**Never after? Queer temporalities and the politics of non-reproduction**

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What kind of family is evoked by the label ‘family geographies’ and who might be excluded from this conceptual frame? Drawing upon literature from feminist and queer geographies, this paper examines the lives of those who exist outside of normative notions of ‘the family’. Data comes from biographical narrative interviews, conducted in Britain, with those who are both single and childfree. The paper outlines the potential queerness of a 'non-reproductive' life, exploring the alternative temporalities and spatialities this produces.  In what ways does the non-reproductive challenge normative ideals of the way a life should unfold? How do 'procreational norms' shape the landscape? By answering such questions, the paper contributes an empirically grounded reflection on the queer potentialities of non-reproduction, challenging certain queer theorizations that equate non-reproduction with anti-futurity. Ultimately the paper argues that an exploration of the non-reproductive may help reform our understandings of the geographies of intimacy, care and relatedness.

Keywords: childfree, coupledom, intimacy, kinship, motherhood, reproduction

In recent decades we have witnessed increasingly fluid and expansive understandings of who is included under the label of ‘family’. The legal recognition of same-sex relationships across many countries has meant that conceptualizations of family are no longer necessarily centred on the heterosexual couple. A growing body of literature on ‘families of choice’ has highlighted the multitude of ways in which people ‘do’ family (Weston 1991; Weeks et al. 2001). Yet while these changes mark a progressive shift, others have noted that the label ‘family’ still continues to be founded upon exclusionary logics. Denise Riley, for example, has cautioned against framing the increasing recognition of new family forms solely within a celebratory narrative of progress. For Riley (2002, 2), these expanded definitions of kinship still serve to uphold a distinction between ‘who and what is in, and who and what is not’, noting that:

An enlarged societal realm expanded by recently recognized familial ties pushes back the margins to swell and puff up the sphere of the social until only the thinnest fringe of an unutterably dreadful asociality skirts it. Then is every utopia to be encircled by a dystopia? No doubt: it shouldn't surprise us to find that liberalizing moves also produce fresh forms of the socially inadmissible (Riley 2002, 8)

In the middle we still find the charmed circle of family relations. Other forms of intimate attachment are pushed to the periphery, whilst the very outer edge is inhabited by unattached solitary figures. Notions of the familial continue to produce a topography of exclusion, as new inclusions only serve to sharpen the distinction between the familial and the ‘socially inadmissible’. Hence, it remains important to question exactly what kind of family is evoked by the label ‘family geographies’ and to think about who might be excluded from this conceptual frame.

Existing sociological research has proposed that in order to better understand intimate life we need to ‘decentre the ‘family’ and the heterosexual couple in our intellectual imaginaries’ (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004, 104). It is argued that the term ‘family’ is an exclusionary concept that will never be fluid enough to capture the complexities of people’s intimate attachments (May 2012, author 2012). Consequently, we have witnessed a shift to other more expansive terms, such as ‘intimacy’ and ‘personal life’ (Jamieson 1997; Smart 2007). These conceptual shifts enable us to better recognize the multitude of ways in which people’s intimate ties and relationships stretch beyond the boundaries of the family. Hence, in this paper, rather than a narrow focus on family geographies, I propose that we should instead turn towards the geographies of intimacy. I suggest that focusing upon intimacy might help capture different forms of attachment that stretch beyond even our most seemingly fluid and expansive definitions of family. I see intimacy as offering a broader conceptual frame: one that can be alert to the multitude of relationships, friendships, desires and encounters that exceed our notions of family.

In this paper I explore the lives of those who exist outside of normative notions of ‘the family’, via an empirical study of those who are both single and childfree. The study focuses on the lives of those who may be presumed to inhabit the dystopian terrain of the asocial: those who are unattached, solitary and alone. The paper draws upon empirical fieldwork conducted in Britain. The project consisted of fifty interviews with people who defined themselves as largely content in their single status. Many stated that they had no future desires to find a partner or start a family. The geographies of single-life have yet to receive much scholarly attention, though a number of studies have begun to examine how the design, use and occupation of space are shaped by the norms of coupledom and the privileging of the nuclear family (Chasteen 1994; Lahad and May 2017; Morrison 2012; Oswin 2010; Ramdas 2012, 2015). However, this paper moves beyond a focus on single-life, to instead examine how childrearing is intrinsically entwined with the logics of couple culture. The paper explores how ‘procreational norms’ shape the life course, and examines the ways in which the non-reproductive might challenge normative ideas of the ways in which a life should unfold.

