, and (hetero)normative states (Flaquer 2000; Torres et al. 2008; Mínguez and Crespi 2017). Despite changes, cultural expectations encourage linearity in intimate biographies: after reaching adulthood, one finds a partner, gets formal recognition (i.e., marriage), and has biological children (Roseneil et al. 2015, 2020). Therefore, according to the dominant sexuality regime, being coupled is better than remaining single, and this applies regardless of sexual orientation. The difference when it comes to non-normative intimacy is that one's own sexuality does not exist in and by itself until a partner turns it into something tangible, material, and real. Such a requirement hails from the dominant matrix of heterosexuality (Butler 1999), which does not require a partner in order to be culturally confirmed. Furthermore, not only do lesbian, gay, or bisexual orientations require a partner to acquire visibility, hence to become real, but also, to be culturally recognized, they should succeed in obtaining a legitimate, preferably legalized, marital status. As Amy explains in her interview:

*When I tell someone Dany and I are together for 7 years, they're like "Seven years? How so? How did that happen? Are you going to get married?" And we are like, "yeah, yeah, we'll get married, eventually". (Amy, lesbian, 25–29 years old)*

This requirement introduces a sharp division between our lesbian sample, for whom de facto union and marriage have been legally possible since 2001 and 2010, respectively, and our LGBTQ+ non-monogamous sample, for whom formal relationship recognition is not even perceived as a political demand.<sup>3</sup> Susana, a polyamorous participant in the study, said:

*We don't have any type of representation, we're not visible at all and we don't have any rights. [...] If one of our children ends up in hospital, who gets to be there, who's got that right to be there? And even in situations of separation or death, right? It's difficult to understand what our rights consist of. [...] Possibly, we'll have to swallow many bitter pills, or face many unfair situations in which we will not win, and that is sad. I mean we see it daily, it's always couple-oriented, a short-break for two and stuff. (Susana, bisexual, 25–29 years old)*

In order to counter the abject (heteronormative) gaze and the silent shame inscribed in the non-normative intimate citizen, LGBTQ+ people internalize the need to choose wisely who will be presented as 'the' partner. Dory admits this when she refers to the women she met in the nightclub: "I wouldn't present those people neither to my parents nor to my child". Further, even in situations in which partners wish to be recognized as such, this desire is often met with disbelief or dismissal. The following excerpts from interviews with Paulo and Susana, both polyamorous, are one example amongst many we encountered:

*My mum had a very amusing reaction when she refused to accept my bisexuality. She was like, "come on, you don't need to pretend that you still fancy women, you can stop it". But then she would realize I was involved with this girl and so on, and she would be very puzzled. (Paulo, bisexual, 25–29 years old)*

*Once mum and I were chatting and she said something like "you two have adopted him as if he is your cat", or something. She thinks my relationships are a bit like, how should*

*I put this, a product of a whim, for some reason that is how she sees my relationships, and it is precisely the opposite. (Susana, bisexual, 25–29 years old)*

Two main conclusions can be immediately extracted: firstly, the dominant sexuality regime does not take same-sex and non-monogamous relationships as seriously, and genuine as straight and monogamous relationships. Second, in the hierarchy of intimate biographies, a registered union is ascribed more social value than a relationship that lacks any sort of formal recognition (A. C. Santos 2013b). In this relational hierarchy, LGBTQ+ non-monogamous relationships face very difficult conditions whereby no form of de facto or legal protection is granted (A. C. Santos 2019). It is important to note, however, that not all registered relationships receive the same type of endorsement, and therefore the legal recognition of a lesbian relationship may push for social acknowledgment regarding sexual orientation but still fail to guarantee social validation regarding the relationship in itself. This is why the queer struggle would not aim for equal status with the heteronormativity but the challenge of these institutions (Warner 1991). However, according to Heaphy et al. (2013) “legal recognition can enable the living of ordinary lives” (p. 17), and this brings homosexuals wanting to fulfill the cultural morality to be considered “normal” people, “actively claiming their ordinariness” (ibid.), to fulfill the norms for the sake of a “liveable life” (Butler 2004).

