

# **Gender, Sexuality and Life Course**

Research and Dialogues over Contemporary Social  
Transformations

Edited by

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# Foreword

Over the last few decades, **activist** and academic interest has been flourishing in the analysis of **gender** and **sexuality** relations while interweaving with other **social markers of difference**, such as **age**, **generation**, **social class**, **race**, **ethnicity** and **corporeality**, among others. In general terms, such a trend has been attentive to the complexity of social phenomena, particularly with regards to the ways in which particular markers of difference may influence the construction of **inequalities**, **discriminations**, hierarchies, **normativeness**, consequently making room to relativize, contest, and deconstruct such scenarios. Through the analysis of these phenomena, it becomes possible not only to enrich the academic and **activist** debates, but also to build **public policies** aimed at certain segments of the **population**.

It was for this purpose that the panel **Anthropology** and **Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Age/Generation** was conceived, bringing together several researchers throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> International Union of **Anthropological** and Ethnic Sciences, held in Florianopolis, **Brazil**, in 2018. This collection is a selection of some of the best works presented at the event and by other similar panels at events in this field. Our objective is to present recent investigations in **Brazil**, as well as in Spanish-speaking **Latin America**, that deal with such **intersections** in a variety of ways. These investigations are mostly **anthropological** approaches, paying special attention to the associations between **gender**, **sexuality**, and **generation** in their multiple facets. In other words, the articles presented in this book focus on understanding the complex ways in which periods throughout the **life course** – such as **youth**, **adulthood**, **middle age** and **old age** – gain particular **meanings** and can be analyzed via **gender** and **sexuality**.

The socio-**anthropological** themes on the **life course**, especially the periodization and historical-cultural variability, are not exactly recent. In this sense, several **ethnographies** demonstrate the widespread existence of **age** ranges in most **societies**. This would demonstrate, for example, that **age** is not a datum of nature, an intrinsically constitutive principle of social groups, nor an essentially explanatory factor of human behavior.

Moreover, several historical and socio-**anthropological** works show that periods of life, such as **childhood**, **youth**, and **old age**, are not based on substantial attributes that individuals would acquire with the inexorable advancement of chronological **age**. Instead, **anthropological** research has pointed out that what is seen as a mere biological process actually has complex **symbolic** elaborations. Such elaborations are often transected by, amongst

other things, rituals that define borders and boundaries between the periods of life, which would not necessarily be widespread and much less be universal.

Although the socio-**anthropological** analysis of the **course of life** is not a recent theme, there has been a significant expansion of this debate in recent years. Currently, sophisticated and innovative issues have been brought into question, such as the distinct historical-cultural understandings of the **biographical** path with a particular emphasis on the interrelationship of the **life course** with **sexual** and **gender diversity**.

With these considerations in mind, it is possible to state that within the **Latin American** context, the socio-**anthropological** analysis of **generation**, the **life course**, and especially of **old age**, has been lavish and fruitful. A significant number of postgraduate programs in **geriatrics** and **gerontology** have been created in several universities in different countries with the production of research on the challenges of longevity, as we can see in the chapters presented here. The public concern that marks the research production and social action related to **childhood** and **adolescence** has been broadened to include older segments of the **population**. Similarly, the creation of state-specific and **age-oriented** non-governmental organizations demonstrates the growing interest that the issue has risen in **Latin American** countries, which until recently considered themselves to be young countries.

The expansion of interest in the **subject** is also expressed in a growing number of publications, as well as in panels, symposia, and round tables at some of the leading academic events both in **Latin America** and worldwide in recent years. In addition to the aforementioned IUAES congress, some such examples are the ANPOCS Annual Meeting – National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in **Social Sciences in Brazil**; the **Brazilian Anthropology Meeting**; the Mercosur **Anthropology Meeting**; the **Latin American Anthropological Association Congress**; the International Seminar Fazendo Gênero; and the International Seminar Desfazendo Gênero. Special mention should be made of the International Seminar on **Gender and Sexual Diversity in Old Age**, hosted by the Argentine Ministry of Social Development in 2015, inspired by the pioneering initiative of a state organization to put **gender** and **sexual diversity in old age** on its agenda.

