

Article

Queering Aging Futures

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Abstract: This paper explores the potential for cultural gerontology to extend its ideas of diversity in aging experiences by opening space to rethink conceptions of successful aging futures. We propose a ‘queering’ of aging futures that disrupts the ways that expectations of a good later life and happy aging are seen to adhere to some bodies and subjectivities over others. Drawing on feminist, queer, and crip theories, we build on existing critiques of ‘successful aging’ to interrogate the assumptions of heteronormativity, able-bodiedness and able-mindedness that shape the dividing lines between success and failure in aging, and which inform attempts to ‘repair’ damaged futures. Conclusions suggest that recognizing diversity in successful aging futures is important in shaping responses to the challenges of aging societies, and presents an opportunity for critical cultural gerontology to join with its theoretical allies in imagining more inclusive alternatives.

Keywords: queer theory; cultural gerontology; gender; sexuality; aging; future; later life

1. Introduction

Let us begin with two scenarios that represent different yet related versions of aging futures.

A health promotion ad produced by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada—and widely shown on television in 2013—asks viewers to imagine their aging future—specifically, their last 10 years of life. A split screen presents the same older man in two possible future scenarios. In one, he enjoys life with his wife and family, in the other, he lives in a care facility. In one, he laces up running shoes, bicycles, plays with grandchildren and celebrates with his wife. In the other, the running shoes are replaced by slippers, the bicycle by a wheelchair, the grandchild’s playful offering of a juice box by a cup and straw held by a health care aid, the necktie by an oxygen tube, the watch by a hospital band and so on. The closing—and lasting—image is of his face in the middle, on one screen being kissed by his smiling wife as they celebrate what is presumably an anniversary, on the other, her face held against his cheek as she weeps in despair.¹

In a story widely covered by both print and broadcast media in the late summer of 2016, twin sisters in Texas, USA, decided to stage wedding photos with their father, who has Alzheimer’s disease, as a way of ‘making memories’ with him. Although neither had wedding plans, they enacted the performance of brides with borrowed props, primping and dressing, to be met by their father’s smiles. They walked arm in arm with him to a neighbor’s yard, where a professional photographer took classic father-daughter bridal photos with them. The heart-warming outcome was described as “memories that the twins will cherish forever, even as their father’s memory fades away”.²

In the first scenario, the central character is enjoined to take action to preserve his health, so that he and his wife and family can together celebrate a happy long life, rather than his decline causing

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qo6QNU8kHxI>.

² <http://www.glamour.com/story/father-daughter-alzheimers-wedding-photos>.

separation and anguish. In the second, the white wedding, as the central ritual of heterosexual happiness, is deployed as a reparative device for a future where happiness is seen to be absent—in dementia. The happy future here belongs not to the father with dementia, but attaches to his role in reconstructing intergenerational hetero-happiness—the (hetero)generativity that is threatened by his dementia. These two scenarios, while in many ways strikingly different, may be seen as representing some problematic ways that aging and imagined futures are intertwined with heteronormativity in contemporary Western cultures.

There are signs of a growing interest in bringing gerontology into dialogue with feminist, queer and crip theories to critique socially-constructed binaries and embrace diversity in aging experiences and identities.³ Siding with this critical strand in cultural gerontology, we explore in this paper some ways that feminist, queer and crip studies might be useful allies in providing new, and indeed urgent, perspectives on aging futures. Our use of the terms feminist, queer and crip in this article refers to the attempt to revalue and politicize abject bodies and identities, drawing attention to the “social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds and ways of being” [1] (p. 6). Inspired by the work of critical, post-structuralist scholars such as Robert McRuer [2] and Alison Kafer [1], which combines queer theory’s critical approach to heteronormativity with a critical gaze on compulsory able-bodiedness, we interrogate how some ageing bodies and subjectivities are understood as desirable and taken-for-granted while others are constructed as unwanted and problematic.

Thus what we discuss as ‘queering aging futures’ entails a disruption of the narrative of hetero-happiness—as seen in the above scenarios for example—and a critique of how heteronormativity continuously shapes dominant conceptions of ‘successful aging’. However, we suggest that this critique also needs to be developed in a broader sense, to interrogate the ways that expectations of a good later life and happy aging futures adhere to some bodies and subjectivities over others. We argue for increased attention to the ways that “compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and compulsory heterosexuality intertwine in the service of normativity” [1] (p. 16), but extend this to the imagining of aging futures. By queering aging futures we thus aim to open 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 aging.’

We begin with a brief review of critiques of ‘successful aging’ as a concept in gerontology and a summary of recent work on popular representations of successful aging. In particular, we build on our own studies of cultural representations of successful aging as modes of heteronormative belonging [3,4] to suggest that ‘failures’ (such as that represented by queerness, disability or dementia) to meet ‘success’ in this way open important questions about what kinds of futures are deemed possible. Drawing on queer and crip theories of temporality, we critique ways that various restorative tropes have sought to ‘repair’ aging futures, and point to the alternatives which these obscure. Conclusions suggest that recognizing diversity in successful aging futures is important in shaping responses to the challenges of aging societies, and poses an opportunity for cultural gerontology to ally itself more explicitly with feminist, queer and crip studies.

