

Chapter 1:

Sex and Intimacy in Later Life: A review of the terrain

Paul Reynolds, Trish Hafford-Letchfield and Paul Simpson

That time of year thou may'st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day,
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by-and-by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 73

Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73* suggests a recognition of finality, mortality and the changes that ageing brings, with a plea for love (and respect?) from those who are younger, through the certain knowledge that they will miss those who are ageing when they pass, and will experience ageing and its vicissitudes themselves. This is ageing as natural cycle and self-aware progression through the life course. It

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appeals to naturalized and normalized contours of the process of ageing, which are 'coloured in' by cultural representations of how we are seen to age. Older people should 'grow old gracefully', both experience and express that 'slow journey into the twilight of their lives'.

Whilst the sentiment of the sonnet might be regarded as romantic in its appeal to the recognition and acceptance of naturalism and the character of love and respect across generations, it betrays both a naivety and a danger. Its naivety lies in its 'rose-tinted' characterization. Generally, in more economically developed societies, age is more a subject of pathology, prejudice and crude cultural stereotypes - the irrelevant or burdensome rather than the experienced or useful, the decaying rather than the preserved and venerable, the infirm rather than the healthy within the life course, the decrepit or absent-minded rather than the eccentric or the wise. Their roles are simultaneously and contradictorily seen as celebrated and wasted, cherished and abandoned, loved and left behind. Late modernity, with its diversification of family and community form and its focus on the twin preoccupations of work and cultural achievement often leaves older people at the margins or with a limited familial role or in the work force. The billion-dollar market in anti-ageing and youth preserving products suggests that age – and showing age – has diminishing social, economic and cultural power and recognition outside of carefully prescribed roles and characterisations (Statistica 2020, Zion 2018). The agenda for today is to simultaneously grow old 'well' and minimize the impact of growing old, by conforming to dominant cultural expectations.

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Older people's desire, love and intimacy are commonly stereotyped – and mainly negatively – as not sexual or sensual, progressively dysfunctional and limited. By these representations, sensual pleasures are superseded by friendship, familiarity and the intimacy that brings. Relationships that cross generations are 'May-December' and often regarded as either driven by youth tempted by material wealth or the inappropriate carnality of the older, as if relationships are only meaningful within age bands. Equally, older people's relationships with other older people are viewed with a desexualized reserve, whether they are reified for long-term romantic attachment or diminished as 'companionship'. Older sexual desires, and the enjoyment of sexual pleasures, are regarded with suspicion, a curious mixture of cultural and moral reserve.

Echoing Shakespeare, convention exhorts that older people should be loved, but only because they embrace their age, their changing place and ultimately their passing. Conforming to the stereotypes afforded to older people becomes essential to their inclusion and respect. Which begs the question: what if convention and conformity are not desired? What if the naturalized notion of ageing, and the constraints attached to sexual expression are neither desired nor healthy to a satisfying longevity.

In sociological studies, a dominant feature of the last 70 years, to varying degrees across the globe, has been the retreat from seeing people simply as atomized and unique individuals or as subjects of a nation, ethnicity or sociological class and reducible to its stereotypes. Concerns with gender, ethnicity/race/culture/religion and been joined by (dis)ability and sexuality in being regarded as increasingly significant

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since the 1960's, within struggles for rights and recognition within a broad shift in critical approaches that focus on the cultural politics of identities (see Honneth 1995 and Fraser and Honneth 2004 on the conceptual frames of recognition and redistribution). In the twenty-first century, the politics of identity has shifted from focusing on particular social identity constructs to their intersections in the lived experiences of people striving to address multiple oppressions, discriminations and constraints (Jenkins 2014, Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). It is within this context that the field focused on the intersections of age and sex/sexuality has emerged.

This text (and its series) is devoted to dispelling prejudices and replacing assumed and prejudicial assumptions with interrogated and examined knowledges. Within this context, it might be surprising to reflect on how resistant stereotypes, pathologies and prejudices about age have been to the critical study of ageing and later life. Age as a meaningful difference has begun to be recognized as significant, particularly as the experience of age has become differentiated in more economically developed and culturally diverse societies. The conception of age (and ageing) has changed for a number of reasons: in many societies people are living longer, working longer and have greater resources, thereby engaging more visibly with consumer society. Older people themselves become a site of consumption and services that occupies a significant proportion of the economy (illustratively, Harper 2013, Thorson 2000).