The works presented in this collection are largely representative of this production and are the fruit of **ethnographic** research, in which the heuristic virtues of a **sexual** and **gendered** reading of the **course of life** are indispensable in understanding the social world. The **ethnographies** presented here are concerned with understanding the social changes that challenge patriarchies and **conservatism** that mark **Latin American societies**, while protecting the **identities** of all **interviewees** by changing their names.



The aim of the book is to invite critical dialogue on a wider set of possibilities for imagining what it is to live a **meaningful life course**. In order to help us expand our imagination, this collection explores the complex and varied ways **young** and **older** people themselves – across a range of **cultural**, national, religious, **class** **gender** and **sexuality – practice** and understand their own life **experiences**.

This collection benefits from the meticulous introduction by Donna Goldstein, an **anthropologist** at the University of Colorado, with long **experience** in research in **Brazil**, **Mexico** and **Argentina**. Goldstein, before outlining and summarizing the essays that follow, with refined humor, recounts her **aunt's experience** in an independent living **community** for **older adults** in **North America**. Thus, she offers us a reflexive approach with configurations of **gender** and **sexuality** in another ethnic and national context, characteristic of the **Global North**.

We hope that this **diverse** and representative compilation of research can contribute to contemporary discussions and reflections on the prolific **transnational** and **Latin American** field of studies on **gender** and **sexuality** in terms of the **life course**. Integrating the essays that follow are sets of **images** that produce unexpected configurations and unfamiliar patterns focusing on **sexuality**, rather than reflecting **reproductive** forms of **heterosexuality**. What we have here is a volume of essays that takes **pleasure** in problematizing **sexuality**, and vividly puts into question **normative** notions, provoking other considerations about **gender**, **sexuality** and the **life course**.



# Introduction: Corned Beef Sandwich: Sexuality and Aging in Times of COVID-19

Donna M. Goldstein

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I first began writing this Introduction from my home in the western **United States**, while experiencing the relative **solitude** of the early months of the **COVID-19 pandemic**. We anticipated and went on living amid an ongoing catastrophe at that time. The catastrophe we **experienced** was national, regional and local because the lack of a nationwide response to this **pandemic** had left each descending jurisdictional level the responsibility to decide how they would confront this **public health** disaster. In the first months of the **pandemic**, guidance and coordination at all levels was spotty, and leadership, scant. And, of course, this **pandemic** quickly became global, although with differing circumstances in each jurisdiction.

The University of Colorado Boulder, where I currently work, is located in a small college town of approximately 110,000 residents. The university had been mostly shut down since the middle of March 2020, and my own nuclear **family** remained careful. Later, we waited for a vaccine. We rarely leave the house, and when we do, we abide by strict rules of mask-wearing and social distancing. This has not been true for everyone. By November 2020, we had reached code red, another way of saying that we were close to hospital capacity. If I ever **experience** a moment of laziness in my own adherence to strict **COVID-19** rules, I need only to move my thoughts to my 90-year-old **aunt** Francis and how much hope I have that she will stay with us as long as possible. If there was ever a time for **anthropological** research on **aging** to come to full center, it is now, as we witness worldwide, the devastating effects of this **virus** on our **aging populations**.

My **aunt** Francis, a **cisgender, heterosexual** 90-year-old **woman**, now lives in an independent living **community** near Princeton, New Jersey, a facility originally founded as a home for **elderly retired** professors of the university. She survived the New York-New Jersey months of a **COVID-19** lockdown that

sought to prevent a more serious situation by abiding by a completely revamped social life for **senior citizens** in these facilities.

During **normal non-COVID-19** times, there is a great deal of sociality in the Princeton independent living **community**. In particular, my **aunt** Francis enjoys some of the many classes offered there, including Yiddish, and she admits to playing a competitive game of Bingo. In addition to a devoted reading library and multiple music and game rooms, the long hallways that connect buildings are suitable for friendly conversation. Dinner is a central event, taking place in a dining hall with floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking a lovely pond with paired **black** swans to gaze at.

