

The Aging Queer Body

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Abstract: Due to discriminatory patriarchal belief systems, American society prizes youthfulness and celebrates an idealistic, yet virtually unattainable image of the human body. Such beliefs profoundly inform conceptualizations of aging in American society. In addition to a double standard of aging pertaining to sexist ideology that exposes elderly women to particular social sanctions, I seek to explore how individuals of non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities experience a distinct kind of vulnerability stemming from the relationship between their aging bodies and heteronormative power structures. More precisely, this article looks at Stu Maddux's documentary *Gen Silent* (2011) to argue for the necessity of a discourse on aging bodies that includes people of non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities and thus demands a queering of normative assumptions about aging in general.

In 1969, gerontologist Robert Neil Butler elaborated on the discriminatory treatment of people of old age in American society, concluding that “[w]e don’t all grow white or black, but we all grow old” (246). The inevitability and universality of the act of aging in the realm of multicellular organisms, including *Homo sapiens*, might evoke the assumption that aging is a purely physiological phenomenon. However, the concept of age is not only a biological fact. Hegemonic ideologies rooted in white heteronormative patriarchy inform representations of the enactment of aging in popular culture, thus contributing to what is deemed age-appropriate and age-inappropriate behavior in American society. Moreover, the social and cultural construction of the process of aging puts at risk those who are physically and mentally unable to live up to the prevalent conceptualization of aging. This dominant narrative is intertwined with heteronormative assumptions about visions of a future dependent upon heterosexual reproduction.

In this article, I intend to elaborate on the social and cultural construction of aging from a queer theory perspective. In an effort to relate the aging queer body to normative assumptions about aging, I will first elaborate on the concept of heteronormativity. To get a better grasp of elderly people's growing vulnerability to discriminatory actions and stigmata, I will then discuss the concept of ageism to establish the aging process as a social construct that is subjected to hegemonic ideologies, thus informing the politics¹ that govern institutionalized power structures as well as social life. I will then look closer at the preoccupation with what Edelman calls 'reproductive futurism' in Western societies and how this ideology informs politics that are deeply embedded in a heteronormative narrative about the image of the Child (qtd. in. Edelman), which ultimately situates the queer not in opposition but outside the political sphere. I seek to establish a connection between such heteronormative visions of the future and the aging queer body that calls for a renegotiation of the fundamental reproduction paradigm that dictates politics in American society. To illustrate seemingly unsuccessful, i.e. socially stigmatized and sanctioned, modes of aging I will draw from Stu Maddux's documentary *Gen Silent* (2011), which follows the lives of aging people in the LGBTQ+ community.

Eventually, I intend to queer² the process of aging in relation to people with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities by considering Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and linking it to seemingly 'unsuccessful modes of aging.' I want to demonstrate how using age as a key concept in queer theory can help lay bare the inequalities that many elderly LGBTQ+ people must face by employing a paranoid reading of the aging queer body. I further hope the queering of age offers reparative, alternative stances on the enactment of the aging process for people of any sexual orientation and gender identity that are affected by normative and discriminatory assumptions associated with growing old. Thus, I argue that *Gen Silent* exposes the silence around aging queer bodies as sites of particular vulnerability to ageist discrimination due to policy paradigms based on assumptions about heteronormative futurities.

1 In this article, I use the terms 'politics' and 'political' in the same way Edelman does in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* as "the logic within which the political itself must be thought" (2).

2 In this article, I do not exclusively employ 'queer' as an umbrella term to describe people with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities, but as a crucial and ever-changing concept within critical theory that "confront[s] the default heteronormativity of modern culture" (Warner 16).

METHOD

Following a discussion of the critical terms heteronormativity and ageism, I will conduct a reading of *Gen Silent*, using Eve Sedgwick's seemingly contradictory conceptualizations of paranoid and reparative reading. Sedgwick suggests that paranoid reading aims at "exposing and problematizing hidden violences" rooted in an urge to avoid negative affects (139). Approaching a cultural text from a paranoid perspective thus helps to unveil hegemonic structures of power. Nevertheless, Sedgwick points out that paranoid reading has critical limitations, for "[p]aranoia knows some things well and others poorly" (130). Particularly, paranoid reading might ignore the "potentially operative goal of seeking positive affect" because it focuses only on avoiding negative surprises (136).

