



## “Courage to cobble something new”: Women’s queer and creative narratives of bisexuality and ageing

Rebecca L. Jones<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sarah Jen<sup>b</sup>, Bea Reiter<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care, Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> University of Kansas, School of Social Welfare, Twente Hall, Lawrence, KS 66044, USA

<sup>c</sup> Emporia State University, School of Library and Information Management, Campus Box 4025, 1 Kellogg Circle, Emporia, KS 66801, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Critical gerontologists have called for more diverse and inclusive visions of a good old age, and especially for imaginings that do not depend on health, wealth and heterosexuality. They have suggested that LGBTQ people, alongside other marginalized groups, may have particular contributions to make to the project of reimagining ageing. In this paper, we bring together this work with Jose Muñoz’s concept of ‘cruising utopia’ to examine possibilities for imagining a more utopian, queer life course. We present findings from a narrative analysis of *Bi Women Quarterly*, a grassroots online bi community newsletter with an international readership, analyzing three issues published between 2014 and 2019 that focused on the intersection of ageing and bisexuality. We found several ways in which the authors told counter-narratives that queered normative visions of successful ageing. They queered norms around the stability and reification of sexual and gender identities. They challenged current forms of LGBTQ activism. They embraced and celebrated ageing, through such activities as croning ceremonies, and directly addressed and contemplated death. Finally, they queered the narrative form, by giving accounts of personal experience that were dreamlike, poetic or inconclusive. We conclude that counter-normative spaces, such as activist newsletters, offer valuable resources to progress the wider project of reimagining successful ageing more inclusively.

### Introduction

Popular visions of “successful” ageing, while intended to be optimistic and a challenge to ageism (Katz & Calasanti, 2015), have been criticised as neoliberal (Minkler & Holstein, 2008), ableist (Gibbons, 2016), Western/North American-centric (Liang & Luo, 2012), heteronormative (Marshall, 2018) and drawing on very limited forms of reproductive futurity (Chazan, 2020). Critical gerontologists Linn Sandberg and Barbara Marshall (2017) have called for a “queering [of] ageing futures,” for breaking down the binary construction of “success” versus “failure” and for reclaiming or repairing what might previously have been considered “damaged lives” due to marginality, disability and/or LGBTQ+ behaviours or identities. Queering here refers to more than the experiences of LGBTQ+ people; rather it references a radically (de)constructive approach to categories and identities (see King, 2021, and below). Sandberg and Marshall argue that new possibilities for queer ageing futures are located at the intersections of queer theory, crip

theory, feminist theory and gerontology. Recent articles in this journal responding to their paper have demonstrated the fruitfulness of such approaches in offering new and more inclusive visions of a good old age (Changfoot et al., 2021; Chazan & Whetung, 2021; Jones, 2021; King, 2021; McLeod, 2021). This paper aims to add another such example of “open[ing] up alternative ways of thinking and theorizing that might provide space for a greater diversity of later lives, including those rendered abject in current models of ‘successful ageing’” (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017, p.2). This paper combines the approach advocated by Sandberg and Marshall with Jose Muñoz’s theory of “cruising utopia” and the idea that “queerness is about collectively imagining a future that moves beyond the negative present” (Hoyos Twomey, 2020, para 6), allowing gerontology to move beyond heteronormative futures to imagine a more utopian, queer life course.

In *Cruising Utopia* Muñoz (2009), Muñoz claims that creating a queer utopia requires the radical embrace of new forms of fluidity and possibility in queer lives and experiences. While the promise of such a future

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [rebecca.jones@open.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.jones@open.ac.uk) (R.L. Jones).

is not yet a reality, its possibility and potential is enough to maintain hope for what that future might entail. He refers to this hope as a “gesture” toward what queerness can be, a not-yet-here, futurity-bound phenomenon, that is yet to be realized. While the concept of queerness has been applied and developed in many forms through scholarship, community practice, and individual identity-development, the construct hinges on radically resisting the categories, labels, and scripts available to us in the current binary-focused and heteronormative world (Sullivan, 2003). Rather than focus on the limited potential of here-and-now possibilities, Muñoz suggests “cruising ahead” toward an imagined future of what might be for queer realities and lives, not only from the framework of sexuality, but at the intersections of sexuality with race, age, gender and other social locations. Crossing the barrier between the two – the here-and-now and the not-yet-here – necessitates a radical break from what has formerly been and the potential for discovery of new ways of being. Since Muñoz’s approach is explicitly future-oriented, it offers a natural fit with Sandberg and Marshall’s focus on the significance of imagined futures. In order to ground his theorizing of the future in concrete realities, Muñoz also situates his work within historical contexts, artistic archives, and artifacts, illustrating how the stories we tell of the past hold potential for our futures as well. For instance, in analyzing personal histories and photography depicting the past queer nightclub scene, Muñoz finds evidence of hoping for and imagining a queer society where heterosexuality is not assumed and homosexuality is embraced and celebrated. This claim for the significance of the past in imagining the future aligns well with life course perspectives on ageing, which situate ageing and later life experiences as being shaped by the intersecting factors of historical context and human agency (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). While Muñoz’s work is not explicitly ageing-focused, *Cruising Utopia* and Sandberg and Marshall’s call for queering ageing futures both carry an optimism for futures full of new possibilities. Marginal identities that already exist outside of normative scripts and structures present useful sites for exploring these possibilities, as those who claim such identities have long had to creatively navigate and/or resist the normative lives and futures set out for them.

