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From allochronism to generationality: Ageism in queer communities in Belgium

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Abstract

This paper looks into ageist and generationalist assumptions that penetrate queer spatio-temporal imageries and explore how to resist oppressive temporalities. It draws on fieldwork in a queer advocacy group and qualitative interviews with trans-, lesbian-, and women-identifying participants in Belgium to explore notions of age and ageism in queer communities. The research relates to feminist generationalism and searches for more complex notions of generationality that complicate the idea of horizontal generations or waves succeeding each other in progressive time. We address the conflicts and dissimilarities across the generational divide to question and trouble the viability of allochronic categorizations in feminist queer movements.

Keywords

Ageism, gender, generationality, queer, sexuality

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

Introduction

In autumn 2021, Café Blond, a small feminist queer bar in the city centre of Ghent, a midsized city in northern Belgium, suddenly became national news. On a Saturday night and after some people in the pub had been harassed, the pub owners decided to deny access to cis men for the rest of the night. A heated public discussion followed in the following weeks, with, on the one hand, people who believed the pub owners had violated the right to equality and non-discrimination and, on the other hand, people who defended the right of the pub owners to try to create harassment-free safe spaces for women and sexual minorities. The headline of an opinion piece on the case in the Dutch-language newspaper *De Morgen* cited a 39 years-old regular customer of Café Blond, who addressed the public by stating: ‘Leave Café Blond to us; I don’t go to events for retired people either’.¹ In the newspaper article, the customer explained that women and subjugated gender and sexual groups need safe spaces in the face of rampant sexual violence predominantly committed by cis men. Yet, the person compared the exclusion of younger people in events for retirees to argue for the need for spaces where queer people can feel safe. Designating events for the retired as ‘safe spaces’, that is, spaces free of fears caused by members of more privileged groups, is not necessarily accurate. But what is more, the statement demonstrates how feminist queers and retirees become easily constructed as two mutually exclusive categories and how the need for feminist, queer spaces is attributed to the young, or at least to the not yet ‘retired’. Several scholars have criticized Western queer politics for its complicity in hegemonic structures and for instrumentalizing sexual freedom as a means to ‘stigmatize entire populations in the global South as repressive and backward’ (Dhawan, 2016), yet the spatio-temporal distancing of older (queer) people, and their exclusion from some queer spaces, has received far less academic attention.

In this paper, we aim to look into ageist and generationalist assumptions that penetrate queer spatio-temporal imageries and explore how to resist oppressive temporalities, focussing on the perspective of older queer people. We do so by drawing on qualitative interviews with older women-identifying trans and lesbian participants. At the nexus of queerness and temporality, we ask, ‘how do generational thinking and ageism interpellate these individuals?’ and ‘how do these individuals perceive generationality and its role in the queer communities they belong to?’ The deconstructive work the paper aims to do aligns with the queer feminist refusal of linear historicism and repro-generationality – also called ‘chrononormativity’ (Freeman, 2010: 3) – and with its insistence on thinking about twisting chronology and interrupting the flow of productivity. The increased attention to time since the beginning of the 21st century (e.g. Edelman, 2004; Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005) has been called the ‘temporal turn’ in queer studies. Edelman (2004) found in queer people’s failure to comply with straight notions of time and futurity was a means to mobilize resistance to normative politics. Yet, an attitude of rejection of reproductive futurism cannot completely rule out the possibility that other, ‘homonormative’ temporal schemas emerge, which, as Nguyen Tan Hoang phrases it (in Dinshaw et al., 2007: 184), ‘pity those who come out later

in life, do not find a long-term partner before they lose their looks, or continue to hit the bars when they are in bartender's father's age'.

Moreover, the tactics older generations used (and still use) to live their queerness, which often include strategies of discretion, silence, and conformity in some aspects (see e.g. Rosenfeld, 2009), tend to be pitied, problematized, and rendered 'backward' by prevailing identity-driven sexual politics, rather than considered part of the contemporary queer landscape shaped by different and diverging positionalities and subjectivities. Furthermore, the narrative of linear progress tends to make the gender and sexual politics that is currently dominant in the West unquestionably the way to go, while potentially radical aspects of older people's queer politics and their past struggles against gender binaries and sexual repressions may remain unseen or swept under the carpet.