The ghost of the missing wedding aims at denouncing the mandatory character of state-sanctioned relationships—partnering is culturally endorsed to the extent to which the state grants legal rights to those (and not others) forms of partnering: monogamous, cohabiting, hopefully reproductive, one way or the other. These are the features that save partnering from being a source of shame and embarrassment in the eyes of others who seek a proper justification for sexual intimacy, such as reproduction. The link between LGBTQ+ partnering and parenting, and the type of reaction it triggers in others, will be further developed in the next section.

### 3.3. Parenting, and the Ghost of the Missing Father

Under the constraining repronormative lens, lesbians, bisexuals, and other sexual dissidents continue to be culturally perceived as non-reproductive (Bernstein and Reimann 2001; Hines 2006; Moreira 2018). They are reproductive misfits (A. C. Santos 2018). 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.

This section draws on narratives of lesbian and bisexual mothers<sup>4</sup> and the reactions their decision to procreate triggered in their cultural milieu in the context of legal transformation in the making. In fact, in May 2016, coinciding with the time we were conducting our interviews, the legal context of reproductive citizenship changed; while earlier surrogacy was forbidden on all grounds and medically assisted conception was only available to heterosexual married women to the current legal framework that enables a limited version of surrogacy and medically assisted conception to all women regardless of sexual orientation or relational status.

One of the most significant traits of heteronormativity is the discourse around nature: to put it bluntly, sex between a man and woman is natural, and the proof of its natural character is that it triggers ‘life’. The shameful or immoral character of LGBTQ+ reproduction lies in their successful escape from the inevitability of heterosexuality. By undoing the inevitability of heterosexuality, by exposing its fractures, same-sex parenting is seen as a threat and dismissed as wrong, dangerous, and despicable. The abject here is deployed through hate more so than through shame. Instead of shameful sinners, prospective mums and dads are portrayed as selfish and therefore deserving of rejection for the sake of children’s best interest.<sup>5</sup> Accusations of selfishness were reported by several of our interviewees regarding their reproductive decisions. Catarina, for instance, describes a difficult situation with a co-worker:

*She thinks that if women cannot have kids—as it is the case with a lesbian couple —, then they should not have kids. If they chose to be lesbians, they shouldn't have kids. [...] She often speaks of this being a selfish act. (Catarina, bisexual, 35–39 years old)*

Catarina proceeds to describe instances in which she felt disenfranchised as a non-gestational mother, both by her family and her partner's family. She also mentioned moments in which her role as a mother was not taken seriously. For instance, in a workshop in preparation for labor, referring to people attending the course, she says, "most of them felt upset. [...] Based on the language used or their attitude, they wouldn't take me seriously, I mean, as a mum, they wouldn't let me into that group".

#### **4. The Good Intimate Citizen and Its Others—Panic, Negotiation, and Relational Performativity**

In the previous section, we chose to analyze our empirical material considering three turning points in intimate biographies—coming out, partnering, and parenting. None of them were treated, but instead, we placed them against the backdrop of the unspoken ghostly absence they represent: coming out versus the missing (proper) couple; partnering in light of the missing husband; and parenting when the ghost of the inexistent father still haunts reproductive citizenship rights of lesbian and bisexual women.