**Procreational geographies**

Despite a well-established body of theoretical and empirical work on sexuality and space (e.g. Bell and Valentine 1995; Binnie and Valentine 1999; Browne et al. 2009; De Craene 2017; Johnston and Longhurst 2009), the issue of procreation has remained surprisingly absent. As Glen Elder et al. (2003, 206) note, ‘most geographers sidestep the procreational norms though which the world is sexually structured and known’. These ‘procreational norms’ are said to underpin:

…the many practical and symbolic ways in which notions of modern motherhood, fatherhood and (nuclear, heterosexed) family life insinuate their ways into cultural bodies, places and imaginings: from constructions of normative nuclear familial life and goals, to heteropatriarchal framings of the nation-states, to the sexualized language through which many of us write or explain the world (ibid.).

Procreation thus forms an integral part the logics and imaginaries of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity maps out the route an individual life should follow: a path shaped by the contours of coupledom, marriage, childbearing and inheritance. The unquestioned privileging of heteronormativity is upheld by what Lee Edelman (2004) terms ‘reproductive futurism’. Theorising from the context of the US, Edelman highlights how reproductive futurism permeates social and political structures and is foremost a technology of power that operates at the level of fantasy and desire.[[1]](#endnote-1) The figural Child is constructed as the embodiment of political hope, the symbol of our collective desires, an impossible ‘fantasmatic future’ (Edelman 2004, 31). For Edelman, queers are seen as failing to invest in the logic of the child, as having ‘no future’. Queerness is hence tied to the death drive, ‘negatively opposed to every form of social viability’ (2004, 9). Edelman positions queerness as defiance, as an anti-normative refusal to invest in heteronormative futurism.

It is important to note, however, that heteronormativity is a concept that is distinct from heterosexuality, and refers to the privileging of a particular set of desires, feelings and practices that are tied to the nuclear family (Berlant and Warner 1998). Thus, as Natalie Oswin (2010, 257) notes, heteronormativity should not be understood simply as the ‘universal policing of a heterosexual-homosexual binary’. Understandings of the workings of heteronormativity have been furthered by critiques of ‘homonormative’ visions of the family, where same-sex couples are seen to be investing in the same logic of family-values and reproductive futurism (Duggan 2002; Garwood 2016). The ‘good’ gay nuclear family can be seen to uphold the logic of heteronormativity: coupledom, stability, fiscal responsibility. Same-sex intimacies are depicted not as a threat, but as respectably invested in the very same child-centred future.

Both heteronormativity and homonormativity are founded upon particular procreational norms that position childrearing and the nuclear family as our most significant intimate attachments. However, it is important to note that procreational norms do not position all forms of reproduction as an unquestionable societal good; they also help construct a binary between good and bad forms of reproduction. Integral to heteronormativity is the regulation of the ‘right’ kinds of people having the ‘right’ numbers of children, and the racialised and classed lines on which these distinctions are drawn. José Esteban Muñoz, for example, has challenged Edelman’s construction of the figural child as the emblem of the future, noting that ‘racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity’. [[2]](#endnote-2) Muñoz highlights the ways in which Edelman reproduces a ‘monolithic figure of the child that is … always already white’ (2009, 95), suggesting a link between whiteness and social reproduction under capitalism. Heteronormativity maintains normative conceptions of whose reproduction has value and whose does not. Hence, as Jabir Puar notes, those ‘destined for no future’ are ‘based not upon whether they can or cannot reproduce children but on what capacities they can and cannot regenerate and what kind of assemblages they compel, repel, spur, deflate’ (2007, 211).

Some forms of reproduction are upheld as serving the national interest, whereas others are depicted as a threat to the moral fabric of society. For example, procreation outside of the coupled family unit has historically been disparaged and vilified, with single parenthood demonised as a danger, and a drain on state welfare (Gordon 1994; Smith 2007; Wong et al. 2004). The construction of the category of an ‘unfit parent’ is thus entwined with, and helps uphold, classed, raced and gendered divisions. How then does the exclusionary logic of the ‘ideal family’ serve as a tool of marginalization; marking certain populations as surplus, unwanted, or abject? As Lauren Martin notes, ‘the family’ is a technique of subject formation, and accordingly, critical geographers need to ‘pay greater attention to how familial discourses are mobilized to differentiate, marginalize and oppress’ (2014, 459). What techniques of delineation and exclusion do heteronormative conceptualisations of the family create? Who is cast out from these imaginings of the legitimate family?