Bisexuality has been argued to have a particular role in queering norms and futures, due to its refusal of prevalent monosexuality (Carr, 2006; Hemmings, 2002) and its often liminal and problematic status within LGBTQ politics (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Armstrong, 1995; Gurevich, Bower, Mathieson, & Dhayanandhan, 2007; Hartman, 2005). In the current climate in many Anglophone and European countries, some types of lesbian and gay relationships are increasingly culturally visible and treated as normative (Santos, 2013) whereas bisexuality remains erased and relatively invisible due to monosexuality and biphobia (Gurevich et al., 2007; Jen, 2018; Monroe, 2015; San Francisco Human Rights Commission, 2010) and trans lives are hypervisible and the subject of polarised public debate (Hines, 2019). Arguably, bisexual people, like trans people, queer people, and others included under the LGBTQ umbrella, currently make up the ‘queerer’ parts of the LGBTQ acronym. The ongoing erasure of bisexuality as a valid, and sometimes lifelong, identity means that positioning oneself as bisexual when reviewing a life course, or imagining one, might open up discursive space for producing more utopian and less normative visions of later life: if you are already positioning yourself counter to norms in terms of sexuality, this might make storylines more available where you also counter norms about a good old age. For instance, Jen (2018) found that older bisexual women sometimes took up non-normative narratives of ageing because they did not see a traditional life as possible for them. However, countering norms around sexuality, might make it more challenging to counter norms around age, because of the increased risk of encountering hostility or misunderstanding. This paper considers accounts produced by bisexual people (some of whom are also trans) reflecting on ageing and later life for the purpose of understanding how bisexual individuals can contribute to queering visions of successful ageing.

Drawing on accounts of ageing by bisexual people also helps to add

to the limited literature on bisexual ageing, and addresses a gap in the predominant framing of what little research there is that focuses specifically on bisexuality in later life. While research on LGBTQ people continues to grow, research that focuses only on bisexual people lags behind. A systematic review of 66 articles about LGBTQ ageing shows fewer than one-third included bisexual participants, and none focused only on bisexual issues (Fredriksen Goldsen, Jen, & Muraco, 2019). Even in studies where data is available about bisexual groups, it is frequently separated by gender into shared categories with gay men or lesbians (Dodge & Sandfort, 2007, 2007). When they are examined as a distinct population, bisexual individuals report many physical and mental health disparities compared to gay, lesbian, and heterosexual counterparts (Colledge, Hickson, Reid, & Weatherburn, 2015; Dodge & Sandfort, 2007; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Balsam, & Mincer, 2010). Socially, bisexual individuals also experience stigma from heterosexual populations, but also within LGBTQ+ communities, in which they or their sexual identity are often portrayed as hypersexual, confused, transitional, greedy, or less committed to LGBTQ+ causes (Kertzner, Meyer, Frost, & Stirratt, 2009; Monroe, 2015). Bisexual women particularly struggle with lack of identity valence, internalized stigma, and lack of community (Balsam, Beauchaine, Mickey, & Rothblum, 2005). Studies such as these are crucial to support advocacy around recognition and resources among marginalized individuals (Jen, 2018).

However, health-pathway comparisons can limit our focus to health outcomes or specific aspects of experience (e.g. coming out, finding a partner, securing social support, etc.) without assessing the full complexity of lives. Focusing on health pathways also glosses over the potential of LGBTQ+ lives to reinvent what is possible. A small number of studies take an alternative approach to bisexual ageing, often using creative methods such as asking research participants to draw pictures (Jones, 2011) or imagine the future (Jen & Jones, 2019). For example, in Jones’, 2011 study, participants imagined positive but highly non-normative, later lives, marked by fluidity, possibility, non-monogamy and continuing bisexual behaviours and attractions. In a qualitative study, Jen (2021) co-created life review timelines with older bisexual women and found that participants described identity development and disclosure patterns which could not be homogeneously represented by simplistic “coming out” narratives.

This literature suggests that bisexual people may be well positioned to produce accounts of ageing and later life that queer expectations of a successful old age. The first two authors of this paper were aware that the grassroots newsletter-style publication *Bi Women Quarterly (BWQ)* (discussed in more detail below) had produced three issues themed on ageing and later life, and we decided to examine them in order to explore what possibilities they held for cruising ahead to a queerer old age.

## Methodology and method

### Counter narratives

In this paper, we employ narrative analysis in order to interrogate whether and how writers in BWQ tell stories about ageing that queer (hetero)normative stories of successful ageing. We locate our approach to narrative analysis toward the centre of the continuum of approaches to selves and identities discussed by Smith and Sparkes (2008) and draw on the narrative-discursive approach outlined by Taylor and Littleton (2006), thereby situating ourselves within ‘big Q’ paradigms (Kidder & Fine, 1987). That is to say, we draw on a non-realist epistemology and conceptualise narratives as socio-cultural phenomena, rather than as ways to access individual’s interior realities or authentic selves. We understand the narratives written for BWQ, like those produced for other contexts, to combine available wider cultural narratives around age and ageing with writers’ own active creation and presentation of self. Drawing on Gubrium and Holstein’s classic examination of the significance of coherence in personal narratives (Gubrium & Holstein,

1998), we focus especially on moments of slippage or discontinuity between wider meta-narratives and the narratives told. We also explore how taking up certain subject positions enables particular storylines and closes down other possibilities. We ask not only ‘do these accounts offer queerer visions of a good old age?’ but also ‘how do authors achieve the telling of these stories?’