My **aunt** Francis usually shares her evening meal with three other companions, including George, a **man** twelve years her junior. George had only arrived at the Princeton facility a year before and had instantly taken a liking to my **aunt**, who “adopted” him into her dining room table. She had noticed signs of **depression** and **loneliness** in the **man**, whose affable, good-hearted **attitude** she liked. I should also mention that George resembles my uncle Robert (**aunt** Francis’s deceased husband), who passed away almost a decade ago, and that resemblance goes beyond physical traits. It includes his easygoing openness and willingness to engage in conversation with a broad range of people. George became a regular at my **aunt** Francis’s dining table and a close friend to her. Months after moving into the facility, he traded in his **white** Volvo station wagon for a brand new 2020 red Corvette, and for a brief time, my **aunt** Francis, with her flaming red (dyed) hair, could be seen riding around New Jersey in the passenger seat.

Due to its broad effects on human relationships, the **pandemic** was hard on everyone in the facility, as they were urged to stay in their apartments and avoid one another. The early outbreaks of **COVID-19** in the **United States** proved to be deadly for **elderly** people, as evidenced by what happened in Seattle, New York, New Jersey and many other places. The restrictions imposed on sociality are, of course, understandable and prudent, yet also tragic in their own right. Now, months later, my **aunt** Francis remains almost entirely limited to moving within her small but comfortable one-bedroom apartment, where she lives by herself. Residents at the Princeton facility are allowed to amble around the long connecting corridors, but in accordance with social distancing protocols, they are not supposed to speak with one another for longer than a few minutes, and they are urged to leave their masks on at all times. She is allowed to pick up food for either breakfast or lunch, and her nightly meal—once the central event of the day—is delivered directly to her doorstep.

But banal details of social survival have also become salient in a time of limited sociality. Similarly, the multiple forms of human relationships and

intimacy are important sustenance no matter what their form and whether or not they ever become **sexual** in the **traditional** sense.

My **aunt** reported that when the facility started to deliver the evening meal to her door in March of 2020, the quality noticeably declined. She lived with the bad food for a while, but I think this was when my **aunt** Francis and George—who had not seen each other in many weeks—decided that they would safely meet up for a drive and together seek better meals elsewhere. So, as I learned, much of their shared adventures out in the world throughout May and June, during the early days of the **pandemic**, revolved around finding alternative food; in particular, the object of their joint **desire** became a quest to find the most satisfying corned beef sandwich available within a reasonable distance of their Princeton home.

“What is a corned beef sandwich?” you might ask. In my **aunt** Francis’s and George’s worldviews, a corned beef sandwich is something brimming with **memories** and shared **meanings**. Corned beef is a salt-cured brisket of beef. It can be eaten in multiple ways but is often served as a sandwich with rye as the bread of choice. It is the sandwich that Jewish New Yorkers of a certain **generation** get **sentimental** about. In those nostalgic bygone days, the sandwich was tall, accompanied by coleslaw, Russian dressing (or not), and a pickle on the side. For my **aunt** Francis and George, the corn beef sandwich became a shared **memory**—newly created in the present—of their East Coast Jewish New York youth, an edible object of communion.

I return to the quest for a corned beef sandwich at the end of my comments so that I might think through more concrete aspects of the **narrative** surrounding the intimate relationship between George and my **aunt**. For now, I assert simply that this sandwich is more than its apparent **materiality**. It holds an inherent **memory** value for these **elders**, bringing **meanings** from the past into the present and **symbolizing** a shared sociality that surpasses the space of the **senior** living home. But in relation to the theme of this book, it also holds another kind of semiotic significance in my **aunt** Francis’s **narratives**: it alludes to the special intimacy she shared with George.

The essays that follow similarly remind us that a corned beef sandwich is never just a sandwich. By addressing a **diversity** of **aging populations** in **Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico**, each author strives to understand the **sexual subjectivity** of **aging** individuals and the collectives that sustain them through a consideration of **materiality, memory, and signs**.

### The Edited Collection

This collection directly addresses questions related to **aging** (with many of the essays devoted to understanding **elderly populations**) and is, therefore

relevant to humanity more generally. It is also committed to exploring **gender** and **sexual diversity** in the **elderly population**. Each chapter takes a different angle on the **life course** and on one or more of the themes highlighted in the title. As a scholar of **Latin America** and of **Brazil** in particular, and as an **anthropologist** who has lived and worked extensively in all three of the countries represented in the collection, I read each essay with great interest and with anticipation of aligning the analyses presented with my own **experiences**. I was not disappointed.