All of the examples discussed so far put our interviewees in a silent dialogue with the willful figure explored by Sara Ahmed (2017). Ahmed draws on Grimm's story "The Willful Child", which speaks about a kid who was so disobedient that God let her become ill and die. On the day of her funeral, when the first layer of earth was spread upon her body, to everyone's dismay, the child's arm stretched upwards and kept coming out no matter what. Then, the story goes, her mother came to the grave and bit the arm with a rod, and "then at last the child had rest beneath the ground" (Grimm and Grimm apud Ahmed 2017, p. 67). Ahmed questions: "is the willful child a lesbian? Is the arm a lesbian?" (Ahmed 2017, p. 233). Inhabiting a body and living an intimate life that is perceived as abject, shameful, or hateful can lead to an embodiment of intimacy that becomes self-identitarian. When you are not given a choice to be ordinary, visibility is not optional either. You have to carefully select the spheres in which you chose or avoid coming out as Paulo did:

*I don't hide anything from my friends. My friends must know me the way I am, to know exactly what I like. [...] In my work life, I don't wish to provide them with stones they can throw back at me. And LGBT people have that fragility, I mean, it's so easy to be discriminated against, to be insulted. I don't want to place that gun in someone else's hand. (Paulo, bisexual, 25–29 years old)*

So much can be said about this excerpt: Paulo's closet as avoidance; he does not want to place that gun in someone else's hand. The trigger can be pulled by the abject gaze, the shameful feeling, the hateful insult. The gun does not require a subject to be activated or an arm to be stretched out to use it. Indeed, the non-normative intimate citizen does not have to stretch their arm to become noticed—by failing to meet the expectations of heterosexual coupledness and reproduction, intimacy becomes an unacknowledged political statement.

As we briefly discussed in the first part of the article, mainstream LGBTQ+ activism and social policies around sexual citizenship encourage people to rate marriage as the zenith of successful coupledness. Legal and cultural endorsements of marriage have an impact on people who are in monogamous relationships. Let us return to Amy to take this point a bit further:

*There's a moment when you are proud. We're together for one year! Two years! Three! Then there's a moment when we stop counting. We'll start feeling ashamed because each year that goes by we are not married. (Amy, lesbian, 25–29 years old)*

The social pressure to get married is triggering shame in Amy and pushing her into deciding to get married as a way to achieve recognition as a "real" lesbian. We learn from Elspeth Probyn that shame, in the context of writing practice, happens when the writer fails to engage readers, and it becomes more important to conquer the reader's



attention than to focus on the writing (Probyn 2010). Similarly, Amy hopes to engage with the expectations of her counterparties. Just as writing is portrayed as a corporeal activity, so is marriage; once one gets married, s/he must direct her/his body towards conjugal life. According to the Portuguese Civil Code, spouses must respect, be faithful, cohabit, and provide assistance to the spouse (Código Civil 1672). These so-called marital duties imply a bodily compromise towards the partner. In fact, Amy believes marriage will grant her the possibility to cohabit with her partner once “being together” is one of the reasons why they want to do so. We understand that marriage affects the body and bodily experience. As reported by Deleuze (1998) in his comment to D. H. Lawrence’s *Apocalypse*, “The mind depends on the body; shame would be nothing without this dependency, this attraction for the abject, this voyeurism of the body.” (p. 123). The mind is ashamed of the body. Amy’s mind is ashamed of her unmarried, non-cohabited body; her unmarried body becomes abject as the years go by. The performativity theory of Judith Butler (1999) is useful to question how Amy’s behavior contributes to the construction and establishment of her sexual orientation as a lesbian. According to that theory, gender results from the repetition of acts in the body. Those acts are inserted into a normative system that confers recognition on the subject. The repetition of non-conformity standards of conjugality offers Amy one identity of abjection, the “fake” lesbian because her relationality does not fit the meaning conjugal relationships have in cultural rules. By getting married, Amy will develop a new subjectivity, one which will be recognized by her family and friends as a “proper lesbian”. The repetition in the body of the standards of conjugality cited above (cohabitation, assistance, etc.) will provide her with the recognition of a (good) lesbian. That is, the relational performativity of Amy will dislocate her back to the opposite side of the abject, the side of the norms that do not disturb the cultural rules and the meanings of conjugality.