We draw on Sullivan’s definition that to queer is “to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up - heteronormative knowledge and institutions” (Sullivan, 2003, p. vi) because we find this to offer a fruitful set of analytic questions with which to interrogate narratives to identify potential queerness – we ask ‘does this make strange, frustrate, counteract, delegitimise, or camp up successful ageing?’ We draw also on King’s reflection that Sullivan’s definition, which references a set of resistive actions, “implies a person who acts within known, normative limits even as they are chastised, pathologized and restricted in the process” (King, 2021). This framing of queering as happening within, or in contrast to, normative frameworks has clear synergies with the concept of counter-narratives. Counter-narratives, or stories that oppose a more dominant or common way of making sense of the world, can be analyzed to understand the ways in which power plays out in accounts of experience (Andrews & Bamberg, 2004; Lueg & Lundholt, 2021). Analysts differ in how reified they consider dominant or ‘master’ narratives to be, leading to debates about what exactly constitutes a counter-narrative, and how they are to be identified in data (Bamberg & Wipff, 2020). Most, however, agree that they are locally variable to at least some extent, meaning that, in particular contexts, narratives that would often be dominant can become counter-narratives, and vice versa. Commensurate with our narrative-discursive approach, we are interested in the variability of which narratives are dominant, and we consider counter-narratives to be visible both in local member orientations to telling something which counters something they treat as a norm, and also through analysts’ wider knowledge of broader cultural storylines. Previous research that endeavored to produce new visions of old age has found that doing so was challenging (Jones, 2021; Richards, Warren, & Gott, 2012). The literature on counter-narratives offers a tool to help us to think about how people do manage to tell counter-narratives when they do.

Avoided counter-cultural spaces have a particular role in enabling narratives that, in other contexts, would be considered counter-narratives and might need to be marked as such in order to be hearable. For example, Bowes-Catton, Barker, and Richards (2011) discuss the ways in which people at a bisexual convention talked about feeling less bisexual than in normal life, because attendees’ bisexuality became taken-for-granted and normative: the accounts they produced at the convention did not need to attend to bisexuality as counter to norms about sexuality. Activist publications, such as zines and newsletters, not only create space for counter-narratives but create their own norms and so their own anticipated storylines (Chidgey, 2013).

### *Bi Women Quarterly*

*Bi Women Quarterly* (BWQ) is a grassroots newsletter published by the Boston Bisexual Women’s Network that has been in circulation in hardcopy since 1983 and also online more recently (<http://biwomenbo.ston.org/newsletter>). It has an international readership and contributors but the majority of submissions appear to be from authors based in North America. Each quarterly publication features a topical issue for which submissions are solicited from the readership in the previous issue and online. Submissions feature poetry, photos and drawings, short stories, reflections, news about current issues, letters to the editor, and more, and are welcomed from individuals with self-identified “bi+ sexualities” (bisexual, pansexual, omniseual and other non-

monosexual identities) and who are women, defined as a “broad category” according to the submission guidelines: “We welcome contributions from bi+ women who identify as trans, non-binary, cis,<sup>1</sup> and beyond” (<https://www.biwomenquarterly.com/submission-guidelines/>). This wording, alongside the recurring statement of the purpose of the publication in every edition, immediately suggest some of the counter-narratives that are likely to be more easily told within the pages of BWQ than elsewhere. For example, bisexuality and other non-monosexual identities may be more taken for granted, as may the validity of trans and non-binary genders.

BWQ can be understood to be continually reimagining bisexuality and bisexual lives in diverse ways. By offering varied forms of expression by and for bi+ women, the narratives and imagery represented in this space capture a collective imaginary, a liminal space wherein lives can be told on alternative terms. Given the broad range of topical issues, this newsletter also offers the opportunity to analyze more specifically what it means to age and what ageing means to bisexual women. Three issues have focused on themes related to age and ageing. In the Summer of 2014, an issue was published on the intersection of bisexuality and age (titled “Intersection: Age”). This issue prompted such numerous responses that another issue, “Intersection: Age (2),” was published in the Spring of 2015. In the Fall of 2019, another was published on the topic of “Growing Older.” We reviewed each issue in order to identify the pieces that could be analyzed as personal narratives, inclusively defined as consequentially ordered talk that engages in cultural sense making (Riessman, 1993). In this process, we eliminated the editor’s introductions to the issues, letters to the editor, and announcements of events, due to their non-narrative or non-personal format, as well as photos, in order to limit analysis to written texts. This process narrowed our focus to 40 narratives in total, including 12 from Summer 2014 (“Intersection: Age”), 11 from Spring 2015 (“Intersection: Age (2)”), and 17 from Fall 2019 (“Growing Older”).