Yet procreational norms are not just shaped through narratives that promote responsibility and restraint, those that speak of the dangers posed by over-reproduction and excess; or via the circulation of stories that vilify ‘troubled families’ and ‘unfit parents’. In countries with declining fertility rates there is also a ‘procreational panic’ around the dangers of (primarily middle and upper class) women delaying childbearing until it becomes ‘too late’ (Budds et al. 2012). Procreational norms are shaped through a pro-natalist discourse that aims to ensure that the ‘right’ people continue to reproduce (Nast 2017; Oswin 2014). Procreation is still upheld as the central purpose of life itself, as integral to both personal fulfillment and the continued prosperity of the nation. To eschew parenthood is still seen as an unnatural life choice; presumed to either be a missed chance, or a result of a biological barrier, rather than a voluntary life choice. To not desire procreation is incomprehensible: who after all would not wish to desire the desirable? Yet more than this, to desire outside of the logic of reproductive futurism becomes an impossibility, as reproductive futurism is seen as synonymous with desire itself. Those who fail to adhere to heteronormative logics are governed not through force, but through the positioning of the heteronormative life trajectory as the only pathway to a life of fulfillment and happiness. The logic of reproductive futurism can thus be seen as a technique of control, tied to Foucauldian conceptualisations of power, where power works as a tool of normalization and desire rather than repression and coercion (Foucault 1978). To not continue the family line is to fall out of line with the temporal logic of reproductive futurism. Those who are single and childfree become queerly positioned as ‘other’: they are viewed as a threat to continuation of society and the preservation of the social good. The childfree become tied to the death drive, positioned as figures of finitude.

Of interest to this paper then, is the ways in which heteronormativity produces a range of non-heteronormative practices that become queerly positioned as ‘other’ (Cohen 1997; Hubbard 2008; Jackson 2006; Tang and Quah 2017). Accordingly, my focus is not just on those who identify as ‘queer’, but also on heterosexually-identified subjects whose lives also fall outside of the logic of reproductive futurism. I want to think about single-life and the non-reproductive as potentially queer practices: that is, to consider the ways in which those who are single and childfree become queerly positioned as out of place, and out of synch, with the heteronormative life-course. This paper thus makes an important empirical contribution to an emerging body of work that is beginning to look at the possibility of doing queer scholarship without a primary focus on ‘anti-normativity’ (Wiegman and Wilson 2015). Whereas *anti*-normativity can be seen as oppositional and defiant, the *non*-normative represents something quieter and not necessarily oppositional: those who simply find themselves outside the charmed circle of ‘appropriate’ intimacy. The data gathered in this research is not explicitly about self-defined queer defiance, or a radical refusal to be tied down by the norms of coupledom or reproduction; it is mundane, everyday, ordinary, yet still in many ways disrupts heteronormative ideals around the way a life should unfold.

**Researching single life**

The paper draws upon empirical fieldwork conducted in Britain between 2011-2014. The research consisted of two stages: the first was a self-selecting online questionnaire, open to those who identified as single and who currently resided in Britain. At the end of the questionnaire participants were asked to put forward their contact details if they wanted to be interviewed for the second stage of the research, out of which fifty participants were then selected for interview. All those selected for interview had reported relatively positive experiences of single-life, as the research was interested in exploring some of the reasons why a person might actively choose to remain single. Hence, often those being interviewed saw their single and childfree status as something long-term or even permanent. A biographical approach was used in order to produce a free-form open interview where participants had space to narrate their own life stories (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). This technique also enabled a richer understanding of peoples’ complex life stories, in order to consider how the past shapes our experiences of the present. During the interview, research participants were asked three open-ended questions about their past, their present and their future. Follow up questions were only asked once the participant had finished telling their story, so as not to interrupt the narrative. Interviews lasted from between one to four hours and were conducted with people from a range of different sexual orientations, genders, and ethnicities. Interviewees came from a range of different socio-economic positions, some were in employment, some were retired, and some were in receipt of welfare, but all had relative financial security at the time of interview.[[3]](#endnote-3) An attempt was made to interview participants from different locations (e.g. urban, rural), but the majority of participants lived in urban areas. Interviewees were all aged between 35 and 75, as the focus of the project was on single people’s networks of care and the transition from mid to later life.