Generationality and ageism in queer communities

Anthropologist Fabian (1983) contributed immensely to the discipline's understanding of allochronism or the denial of coevalness as a (neo)colonial domination mechanism. He pointed to how subjugated people have been rhetorically pushed out of the historical present in anthropological studies and public discourse. 'Distancing devices' include temporal terms such as primitive, tribal, traditional, or Third World, which position the Other in an earlier point of evolutionary time. Even though the referent is contemporary, the temporal operators relegate her to a backward past. Fabian's analysis concerned the spatiotemporal distancing of people from the metaphorical South, yet a similar analysis can be made concerning the elderly. Temporal terms such as *soixante-huitard*, boomer, or second-wave feminist work to homogenize older people's ideas and experiences and exclude them from socio-cultural contemporaneity.

Valentine (2015) points to how this temporal distancing connects to older people's spatial segregation. Living segregated lives gives them fewer opportunities to encounter younger people and get acquainted with their ways of thinking. In turn, older people's lack of mastery of new paradigms, codes, and vocabulary may cause them to be seen as belonging to an outdated past. This spatiotemporal segregation may render their experiences and views irrelevant and unworthy of attention or remnants of a problematic past when they appear to deviate from the prevailing norms (Halberstam, 2018; Valentine, 2015). Halberstam (2018) argues that there is a tendency within queer communities to prioritize youth, which can lead to marginalisation and erasure of older trans and gender non-conforming individuals. The casting in contemporary queer milieus of older queer and trans adults not only as backward and not up-to-date but even as the enemy, or potential predators of queer youth is due to the loss of intergenerational contact among queer and trans folks. He also argues that the dramatically different experiences of the younger generations of white middle-class trans kids make them feel at odds with the history that produced the conditions for their smoother passage from trans childhood to adulthood.

Bevernage (2016), in his response to Fabian's book, argues that mechanisms of spatiotemporal distancing only work because the contemporaneity of the West is taken as the norm. He argues that 'the fiction of the contemporary is based on an allochronising

mechanism of differentiation in which the actuality of the contemporary is defined by contrasting it to that what is deemed out-of-date or non-contemporary in the (chronological) present' (2016: 19). He claims that we can move beyond allochronism, not as Fabian argues, by stressing the coevalness of anthropologists and their research objects but by radically deconstructing the metaphysics of the present. This includes unpacking the power mechanisms and inequalities that produce the contemporaneity deemed referential.

This paper responds to this plea by deconstructing prevailing envisionings of queer present and history. The Western history of queer culture is usually understood as a process of steady progress, culminating in the present identitarian, rights-based, and liberationist notions of gender and sexuality being coded as enlightened and inclusive. This understanding has resulted from a long-standing tradition of developmental and evolutionary thinking established by Western philosophers and social scientists (Turner and Machalek, 2018), assuming that the Western present is superior to all non-Western presents at any given moment and superior to its own past. This linear temporal rationale, in tandem with the hegemonic liberal imaginary, has turned Western queer politics and sexual minority rights into vectors 'for making civilizational distinction' (Hoad, 2015: 35). The purported non-Western same-sex politics are thus seen as 'not yet' evolved from earlier concepts of queerness. Similarly, older people's same-sex politics are condemned or pitied as the 'product of less enlightened times' (Valentine, 2015).

To explore mechanisms of spatiotemporal distancing of older people in queer culture and deconstruct the hegemonic fictional structure of its historical present, we employ Van der Tuin's work on feminist generations (Van der Tuin, 2014). This work seeks to dodge the linear temporality of the progress narrative of feminist classification, which tends to gloss over the fact that feminism has always been plural and dispersed. Van der Tuin argues for 'critically acclaiming the work of foremothers' (xv) and for transgenerational exchange as a way of overcoming processes of disidentification that pit younger and older feminists against each other in any given context. She proposes a 'jumping generations' methodology that allows one to seek 'commonalities in difference and useful coalitions vis-à-vis current-day problems' (9). Plummer's (2015) insistence on a more rhizomatic interpretation of the history of sexuality aligns with Van der Tuin's Deleuzian and critical new-materialist conceptualisation of time. Building on Foucault's 'reversal and refusal of the commonly held belief that we have "evolved" from Victorian repression to modern sexual liberation' (Franks, 2012), Plummer pleads for a more complex and synchronic interpretation of time, envisioned with the 'helix/matrix metaphors of flux, multiplicity, flowing chaos and the rhizomes of life' (Plummer, 2015: 341). He proposes to think with the concept of 'synchronic sexualities' and 'to ask how different pasts, presents, and futures dwell in the fragile, ever-changing moment' (Plummer, 2007: 341). This paper supports this plea for the need for a fluid queer generationality, both within each context and among queer people of different backgrounds, that may 'generate futures of sexual differing' (Van der Tuin, 2014: 42).