We took a predominantly deductive approach to analysis, with the first two authors reading through the sample multiple times and annotating the copies with thoughts and reactions to the data in relation to our focus, namely to ask how the narratives “make strange, frustrate, counteract, delegitimise, or camp up successful ageing” as informed by Sullivan’s definition (2003). We predominantly discussed our interpretation through these annotations, but also discussed interpretation in online calls. We identified many different ways in which these narratives reimagine ageing in queerer ways but, for reasons of space, focus here on those that seemed to be less well represented in existing literature, (for example, we do not discuss queer kinship (Weston, 1991) in later life, although this is an important issue and was very commonly invoked. For overviews, see Mizielnińska, Struzik, and Król (2022) and Westwood (2015)). Names of authors are provided in the form given in the publication; the majority are not anonymous. While all of the pieces speak to intersections between age or ageing and bisexuality, the authors represent a wide variety of ages. Not all authors specifically stated their age, but we provide this information when possible. Reproduced portions of text from BWQ are also referenced by their volume, issue, and page.

### Queering sexual and gender identities

While being visibly or avowedly bisexual in later life arguably itself queers ageing futures, because older people are often expected to be asexual, or at most heterosexual (Hinchliff & Gott, 2016), changes of sexuality in later life are arguably queerer. Expectations about human development, combined with the fact that coming out narratives are dominated by the accounts of younger people (Saxey, 2008) mean that accounts of later life changes of sexuality run contrary to dominant storylines. The same is true of changes to gender identity (Fabbre, 2015).

<sup>1</sup> Cis is short for ‘cisgender’ – people’s whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Jennifer Glenister, writing at the age of 83, gives an account of very suddenly realising her sexual identity a couple of years ago, while watching a TV comedy show:

I'm gay! I've always been gay! That's what my secret has been all along—a secret to me, and a secret to everyone else. It's the door out of all the secrecy that crushed me for most of my life. I own it!! I'm gay!

I was flooded with an overwhelming sense of relief, joy, and excitement that hasn't left me. A dark mystery has melted away, and my floundering search for intimacy and love makes sense now. I guess I was looking and never finding because I was lost before I started.

Now something unimagined is beginning. An unfolding of a new way of being.

I think perhaps it's time to welcome me home.

37:4, p. 15

In this, the final section of an otherwise troubled account of lifelong uncertainty and unease, the author uses ecstatic and dramatic language to convey the revelation of a pre-existing but unrealised essential truth. By claiming that she has always been gay, she is able to explain her previous unhappiness and speak from a current position of authority and knowledge. While she does not explain her choice of the term “gay” as opposed to “bisexual” as implied by the publication's title, it is possible that she is highlighting the aspect of her attractions that has been hidden in the language that was readily available to her at the time. As other older bisexual women have noted, the term “bisexual” was not known to them until long after they recognized their same-sex desires (Jen, 2021). The last three sentences speak to the future – ‘a new way of being’ with possibilities that are not yet even imagined – and also to an implicit or imagined past – being welcomed home, which suggests a place that has always existed. While Glenister's revelation embraces a true, previously-hidden nature and way of being, she also joyfully, although tentatively, claims a sense of homecoming. The idea of being welcomed home by an imagined other, gestures toward a utopian space in which not only she, but others like her can find and share a sense of home and belonging.

Robyn Walters writes in both the 2015 33:2 edition and the 2019 37:4 edition about her experiences of transitioning to female in her 60s. In the 2019 edition she talks about forming a new relationship with a trans man while she was still living as a man and her new partner (Emery) was living as a woman:

Emery and I had met in an online transgender group for older transgender people [...] A year later, after an amicable divorce from my wife, Emery and I married: man and wife. Months later, I had my surgery: a lesbian marriage before it was legal. The state didn't care; the Feds didn't care. After another year, Emery had his surgery: now wife and man. Changing all the paperwork was the hardest part. We have been married for over nineteen years, a traditional marriage with no cheating, no extra partners.

37:4, p. 9

Here, Robyn Walters not only describes gender affirming surgery in later life, but a new marital relationship where both partner's legal gender and bodies changed in ways they were happy with but ‘the paperwork’ did not easily allow. The claim of nineteen years' duration of this marriage, and the invocation and rebuttal of ‘cheating’ and ‘extra partners’ perhaps function as a counterweight to the unusual story: this is a traditional story of a successful, monogamous, different-sex relationship, with a queer history. In telling a counter-narrative, narrators may need to ensure their account draws on some alternative storyline that is culturally valued, if they are not to be positioned negatively.

An alternative way of telling a counter-narrative is not to claim certainty and settled-status but to acknowledge ongoing change and development head-on. Of navigating such transitions in life phases, Teek Spectrum says:

The word “phase” is often used to erase us, but for me, it describes a journey through multiple transitions, mistakes, and discoveries. This is a journey that we all take, each in our own unique way. The more changes and adjustments we make as we respond to the world, the more fortunate we are.