When Ahmed writes about the importance of the Australian nation declaring shame in relation to past actions towards the indigenous population, she takes shame as a form of recognition that offers the “promise of reconciliation” (Ahmed 2010, p. 102). Shame presupposes recognizing the “wrongfulness of the past”, and, in the case of Australia, it is related to injustice against others (Ibid.). Shame becomes not only a mode of recognition of injustice but also a way of building the nation in a collective sense. As a collective emotion, the shame of being single and not having a ‘proper’ life project—to get married, to cohabit, to have children (Roseneil et al. 2015, 2020)—leads to the building of Portugal as a nation in which 40.3% of households are constituted by married couples with children, being the most common form of household followed by couples without children (FFMS 2021).

However, shame as a personal experience is related to the exposure to the other’s gaze, and it is about how one appears to the other. Shame derives from the Goth word *Scham*, which refers to covering the face (Probyn 2010, p. 72). In this sense, shame implies self-recognition and involves a movement towards oneself, but this movement is already a failure: “In shame, the subject’s movement back into itself is simultaneously a turning away from itself. In shame, the subject may have nowhere to turn” (Ahmed 2004, p. 104). There is a physical response to shame that can range from blushing to turning away and hiding. The ashamed person recognizes something bad about her/himself, and that emotion is aggravated when others recognize her/his failure and recognize her/his emotional state of shame. Those are others that matter, and shame does not exist outside of them, even if they are an imagined view of the other.

Society bears a structure without knowing it. It does not feel or see its compulsion, and people are compelled to act according to its invisible system. The failure to compel that system affects people with emotions such as shame or hate. As such, the desire to be like others is the desire to be recognized as one of them: “an ideal self is produced as an approximation of the other’s being. [...] If we feel shame, *we feel shame because we have failed to approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love.*” (Ahmed 2004, p. 106). That is precisely why Amy is exposed to the shame of not being married, to the failure of prosecuting a normative relationship according to the social ideal. While

shame implies an urge towards herself to hide, for Amy, it also involves a shift into the public realm for affirmation and recognition. This demonstrates that she is capable of overcoming failure.

There is a double bind in Amy's shame: she is exposed to the shame of not being married, while at the same time exposed to the shame of not being recognized as a lesbian if not married. When she finally gets her recognition as a 'proper' lesbian, this recognition will be attached to a mutual affect. According to Honneth (1995), "Recognition itself must possess the character of affective approval or encouragement" (p. 95), and in Watkins' wording (2010), moments of recognition function as an affective force. The recognition as a real lesbian stemming from marriage may become a source of positive emotions. However, "recognition can also function in a negative way, carrying the resultant force of negative affects" (Watkins 2010, p. 273). This is the reason why for more than twenty years Alex, a 45 years old woman in a lesbian relationship for 20 years, chose to live far away from her workplace and, together with her partner, decided to buy two different houses to avoid being recognized as a lesbian couple.

Moreover, even if a legally recognized marital status may sometimes contribute to overcoming the abject, the shameful, or the hateful, both in relation to the state and the cultural milieu, this possibility is not equally available to all our participants as significant differences persist in the sphere of formal recognition. Furthermore, legal change does not guarantee per se a transformation in the ways people interpret and react to non-normative intimacy. In the last section of the article, we explore the ways in which intimacy as negotiated performativity implies different outcomes regarding the politics of (abject) dissident relationality by looking into queer aging as a form of dissident sexuality.

## 5. Dissident Relationality in Old Age

Our most recent research with LGBTQ+ people over 60 years old provides a compelling account of the limits of the state for un/doing the abject that is still culturally attached to LGBTQ+ intimacies, as demonstrated by literature (Almack 2018; King et al. 2019). Several of our older interviewees spoke about the impacts on later life of having grown up in a time when cis-heterosexuality was the only livable way. Whilst for some, the possibilities of becoming a full intimate citizen offered new and exciting paths, for many, equality policies were perceived as having arrived too late to trigger tangible changes in the daily management of intimate life, leaving issues related to networks of care and mental health largely neglected (A. C. Santos 2023). One powerful example is provided by Salvador, a gay man over 60 with a degenerative disease diagnosed several years ago. In his account, Salvador summarizes, in a nutshell, many of the points that are important to retain in relation to the deficit care networks in a context of structural homophobia and ageism:

*I know this suffering all too well, my progressive isolation. . . My loneliness, which is very, very prominent, led me to not having a real network. [ . . . ] People are too scared, certain situations of mine are too unbearable, I get it, I don't have any expectations.*  
(Salvador, gay, 60–64 years old, initial interview)

Later on, in the same interview, Salvador shared some of his encounters with health professionals that were telling him about the absence of recognition of same-sex relations in older age:

*At the hospital, I was asked "Who's your next-of-kin? Who should we warn in the event of death?", and I gave the name of my partner. "Do you have a relative, someone in your family? Have you no family? Is he a stranger?". Silence, everything freezes... [On another occasion, at a consultation] I noticed the doctor's fury, because I flatly refused, I moved away from the conversation and was visibly upset when she said: "Don't you have family? But why didn't you get married? Is there no one to treat you, then?" She understood exactly what it was about but she wanted me to confess, you see? [ . . . ] And I didn't want to get to the situation of having to get up and say, "I refuse to be*

*treated”, and then go home, knowing that I would be going home to die. (Salvador, gay, 60–64 years old)*

Salvador was not alone in his perception of the abject that dissident sexualities—and relationalities—trigger. Indeed, several interviewees identified their main difficulty as older LGBTQ+ people as the fact that they were no longer subjects of erotic desire. This change was felt by women and men from “a certain age”—variable according to the intimate biography of each person—resulting in emotional discouragement, aggravated in cases where there was no partner:

*[Interviewer: Does age affect this possibility of enjoying sexuality?] Interviewee: Ouch! It does. It affects us, because we are seen as: “Look, those pigs, old people and still ...” [. . .] When you’re young, everything is forgiven, but when you’re old. [. . .] [Interviewer: And at what age do you stop being forgiving?] Interviewee: I don’t know. I do not know. But, look, from my age onwards! Perhaps it also depends on the person’s looks, right? Older people are seen in a certain way: “Look at those, that old, and they haven’t been cured yet.” (Manuel, gay, 60–64 years old)*

*[Interviewer: What challenges do you encounter in your daily life?] Interviewee: There’s isolation. [. . .] What is left as we age? Friendship, tenderness, presence, cuddles... But it’s not like one can no longer have an active, physical and sexual life. [. . .] I have to be honest here: what I’m afraid is of not having a satisfying relationship ever again. (Anabela, lesbian, 60–64 years old)*

It is also important to notice that policies aiming at promoting the so-called “active ageing” in the 21st century have not been able to place sexuality at the center of the narrative, and therefore sex involving older adults remains taboo. There is indeed a loud silence around sexual life in old age, and this silence is in sharp contrast with the amount of information related to healthcare that, to a great extent, invariably excludes sexual health (Segal 2014). If this silence involving sexuality is oppressive for people over 60, it becomes twice as much oppressive for people whose sexuality or gender identity was always dissident from the majority and, therefore, became key features in the construction—and performance—of the Self. Although our sample of interviewees did not explicitly address issues related to consensual non-monogamy, recent studies in gender research, demonstrate that many of the silences around sexual and gender diversity in old age are also shared with older non-monogamous people (Labriola 2022). Arguably, ageism pushes LGBTQ+ older people in general into multiple invisibility and amplified oppression, which ultimately results in the denial of their existence (A. C. Santos 2023).