Sedgwick, however, also proposes a constructive way of approaching a cultural text, which she refers to as reparative reading. For a reparative reader, "it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise[s]," both terrible and good ones (146). Sedgwick describes reading from a reparative impulse as "additive and accretive," as opposed to the deconstructing forces of paranoid reading (149). The fear of the reparative impulse, she further argues, "is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self" (149). Although a reparative reading of age/aging in particular manifestations of visual culture would go beyond the scope of this essay, understanding Sedgwick's idea of constructive approaches to reading will further underpin my call for a renegotiation of conceptualizations of age and aging.

HETERONORMATIVITY

Before I delve deeper into how the aging queer body relates to heteronormative politics, I consider it critical to first look at the term heteronormativity itself, for it is central to the evaluation of the concept of age/aging in queer theory. In his 1991 article "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," Michael Warner first popularized³ the term heteronormativity as a concept to be challenged by queer politics (3). According to Warner, heteronormativity reasons that there exists a default

³ Although Michael Warner popularized the term heteronormativity in the early 1990s, the concept emerged as early as the 1980s in social and feminist lesbian theory (qtd. in Adrienne Rich's idea of compulsive heterosexuality, Gayle Rubin's idea of a sex/gender system, and Monique Wittig's idea of a heterosexual contract).

normalization of heterosexuality in modern cultures, which is reinforced through an assumed innate bifurcation of both sex and gender (16). This normalization of sexuality and gender works within “punitively regulated cultural fictions” in which society encourages certain enactments of gender roles that are supposed to secure sexual reproduction and align with an arbitrary connection to sexuality, thus underpinning patriarchal power structures (J. Butler 522). At the same time, society stigmatizes and punishes people who deviate from such enactments that sustain hegemony. Consequently, normativity manifests in law, popular culture, politics, familial structures, etc., for instance through stereotypical depictions of non-binary people, or the exclusion of transgender individuals from serving in the military or using the bathroom of their choice.⁴

At the end of his article, Warner identifies queerness as a means to combat the normativity related to binary assumptions on sexuality and gender. He argues that “[t]he task of queer social theory [...] must be to confront the default heteronormativity of modern culture with its worst nightmare, a queer planet” (16). Warner’s conceptualization of heteronormativity succeeds in constituting a helpful tool in queer theory to lay bare hegemonic notions of sexual politics. In the following, I thus seek to shift the focus from the bifurcation of sex and gender to the aging process and how its intersection with heteronormative politics facilitates discrimination against the aging queer body. Moreover, heteronormativity lays the foundation for numerous forms of discrimination in the US, for its preoccupation with sexuality, the gender binary, and reproductive futurity marginalizes an abundance of diverging modes of living. Elderly people, in particular, appear to deviate significantly from heteronormative notions of sexuality and reproduction in American society due to the stigmatization of sex in old age, thus becoming the target of a distinct form of discrimination which I explore in the next chapter.

AGEISM

The term ageism was coined by Robert Neil Butler in his 1969 article “Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry,” in which he explores the “prejudice by one age group toward other age groups” (243). Butler further defines ageism as reflecting a “deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion

4 The placement of bathrooms in most public buildings itself is a mechanism of normalizing the gender binary through architectural means and forces people to choose from two normalized genders with the exception of the occasional gender-neutral bathroom.

to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, ‘uselessness,’ and death” (243). Social discrimination against people of old age, despite occurring in most Western societies, appears to be particularly prevalent in the United States, for America is “a society that has traditionally valued pragmatism, action, power, and the vigor of youth over contemplation, reflection, experience, and the wisdom of age” (243). Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that additional identity factors significantly affect the limitations of socially acceptable aging. In “The Double Standard of Aging,” Susan Sontag, who herself is part of the LGBTQ+ community, argues that “[m]en are ‘allowed’ to age, without penalty, in several ways women are not,” for “[m]asculinity’ is identified with competence, autonomy, self-control—qualities which the disappearance of youth does not threaten” (31). Nevertheless, the “prestige of youth afflicts everyone in this society,” thus propagating a way of aging that is associated with “images of happiness and personal well-being” that are equated with the concept of youth (31). Robert Neil Butler and Sontag provide a framework of ageism that demonstrates how hierarchical structures of power, by regulating the degree of social and institutional sanction and vulnerability, determine the perception of one’s aging process.