These forms of change also impact upon the prejudicial characterizations of older people that persist in the twenty-first century, that they are homogenized in their conforming to stereotypes. In part, this involves a failure to see them as intersecting *subjects* – constituted *in* class, ethnic, gendered, dis/ability and sexuality social

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relations and seeking to constitute *themselves within* those relations, rather than singularly constituted in age. This is particularly evident when we consider the intersections of age and sex. The prevailing prejudice is that older people are sexless and subject to 'ageist erotophobia' (see Simpson et al 2018) – absent of and from legitimate desires, erotic imaginations and want of sexual pleasures. This book, and the series that this book launches, seeks to stand as a resource to turn back the tide of prejudice and pathology, and stimulate critical debate, research, policy and practice (the series introduction provides an overview of the project).

This volume of essays explores an array of identity intersections that show the different ways in which older sexual agents are constituted in contemporary cultures and societies. What becomes clear with each successive study is that there are strong common themes that shape the experience and recognition – or invisibility, prejudice and pathology - of older sexual agents. Equally, there are important differences that require attention if the task of elucidating and empowering across one set of intersections does not fall into assumed homogeneity and/or exclusions of others. How ethnic, differently-abled, gendered and class differences (amongst others) are manifest is critical in balancing a focus on sexual agency amongst older people and a recognition that those agents have very different and distinct experiences and patinas of oppression and discrimination.

The chapters collected and curated in this text are not intended to be an exhaustive survey of these intersections. What they do, however, is take some dominant intersected identities with the intention of both exploring key themes and issues in the nascent development of the field of sex and intimacy in later life. In doing so, they

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provide valuable digests of the current state of the literature, enlightening case studies that illustrate critical issues, and begin to define part of a critical research agenda. They give the reader the opportunity both to take stock of extant scholarship and consider the next steps in developing the field, articulating more empowering possibilities and informing public and policy debate. This was the explicit intention in curating this collection as a first contribution to this book series.

In the next chapter, Debra Harley focuses on an often-overlooked intersection of age and sexuality – with race and ethnicity – in a focus on older black minority ethnic (BME) women. Harley underlines the importance of the intersection of race and ethnicity in influencing the way the expression of sexuality and pursuit of sexual pleasure are articulated prejudicially, where older BME women are subject to representations that either desexualise or render them as lacking morality and/or taste. This creates powerful prejudices and pathologies that bound and constrain older BME women's sexuality. Whilst she draws from a range of international studies, her primary focus is on the US experience and Afro-American women, where the cultural context of racism, slavery and the persistence of violence and prejudice provides a pervasive and persistent backdrop that BME women struggle against. This struggle impacts upon how older BME women neither see themselves nor are seen as sexual agents, and extends to rendering non-hetero, non-monogamous no-gender conforming BME women as doubly invisible or perverse. Harley's chapter elucidates the construction of prejudice and then explores its impact on both sexual health and sexual pleasure. She outlines how further factors, such as living with HIV and receiving sexual health services, only compound the disadvantage to their sexual agency and intimate lives. Yet at the same time, Harley

recognises where older BME women are exploring sexual pleasures, even within the context of oppression and pathology.

Karen Rennie considers another underrepresented and under-researched intersection – older people towards the end of life. This is clearly an elusive group to describe, but Rennie turns a spotlight on two interrelated but non-exclusive groups, those at the upper end of ‘older’, and those receiving care signifying the nearing of the end of their lives. Both of these groups are often regarded as non-sexual simply by virtue of their stage in the life course, even by those otherwise keen to dispel pathologies around older sexual agents. Rennie mounts a persuasive narrative against such assumptions, emphasising the sexual and intimate needs of these agents, and takes a critical review of the relevant literature to argue for the special value of sex for older old people and those whose lives are drawing to a close. She draws out the importance of both valuing sex and also recognising that intimacy takes a range of forms – both inclusive of and beyond genitocentric and penetrative sex - that bring closeness and pleasure, and the way in which these pleasures are subject to ‘ageist erotophobia’ (Simpson et al. 2018). Rennie manages to retain the value of recognisable sexual pleasures, whilst recognising that the balance of physical pleasure, emotional satisfaction and sensual practices may vary. A particular variable for older people is their understanding of sexual pleasure and the way narrow genito-centric conceptions may reinforce a normalisation of assumed relationship between aging and diminished sexual capacity or pleasure. Rennie also recognises that issues such as diminished capacity (Alzheimer’s and dementia) and the issue of palliative care and older people’s care institutions create additional concerns in terms of how older people’s sexual pleasure is seen as risk-laden.