## 6. Conclusions

To reiterate: normative coupledness—that is, cis-heterosexual, cohabiting, reproductive, and monogamous—is one of the most powerful value discourses of the intimate regime (Roseneil et al. 2020). By looking into coupledness, we consider the significance of relationality to build an idea of the self with and in opposition to others. Relationality, then, becomes a platform from which the abject can be resisted or embraced but can never really be escaped—you are either partnered or single, never both or none. In light of this, the ways in which we are and are not partnered contribute to what we do and how others perceive us—as intimate lovers and/or as legal strangers. We want to advance the notion of relational performativity as a way to frame the public enactment of coupledness according to a set of rules, roles, and expectations reinforced through rituals and allies who rely predominantly on a monogamous script. We suggest the legally recognized (monogamous) marital status fits into what can be described as “good relationality” and has been used as a way to overcome LGBTQ+ invisibility, as well as to undo disgust, shame, and hate, both in relation to the state and the cultural milieu.

In the end, it all amounts to rejecting a legal and cultural hierarchy between consensual relational orientations and practices. Relationships that are beyond the law have historically remained vulnerable, subject to violence, and lacking both definition and protection. The

lack of any form of public acknowledgment of multiple partners in formal legal codes constitutes, therefore, a failure of the state to accommodate a diversity of intimate relational models. Moreover, it represents the contradiction through which one can claim legitimate recognition based on divorce, remarriage, or civil partnership but cannot do so when engaged in multiple, simultaneous intimate relationships. The absence of formal recognition of consensual non-monogamy contributes to what we describe as the *narratives of intimate dissonance* produced by participants for whom the lesbian, bisexual, and non-monogamous closets are still very hard to break.

Regarding lesbian and bisexual participants, despite the favorable legal framework, partnering and parenting relationships are still met with disapproval in the cultural sphere; in relation to consensual non-monogamy, despite the consensual character of their relational experiences, participants' accounts display a tendency towards remaining a secret shared only with a handful of people, and certainly not with co-workers or employers. In this context, the lack of formal and cultural acknowledgment of consensual non-monogamy generates an *asymmetry between the 'normal' intimate citizen*, whom the state is willing to acknowledge, and the *dissident intimate citizen*—the uncoupled, the non-parent, the uncohabitant/solo living, the non-monogamous—who remains, at best, an outsider. In such context, full intimate citizenship (Roseneil 2010) remains a political and theoretical aspiration beyond the walls of abjection, shame, and hate.

Finally, based on the life stories of LGBTQ+ elders, we can see the importance of bridging the gap between formal rights and aging intimate biographies. As (intimate) citizens, we need an age-sensitive approach to citizenship understood as a symbolic claim, a cluster of arguments that sustain the (political and sociocultural) possibility of existence beyond linear categories and binaries. A platform for recognition that does not necessarily focus on legal change alone.

The examples we offered in this article constitute only a parcel of a broader, gendered sociocultural framework that disenfranchises any form of dissident relationality. We hope this article can contribute to rethinking and reframing our understandings and doings of relationality. As politically engaged scholars, we remain hopeful that gender research will continue to provide safe and engaging platforms for unpacking cis-hetero-mononormativity in academia and beyond.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Both datasets were collected during funded research projects lead by one of the authors of the article. These projects are INTIMATE (2014–2019); REMEMBER (ongoing) and TRACE (ongoing). All projects received clearance from the adequate ethical committees both at national and European levels.
- <sup>2</sup> The authors appreciate the insightful comments of Reviewer 2 in this regard.
- <sup>3</sup> Activism in the field of consensual non-monogamies, in Portugal and elsewhere, have organized politically, including relationship recognition political demands. That was not the case with our sample of non-activists. To know more about activism in this field, please refer to [Klesse et al. \(2022\)](#) amongst others.
- <sup>4</sup> Our non-monogamous interviewees are not parents, hence the exclusive focus on the lesbian and bisexual sample for the current section.
- <sup>5</sup> Whose child is being defended after all, one might immediately ask. What imaginary of children is under construction by dominant legal and cultural narratives? And, as Preciado rightly noted, who is going to protect the queer child's best interest? ([Preciado 2013](#)).

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