Although Sontag specifically looks at the intersection of age and gender, her argument supports the idea that age/aging must be considered in connection to other markers of identity, such as sexuality and non-normative gender expressions, which calls for the kind of intersectional analysis of ageism and queer bodies that is at the center of this article. Kimberlé Crenshaw describes intersectionality as “a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power” that brings to light the “invisibility of many constituents within groups that claim them as members, but often fail to represent them” (“Why intersectionality”) She holds that “[i]ntersectional erasures are not exclusive to black women,” but affect all people that “face vulnerabilities that reflect the intersections of racism, sexism, class oppression, transphobia, able-ism and more” (“Why intersectionality”). Therefore, the later analysis of *Gen Silent* shall open up the concept of ageism to queer bodies in an effort to acknowledge the varied intersections of age that expose people with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities to structural discrimination.

REPRODUCTIVE FUTURITY

The emphasis on the gender binary in much of the discourse around ageism complies with a heteronormative narrative about futurity that is prevalent in American society. According to Lee Edelman, this notion of aging falls in line with his idea of reproductive futurism. He suggests that reproductive futurism privileges heteronormativity by iconifying the image of the Child (2). He argues that “the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political self must be thought,” thus pushing the seemingly non-reproductive queer outside of the realm of politics to further a vision of a terminal fullness of meaning granted through heterosexual reproduction (2).

Edelman points out that the “fatal embrace of a futurism so blindly committed to the figure of the Child [...] will justify refusing health care benefits to the adults that some children become” when they are situated outside a heteronormative imagination of reproductive futurism (29). Thus, the obsession with reproductive futurity facilitates discrimination against aging queer bodies, in particular, because it leaves no ideological space for non-reproductive elderly people with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities to exist. Therefore Edelman calls for “the future to stop here” (31) and argues that politics and the self must be destroyed as an “act of resisting enslavement to the future in the name of having a life”(30) in order to liberate the queer body from the heteronormative ideology that denies a future for queer people.

It is critical to note, however, that Edelman’s elaboration on a heteronormative politics aligns itself with an understanding of queer that seeks to radically break with heteronormativity and futurity itself by embracing an apolitical death drive rather than transforming heteronormative power structures. Jack Halberstam admits that he is drawn to a “queer politics of negativity” (Anti-Social 147) as envisioned by Edelman, pointed, however, at “alternative political imaginaries” (Anti-Social 153). Halberstam argues:

[W]e must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate. (Anti-Social 154)

Connecting Halberstam's idea of queer alternative political imaginaries to Edelman's concept of reproductive futurity circumvents the polemical tone Edelman's *No Future* has been criticized for (qtd. in Halberstam, Ahmed, Ford)⁵ and thus emphasizes the importance of identifying society's obsession with heterosexual reproduction—an obsession that also only leaves limited space for elderly populations.

THE AGING QUEER BODY AND HETERONORMATIVITY

Since the central topic of this article is the aging queer body, it is critical to examine how heteronormative assumptions about the aging process inform discrimination against people with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities. In the previous paragraph, I have elaborated on the idea that in the context of contemporary assumptions about futurity, one has to comply with notions about reproductive futurism in order to be represented in a politics that is preoccupied with the image of the Child. However, the mere fact of assumed non-reproductivity seems to be an insufficient explanation of social and institutional discrimination against people with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities. In *The Reaches of Heteronormativity: An Introduction*, Jane Ward and Beth Schneider point toward the impact of normative assumptions about the aging queer body by explaining that “heterosexual and homosexual norms are constituted not only by notions about gender and ‘object choice’ but also by a complex matrix of ideas about age, racialized and gendered bodies, romantic love, middle class strivings, nationalist values, and cross-cultural desires” (435). In acknowledging the intersectionality that informs heterosexual and homosexual norms, they also offer an avenue to look at age in relation to heteronormative politics. Although Ward and Schneider mention homosexual norms, this idea, according to Lisa Duggan, plays into a sexual politics “that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions” (179).