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Although – and this is a theme stretching throughout the collection – older sexual agents are beset by constraints, prejudices and limitations, Rennie sets an agenda for a sexier old age, sketching a research agenda that celebrates older and end-of-life sexual agency. This is an important thread through this volume – whilst invariably the analysis focuses on problems and issues, they should not become a preoccupation at the expense of exploring pleasures and opportunities.

Trish Hafford-Letchfield focuses on solo ‘straight’ older women’s sex and intimacy, and particularly older women’s voices that indicate expressions of sexual agency. Once again, there is a focus on barriers, both external and internalised, and particularly issues around social-cultural constraints and situational limitations. Hafford-Letchfield recognises how discursive constructs such as the clumsiness of caregivers around sexual issues to the cultural and medical constraints in managing physiological changes. She draws from her own research participation and an erudite understanding of gendered pathology to explore the way older heterosexual women both pursue and self-limit their sexual agency. Her theoretical framing critically deconstructs older heterosexuality in the context of complexities in gender fluidity, and her synthesis of extant research studies yields a number of key themes: social legitimacy, the impact of health changes and the power of heteronormative assumptions about active and healthy (penetrative) sex. Hafford-Letchfield also explores older women’s experience of intimate relationships and the crucial – and contingently, empowering or constraining – factor of relationship status, which has always been a significant feature of gendered experience in socio-cultural analysis. Hafford-Letchfield provides a nuanced review and analysis of the literature that both represents fully the maze of limitations constraining older hetero women, whilst

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recognising that there are opportunities and possibilities in cultural change and agentic action. She concludes by outlining key challenges that form an agenda for both research and the expression of sexual agency.

Subsequently, David Lee and Josie Tetley move the focus onto heterosexual men, recognising similar constraints in prejudicial cultural discourses and institutional and relational contexts. Whilst women face qualitatively gendered forms of prejudice and discrimination, it does not follow that older men, under the pervasive power of masculinity (classically, Connell 1987, 2005) themselves do not experience equivalent (if perhaps not equal) problems. Using large scale data sets against the extant literature, they explore the way in which heterosexual men are limited by discursive constructions that render their sexual desires perverse, pathological or abnormal in later life. Again, Lee and Tetley make the connection between discursive constructs and the challenges of aging and extant policy and practice. An analysis of a large longitudinal study draws out the agenda older men face: concerns about sexual difficulties in performance and sexual health as they age; the way in which sexual relationships changed, were challenged and constrained with age; and their sense of reflecting on their past and understanding the impact of ageing on their sexual desires and performance.

Further, Lee and Tetley emphasise in their analysis that it is in the construction of older men's sense of their own changing sexual selves that issues of health, performance and physiological change are instantiated, as well as prevailing external discourses. They recognise that in some areas, such as older men's sexual health, there are grounds for seeing constructive change. They also make a critical

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assessment of the methods and analysis of the longitudinal study that forms the focus of the analysis. Their conclusions, seeking to balance these factors, aim to promote an opening up of the often 'silenced' narrative of older heterosexual men and the need to build upon their research to improve policy and practice.

The focus of the next chapter by Peter Robinson is on older gay men, which draws on narratives of the sexual encounters of a small but international (Anglophone) sample of gay men (contextualised within the extant literature). He draws two main themes from these narratives: the impact of age – and physiological change – on the satisfaction of sexual desires, and the age preferences they expressed. Robinson explores what he takes from Heaphy (2007) as 'resources of ageing' as a counterweight to the constraining impact of ageing. Whilst youth is culturally constituted as the preferential age for sexual desire and pleasure in contemporary societies, Robinson outlines what age might bring in terms of knowledge gains to the older sexual agent. Whilst acknowledging the persistence of prejudicial discourses, he is able to draw from the experiences of men who have improved sexual esteem, developed strategies for coping with changes in sex drive and developed strategies to fulfil sexual desires with younger men. The accounts of Robinson's study participants' provide a rich sense of how some sexual agents are able to compensate for both personal changes and socio-cultural discourses that constrain other men. Robinson's analysis reminds the reader that, whilst structural and cultural factors and the intersections that constitute social identities are important, individual sexual agents personal trajectories and willingness to develop resources that are enabling, can lead to significant differences in agentic outcomes. In this respect, Robinson opens up an interesting avenue for further study and reflection.