In the sections that follow, I examine how procreational norms are upheld via an exploration into some of the everyday experiences of those who are single and childfree. The paper begins by examining how child-friendly spaces can often be felt as sites of exclusion for those who are childfree. The paper then explores how the childfree become positioned as abject outsiders, and at times demonized as figures of fear and threat. I conclude by outlining how a refusal to submit to the disciplinary logic of reproductive futurism might disrupt the seemingly natural temporal link between the figure of the Child and the future.

**Unfriendly child-friendly spaces**

Coupledom and childrearing are integral to normative conceptions of what counts as family life. The privileging of couple culture and procreation can often shape both the design and everyday use of space, resulting in those who are single feeling out of place. Take for example, the following extract from an interview with Julie[[4]](#endnote-4), a queer woman in her late forties who lived in a city in the midlands of England and worked in the public sector. Here she is talking about her frustration of what she termed ‘the entitlement of people with kids’:

…it’s a crowded bus, and they go in with a buggy which is basically an SUV[[5]](#endnote-5), and even sometimes they’re holding the kid and the SUV is unfolded, and I’m like ‘fold it goddamnit’, I’m standing here squeezed like a sardine… why do you think that having a child privileges you? I mean most people probably think of it as a social service, providing something for society.

The societal good placed on children means Julie feels like she has less of a right to occupy public space. While Julie tries to present her frustration in quite a playful way, her story also highlights the ways in which quotidian moments can serve as a visceral reminder that those who are childfree are positioned as having less value. Other interviewees spoke of how parenthood is privileged, via things such as parent-child-parking spaces and family-sized food in the supermarket, all of which served as everyday reminders that reproduction is a social good, and that to be childfree and uncoupled is to be on the outside.

At times single-childfree people’s encounters with child-friendly spaces became experienced as places of discomfort. Take for example the following interview extract with one research participant Tracey, who lived in South London and worked at a local charity. Here Tracey is talking about her attempts to engage in family-friendly work events:

…at the place I work they often have these family-friendly social activities, and at the start I thought I should go and try and get involved… but I just felt like a total pariah when I went to them… At one of these events, one of my colleagues actually came up to me, and we were just having a general chitchat and she actually asked me straight up if I ever regretted not having children. I mean I think she was trying to be well intentioned, but still what a bloody awful thing to ask someone! And I look round the room, and there’s children running and screaming everywhere, food all over the floor, snot all over their faces, and I just thought to myself “thank fuck no”. I didn’t say this though, of course not, you can’t really can you? So I just smiled politely and tried to move the conversation on (Tracey, early 50s, bisexual, black-British).

Tracey goes on to speak of how womanhood and motherhood are often positioned as synonymous. To ‘out’ oneself as not desiring motherhood is to risk social exclusion. When asked about her childfree status Tracey feels that her only option is to remain silent and then try and ‘move the conversation on’. Many of the women interviewed spoke of their fear that others would see their decision not to have a child as ‘selfish’: that they would be condemned for placing too much emphasis on their own autonomy. Thus, as Penelope Deutscher notes, in order to fully understand the logic of reproductive futurism, we also need to pay attention to the character of the imaginary Mother. Edelman’s focus on the figure of the Child only tells one side of the tale. For Deutscher (2017, 51) ‘the imaginary Mother… is complement to the imaginary Child. This imaginary Mother is an unselfish, responsibilized moral agent, conduit of individual and social hopes’. The imaginary mother is a hence a biopolitical agent, whose role is to reproduce in order to maximise the wellbeing of children, communities, the nation, and imagined future generations. Those who do not desire the maternal do not just fall outside of the logic of respectable femininity; they are also seen to be failing to invest in the social good, of having ‘no future’ (Downing 2011).