In *A Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam (2005) engages with Freeman's notion of a 'temporal drag' that produces a complex understanding of the relations between the now of queer performativity and the then of historical time. Freeman pleads for temporal drag

as a ‘countergenealogical practice of archiving culture’s throwaway objects, including the outmoded masculinities and femininities from which usable pasts may be extracted’ (Freeman, 2010: xxiii). Halberstam uses Freeman’s notion and critique of Butler’s rendering of gender as a copy with no original. In this critique, Freeman argues that this notion of gender proposed by Butler ignores the genuine contributions of past-ness to the political present. Halberstam employs subcultural historiography of queer performers to render a linear narrative history void by showing that narratives of queer performance have complex temporal patterns (Halberstam, 2005). Thereby Halberstam reinstates that the historicity of gender performance is an indispensable repertoire for the present. He further argues that different traditions of feminism produced different intergenerational relations; the legacy of white feminism and lesbian feminism more difficult to reconcile with contemporary queer culture. In this paper, we discuss how women and non-conforming individuals associated with different strands of feminism may lead to different understandings and interpretations of generationality and tendencies to inter-generational dialogue.

Methods

This paper draws on the data collected between spring 2020 and spring 2022 by Nika for their PhD project within the framework of an ERC-funded project on the intimate practices, places, and representations of 50+ women in Belgium. The analysis developed by Katrien and Ladan has emerged from the multiple discussions between the authors in the context of Nika’s PhD supervision. It results from careful reading and re-reading of the research material collected by Nika, collective sensemaking, and content analysis. The three authors have different ages (Katrien is in her early fifties, Ladan in her late thirties, and Nika in their late twenties), and even though they have all identified either with genderqueer or queer sexuality at one point throughout their life courses, they have different histories and non-linear gender and sexual identifications. The authors’ age differences resulted in various sensitivities and constructive interactions when discussing the data, which helped us understand the multifacetedness of the tensions the research participants talked about.

Even though the COVID19 pandemic heavily restricted fieldwork opportunities, Nika actively participated in the online and offline activities of an advocacy group for older queer people (hereafter called QAG for queer advocacy group) between August 2020 and April 2022. The research material we relied on includes Nika’s fieldnotes from this fieldwork and interview transcripts with QAG’s members and other female- and woman-identifying, trans and lesbian individuals in their fifties, sixties, and seventies. The interviews focused on the participants’ dating experiences and intimate practices and included 28 recorded and transcribed interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in Dutch, and some in French (with the help of an interpreter) or in English. The individuals that were interviewed were all white Europeans. They differed when it came to gender identity and expression and the label they used to describe their sexual orientation – ranging from *gouine* (dyke), to radical lesbian, to preferring to use no label at all. Their life trajectories were often influenced by the age at which they decided to be open about their

gender identity and/or sexual orientation. As we adhere to guidelines of consent and confidentiality as stipulated in the project's ethical assessment procedure, we have, for example, used pseudonymisation, and the interviewees have provided their informed consent to participate in this research.

Although the paper is grounded in extensive empirical research, it mainly discusses the experiences of four participants: pseudonymised as Inge, Chris, Annemarie, and Alyt. Nika conducted in-depth interviews with them at separate moments and in different online and offline places; the latter took place outside on the terrace of a queer bar or in the participant's house. The four participants identified as working or middle-class; and they were in their late forties (Inge), mid-fifties (Alyt), early sixties (Chris), and late sixties (Annemarie) at the time of the interview. Inge lived in a small town in northern Belgium, and Annemarie, Alyt, and Chris lived in urban areas, some of them having left their small hometowns as a teenager because of their sexuality.

The four women used different terms of gender or sexual identification. Annemarie used the term '*vrouw met een transverleden*' to describe her identity, which roughly translates to 'woman with a trans past'. She started living as a woman about 10 years before the interview and after a long-term marriage. With the term, she aims to emphasize that she is a woman now and that her trans past is behind her. Alyt indicated that she was using the term *trans woman* for the time being but would prefer to start calling herself 'woman' as soon as her medical transition is more established, which she only started a couple of months before the interview. Inge identified as a *lesbian*, yet said she did not attach great importance to this label and preferred to freely choose with whom to enter into a relationship, irrespective of their gender. Finally, Chris described herself by using the terms *lesbian* and *radical lesbian*, sometimes alternated with the term *political lesbian*. Both Inge and Chris had identified with the term *lesbian* for a long time, and have been active in feminist and lesbian circles since they were younger. Still, Chris seemed to be more outspoken in identifying with the term and was more actively involved in activist work at the time of the interview.

