

EDITORIAL

No longer employed, not reproducing, perhaps technologically illiterate, and frequently without disposable income, the old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future.

(Cynthia Port, "No Future?")

IN A CULTURE fixated on youth and health there is something inherently queer about aging. But what does it mean to age queerly and how do queers experience aging? If queers have historically not been bounded by what Judith Jack Halberstam (2005) has called reproductive time and its normative life course of respectable maturation and adulthood via marriage and passing on the family line, then how do we know how, when and if we are aging or old? What kinds of queer (aging) futurities might we imagine, in the here and now and in an increasingly reproduction-oriented future? This special issue of *lambda nordica* does not aim to answer all these questions, but it does present some new perspectives on the intersection of aging, illness, death and queerness and in this editorial, we take the opportunity, as slowly greying editors, to reflect briefly on what the issue of queer aging might come up against in the Nordic context. It seems to us that even if a lot of research on queer aging remains to be done in our setting, we have ample theoretical tools for beginning to ponder what the fact that as a population we are living longer and healthier than before might mean for (studying) queer aging. Taking cue from Cynthia Port (2012), we might begin by noting that new approaches to queer(ing) temporality, a subject for a future issue of our journal, may also help us reconsider the temporalities of old age, even if there are obvious differ-

ences between queer sexuality and old age as categories of experience and identity.

Three decades after the onset of the AIDS epidemic, and the subsequent and deeply tragic loss of thousands of gay men, many of whom were young, growing old is perhaps no longer unimaginable, even if it remains both feared and mysterious. Even as a discourse of inevitable disease and (premature) death or an absence of reproductive futurity linked with queer sex has been challenged and increasingly replaced with one of respectability via legalized partnership and marriage, reproductive rights and recognition, queer politics and representation seems to remain intimately tied to youth. Images of pride parades and celebrations are still heavily dominated by young, able bodies dancing and partying. In a wide range of urban settings, social spaces and activities often privilege the interests and needs of young people and clubs are getting increasingly age-segregated. Our tendency to privilege futurity also means that a great deal more emphasis is placed on the health and risks of queer youth, on coming out stories, and on making it in an increasingly neoliberal world than on what it means to age. A significant part of contemporary trans-politics also departs from the figure of the young trans-person, their reproductive futures and needs for early gender adjustment surgeries. The list goes on.

Whether or not aging inevitably means that “it gets better,” to use Dan Savage’s famous formulation, clearly depends on a wide range of factors that extend beyond a LGBTQ identity, at the same time as queer aging comes with its own set of dilemmas. How are we to decide when aging starts? What, for instance, does it mean for our understandings of desirability, gender, and sexuality that membership in an organization such as the RFSL sponsored group Golden ladies is open to women over thirty-five? If reproductive time increasingly shape queer livelihoods, it is also true that family-making via reproduction increasingly coincides with the time that we achieve “golden” status. At the same time, many argue that for LGBTQ people who are moving into the “later” stages of life, by which we might infer retirement and thereafter, there are a range of issues that urgently need to be addressed. What happens to our

lives, relationships, needs, and identities as we (inevitably) age? Placing the question of aging at the center of queer discussions begs existential and scientific questions: whose needs determine our LGBTQ political agendas and what do queers make of the simple fact that we are all destined to age, become ill or less able, and eventually die?

In the Nordic region, as in the West/world at large, we are living longer and longer, and in many respects, stay “healthy” and remain more independent in old age. This means, first of all, that today’s queer communities at least in theory ought to be multigenerational and to invariably include aging populations with their own set of histories, desires, and needs. With the future of our welfare states in serious danger due to ongoing privatization and rationalization of care, among a host of other changes, we can also surmise that aging and illness will become increasingly unequally distributed across classed, gendered, and racial lines. If living into old age with HIV/AIDS is more likely today, cancer rates are going up and quality of life will inevitably be tied to access to both professional care and cultural competence and sensitivity. If the US context, that we so often and routinely turn to for theoretical and political inspiration, is any indication, we might ask whether what researchers there have shown, namely that: “many LGBTQ elders enter their later years with reduced earnings; are single, childless, and with a more fragile personal safety net than their peers; and deal with persistent discrimination in all aspects of their lives” (Espinoza 2013, 45), means for our context. If the USA is any indication, the time is more than ripe for serious discussion about both current and future politics of queer aging. Indeed, as American lifelong LGBTQ activist Amber Hollibaugh has asked:

How do we as an LGBT movement push forward a transgressive vision of society that includes what we know are the issues that make aging particularly challenging for members of our community?!