Yet the exclusion associated with being a non-parent was also felt by a number of men who took part in the research. Take for example the story of Patrick, a white gay man in his late thirties, working in the public sector. During the interview Patrick spoke of how his work-place was the space in which he often felt most marginalized for his single and childfree status. Parenthood is frequently a primary way in which to connect with others, a way to find common ground. Patrick recounts a story about attending after work drinks in London one day: he is gathered round a table with his colleagues who are having an animated and lengthy discussion about their partners and children. During this conversation Patrick remains silent: he has, after all nothing to contribute. After a while the conversation ends and the group falls silent. One of his colleagues turns to him and, in a desperate attempt to bring him into the conversation, asks, and ‘what about you, do you have a pet?’ Patrick goes on to deliberate over whether his feeling of exclusion in certain spaces is a result of his sexual orientation as a gay man, or if it is primarily about his single childfree status:

…the stigma and marginalisation I feel in a lot of social situations, it’s difficult to say what’s what. I actually suspect it’s more about being single, because if it was just about me bringing my perfectly respectable husband it will be very uncomplicated I think, in comparison to representing a lifestyle which is completely different from how they live their lives.

Thus while the coupled same-sex family may be able to enter this charmed circle of the familial, to be single and childfree is to remain outside.

**Mothers and monstrous others**

Societal perceptions of those who are single and childfree clearly differ across the life-course, with singleness being accepted, and even promoted at certain stages. To be single and childfree in young adulthood is often marketed as a desirable lifestyle choice. The young single urban professional is seen as a profitable demographic, a flexible lifestyle for the neoliberal economy (Hubbard 2012; Kern 2007; Lloyd 2008). Being single and delaying parenthood is hence seen an acceptable transitional phase, forming part of a broader individualized life-script in which you take a period of time to ‘work on yourself’ until you find the right partner to start a family. However, to be single and childfree in later life is to be positioned as a risk. Older childfree singles are seen as a potential economic drain on the state because they are without close familial bonds on which to rely for care needs in later life. Those who are single long-term are still often depicted as tragic failures, shamefully seen as living a loveless life, or ridiculed as a source of humour: through, for example, the figure of the spinster; the ‘old maid’; or her recent reincarnation as the ‘crazy cat lady’ (McKeithen 2017). Moreover, those who claim to have no desire to find a partner or settle down are still often pathologized as abnormal or selfish. Thus a frequent narrative that emerged from the interviews in this project was an awareness of the societal stigma that is still placed on those who are single long-term. This is exemplified in the following quote from James, who reports that while he generally enjoys life as a single man, he is often worried about the image projected upon him by his colleagues at work, stating that:

It’d be nice just to, even if it is only in my own head, not be seen as some sort of either tragic or sleazy, or tragic *and* sleazy, or weird, or creepy… (bisexual, white, early-40s, living in a city in the north of England, working in the public sector)

Entwined with these depictions of single people as sources of ridicule and pity was an underlying stigma that positioned long-term singles as potential threats who are ‘weird’ or ‘creepy’. To be positioned outside the logic of reproductive futurism, is, as Edelman (2004) notes, to become a figure of fear, a threat to the child, and thus a threat to the future and the very fabric of the social. Reproductive futurism is upheld via the projection of an abject other from which the child must be protected. Whilst Edelman here is speaking of the figural child, we can also see how this construction of the ‘non-reproductive’ as ‘threat’ can play out in everyday life. The figure of the long-term single, especially those who have no interest in having a child, is seen as abnormal, as a potential danger. This was primarily a narrative that came through when talking with single men, with a frequent trope being that long-term single men were either tragic loners or ‘sleazy commitment-phobes’. At times, the narrative projected onto them was one that positioned them as closeted; here singleness becomes understood not as a choice in its own right but as a mask for repressed same-sex desire (Kahan 2013).

For others, being single and childfree became seen as a quite literal threat to the child, with fears surrounding ‘stranger danger’ and paedophilia often making it difficult for those without children to strike up any form of intergenerational sociability with those with whom they are not genetically related. This is demonstrated through an interview with one research participant Neil, a mixed-race heterosexual man in his early forties, self-employed and living in a small market town in the South of England. In his interview Neil recounts how one of the most important people in his life is his goddaughter Rebecca, who is the child of his best friend. He speaks warmly of the importance that being a godfather has in his life, but also how he at times feels excluded from their family spaces, despite the way his friend attempts to ensure he feels included. Neil reveals how he is no longer invited to Rebecca’s birthday parties, but that he still always makes sure to take her somewhere for a birthday day-trip. This year was her sixth birthday and she wanted to go to a nearby swimming pool and to bring a friend:

It was the first time she wanted to bring a friend, but I guess that will happen more as she gets older…. I was happy for her to bring a friend. But then it turned out that the parents of her friend didn’t want her coming with me, as they didn’t know me… and part of it is I guess because we’re not related, not actual family, so there’s this fear I think, [pauses] yeah a fear really… and sometimes it hits you really hard, no matter how close I am to her people will always remind you that you’re not ‘real’ family.