The generational is political

In analysing the interview and fieldwork material, we encountered many moments of reflection on age and generational differences. Because of being older, participants' accounts included narratives of several decades of feminist and queer activism and lived experiences that spanned different political and social climates. Most participants had identified with a queer identity at a relatively young age and fondly recalled their first contact with queer communities. Lesbian women, in particular, typically described these contacts as a revelation. Those in their sixties or seventies indicated that the term 'lesbian' was not commonly used or known when they were young. They had known that there were men who had sex with men, but they had not encountered such a potential or identity in women. They described the discovery of this possibility as life-changing. They explained that queer communities 'back then' were much less accessible than queer communities today. Some recalled the secrecy around the existing communities. Approaching queer communities often took a lot of courage and was often perceived as scary

because violence against gays and lesbians, especially when they formed collectives, was common (Jenness and Broad, 1994; Tomsen and Mason, 2001). Finding one's way into queer communities was much more difficult than it is today. And even when one found their way into them, as late as the 1990s, one had to ring the doorbell and provide a password before being allowed to enter an unmarked room.

Participants described the openness and accessibility of today's queer communities as something positive, but some also noted that something had been lost along the way. Inge, who had participated in anarchist-feminist and lesbian milieus in the late 1980s and 1990s, looked back nostalgically on the somewhat subversive, 'underground' atmosphere that characterized the scene. She found that what was happening then was a sharper social critique compared to what is happening in queer communities today, precisely because queer communities were less open and less accepted by society. Inge recalled publications from the 1970s, such as the book by the Dutch feminist writer and activist Anja Meulenbelt, and that this kind of thing does not happen anymore. She linked this shift in social critique to the struggle for emancipation, which has focused primarily on including LGBT+ people in the mainstream rather than overturning normative structures themselves.

Inge recalled that same-sex marriage was not something that the feminist-anarchist movement, to which she belonged, fought for. This critical stand against the normalisation of queer identities ties into existing discussions in queer theory denouncing 'homonormativity' (Duggan, 2002; Stryker, 2008) and the shift in queer politics toward the heteronormative organisation of love and family (Halberstam, 2012). Inge explained that she thought it was unjust that gay people were not allowed to marry but that access to the normal heterosexual lifestyle was not the goal of the feminist-anarchist movement. She said,

We lost the right to walk around with feathers in our butts and as truck drivers because we used to be LGBT+, but now we are just weird. The diversity that used to exist has shrunk because now you can get married and have kids [laughs]. I do not mind that, but a lot has been lost because of that. – Inge, aged late forties.

Inge regrets that the mainstream has now swallowed what was once subversive. Her concerns echo those of queer scholars (Cohen, 2001; Duggan, 2002; Halberstam, 2011) who note that the sexual politics of neoliberalism have robbed queerness of its capacity to be a destructive force of failure against conventional social scripts and a space for transformational political work. This critique also points to the proliferation of queer identities within 'mainstream' queer politics, another aspect that participants found somewhat problematic. Although they welcomed the fact that young people no longer have to fight the battles they used to have to fight, some participants regretted that the struggle is now somewhat depoliticised. They felt their struggle to break free from traditional norms led to increasingly individualized identities. Chris, who had been involved in activist work in the 1980s and 1990s as an organizer of community meetings aimed primarily at lesbian women, mentioned that:

We had other concepts that were not so divided. For us, identity was something that could always change, whereas now it is more crystallized than ever. For us, the terms were more political. It was a choice that you make, not a sexual choice, but how do I define myself in this society for the time being? – Chris, aged early sixties.

Chris thus explained that she refers to herself as a ‘radical lesbian’ to emphasize her political motivation behind choosing the term lesbian and that the current discourse, which produces several new terms, neglects this political disposition. She thus identifies with the political lesbianism that emerged in the 1980s and was driven by women who saw their sexual self-definition as ‘a mode of resistance to patriarchal control rather than the expression of an innate disposition’ (Jackson, 1999: 13). For Chris, the term signified resistance against both sexual and gender norms. Several participants found that prevailing LGBT+ discourse reinforces rather than challenges gender dichotomies, but Chris was the most vocal in her critique of the current prevailing terms. For example, she articulated her discomfort with being referred to as cis. For her, being called cis by others denied both the political meaning of the term lesbian and her belonging to the lesbian herstory of active struggle. It also glossed over her feeling of not fitting into binary gender categories.