Amber Hollibaugh notes that there is a range of things that set the LGBTQ population apart from the majority. She supports Robert Es-

pinoza's observations and estimates that between 70 and 80 % of LGBTQ people age alone. Many are without familial or kinship systems as support in the aging process, partly because aging gays and lesbians today are less likely to have children to rely on, even if of course some do. Hollibaugh also calls attention to how the very urban living that was required for and desired by many (Americans) of her generation in order to live openly and queerly also shapes aging livelihoods in particular ways. The economic vulnerability and hardship of urban life, especially for working class people can makes for a particularly hard later life. Needless to say, Hollibaugh is drawing on her experiences of American urban political organizing and living. Rural and small town living can for queer as for all elders bring about particular challenges, including in Nordic welfare states. Lack of access to transportation and long distances to medical services, the diminishing numbers of hours of care provided by the welfare state, and lack of infrastructure for the elderly's needs in general shape queer aging as well.

It is clear that when we age and get ill we become increasingly dependent and for queers whose relationship to kin may be complicated, distant, and even painful, this can be a challenge. For many queers, creating alternative families and ties is a way to secure company and comfort into old age; we look after our own and ourselves. While the expansion of marriage rights in the Nordic region might mean that we are better equipped to support our aging, sick, and dying partners, the privatization of the welfare state and its support structure in the Nordic setting, also puts particular pressure on those queers who lack family support in demanding their rights. At the same time, a young generation of LGBTQ people and allies, who have come of age in a time with increasing rights and recognition, may not be aware of the histories and struggles of aging queers today. Indeed, as a member of a panel discussion about the prospects of LGBTQ elderly care some years ago noted, we need to consider the urgent questions of queer aging alongside how we pass on queer histories. As we envision a future in a facility for LGBTQ elders, who may have lived queer lives without marriage and reproductive rights, we may not necessarily want to be pitied for not

having children, for instance. Indeed, for many lesbian feminists, the freedom from motherhood and marriage has been and remains central to activism and liberation.

As this issue's articles and essays also make clear, aging queerly is not freed from but rather intimately tied to gendered norms and ideals. The demands and struggles of feminine aging differ markedly from those on masculine; in communities organized around butch and femme, for instance, this can have particular gendered consequences. We can think of loving but telling sayings such as "butches are like wine, they become better with age" which suggest that the transition from "baby butch" to, say, "butch daddy" follow a different trajectory than that of femmes. This reminds us that the pressures and ideals that are tied to femininity can extend beyond sexuality. At the same time we also know that experiences of gendered aging is deeply shaped by both cultural and geographical belonging, education and professional life, and experiences with oppression along racial, gendered, ableist, and economic lines.

While transmen may experience receding hairlines, they can at least to some extent expect the status of aging manhood, whereas transwomen have societal pressures and ideals of youthful femininity to struggle with too. In her book *Out of Time: Reflections on the Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*, feminist theorist Lynne Segal (2013) not only critically scrutinizes the unequal status of aging for women and men, she also calls for alternative narratives of aging in order to call the fear thereof, and especially what she calls the "cultural segregation" of young and old, into question. As a socialist feminist, Segal is staunchly critical of hyper-capitalism's ability to profit off fears of aging via the promotion of a range of medical, surgical and, shall we add, "healthy lifestyle" interventions.

A (queerly) feminine experience of aging, may well include engaging with a real sense of horror and fear that seems to normatively accompany the process of aging, especially in a society which does not value feminine aging. Feminist critiques are needed, and at the same time, the seductive appeal in those technologies and cosmetologies is not surprising. Both an active incorporation and a rejection of these technologies into one's sense of aging self is something that women potentially both share

and reject across cis/trans distinctions. For many feminine-identified, including transwomen and femmes, these technologies are not simply reflections of societal pressures but can also be a central part of taking charge of and embodying one's femininity, even if it appears anachronistic. For those who may have come to fully express their femininity later in life, after surviving eating disorders, drug addictions, abuse and assault, whether one mourns the loss of or strives to (re)embrace femininity as youth is a complex question. Arguing against any fantasy of agelessness Segal proposes that:

[I]n its repudiation of actual ageing, striving for agelessness is thus in one sense a rejection of life and collectivity. It is not just that such relentless buoyancy allows no space for neediness and dependence; it is also quintessentially shallow, self-centered, and elitist in its refusal to engage with the suffering and helplessness of others. (Segal 2013, 179)

Segal's response is instead to urge us to remain activists and engaged in the struggles for equal care. If older folks in general are presumed to be uninterested in sex, or even intimacy and if they are interested, to be presented with heteronormative options for social interaction, it is also clear that in terms of care concerns, transgender elders are particularly vulnerable to and likely to experience incompetence and prejudice in both health care and nursing homes for the elderly.