Shifting onto the focus to older lesbian-identified women, Megan Todd examines the interrelationship between sex and violence as another significant feature of older sexual agents' lives. Despite a more tolerant social context, that includes civil partnerships and marriages as forms of relationship recognition, she discusses the limiting factors for older lesbians that homonormative preconceptions sustain (see Duggan 2002). Against a youth-oriented 'out' queer culture and persistent negations of the lesbian sexuality that encourages invisibility, Todd explores the impacts of such sexually abusive relationships. She draws on recent research and feminist methodology to explore the complexities of older lesbian's narratives of their relationships. She provides a rich description of the tensions that lesbian sexual agents face in the face of a complex conjuncture of progressive change and the persistence of regressive forces, where culturally constituted notions of respectability, conformity to monogamy and the stereotype of intimate relationships persist even amongst those sexual agents whose recognition is relatively recent. Todd also picks up on another theme that runs through this set of essays, that there is research that is beginning to unpack and analyse the experiences of different sexual agents, but the gaps and paucity of research speaks to the need for more work in this field. Where sexual violence is concerned, any sense that the cultural constraints to sexual agency produce an invisibility that impedes relief for victims requires urgent redress. Todd concludes by signposting where new research might begin.

In the following chapter, Christopher Wells shifts the focus to older bisexuals, considering the impact of mononormativity and employing the conceptual framing of

Foucault's (1967) 'heterotopia' as a means of representing the contradiction of inclusion/exclusion that older bisexuals experience. Wells combines an exploration of the relatively few research studies available with a sophisticated and critical framing that explores how bisexuals experience 'ageist erotophobia' overlaid with the constraining presumptions that older sexual agents will be in settled monogamous relationships (Simpson et al 2018). The impact of these constructs reinforces the invisibility of older bisexuals, which is itself compounded by the slipperiness with which non-mononormativity is perceived. Where the very terms of the identity are often reduced to negative characterisations such as greed and licentiousness (see Udis-Kessler 1996), it becomes more difficult to constitute the ground for resistance through an identity politics, as with lesbian and gay sexuality. This impacts on both the reflective subjectivity of the sexual agent and the elusiveness yet discursively constrained constitution of bisexual identity. Wells' critical analysis captures the contradictions and complexities of exploring fluidity and plasticity in the self and social identification of sexual agents.

In terms of those thought to represent no-normative gender, Laura Scarrone Bonhomme explores the experiences of those sexual agents who choose to transition in later life. This chapter explores the context of trans in a gendered hegemonic culture and then draws out the experience of older trans people through the recognition of this intersection, as those in previous chapters, being a space that composed of overlapping and different pathological discourses. In looking at transitions in older age, the personal trajectories and narratives of transitioning individuals are important to counterpoint against the broader cultural forces that reinforce conformity to cisgenderedness. Scarrone Bonhomme explores these

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forces, both in their specificity – transitioning as parents, transitioning in established intimate relationships as well as through the opportunities of being an older sexual agent, transitioning regarded as ‘second adolescence’ – as well as the more generic pressures upon people who transition as a form of sexual agency in later life. Scarrone Bonhomme provides a rich description of the biopsychosocial factors that are relevant to understanding older transitioning agents – whether male to female or female to male (each with their own similarities and conformities). It recognises both the agency exercised in difficult circumstances as a celebration of self-recognition, whilst equally recognising both the constraints and pathologies they face. Indeed, Scarrone Bonhomme picks up on how this analysis is offered on the basis of limited research into a relatively unexplored intersectional grouping, contrasting the burdens on those who choose to transition and their relative neglect by professionals and healthcare providers, whose cisnormative and heteronormative paradigms render older trans people invisible, unsupported and excluded.

Taking a different route into considering sex and intimacy in later life, Ela Przybylo illuminates the powerful discourses of desexualisation/sexualisation as having an impact on older sexual agents in intimate relationships. Working within the context of a sexualised culture where older people are desexualised and thereby in part limited in their participation and exclusion, she draws attention to asexuality, where intimate relationships, feelings and affections are not accompanied by a desire for expression through sexual pleasure. Whilst desexualisation has been a background feature of all the essays in the collection, it is here that it is foregrounded and explored for its constituent pathologies – such as disgust, disposability of choices (particularly in institutional contexts such as care homes) and cultural and procedural constraints

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that impede the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Simultaneously, however, Przybylo is critical of the position that sees a critical response to these limitations as subject to a kind of 'book-keeping', where having more sex signifies progress or a 'ageing successfully' and on youth-oriented terms. This constitutes a 'double bind', within which older people negotiate their sexual and/or intimate lives. Drawing from both critical disability studies and asexuality studies, she preserves the notion of sexual agency being about choice in how intimate relationships are constituted, and how they are reconstituted in the process of ageing, rather than simply representing an easy binary opposition between desexualisation and resexualisation (selectively see McRuer 2006 on critical disability studies and Bogaert 2015 on asexuality). In this analysis, Przybylo provides a powerful corrective to the notion that either a sexualised or a desexualised culture are in and of themselves progressive for older people. Rather they are progressive insofar as sexual agents have choice in constructing their sexual and intimate lives.