Several other lesbian women in this study indicated that their aversion to binary divisions was absorbed by other terms when the term non-binary did not exist. Nevertheless, they did not consider terms such as non-binary and cis to be suitable alternatives precisely because they felt that the term ‘cis’ brought dichotomies back into play, as making the distinction between binary and non-binary people, or between cis and trans people, is somehow denying that gender is a continuum for everyone. This same critique is articulated by transfeminist scholars such as Enke (2013), who argue that cis/trans binary is an effect of neoliberal politics in which identity categories are crafted to maximize a share of normative privilege. ‘The act of defining is political. It is extremely political’, Chris asserted, ‘and I am constantly censured like other feminist political lesbians’.

While participating in drafting educational materials on LGBT+ rights for residential homes, Nika witnessed one of the QAG members exclaiming that she was completely fed up with binary thinking after she had noticed that in the educational material, the term ‘intersex’ had been defined as ‘they are part of a spectrum of sex-based characteristics’. She had snorted and said: ‘we all are, are we not?’ Her reaction seemed to indicate the accumulated frustration of being unable to express what she found problematic in a way that is taken seriously. Older lesbians’ resistance against current queer politics becomes easily dismissed as ‘second wave’ and consequently considered outdated, resulting in them falling behind (Fahs, 2015). Moreover, their refusal of terms gets easily explained as resulting from the elderly’s assumed reduced capacity for learning (for more on the myth of old age and mental incompetence see e.g. Applewhite, 2019). Therefore, they are considered a mere failure to remain abreast of the latest developments in terminologies referring to gender and sexuality. This line of thought ignores the political motivations behind term refusal. As such, their (sometimes well-founded) criticism becomes silenced and marginalised, rather than brought into the debate. The frustration of the QAG member and other research participants seemed to result from two sources; first, their inability to find the right words to express their unease with a discourse that is presented as

being ‘truer’ than previous conceptualisations, while in their view, its shortcomings are insufficiently recognized. Secondly, the experience of ageism and the dismissal of their articulations on gender and sexuality made them feel marginalized. Older lesbians’ politics and their usage of terms are dismissed as problematically binary and outdated, causing them to feel that the radical potential in their politics is being obscured and placed outside contemporary queer discourse.

Moreover, it often came up in the conversations that the participants found that contemporary queer communities are not necessarily very welcoming places for older lesbians, even though they applauded the ‘openness’ of contemporary queer communities for younger people. Some pointed to the sharp invisibility of older LGBT+ people within queer communities. Annemarie observed,

One of the big issues is that people always want to put LGBT+ seniors away. It seems like lesbians or gay people or trans [people] are only young people, and from the age of 45, they are all gone – Annemarie, aged late sixties.

Annemarie’s perception was confirmed by Chris, who explained that she felt that she was treated differently when she returned to queer activist spaces after being absent for several years. At the time she experienced othering, she was still in her forties, but her hair had started to turn grey, and she believed that her ageing appearance was why others looked at her differently. She remembered the comments when she arrived with her girlfriend (who had black hair) about how she looked so much older than her girlfriend,

I found it very shocking that this happened in my own circles. I’m very angry about it. It is very painful to see all these stereotypes also present there. I immediately reacted and asked them, ‘What is this?’ ‘Are you telling me that I’m the old one?’ And everyone started to blush with shame. [...] Then they told me that I had to dye my hair, but then I said: ‘Why would I do that?’ [...] That was so violent, it’s violent, towards women, and [it happens] even among women with politics, you would think that they question things more. So, we women, yes, we are just at the beginning of subverting all these stereotypes – Chris.

What was even more of a shock to Chris was to realize that, because of her older-looking appearance, other younger people in the queer community had begun to think of her as someone who could impossibly be militant or ‘queer enough’. She explained,

There was nothing I could say, or they would call me old school or so old. I suppose they looked at me as if I had never been a militant, like their grandparents. I told them that I had been active since the seventies. I was like, ‘What’s going on here?’ And when I used a certain term, they corrected me and told me: ‘We don’t say that anymore. That is stereotyping.’ But then I explained that we used to intentionally use slurs to turn them into something good. We were playing with this. That was a choice we made. One should respect the customs of these days, right? – Chris.