Neil does not expand on what has provoked this fear, but clearly it is founded upon a notion of ‘stranger danger’, the risk posed to the child by those who are non-kin. Understandings of who counts as ‘real’ family are often tied to the nuclear family form, underpinned by ‘geographies of relatedness’ (Nash 2005). Thus despite the best efforts of Neil and his friend to create a more expansive definition of family, kinship and relatedness become the terrain on which lines of exclusion are drawn.

Another vivid example of the childfree as ‘threat’ comes from an interview with a participant called Anne. Anne was a white heterosexual woman in her early sixties, a former teacher, living in North London. She spoke of an occurrence that took place on when she was in her forties while on a solo-camping holiday in France. During this holiday she decided to take a daytrip on a boat. On the boat Anne found that she was among about six families, she was the only single person on-board. One of the other families was also from England, and had a son who was around eight years old, so she decides to strike up a conversation with this boy:

… so I’m talking to this… boy, and we’re reading the little information leaflet… and laughing at the terrible translation… suddenly his mother just snatched him away from me, and said “I’ve told you never to talk to strangers”… and of course the other families didn’t know what was happening, they just saw that the English mother had taken the son away from the English woman, and so they were fearful.

Despite that fact this incident took place several years ago, Anne becomes visibly upset when trying to recall this experience, and at points struggles to articulate the event, finding it difficult to put into words:

I had the most awful day, I can’t tell you how terrible it was. And I got back to my tent and threw everything in the car and just drove, drove for hours… it made me feel like a complete pariah as a single childless woman… and what are you supposed to say, you can’t say anything in that moment, it’s just not possible.

Anne outlines how, since this day she has decided to never stay at campsites that cater specifically for children, as she does not want to risk being put in that kind of situation again. To be both single and childfree is at times to be placed not just as a figure of failure or ridicule, but also a source of fear and threat. The non-parental becomes an abject figure, a monstrous other.

**Conclusion: Happily (n)ever after?**

The family has been identified as a ‘peculiar absent presence’ within geographic scholarship (Valentine 2008). Yet in this article I have proposed that ‘family’ is still a too narrow frame through which to understand intimate life. Despite increasingly fluid definitions of family, the familial still serves as a technique of exclusion. In this paper I have questioned what kind of family is evoked by the label ‘family geographies’ and have explored who might be excluded from this conceptual frame. I have outlined how kinship and relatedness still continue to delineate who is seen as ‘legitimate’ family. This paper has primarily focused on how being single and childfree can lead to exclusionary experiences of feeling out of place; of not belonging in child-centred family-friendly spaces. To be single and childfree can lead to feelings of marginalisation, abjection, and failure.

However, it is important to recognise that this outsider status is not necessarily always experienced negatively, or as an unequivocal burden. We are made to believe that to live a life outside of heteronormativity is to live a life on the dystopian periphery. Yet, the periphery may also be experienced as a place of utopian promise. Those who are single and childfree are often misconstrued as lonely figures: isolated, unloved, alone. But as Michael Cobb (2008, 217) notes, ‘they might not be lonely—they might just want to be antisocial, they might just want to relate to others outside of the supreme logic of the couple, which has become the way one binds oneself to the social’. Thus rather than seeing those who are both single and childfree as having ‘no future’, we can instead think about how single-life might create new forms of intimacy and alternative queer futures. Stepping outside of the logic of reproductive futurism may open up new spaces, new life trajectories, and new futures beyond the temporal logic of heteronormativity. Take, for example, the story of Jess, a white heterosexual woman in her early forties living in a University town in the south of England. Jess becomes instantly animated when asked to talk about her visions for future as a single childfree woman. She reveals that her twin sister is also single and without children, and that they have already discussed their plans for moving in together in later life:

…my twin and I realistically think that in the future… I’ll move where she is. We thought we can pool our resources and buy somewhere together, I can do all the gardening and she can knit or do whatever it is she wants to do. We could afford somewhere where we could share but have our own space. And I think we’d be very happy together [pauses then laughs]… it’s very comforting to think that something is in place.