In *Facing the Horror: Becoming an ‘Old Maid,’* Kinneret Lahad argues that the “privileging of heterosexual and familial bonds has the pro-active force of

5 Jack Halberstam, Sara Ahmed, and Derek R. Ford repeatedly take issue with and expand on Edelman's idea of futurity. Their commentary on the polemical nature of *No Future* I read while researching for this paper can be found in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), and *Politics and Pedagogy in the “Post-Truth” Era: Insurgent Philosophy and Praxis* (2019), respectively.

structuring normative understandings about single women and aging” (53). Although she only refers to how heterosexuality informs the aging process for single women, this pro-active force also applies to people with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities. In Stu Maddux’s documentary *Gen Silent*, Jenifer Firestone, who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community and works at a hospice in Massachusetts, confirms: “These are the ways in which we’re not just like anybody else. LGBT elders are more likely to age alone, because many never had children, many are not in close contact or have [...] not had great relationships with their families of origin” (00:20:38-21:03). Moreover, Lahad also suggests that “the chronological aging process of women is embedded within heteronormative, ageist, and sexist assumptions, through which they are devalued and socially marginalized” (58). The social marginalization of the aging queer body, too, is deeply connected with heteronormative assumptions about futurity, which, in turn, affect the politics that govern the institutions responsible for discriminatory actions against people with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities. *Gen Silent* expands on Lahad’s beliefs about society’s treatment of the aging female body by including the aging queer body as well. For instance, KrysAnne Hembrough, a trans woman and protagonist of Stu Maddux’s documentary who was forced into early retirement due to terminal lung cancer, struggles with finding someone willing to take care of her. She complains, “They didn’t wanna touch my body” (00:09:35-37), which illustrates her as a target of discrimination against both aging women and transgender people which points to the particular vulnerability of the aging queer body.

SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL AGING

Discrimination against the aging queer body facilitates assumptions about success in relation to the aging process that are closely connected to heteronormative sexual politics. Although American society has achieved significant advancements regarding the rights of people with non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities in the past decades,⁶ discrimination against these social groups is still prevalent in American society. Jenifer Firestone even identifies age-related issues as “an epidemic in the LGBT community” (00:45:23-25). Thus, *Gen Silent* paints a picture that aligns with Vanessa D. Fabbre’s observations about successful aging. She

6 Perhaps the most mediated in the last couple of years being the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision that all states must grant same-sex couples the right to get married (“Obergefell v. Hodges.”).

finds that “[s]cholarly discourse within the successful aging paradigm, by ignoring the constraining effects of heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia in the lives of LGBTQ older adults, perpetuates unspoken assumptions that a heterosexual orientation and gender conforming identities are associated with ideal outcomes in later life” (145). Lisa Krinsky, director of the LGBT Aging Project, confirms such constraining effects in Stu Maddux’s documentary by pointing out that “the provider network isn’t comfortable and up to speed [as] 50 percent of nursing home staff reported that their colleagues would be intolerant of LGBT folks” (00:18:25-45).

Thus, *Gen Silent* succeeds in making visible Fabbre’s idea that unspoken assumptions, embedded in a heteronormative narrative, contribute to a notion of unsuccessful aging of queer people. The movie provides authentic voices that challenge politics informed by normative ideologies. *Gen Silent* shows that the preoccupation with the idea of successful aging and the subsequent escape from social sanctions even causes some LGBTQ+ people to hide their sexuality or gender identity. Although Fabbre further suggests that the conceptualization of success might not be an entirely heteronormative construct, she argues that “the narrow conceptualization of success in this paradigm ignores the diversity of individual LGBTQ experiences and the structural influences of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia on well-being for members of these groups” (“Gender Transitions” 145). Ultimately, Fabbre’s article and Stu Maddux’s documentary illustrate that cultural and social conceptualizations of the aging process are ingrained in a paradigm that forces enactments of aging into a dichotomy of successful and unsuccessful. This binary is deeply informed by heteronormative politics that facilitate discrimination against the aging queer body by erasing it from a normative conceptualization of aging.