Chris's response to what she perceives as ageist treatment shows the difficulties older queer individuals' experience trying to get recognition and be valued, not only for what they contributed to struggles in the past but even more so for their relevance in today's activism.

Troubled interactions across the generational divide

As the conversations with Chris progressed, Nika began to see similarities between Chris's articulation of her identity and Nika's own category of gender identification (non-binary), even though Chris referred to her 'identity' with a term that Nika had not been very familiar with (political or radical lesbian). At first, these lesbian categories seemed somewhat outdated to Nika, who wrote in their notes,

When asked about her own identity label, Chris describes herself as a lesbian. Even though this might, to me, seem to fit into a binary model of sexuality and gender, the way that she describes her ideal world with regard to her identity is very much in line with contemporary queer thought about identities and categories – Nika's fieldnotes.

Nika started to realize that Chris 'played' with gender by using the label (radical) lesbian as a political choice similarly to how they used the term non-binary themselves, notably to solve the tensions between how she was labelled by society (as a woman) and her willingness to blow up binary gender and sexual categories. However, Chris's statement that she chose not to date people who had been socialized as men for a part of their lives (and that she thus excluded trans women from her dating pool), was something Nika found more difficult to reconcile with their beliefs. Chris claimed,

In an ideal society, it wouldn't be necessary, and I could just be myself and have sex with someone without having to name it, and maybe it could be anyone, but now I couldn't do it with someone labelled as a man [at birth]. [...] I don't know anyone raised as a man who goes as far as political lesbians in questioning everything. Even in debates, it is very difficult to be able to have a deep discussion [with a person who had been labelled as a man at birth], and that is only talking, so having sex, no, I can't imagine it – Chris.

This statement about her dating preferences may easily be read as transphobic, and Chris had also confided to Nika that people in the queer community had indeed accused her of being a TERF (abbreviated form for 'trans-exclusionary radical feminist'). Yet Chris had also told Nika she was upset by this accusation and felt unheard and silenced.

Cabral et al. (2022) plead in their special issue call for papers (DiGeSt) for a more careful evaluation of purportedly anti-trans positions. They argue that the current use of the label TERF risks lumping together a diversity of positions and meanings, hence blurring the fundamental dissent between, for instance, the anti-gender activists' adoption of anti-trans sentiments, radical feminist, and lesbianist critiques of trans discourse. They join pleas for 'reparative readings' of radical feminist and radical lesbian positions that may 'contest the idea according to which these theoretical currents would necessarily be

anti-trans'. Recently, cases (e.g. Thomsen and Essig, 2021) have been described in which connotations between the TERF and the radical feminist have functioned to stereotype lesbians and feminists as reactionary figures by the 'diversity industry'. Pointing at the potential conflation between the TERF and the radical feminist is in no way intended to deny transphobia in some strands of radical feminism or to deny that older lesbians or political lesbians may indeed take transphobic positions. It attempts to expose mechanisms that silence certain positions and 'shrink possibilities for feminist, queer, and trans inquiry' (Thomson and Essig, 2021:3) as well as space for intergenerational discourse. Moreover, how ageism operates in these mechanisms is not yet understood.

When we examine Chris's arguments more closely, certain nuances may have been lost in her conversations with younger queers. Chris insisted on making a clear distinction between a gendered/sexual category imposed on someone from outside and an identity that they choose for themselves. She explained,

I say: 'yes, I am a person labeled woman', so I will never say that I am a woman. No, I am a lesbian, I'm not a woman, I don't want to be a woman, I don't want to be a man-woman; what I want is a neutral society without categories. [...] Some say I am cis, but I am not cis, they say I am cis because I say I am a person labeled woman, and yes, I still belong to that social group, and I will do until my death. Even a woman who transitioned to male can say now I am a 'he', but for society, she remains a former woman. The queer movement tends to neutralize this aspect of oppression. They don't recognize the oppression as it is, something you are raised to be, something that forces you into a category. If you really want to get out of that category, you have to do a whole lot of work until the end – Chris.

Chris's argument is similar to the existing critique of gender realism that assumes (binary or diverse) categories of gender are a matter of fact and that gender categories have something intrinsic in common (Mikkola, 2006). By denying identity categorisations, her stance is much closer to that of queer feminism than she realizes, as both movements seek to resist regimes of the normal by resisting compulsory heteropatriarchy (Goodloe, 1994). To us, the above statement seems to indicate that Chris is not rejecting trans identities as such but rejects the neoliberal politics that prioritizes self-identification because they, according to her, risk denying women's oppression and turning individualized identities into a matter of (a depoliticized) lifestyle and personal preference. Nika's notes describe how this was explicitly discussed during an informal talk with Chris,

I tell her that I think that trans women are women because they cannot be defined by their genitals or bodies or genders assigned at birth. Then she replies: 'Yes, of course not!' I feel relieved by this confirmation. But then she continues by saying, 'But, what did they [referring to trans women] think? That they would still be paid the same salary? That they would not be raped? Now they are women, they have to take the handicap as well'. She sounds angry – Nika's fieldnotes.