Not all is gloomy when it comes to aging and illness among queers however. Building on the insights of a long queer tradition of imagining alternative family and living arrangements, Segal urges us to reconsider how we understand home space in old age. Here the role of alternative forms of intimacy, the importance of friendship and what she calls "queer domesticities" and families of choice so familiar to queers become important resources for both meaning-making and liveable lives as we age. Ultimately, Segal (2013, 268) contends, a more sustainable relationship to the inevitability of aging must begin by challenging the cultural obsession with independence and instead value our fundamental and life long interdependence.

“Death should be a part of life. Not hidden, not a secret, something we never said out loud,” writes long-term lesbian feminist activist Jeanne Cordova in an open letter to her community about her struggle with cancer (Ocamb 2016). Since writing these words, Cordova has, along with David Bowie and a host of other icons of queer aesthetics and activism, moved on. They leave us with important legacies as well as with questions to pursue. Along similar lines, activists concerned with aging urge us to place this inevitable fact of life central to a queer political agenda. This means both that LGBTQ elders, like all other groups, should of course get to advocate on their own behalf, but also that we need to make aging and critical analyzes of agism an intergenerational question. Questions of aging, as political questions, are by their very nature intersectional. We need to attend to the specific needs and situations not only of lesbians, gay, queer, and transpeople as homogenous groups, but rather to link these questions to experiences of racism, disability, poverty, unemployment, housing, and so on. As LGBTQ aging activist Espinoza puts it:

When we don't protect elders and invest in elder leadership, we dishonor all that came before us. We become ahistorical. When we don't focus our attention on aging services and supports, we destabilize not just elder lives but the entire family unit, because we still take care of each other – and the costs are financial and emotional on all of us as children, extended family, partners, friends and caregivers. And when families are understood only as biological supports, or spouses, we misname the ways that many of us, if not all of us, have organized ourselves out of necessity, and in the pursuit of justice and joy. (Espinoza 2011)

A Special Issue on Aging

lambda nordica has long wanted to do a special issue on queer aging. Surely, we thought, given the interest in queer livelihoods over time, as well as the interest in oral history and biography, in sexual politics and social movements questions pertaining to aging, even to illness and death, would be interesting and urgent for many queer researchers. Curiously, and for reasons both unexpected and circumstantial, it turned out

to be more challenging than we thought to find contributors to this issue. Nevertheless, we present a strong set of articles and essays here and we hope that we will see a lot more work on these issues in the coming years.

Linn Sandberg brings together queer theory and research on aging in a discussion of the idea of positive aging. Her article is a theoretical contribution, which draws on examples from cultural texts such as advertisement. Using Sara Ahmed's theories on happiness and family, Sandberg argues that aging is constructed as positive by being connected to heterosexual relationships and grandchildren, but also to health and activity. In this process those who are too queer, too disabled, or too poor are associated with unhappiness and unsuccessful aging.

Janne Bromseth presents findings from her research project on older non-heterosexual women. More specifically this article focuses on self-defined lesbian feminists and their experiences of close relationships and community in the past and the present. Subcultures tend to be associated with young people, but Bromseth shows how the lesbian feminist subculture continues to be important socially as these women age, even if their commitment takes new forms.

In her engaging, poetic, and personal essay, Nina Lykke theorizes on the subject of queer widowhood and mourning. She not only describes the death of her long-term partner and her queer encounters with all the norms surrounding death, but also how she struggles to overcome them in order to give her beloved the funeral she wants. Lykke's moving essay offers a beautiful way to rethink these existential dimensions of life and offer a queer feminist approach to the materiality of illness, death, and its ritualization and memorialization.

Finally, in the *We're Here* section gender variant visual artist Del LaGrace Volcano presents a series of new images about the aging queer body, accompanied by an autobiographical essay that weaves together family history, queer politics, and a (r)aging approach to societal ideals of gendered aging. Put together we hope that this special issue will spark new thoughts, raise additional research questions, and contribute to continued discussions among queer researchers and activists.

At the end of January the editors and board of *lambda nordica* in-

vited the members of our Nordic advisory board, Lin Prøitz, Mathias Danbolt, and Kaisa Ilmonen to a meeting in Stockholm to discuss the futurity of our aging but youthful journal. We also received an update on the state of queer research around the region (a matter which we will return to in upcoming issues) as well as some feedback on what colleagues think of the journal. We were pleased to hear that many of you appreciate the professionalization the journal has undergone in recent years, the accessibility of open access, and that our thematic issues are useful in teaching and research. On the last note, we are now setting to work with three exciting upcoming special issues; one on queer(ing) femininities, another on queer histories and temporalities, and the third on postcolonial queer Europe. In addition 2016 will bring you at least one open issue and as always, we look forward to hearing from both readers and interested contributors.

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NOTE

1. Amber Hollibaugh, "Two, four, six, eight: Who says that your grandmother's straight: Enhancing the lives of LGBTQ older adults in the twenty-first century"(n.d.). Paper written for queers for economic justice, courtesy of the author.