The laugh here is a kind of nervous laugh, a recognition that what she has just said echoes the conventional fairy-tale script of ‘we’d be very happy together’, a non-nuclear ‘happily ever after’.

Many of those interviewed for this project did not see being childfree and single as a radical rejection of heteronormative society, but instead simply found themselves outside the charmed circle of coupledom and reproduction. Yet while Edelman (2004) presents a kind of queer apocalypticism, where queerness is tied to the death drive and depicted as a resolute refusal of the future, many of the interviewees in this research project spoke of a far more ambiguous relation to the future. Most of the interviewees had seemingly spent considerable time thinking about other ways of living beyond the nuclear family; at times with other family members, but often with non-kin, highlighting the myriad intimacies and attachments that stretch far beyond the label of ‘family’. Deviating from the heteronormative life trajectory of coupledom and childrearing can open up new spaces, new possibilities and new intimacies. The non-reproductive should not necessarily be automatically positioned as anti-future; it may in fact help reform our understandings of care and relatedness (Andrucki, 2018).

So how might intimacy be reconfigured and reimagined, if we live our lives outside of normative ideals of ‘happily ever after’? What can we learn if we focus on the lives of those who fall outside heteronormative ideals of family life? Lauren Berlant has outlined the importance of what she terms ‘minor intimacies’, those that exist beyond hegemonic fantasies of the good life, of coupledom and reproduction. Telling the story of those who are single and childfree marks an important intervention that shatters normative notions of the good life; it opens up the possibilities for imagining alternative life-plots and the spaces in which these might be cultivated, for, as Berlant notes:

why, when there are so many people, only one plot counts as “life” (first comes love, then…)? Those who don’t or can’t find their way in that story—the queers, the single, the something else—can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves (Berlant 1998: 286)

Yet there are also wider implications for broadening our framework to recognise these so-called ‘minor intimacies’. My call for a focus on the intimate, rather than the familial, is not just an appeal to include the lives of those who fall outside normative ideals of family, but also is an argument for attempting to uncover the potentially queer moments in seemingly ‘normal lives’. It is important to recognise the ways in which so many of our intimate attachments stretch beyond the familial, in complex and multivalent ways. Intimacy is so often a tool of regulation, used to control not just individual subjectivities, but also populations (Oswin and Olund, 2010). Yet, we can also think about the excess and unruliness of intimacy, in order to recognise the ways in which it often exceeds regulation and materialises in ways that challenge normative ideals of kinship, family and relatedness. It is imperative to think further about the utopian promise of intimacy.

Thus, rather than working within the frame of ‘family geographies’, I propose that we should instead be turning towards the geographies of intimacy. I suggest that a focus on intimacy might allow us to gather a richer understanding of the myriad ways in which people create intimate attachments beyond ‘the family’. The framework of intimacy could allow us to better recognise the importance of both human and non-human attachments, including both enduring associations and fleeting moments. Intimacy here may not even need be about an attachment or proximity to others: it could also enable us to reimagine solitude itself as a form of intimacy. Ultimately then, I argue that a turn to intimacy provides a potentially more expansive framework: one that does not narrowly presuppose the boundaries of who or what should count as our most meaningful intimate attachments. This turn might serve to destabilize, rather than further entrench, the supremacy of the family, in order to better recognise the multitude of ways in which intimacy stretches beyond the familial.

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1. It is important to note that these (often universalised) theorisations within queer theory come from a specific national context, and that the workings of reproductive futurism and heteronormativity play out in different ways in different national, regional and local contexts, shaped by the complex power geometries and the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This forms part of a broader challenge to queer theory’s ‘subjectless’ critique, and the ways in which talk of becoming ‘post-identity’ so often results in retrenching gay white middle-class maleness by erasing white privilege and male privilege (see Perez 2005) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It is thus important to note that many may be unable to ‘chose’ single life, for those in economically precarious situations coupledom can often remain the only way to ensure financial stability. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. All names are pseudonyms throughout. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A SUV is a ‘suburban utility vehicle’, a large a family vehicle. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)