Chris's reply and other parts of her statements above suggest that she rejects bio-essentialist notions of gender, yet she shares some of the radical feminist concerns

regarding the purported tendency of queer theory to erase the category of ‘woman’ and (lesbian) feminism (the queer disregard for feminism has been pointed out by several authors, e.g., [Sullivan, 2003](#); [Weed and Schor, 1997](#)). Nika’s note shows that this is an issue that provokes anger in Chris and is also a sensitive topic for Nika as they feel relieved by certain answers. From the beginning of their conversation, Nika had a hard time with certain statements made by Chris and sometimes perceived them as insulting and emotionally taxing. Although Nika found some interactions emotionally difficult, they decided to continue conversing with Chris and go deeper into the tensions between them. Continuing the dialogue allowed Nika to see not only ruptures but also continuities and similarities and draw a more nuanced and layered picture of Chris’s story and the local queer histories and contemporaneities. Nika wrote in their fieldnotes,

I ask her [Chris] how it is possible that we think about gender in a similar way but that we label ourselves so differently. She explains how there is a difference between essentialist lesbians (or homosexual women), who chose to be cisgender women and have sex with women, and radical lesbians (or just lesbians, but definitely not lesbian ‘women’), who reject the system. When I ask her how she feels about the latter’s goals often being placed in the category of ‘trans’ nowadays, she says that she has heard this before. People tell her that she should be trans, but she says no! I am a lesbian! She says she feels mostly just like ‘a being’ or ‘une être’. When I ask her how people should refer to her (in terms of pronouns), she says it would be best just to use her first name – Nika’s fieldnotes.

The similarity Nika describes between their own ideas on gender and those of Chris is reflected in both theories and activism. Notably, Nika recognizes Chris’s perspective on the gender system, and its normative power even on people who identify with categories outside of cis-heteronormative genders and sexualities, but does not think this way of thinking is afforded only to ‘radical lesbians’. As [Tomsen and Mason \(2001\)](#) argue, feminist, queer, and trans studies rest on the position that gender is always becoming and unbecoming, regardless of age and generational differences. Annemarie also shared the sentiment that younger people are less critical than older people. When talking about her transition, she explained how she prepared herself by looking up as much information as possible, as she did not want to be (mis)guided by the medical world. Annemarie had the impression that younger people would not invest the same amount of effort as she did in the research. While a mistrust in transgender medical and care providers is documented ([Johnson et al. 2020](#)), there are no studies that provide generational comparisons to our knowledge. The sentiment that younger people are less critical was not shared by Alyt. She argued that young people have acquired a broader horizon because of better access to information and knowledge of gender and sexuality. She agrees that there is a generational divide, but she thinks younger generations are on the better side of the divide.

Ageist interpellation and transgenerational continuity

The historical and sociopolitical moment in which a scholar enters feminist/sexuality/queer scholarship and movements substantially affects how she theorizes them

(Hoogland et al., 2004). The existing conflicts in feminist scholarship, in particular, have prompted feminist scholar-activists such as Gloria Steinem and Angela Davis to acknowledge the differences between feminist waves and express hope that important commonalities are recognized (Purvis, 2004). This paper aimed to respond to this hope for transgenerational continuity. Our analysis starts from observing a sense of frustration among older individuals in women-identifying lesbian and trans communities about the perceived divergences that have sometimes been reduced to a mere generational divide (Russell and Bohan, 2005). We particularly encountered the struggle of radical or political lesbians who perceive their existence, achievements and politics have come under attack or have been ignored in some queer spaces. This paper has attempted to unpack this struggle.

The sense of threat and dismissal is multi-fold. One aspect of the queer movement that participants have found problematic is the ageism of the queer imaginary, which perhaps unintentionally glorifies youthfulness and marginalises old age (Rowan and Giunta, 2017). Queer theory and activism have been accused of ignoring the perspectives of LGBT+ older adults, which excludes them from influencing the discourse (Brown, 2009). Similar attitudes have been discussed by Jack Giesecking in 'A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers', in which Giesecking shows that younger generations of lesbians may have different experiences and priorities than older generations. This is partly because herstories of lesbian communities in New York City have been shaped by forms of exclusion and marginalization, which may not be entirely relevant today; making continuity and activist priorities difficult, if not impossible.