Lately I've begun yet another new phase. I'm now retired, living alone, and have a treasured handful of queer friends of different ages. I cherish the older ones, and I've found so much value in knowing and learning from the younger ones. In my youth, the gender binary had yet to be challenged; it was taken as a given. I began to interrogate my own gender identity as I learned from my young teachers, and, at nearly 68, I've adopted they/them pronouns. I've learned new words for my and other people's experience, like “cis” and “pansexual.” I've stuck with “bisexual,” because I have fought and struggled for that identity for so long.

37:4, p. 17

Acknowledging change and the sometimes transitory nature of identities can be especially challenging for bisexually-identified people, as the author says at the beginning of their account, because of the common assertion that bisexuality is just a phase on the way to a mature homosexual or heterosexual identity (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Gurevich et al., 2007). By directly addressing this potential challenge to the validity of their bisexual identity, the author is able to then set it aside and make a claim for the validity of experiences of change, and indeed for the superiority of ongoing change of identity (‘the more changes and adjustments [...] the more fortunate we are’). Interestingly, Teek Spectrum, then counters their own counter-narrative of the value of change, by continuing to use the term ‘bisexual’, with the justification that they have fought and struggled for that identity over a lifetime.

### Queering political activism

Several of the accounts mention political activism in passing or more substantially, with issues of anti-racism, disability activism and marriage equality featuring most frequently. In most of these accounts, the author does not orient to telling a counter-narrative – the reader's sympathy with these political causes is treated as taken-for-granted and the causes themselves are treated as unproblematic. Sue Katz, however, positions her own account as a counter-narrative to current LGBTQ politics, which she describes as assimilationist and misplaced, particularly in reference to the (at the time she was writing) prominent fight for marriage equality in the U.S. She achieves this counter narrative with a number of narrative techniques, including a dramatic and poetic account of suffering and living with danger in her early life. She starts:

Hi Queers Under 40,

I was a baby butch in the days when being caught with my high school girlfriend led to threats of incarceration and electroshock. In fact, she nearly succeeded in killing herself and I was forced to undergo therapy with a pig who wanted to know, over and over, what I did to her and what she did to me. She and I were separated, forbidden to meet. It was 1964.

32:3, p. 6

There are four more paragraphs like this, recounting traumatic experiences of homophobia and exclusion, which position Sue Katz as someone who can speak authoritatively from past suffering, and the young queer people she addresses as privileged in comparison. While establishing authority through experience is not a new or non-normative technique, her narration of past suffering lends the authority and gravitas to her account needed to establish her counter-narrative to normative activism at the time: the argument that the current direction of travel for LGBTQ activism is misguided. Like many BWQ authors, she describes the transformatory power of gaining terminology to describe her experiences, and specifically the significance of ‘our working class lesbian posse, Stick-It-In-the-Wall-Motherfucker Collective’. She then

continues:

So forgive me if I have been puzzled by more recent USA LGBTQ politics. Gay politics has gone from revolutionary to assimilationist. We seem to have forgone our Lavender Vision in exchange for a place in the institutions that do such harm.

She talks about the campaigns for LGBTQ inclusion in the military and marriage equality, and why she thinks both are wrong:

I feel like a curmudgeon, for I find it hard to unconditionally celebrate what pass for victories today. I simply cannot stomach, for example, the degree of resources invested in the battle for marriage equality.

While Katz positions herself as queering or “making strange” the political push for institutional inclusion in marriage, she also disrupts normative ageing narratives by narrating her own life in terminology positioning herself only in relation to LGBTQ communities. She calls herself a ‘curmudgeon’ in the title of her account ‘From baby butch to curmudgeon’ and in the sign off ‘In curmudgeonly solidarity’. This word reinforces her self-positioning as old in relation to her imagined audience, because it is often used of older people. It also serves as a kind of stake inoculation (a discursive technique that wards off a potential criticism, see [Edwards & Potter, 1992](#)) by defending her account from the charge of being curmudgeonly by admitting the possibility herself, thereby taking up the positioning of older to avoid being pushed aside to such a positioning by the imagined other. Like Muñoz, Sue Katz has no interest in assimilation to institutions she sees as inherently problematic. She argues that the real issues facing LGBTQ communities today are poverty and wealth disparities especially among young people, queers of colour and women. She talks about younger generations as being privileged and having easier lives, because of the work of her own generation. Her account queers current forms of LGBTQ activism, in Sullivan’s terms, by delegitimising and counter-acting them.

Her account ends on a more optimistic note:

I trust that younger queers will be preparing to fight like hell to change the world in ways I cannot even imagine at this point. I trust that they will conceive and execute their very own Lavender Vision.

In these last two sentences, Sue Katz moves temporal focus again, cruising on to the future. She gestures toward a more hopeful future, or at least leaves open the possibility of one, in contrast to the traumatic past and the disappointing present. This more optimistic ending has the effect of further inoculating her account from the potential charge of being curmudgeonly.

### Queering ageing

One of Sandberg and Marshall’s criticisms of successful ageing is that it merely attempts to extend mid-life for as long as possible. In contrast, writers in BWQ embrace and celebrate ageing. Lani Ka’ahumanu’s brief account is titled “Actual remarks made during my birthday celebration week” and is reproduced here in its entirety:

“Oh, but you don’t look 56! I would have never guessed. Lucky you.”  
 As if looking 56 [whatever that means] is a negative.  
 “You’re so young, no one would ever have to know.”  
 As if people knowing I am 56 is not a positive.  
 “Don’t worry about it, I thought you were 40!”  
 As if I should be worried!  
 “Oh god, you can’t be 56, how depressing. Don’t you feel old? What are you going to do?”  
 As if there is something to do!  
 “Why do you tell people how old you are? Just stretch the truth a little, no one will know.”  
 As if lying is appropriate! As if people knowing is bad!  
 “Why are you so proud of being 56?”