As an **anthropologist** who has written about **HIV/AIDS** in **Brazil** and the **intersections** of **race**, **class**, **gender** and **sexuality** in **Rio's favelas**, I found the attention to the sex, **class**, **race** and **gender** distinctions highlighted by the authors to be an important intervention into our awareness of the **life trajectories**, interests and **desires** of **diverse populations**. As I read through this collection, I also recognized that some things in **society** are moving quickly; others, not so much. **Anthropologists** (mostly) have written these essays; thus, the insights and analytics presented here are grounded in long-term research, **ethnographic fieldwork** and **interviews**. In turn, those who speak to the **anthropologists** are inspired by reflections about the past and reckonings with the present. The shadow of **gerontology** hangs over this work; these **anthropologists** both engage and resist **gerontological** insights, creating awareness of new **subjectivities** in formation.

While the most significant **elder** in my purview at the moment is my **aunt Francis**, reading this collection has also made me aware, once again, of the passage of time and of the **power** of self-and-other reflection. I am lucky to have my **aunt** alive to remind me not only of the passing of time but also to get me to pay attention to the small **pleasures** and banal details of everyday life—including the **desire** for the perfect corned beef sandwich. She continues to show me, too, what social life looked like in the **youth** of her **generation**. Here, I offer some reflections on the essays in light of this observation.

Guita Grin **Debert's** essay, titled "**Gerontology and Sexuality in Brazilian Society**," takes us on a fascinating tour of the contours of knowledge production in **Brazil** in this twentieth and twenty-first-century field. **Debert** centers **Brazil's aging population** within a global economy of representations where new **meanings** have been attributed to and created for **aging populations** as **life expectancy** has expanded. In **Brazil**, the concepts of "**third age**" and "**active old age**" have been created, so it is not surprising that the area and scope of **Brazilian gerontology** have also worked to develop and enhance the theme of **sexuality** (**Debert** and **Brigeiro** 2012, 39) and have created the discursive existence of the concept of "**eroticization**" of **elderly** life. As I read this essay, I admit to thinking to myself, "**Brazil** never disappoints!" For the uninitiated, that is simply a friendly way of referring to what appears as a "sex-positive" **Brasilidade** or **Brazilian** celebration of **sexuality** (**Goldstein** 1994,

2013). The authors' (**Debert** and Brigeiro 2012, 40) earlier work explores the ways in which **sexual** satisfaction has become "obligatory" in all the **stages of life**, including the **third age**.

I want to consider **Debert's** use of the word "obligatory" here, or at least some of its potential **meaning** in the English language. I quote my **aunt** Francis here in her 90-year-old confessional tone to her only niece:

George likes me, and I like him, but he wants something more from this relationship than I do. I am not interested in those things anymore, and while I like his companionship, I don't want to take **care** of anyone anymore. Now Sylvia, she would like that, and she is after George. But he prefers me. I am not interested in him that way.

As an aside, my **aunt** Francis lets me know that her dining mate Sylvia is a very nice person but she suffers from **mental** degeneration produced by **aging**, exhibited by her inability to remember things and her constant paranoia that somebody is "stealing" things from her apartment. My **aunt** reads Sylvia as a person capable of giving George what he wants (supposedly an intimate **sexual relationship**). Unfortunately for George, however, he seems to have catched only to my **aunt** Francis.

While none of these individuals is **Brazilian**, their **generational** behavior conforms to some of what **Debert** states in her chapter. **Brazilian gerontology**—much like the fields of **discourse** created by **gerontology** more globally—has been, "[I]n consonance with this tendency seen at [the] international level to legitimize the **inclusion of old age** in the course of **sexual life**" (**Debert**, this volume, 6). The point here is that now **gerontology** works not only to refute the idea of "**asexuality**" in **old age** but also perhaps to broaden the concept of **sexuality** as existing beyond the act of copulation. Earlier studies in **Brazil** (Brigeiro 2000) have shown that while **older men** seem to highlight **virility**—and erectile capacity—in their private conversations, things are different among **women**. Married **women** show more enthusiasm for **sexuality** than unmarried, separated or widowed **women**. Those **freed** from marital ties are now somewhat **freed** from any number of marital obligations, including **sexual** ones (**Debert** 2014). **Debert's** **gendered** distinctions apply to my **aunt** Francis's case quite literally, as if **Sao Paulo**, in **Brazil**, and **Princeton**, in the **United States**, had achieved a global union. But I should add another detail: even if my **aunt** Francis did not want a **sexual relationship** with George, their intimacy and time spent together—including their joint quest to find the best-corned beef sandwich—indicated that there was something special about this **man** for her. For a while, he was a constant reference point in my conversations with my **aunt**.