On a personal level, our participants noticed the prevalence of generational thinking and ageism in queer communities and interpreted this as gatekeeping and a barrier for feminist transgenerational continuity. Critiques of chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005; Riach et al., 2014) often resonate among younger queers, as they provide a framework for disrupting the ascribed temporal orders to the organisation of life that assume and expect heteronormative trajectories in which things happen at the 'right' time/stage. However, blind spots remain in relation to what older folks are supposed to do. For instance, activism, participation in social movements, and progressiveness are often problematically associated with the early stages of life.

Moreover, existing diversities in the activist landscape have been allochronically categorized because of an assumed generational and political divide. We argue that this rather artificial categorisation partly concerns widespread ageism in Western societies, associating old age with being out of touch and outdated. This causes older trans-, lesbian-, and women-identifying individuals to see their political choices being dismissed as old-fashioned and no longer part of present politics. What is more, lesbian feminist texts and some transphobic ideas, such as those proposed by Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys, have delegitimized lesbian feminisms in Euro–Anglo–American contexts (Banerjea et al., 2019), even though they do not represent the entirety of radical feminism.

While many criticisms of second-wave feminism were justified – and among those were the radical feminist/political lesbians' ignoring of questions of multiple oppression and racial politics (Rudy, 2001), the blanket and overwhelming dismissal of second-wave feminist politics as outdated has allowed younger feminist scholars and activists to ignore many of the second wave's substantial contributions to feminism (Fahs, 2015). Political

lesbians further critique queer theory because it fails to acknowledge the achievements of second-wave feminism, including the theoretical and political work done by lesbian feminists (Goodloe, 1994). Queer theory, and other newer generations of feminist theory and thought, owe their formation to the former generations of feminists, even though their tenets may be incompatible or at odds. The emergence of queer theory, with its rejection of static identity categories, has renewed the debate over the present-day relevance of lesbian feminism (Brennan, 2011). Rejecting identity categories has not rendered them irrelevant but has led to a proliferation of labels and neologisms.

While the older trans-, lesbian-, and women-identifying individuals in this study criticized ageist discourses, we also noticed that they held ageist stereotypes themselves, indicating that generational thinking and ageism interpellate older trans-, lesbian-, and women-identifying individuals as well. The word 'grandparent' was sometimes used to showcase particular people's outdatedness, even within conversations that dismissed ageism. This points to the widespread nature of ageist interpellations that neither queer nor radical feminists are immune to. In these ageist and generationalist accounts, the operative framework is often a strict chronology that delineates the waves according to linear history. In this view, each generation begins and ends at known and sometimes disturbingly precise moments (Purvis, 2004). The linear progress narrative leaves little space for intergenerationality.

Moreover, the generational understanding of progress in gender/sexuality scholarship and the youth-centric understanding of queerness disseminated through representations in popular media (Krainitzki, 2016) leads to the construction of generational divides. In accordance with Siverskog (2015), we argue that queer and post-feminist discourses link sexuality/gender notions to youth and able-bodiedness and distance themselves from a feminist and lesbian past that should supposedly be forgotten and left behind. We believe that, despite their differences, by reconciling with the differences within and among groups/waves and through the problematisation of fixed notions of gender/sex(uality) and lived experiences of rejecting the heteronormative organisation of activist and everyday life, queer and feminist activists can create a transgenerational continuity. Our findings confirm that the assumed differences between feminist and activist groups across the temporal axis are sometimes imagined or caused by the lack of an intergenerational discourse, a product of systematic and internalised ageism. Different spaces of activism and spheres of resistance, such as queer movements and political lesbianism, crosscut the temporal axis. While these movements are often perceived as occurring in diverging spaces, we found that shared concerns and similarities between them are starker than imagined by the people occupying them.

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Note

1. <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/laat-ons-cafe-blond-hebben-ik-kom-toch-ook-niet-naar-een-evenement-voor-gepensioneerden~ba500fc3/>.

Data Availability Statement

The LiLI project has opted-out for the Horizon 2020 Open Research Data Pilot as the ethnographic data collected through this study cannot be adequately pseudonymized to ensure the full confidentiality of sensitive data.

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