As if I should be ashamed!

When people say, “OMG, you’re as old as my mom!”

Responding “Perfect—is she single?” brings a loud shriek and laughter—fun.

37:4 p. 1

In this account, the author refutes, literally line-by-line, a set of ageist assumptions about what it means to be 56. She also playfully counters the norm of later life asexuality and the taboo on adult children imagining their parents as sexual by asking whether commenters’ mothers are single. While “camping up”, one of the characteristics of queering suggested by [Sullivan \(2003\)](#) is more often associated with queer men than women ([Dansky, 2013](#)), this could perhaps be seen as a kind of camping up in the deliberate transgression of norms in a sexualised manner.

Sharon Gonsalves gives an account of holding a croning ceremony at age 50 when she stopped menstruating. She says:

I invited several women who were also becoming crones to join me around a bonfire with several other women who were already in their crone years. We talked about what we felt we were losing (beauty, sexual fire) and they told us what we had to look forward to (less caring what other people think and more being true to ourselves) [...] The following day we invited friends and family to witness our transition to wise women by declaring what we saw as our contribution to the community, going forward. I highly recommend incorporating Crone Ceremonies into the fabric of our lives. I feel much freer now that I’m no longer at the mercy of my hormones. I’ve been celibate for the past five years and I find it very relaxing. While I still identify as bisexual, for now growing older unpartnered seems like just the right thing for me [...] I imagine the future holds many precious moments, love and laughter, friends and family, good food, a sense of peace and no regrets.

37:4 p. 18–19

While some feminists have long argued for the symbolic recognition of a crone stage ([Greer, 1991](#)), positive celebrations of menopause are rarely found in accounts of successful ageing – rather this process is usually framed as a challenge to be overcome ([Hvas & Gannik, 2008](#)). Instead of emphasizing the losses often associated with this life transition, this BWQ author claims the potential of her new contributions and joys to be found in her lived experience while also acknowledging the kinship of women who came before and showed her that it could be so. In doing so, she also resists the demands of continuing sexual activity and interest which have been identified as an important part of new narratives of successful ageing ([Jones, 2002](#); [Marshall, 2010](#)), declaring herself free, celibate, happily unpartnered, and in possession of an imagined future full of positive imagery.

### Death in view

Another critique of successful ageing is that it does not acknowledge that late life is the time when someone’s own death often comes in to view ([Bytheway, 2011](#)). There seems to be no room for impending death in a successful later life. However, this is not the case for some of the authors in these editions of BWQ.

Jane Barnes’ account, titled ‘I, the Septuagenarian: 70 years’ gives an account of a life of struggle, including inadequate parenting, persistent mental health difficulties, suicide attempts, cancer and emergency surgery, untreated diabetes, unstable housing, and alcohol dependence. Her account focuses on her coming death throughout. She muses extensively on when she is likely to die:

Now, in looking at the obits, I can see that while some die between 50 and 60, it’s usually considered “before their time,” whereas some of the wording states that (s/he) died at 62 of “natural causes.” Why not die at 72 of “natural causes”? No, that’s too young. [...] The real oldsters to me are in their eighties and nineties, and the number six

appeals to me, so I'm going to put in for 86, but I've got lots of work to do on the medical front, and on the artistic.

32:3 p.10

She uses the idea of her own death to reflect on what she wants for her life now, contrasting her current experience of stability and well-being with previous instability and unhappiness:

I know one thing: I don't want to die while drinking. [...] OK. It's clear. Keep me sober, make me write, make me look for challenges [...] But I could die today, and if so, at least I've just written uninterrupted for four hours, in my room in a residence of assisted living. And I've got assisted writing – I live on social security, enough for an ice cream now and then, and without laundry, meals, housekeeping, bed changing, and help with meds taking. I have all day to write. Why spoil it by getting an apartment in Manhattan's Upper West Side without a roommate (mine is as silent as a statue), with all that trudging out for groceries and clean clothes? I may have died and gone to heaven but out in the real world there are "chores."

32:3 p.11

The life she wants to live does not look like most visions of successful ageing because she is living on social security, in an assisted living facility in a shared room, with physical disabilities. However, she embraces the freedoms that this living situation offers her, with the playful phrase 'assisted writing' and an imagining of an alternative possible life that is much less convenient. Her account is clear that this is a positive and purposeful life, undertaking activities that are meaningful to her such that, invoking death once more, she 'may have died and gone to heaven'.

In another uncommon take on later life, Loraine Hutchinson titles her piece "I'll take a side of dementia with that" and writes about growing older while living in a Quaker intentional collective home for seniors. She meditates on how to live well and build personal relationships in these circumstances:

In interactions I notice my mind constantly assessing which people are totally here, which ones are on cruise control, with their own personalized touch of dementia, dizzy spells, memory lapses, not-finding-the-words that come and go. Some people I thought were fully here, aren't anymore. Some I thought were really disoriented share moments of lucidity and insight that I didn't expect. What does all this mean in an intentional community [...] when one is never quite sure whom one can count on or how much of one is remembered or known?