AGING AND THE QUEER ART OF FAILURE

A paranoid reading, which aims at “exposing and problematizing hidden violences” is a strong tool to examine the hegemonic power structures that cause discriminatory actions against the aging queer body (Sedgwick 139). A queering of aging through applying notions of failure, however, offers a more reparative approach to elderly LGBTQ+ people, and, in a broader sense, to any person whose enactment of the aging process does not fall in line with heteronormative conceptualizations of successful aging. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam

suggests that “[h]eteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope” (89). Consequently, Halberstam concludes that “[o]ther subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with non-conformity, anti-capitalist practices, non-reproductive life styles, negativity, and critique” (89). Through his positioning against hegemonic political power structures, Halberstam’s approach to the role of queerness differs significantly from Edelman’s preoccupation with embracing an apolitical death drive. Moreover, Halberstam’s more constructive stance on a queer politics allows for the creation of reparative visions of non-normative modes of living.

Halberstam imagines a queer approach to failure that in its celebration of negativity and non-futurity creates alternative modes of living: “The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art and for being” (88). In compliance with Halberstam’s queer approach to failure, Fabbre observes that LGBTQ+ people often embrace failure by “defining success on new terms that prioritize identity development in later life and a sense of authenticity before death” (“Gender Transitions” 148). Thus, alternative modes of aging challenge the discriminatory heteronormative politics that govern institutionalized phobias against queer people.

One has to acknowledge, however, that embracing queer notions of failure in connection to the aging process appears to be limited to some extent within the context of the aging queer body. Although *Gen Silent* demonstrates that members of the LGBTQ+ community work hard to facilitate the celebration of alternative modes of aging, the documentary, through the voice of Lisa Krinsky, also admits that “[y]our life could be at risk” (00:09:57-59) if LGBTQ+ people decide to embrace failure and heteronormative notions of unsuccessful aging due to structural discrimination against the queer body and social stigmatization. The limitations of a reparative approach to the aging process in the context of the queer body, however, do not undermine a celebration of ‘failure’ and unsuccessful aging. Instead, the reparative approach underpins the urgency and significance of the concept of age/aging in queer theory, for, to put it in the words of the LGBT Aging Project in *Gen Silent*: “If we are saying, come out and be filled with pride, it’s our responsibility to make sure that continues right through their last day” (00:58:34-43).

CONCLUSION

The conceptualization of appropriate aging in American society, which is embedded in a heteronormative narrative that privileges people complying with the ideology of reproductive futurism, renders growing old a process that remains free of stigma for a limited number of Americans. Moreover, the aging queer body is subject to multilayered discrimination that depends on the manifestation of its queerness. Therefore, the lived realities portrayed in *Gen Silent* show that being queer only adds to already existing conceptualizations of unsuccessful aging, thus putting aging queer bodies in particularly vulnerable positions regarding social stigmatization and institutionalized discrimination. Thus, the movie justifies the call for a paradigm shift that aligns with Fabbre's proposal "that the concept of queer aging can be used as motivation for increasing self-awareness and attention to structural issues in direct practice" ("Queer Aging" 73). Moreover, a preoccupation with reproductivity and the image of the Child denies the queer body a future through discriminatory politics. Regarding the queer as "the bar to every realization of futurity" (Edelman 4) thus pushes to the margins the fact that although not everyone reproduces, everyone ages. Therefore, the concept of aging constitutes a crucial element within a queer approach to futurity and queer theory itself as it renders the queer body particularly vulnerable to structural discrimination.

Drawing on Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, this article demonstrates the usefulness of reparative impulses in theorizing the aging queer body. The celebration of alternative modes of growing older can help facilitate more accepting views on the notion of 'unsuccessful aging.' By embracing 'failure' a queering of the aging process can be expanded to include aging people that do not fall under the umbrella of queer sexualities and gender identities. Therefore, I believe future scholarship on aging should focus more effort on employing queer theory in order to represent aging in its diverse manifestations and intersections with other markers of identity.

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