In the final substantive chapter, Paul Simpson focuses on an intersection oddly neglected by much of contemporary identity studies – social class. He argues that class is an important factor in exploring issues of entitlement, access, material means and cultural prejudices in how older people practice and 'consume' sexual and intimate lives. He uses the conception of class developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 2005) to provide a framework for thinking about how ageist erotophobia (Simpson et al 2018) has a particular impact across class stratifications. This involves recognising that class both provides a structure for social experience and is present as relational and cultural processes that have concrete impacts on older people's experiences of intimacy and sexuality. Simpson concludes his chapter with

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a sketch of a research agenda that might better elucidate class differences as a variable in erotic and intimate lives.

A number of critical themes come from reading across the collection. Whilst they digest an important selection of extant research, a common feature of each chapter is that in comparison with other intersectional identities and social structures, those characterised by ageing, intimacy and sexuality are under-researched. There is an urgent need for more empirical studies both on and with older people. They need to be tied more clearly to policy, care and welfare provision and professional practice, both in critique and in concrete alternative provisions. They need to deconstruct prejudicial and pathological cultural discourses and recompose them as enabling and enriching. The different contributors use a range of frames of analysis on diverse qualitative, quantitative and mixed data sets, to represent the extent to which negative ageing and sexual discourses are compounded when brought together in the older sexual subject. These considerations are compounded with other prejudicial cultural discourses against same sex relationships, trans, bisexuality or anything that departs from heteronormative/homonormative and cisgender paradigms. The different essays in this volume show the mixture of broad socio-cultural discourses that have a common pathological and prejudicial function across different intersected older identities and the specific constraints to sexual agency that these intersections present.

Whilst a theme of the collection is the paucity of research studies in this area, the chapters themselves nevertheless provide a range of different approaches, collecting data with different methods and engaging different social and cultural theorists to

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enable critical thinking. This underlines the opportunities current and future researchers have in what is a still young field, to bring their methodological and theoretical preferences into play. The sum of these essays' underlines that the exploration of sex and intimacy in later life is deeply complex, requires nuanced responses to the present terrain and sets critical challenges. There is a strong impetus in most essays towards enabling older sexual agents to take pleasure and express themselves free of constraints, but also a recognition that what choices are made cut across rather than correspond to easy notions of conformity or transgression, traditional or progressive, or repressive or sex-positive paradigms.

The essays in this volume illustrate the cultural differences within which constraints are experienced, but also strong correspondences across national and cultural boundaries. Part of a developing research agenda might be to explore anthropologically and sociologically different representations and constructions of older sexual agents in different societies. Yet it is clear that there are important communalities as well as differences, which means that there should be value to sharing the different agentic responses that are uncovered and explored across national and cultural boundaries.

Whilst the collection has been curated around a structure that emphasises intersectional identities, it has also in varying degrees underlined both the constraints across intersections and the importance of agentic self-reflection beyond their belonging to social identities. Particularly where their identities have less recognition, as with bisexuals, identity formations and belongings, and their intersections, matter. Yet it is necessary to engage with them in a nuanced way that recognises their

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porous and tendential character, to avoid replacing one form of oppressive and limiting construct with another construct, less or even equally oppressive but nevertheless limiting.

In the latter part of 2020, notwithstanding arguments varying between unalloyed progress or its superficiality and the persistence of traditional positions (See Weeks 2007), there is a greater degree of socio-cultural space for sexual diversity and agency in more nations across the globe. Yet the power of conformity and traditional structures such as hetero/homonormativities, monogamy and cisgenderedness remain potent. Dominant discourses that reduce older people to positive or negative social stereotypes and functions (such as the 'sweet' grandparent or the older 'lecherous' delinquent) compounds the scope for rendering them invisible and excluded. With an increasing ageing population now reflecting the historically liberating values of the 1960's and 1970's, where traditional values and structures were first substantively challenged and eroded, the agendas for change require important political as well as intellectual work. If this volume encourages both further research and new thinking in policy and practice, whilst supporting the sharing of ideas, experiences and insights, then it would have fulfilled its function.

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