37:4 p.8

Having invoked these unsettling challenges, and their impact on her own ability to build a meaningful life, her piece does not reach a conclusion about how to proceed but ends with a series of poetic invocations of the diversity of the people living in the home:

Someone is afraid people will realize she needs more assistance, will kidnap her and tell her what to do.

Someone can only afford to eat one meal a day, and worries about paying for his funeral.

Someone lives in a creekside cottage, delights in gardening, human contact, artistic expression.

Someone just fell in the bathroom and can't get up.

Someone sits in the sun by the pond writing a poem for their own funeral.

Some of the hidden underground springs are rising. Some of the ghosts haunting the hallway may be ancestors leaving cautionary messages.

In these last two lines of the piece especially, she offers very little closure, instead invoking images of hidden springs (a hopeful metaphor? Or a threatening one?) and cautionary ghosts (perhaps an image of kinship, queer in that it is across the grave, but a troubling one), leaving

us to ponder the material realities of ageing without resolution.

### Queering the narrative form

Personal stories usually follow widely understood norms about content, coherence and satisfactory conclusions (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Most of the accounts in BWQ adhere to these norms, for example in leading to a happy (or at least settled) conclusion, however non-normative the journey around sexuality, gender or reproduction taken to reach that conclusion. However, a handful of accounts, like Lorraine Hutchinson's above, further queer personal stories by producing accounts that are not linear or tidy, but rather are dream-like, poetic or inconclusive. This chimes with one of the notable features of Muñoz's book, which is its non-linear structure, jumping between different historical moments. Muñoz structure has been compared to the act of cruising, in its fluid movement and emphasis on exploration (Hoyos Twomey, 2020). Some of the accounts in BWQ have a similar quality.

As well as writing in issue 32:3, as discussed above, Jane Barnes also contributes to 37:4, five years later. Her account here is titled "Climbing (Sort of) into the 21st Century" and centers around her history of cell-phone ownership. She gives extensive details on which phones she had at which stage, and the rates she paid, and produces a kind of stream of consciousness account e.g.:

Oh, wait: is that your cell's Wagnerian waltz ringtone or mine? I'm dying for a certain call, and I just found out where they live and ordered a pretty Prime sweater in case I see them at the library. Not at a mall. (I never go to malls.) He's on Facebook, unlike me, since I don't want the Russians to try and get me to catch the measles. I had them back in 1947 when phones were black, and if you didn't answer, they eventually just hung up.

37:4 p.20

Jane Barnes could be said to be cruising here, between references to Wagner, buying a sweater, possibly online (if 'Prime' here means 'on Amazon Prime'), shopping malls, Facebook, Russia, the measles and, tying this paragraph back to the organising principle of the whole account, reminiscences about what phones used to be like. The overall effect is somewhat breathless and, on first reading, both the authors involved in the analysis experienced this as an entirely incoherent narrative, even wondering whether the writer had misunderstood the issue theme. More careful subsequent readings and analysis showed that the theme of cellphones does run throughout the account and provides a degree of coherence to an account of ageing. We also wondered whether the focus on phones constituted a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative that older people are incompetent with technology. Our struggles with this account raise an important question about queering narrative forms. How much can authors queer the form of a personal story and still be read by others as competent narrators and discourse users? This is, of course, a particularly pertinent issue when authors are known to be older, making the candidate explanation for incoherence of "dementia" more available to the reader. Articles using the term "queering counter-narratives" tend to discuss counter-narratives about being queer, not how the concept of counter-narratives might be queered. Perhaps incoherent, or at least untidy, inconclusive stories about non-normative experiences can also queer counter-narratives.

Letters to self were a common form of narrative in all three issues, reading at once as advice to others and advice, validation or compassion offered to a former, younger version of oneself. Such letters seem to time travel in order to heal or simply acknowledge the past, but some also hinted toward a queer futurity, taking the narrative act of time travel to new lengths. In one such narrative, Jessica Johnson's submission is a poem in which she describes her own life experiences, flowing through questioning her attractions and identity, pining for what could have been, living through doubt, accessing queer kinship and finally looking forward to creating a life anew:

repeat the word over and over...bisexual  
 obsess about it, whisper it to yourself  
 pine for the girls you loved before you realized you could love them.

next step: doubt.  
 ask yourself if you're lying, painfully examine every minutiae of your  
 attraction

you come out the first time with a heart like a sledgehammer  
 find your new family, create a bisexual collective

stumble over the uneven cracks in your existence and smooth them  
 over as you go  
 adulthood stretches before you with no blueprints  
 so gather the courage to cobble something new  
 32:3, p. 5