Júlio Assis Simões's chapter, "Handling **Aging: Sexuality, Body and Generation** in the **Experiences of Gay Men in Brazil**," contributes additional voices to what we learned from **Debert's** essay. Simões also raises the issue of **sexuality/sexual identity** in his work. If, for example, **sexual identity** was to be a non-existent category of reference in **old age**, then what would we know of the **elderly populations of entendidos (middle-class male gays who came of age in earlier generations)**? Indeed, what would be the fate of **aging male homosexuals** if we began with the premise of an **asexual old age**? Simões takes the richness of the **ethnographic** record and analyzes the findings related to **white cisgender male homosexual experiences** (specifically, **entendidos**) in **Brazil**. It is important to note, as Simões does, that some corners of **gerontology** ignored **homosexuality**, making Simões's contribution even more critical and compelling in terms of focusing on this **population**. The author notes that contemporary communication technologies are recognized as an "inflection point" in the social and **sexual life of older gay men**. Citing Henning's (2016a, 2016b) work, he argues that **body care**, control and conduct are all important features of the **aging gay male** presentation of self. His research establishes the existence of **interviewees** who hold stable partnerships into **advanced age** with **younger male** partners through the exchange of gifts, money, **experience**, social relations and **culture**. The bundle of cultural and **material** capital offered by the **elder** partner, or **coroa**, in these relationships, is as real as any other set of objects in the **anthropological** record that keeps social relations alive and engaged. Simões also points out that there is an effort displayed by **older gay men** to stay alive and active in their **homosexual identities** and to prevent a return to the closet (Simões, this volume, 37, citing Daniel 1994).

Reading Simões chapter reminded me of the work of the recently deceased neurologist, humanist doctor, author and honorary **anthropologist** Oliver Sacks. Sacks passed away in 2015 after writing his memoir, *On the Move: A Life* (2015). In *On the Move*, Sacks confesses that he only heard the word "**gay**" in the 1950s in Amsterdam. He eventually left a cohesive Jewish **family** of doctors in London and made his way to the West Coast of the **United States**, settling in **San Francisco** and then later in New York. At the **age** of forty, during a visit home, his **mother** called him "an abomination" upon learning of his **homosexuality**. Sacks recalls that this episode made him retract from his **homosexuality** for over three decades. At the **age** of seventy or so, after many decades of celibacy, he fell in love, a detail that left many of his readers and fans stunned. In spite of the long periods of **sexual** and relationship drought, Sacks's personae and writing retain all the hallmarks of a twentieth-century cosmopolitan. He has a large fan base, including **anthropologists**, who continue to read his books about patients with often uncommon and sometimes debilitating psychological and physiological issues as in-depth studies of **subjectivity**. Sacks began a serious



love relationship at the **age** of 77 with Bill Hayes, a **younger man** and author. He seemed to want to make up for lost time and spoke lovingly of this final and most important relationship. Yet many reviewers of Sacks's memoir insisted on calling his earlier celibacy "a tragedy" (e.g., Moyer 2015). Certainly, one can recognize and empathize with the tragedy that the constraints of permitted social life and **homophobia** created in Sacks's **generation**. But there is also the sense one gets from reading his work that Sacks is almost always different from his **generational** or **sexually** identified counterparts, and so his embrace of a relationship late in life perhaps cannot only be seen as a tragedy. Sacks's own **life story** is different, but it is consistent with the "**queer**" ways in which many of the **characters** in his books come to see and express their own **subjectivity**. Certainly, as an intellectual of the medical profession spanning much of the twentieth century, Oliver Sacks would have felt the weight not only of his **mother's** reading of his **subjectivity**, but also of 1968 and of the field of **gerontology**.