This narrative hints at vast, imagined possibility in the creation of some new version of growing old, beyond the limits of what scripts or “blueprints” currently exist. Jessica’s bio describes her as “a 24-year-old fighting the good fight [...] By day she works for a performing arts venue and by night she patrols the Internet as a bisexual wannabe superhero.” Her self-description calls to mind a parallel universe, perhaps, in which queer superheroes live among and blend in with the masses, enacting advocacy under cover. Such activism from the shadows seems to reclaim the invisibility of bisexual lives, often described as a limiting factor for social and mental wellbeing, and frames this action instead as that which might make a safer, more queer utopian future possible. Like the idea of a lurking hero, the narrative itself speaks to the lurking possibility in building a future that is yet unknown but certainly imagined and sought after. Her imagery also creates possibility, not only for her own future, but for those of other bisexual individuals as the idea of a wannabe superhero calls to mind the potential lying in wait in every average Joe (or Jessica) to become something that borders on the superhuman or magical. This sentiment echoes prior recorded accounts of bisexual lives which name bisexuality as creating potential for non-normative, non-traditional, creative and agentive lives, which may in and of itself, carry magical possibilities for one’s ageing future (Jen, 2018; Jones, 2011).

## Conclusion

The accounts of ageing in these issues of BWQ clearly suggest possibilities for queering successful ageing, as advocated by Sandberg and Marshall (2017). In this paper, we have focused particularly on accounts that not only resist the heteronormativity of positive ageing futures, as other studies of LGBTQ ageing have done, but also queer expectations about the stability and/or reification of sexual and gender identities by giving accounts of late-life change or continuing instability. We have also discussed one account that counters dominant forms of LGBTQ+ activism, on several accounts that counter the denial of ageing, and on others that focus explicitly on imminent death, contrary to dominant narratives of successful ageing that seem to refuse the inevitable end of ageing. These accounts also seem to cruise toward a more utopian future, as advocated and modelled by Muñoz, by speaking across historical periods to inform creative counter-narratives, drawing on the past to imagine the future and, in some instances, by being written in a fluid style that jumps between concepts and timelines to queer the potential of what narratives can do and ageing lives can be. Such accounts, we argue, queer the narrative form of a personal story, by being written in incoherent, inconclusive and poetic ways that lead to new and yet-unknown or only half-envisioned possibilities, such as lurking queer kinship across the grave or the hidden, bisexual hero lying in wait.

Our second focus in this paper was on how narrators achieved the telling of these non-normative accounts. Authors used a range of techniques that enabled counter-narratives. These techniques included: explicitly positioning the account as a counter-narrative to a dominant narrative, drawing on traumatic personal experience to warrant authority, claiming revelation after a long period of uncertainty and

adhering to some traditional narratives while resisting others. Another important enabling factor for these accounts is clearly the context for which they were written and the subject positions thus made available to authors. The submission guidelines of BWQ, statement of purpose and content of previous issues all cue authors into the kinds of narratives that are expected and comprehensible here and this makes stories tellable here that might not be tellable in more mainstream publications. Counter-normative spaces, such as activist newsletters for LGBTQ+ people and other Others, offer valuable opportunities to tell counter-narratives, and so progress the wider project of reimagining successful ageing more inclusively. Such spaces allow individuals from marginalized communities to take up subject positions that are much harder to claim elsewhere, such as the long-lived and long-term bisexual activist, the bisexual mentor to a younger self, or the queer older woman embracing cronship in the figurative embrace of mentors. Taking up such positions creates new possibilities in terms of who authors can be and to whom they speak, which may inform models of queer kinship, mentorship, and community-building efforts.

Although BWQ has an international readership and the nationality of authors is not stated, the cultural references they make suggest that the majority of authors are from North America. Thus, the visions of ageing and the life course that they create are predominantly from this cultural location. Future work that explored life course accounts from a wider geographical range might offer additional new imagining of a good old age. The various anthologies of bisexual experience offer one possibility for such extension e.g. the first such anthology, both co-editors of which also contributed to the BWQ issues discussed in this paper (Hutchins, 1991) or more recent anthologies from beyond North America (Harrad, 2016; Ochs & Rowley, 2021).

Additionally, while BWQ includes pieces written from a variety of gender identities, the explicit focus is on bisexual women. Thus, our sample of narratives is made up mainly of women’s narratives, although some writers position themselves as gender non-conforming. It is clear that intersections with gender shape how bisexuality is experienced (Carr, 2006; Gurevich et al., 2007). As such, it would be useful to examine the ways in which bisexual men might similarly or distintively imagine and narrate their own ageing experiences. Indeed there are many questions that might be asked to build on this analysis, including how age figures in issues of BWQ that are not focused on ageing but on topics such as bodies or coming out stories, and how bisexual counter-narratives of ageing intersect with or diverge from other counter-narratives, such as feminist ones (Jones, 2021). Such questions would add complexity and nuance to our understandings of how bisexual counter-narratives contribute to the queering of successful ageing in a broader context. Further analyses of activist publications like BWQ would also contribute to our understanding of the role these publications play in enabling and sustaining queer imaginings of later life.

The power of language to shape experience is evident in these accounts – many authors speak of not knowing they could be bisexual, lesbian or queer until they knew there was a word for that identity and life, and previous studies have identified a particular lack of roadmaps for bisexual ageing (Jones, 2011). With this significance in mind, this analysis centers creative and non-normative ways of speaking marginalized ageing into being and hopes that the naming and imagining of what queer futures can be increases the opportunities to live those futures as well.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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