Mauricio List Reyes's chapter, titled "**Sexual Debut and Vulnerability: Narratives of Mexican Gay Men on their Childhood and Adolescence,**" examines the **diversity** of **male homosexual experiences** in **Mexico** between 25 and 48 years of **age**. In introducing his work and analysis, List Reyes points out that the obvious common characteristic affecting this group is their subjection to **homophobia** and to the hierarchically naturalized place of **heterosexuality**, more generally in **Mexican society**. List Reyes also produces an open-ended inquiry into the legal field to understand the **criminalization** of **adult—adolescent** relationships and the interpretation of those relations over time by the Supreme Court of **Mexico**. In some important ways, the Supreme Court has moved away from labeling every case as defined by "**abuse.**" List Reyes acknowledges the difficulty of interpreting **anthropological** research on the **practices** and **memories** of **adults** who are recalling their **experiences** as **minors**, ranging from **narratives** of equal **consent**, unequal **consent**, and **child abuse**. The point of List Reyes's sharing of these varied **narratives** of **sexual** awakening among **minors** is to outline the variety of **male homosexual** first **experiences** told in first person to the **anthropologist**, expressed through their own initiative of how they came to explore their own **sexuality**. In all of the cases he presents, the risk of **homophobic violence** is present, and in some cases—due to the conditions of **sexual education** and the lack of resources at that time by **minors** to protect themselves—these initiating stories reveal **intersections** of **identity**, **violence** and **sexuality** that are not necessarily worthy of celebration but are instead to be understood as troubling.

Andrea Lacombe's work transports the reader to **Córdoba, Argentina**, and is titled, "**Nuances of (In)Visibility: Eroticism, Age and Religion of Women in Homo-Affective Relations.**" The chapter explores the life **trajectories** of **women** who are involved in **homo-affective relations** with other **women** who

are approximately 50 years of **age**, have an interest in **religion** or **spirituality** and who are connected to the waning days of the **military dictatorship** (circa 1983). Lacombe refers to these **homo-affective identities** and their attendant tensions as “**dissident sexualities**” that are both in conflict with institutional **religion** and are **social markers of difference**. The **women** Lacombe came to know and was focused on have had to navigate **religion** in a heterogeneous manner. That is, religious affiliation has become a point of conflict in the context of **sexual preferences** and/or **identity**, inevitably leading many of the **women** she spoke with to either become agnostic, to move away from **religion** or to seek membership in more progressive denominations. This tension from the perspective of the speaker produces all sorts of questions, but it also enables the reader to understand the numerous incompatibilities of **religion** and **female sexuality** when that **sexuality** is directed in non-**heterosexually normative** ways. The text provides an alternative meditation on what is known as “**coming out stories**,” placing the dissidence of the speakers in an interesting **trajectory of resistance**—not to parents but to the institutions of **religion**—while also unintentionally highlighting an additional explanation for the waning of mainstream **religion** and **Catholicism** in contemporary **Latin America**.

The title and theme of Ricardo Iacub's chapter is “**Masculinity and Old Age**,” and his essay focuses on understanding how **elderly men** (generically speaking) respond to both the **loss** of social **power** and the accompanying **gender** representational changes to the **aging body**. Here, too, much of the analysis focuses on the discursive **subject** produced in the field of **gerontology** and its seemingly early focus on **women** and what Iacub sees as the creation of a kind of “**cultural invisibility**” of **old men** (which I have to admit doesn't sound right considering how visible **men** are at all other **stages in life**). Iacub argues that the ability to maintain personal autonomy in the **middle** and **third age** is an indicator of **successful aging** in Western **culture** for **male identity**. Building on the work of R.W. **Connell** (1993) and psychology more generally, Iacub proposes that the four fields that help constitute **normative masculinity** are sports, **sexuality**, paternity and work. He argues that the importance of erectile dysfunction **drugs** for **men** is key in solving one of the critical problems of **aging male sexuality**. Iacub proposes that using these **drugs** has “given **men** the reassurance they need when facing the most feared demasculinization” (Iacub, this volume, 88). Additionally, the author finds that the withdrawal from **sexual relations** leads to **depression** in **men**. Iacub's essay calls for further research on **masculinity** and **sexuality** as potential pathways for understanding broader issues involving the **health** behavior of **men**. Logically, all the above **intersections of masculinity** and **sexuality** would help to explain the reluctance of **men** to enter what are seen as **gerontological** spaces, particularly when those spaces are marked by **asexuality**.