2. The Problem with ‘Successful Aging’

As has now been widely recounted in a growing critical literature⁴, the concept of ‘successful aging’ has acted as a vortex of professional, political and commercial interests. While its central tenets—that aging did not need to be dominated by disease and disability, but could be active, productive and

³ See for example the program for the 2017 conference of the European and North American Networks on Aging Studies where these critical theoretical perspectives, especially feminism, were well-represented (http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/19a082_bfaaf7e92005423db7d44983ec927051.pdf). Because the terminology of ‘feminist’, ‘queer’ and ‘crip’ references broad fields of knowledge production, we resist any move to narrowly define them here. The specific lines of theoretical work we are drawing on will be apparent from the literature we cite throughout.

⁴ See, for example, the special issue of *The Gerontologist* in 2014 (volume 55, issue #1) which was devoted to critical commentary on the concept of successful aging including [5–8].

positive—had been circulating in professional gerontology since the 1960s, these were finally assembled by Rowe and Kahn into what would become a core concept in the late 1980s [9,10]. Professionally, successful aging has grounded what Silke van Dyk [11] terms ‘Happy Gerontology,’ which stresses ‘continuities between midlife and independent/active later life’ (p. 93). In the political and policy realms, concern over the potential burden of aging populations on healthcare and social service budgets has led to enthusiastic embrace of ‘active’ aging as underpinning ‘success’—measured here largely by lack of dependence on the state in later life. Individuals are increasingly seen as responsible for ensuring their ‘success’ through prudent management of bodily resources as a way of mitigating future risk [12]. Commercially, the notion of ‘successful aging’ has resonated with consumerist discourses that proffer an expanding horizon of anti-aging goods and services [13–17]. This ‘successful aging assemblage’ [3] underpins contemporary imaginaries of old age and later life, populating these with active, creative, flexible, ‘sexy seniors’ [18–20]. As critics have demonstrated, attempts to counter old stereotypes of age-related decline and decrepitude with these newer representations have introduced new ways of disciplining later life. It should come as no surprise that ‘successful aging’ (along with related concepts of ‘positive’, ‘active’ and ‘healthy’ aging) has been robustly criticized for its affinity with neoliberal modes of governance, neglect of structural inequalities, commercialization, and alignment with dividing practices that produce some bodies as *unsuccessfully aged* [6,8,21–23].

A significant body of scholarship has also challenged the normative assumptions about gender and sexuality linked to ‘success’ in aging, adding important feminist insights to the critiques noted above. While a central theme in feminist critiques has long been the invisibility of older women—and negative representations when they do appear—more recently researchers have focused on their sexualization [19,24,25]. For men too, successful aging appears to have become synonymous with the continuing performance of sexuality traditionally more common to youthful representations [26,27]. This attention to the intersections of age, gender and sexuality in representations of successful aging has been extended by work focusing on the heteronormativity of successful aging and its ‘others’ [5,28,29]. While mapping the exclusion and/or marginalization of non-heterosexual and transgendered representations is an important endeavor, this needs to be extended to a critique of the ways that heteronormativity and its promises of happiness constitute a powerful narrative that organizes dominant understandings of the good (later) life. In our own work, we have begun this task by drawing out associations between hetero-happiness and successful aging through the widely disseminated imagery of heterosexual coupledness [3,4]. Sandberg [3] explores the emergence of positive aging in popular discourses in Sweden, analyzing print and online text and images. These include advertising and copy from a magazine aimed at older adults, and a website promoting a “seniors’ fair” entitled “Senior- the Good Life.” In both, she notes the regular use of images of smiling heterosexual couples engaged in active life styles to represent successful aging. Success is not just illustrated through coupledness, but also portrayed through happy intimacies with grandchildren, pointing to (hetero)kinship as that which makes later life meaningful and positive. Similarly, Marshall [4] in her analysis of Canadian lifestyle magazines and health promotion materials aimed at mid- to later-life adults shows how heterosexuality as the hallmark of successful aging is visualized through heterosexual couples claiming active, ‘better with age,’ sex. When depicted on their own, older women are often sexualized—for example, by being placed in classic ‘pin up poses’ or other conventional markers of heterosexual desirability. But success is also illustrated through the imagery of reproductive success, with happy older adults consistently positioned in relation to children and grandchildren. Both Sandberg and Marshall suggest that the production of successful aging comes not just from these positive representations, but also from the juxtaposition of this hetero-happiness with the spectre of ‘failed’ or unsuccessful aging.

In what follows, we expand our arguments to suggest that successful aging is not just about what one does in the here and now, but contains an imperative for the future—an association of aging with *possible* futures. As Sandberg argues, heterosexual intimacy functions as an effective sign of the *good* future [3]. As an illustration, she cites an advertisement for the Swedish National

Pensioners' organization which asks "What are you looking forward to?" against the background of an old heterosexual couple walking hand in hand on a beach. It is 'successful aging' as a knowable future in which one reaps the fruits of one's labours—both literal and metaphorical—that dominates popular depictions of physically-fit, youthful-looking, financially-secure, happy heterosexuals. In addition to the happy future of coupledness, depictions of older people with children and grandchildren suggest more than their reproductive success in the present—they are a frequent trope in establishing generativity and the extension of life into the future. It is this implicit link to futurity—or its absence—that we wish to disrupt in this paper through the notion of *queering* aging futures.

3. No Future for the Queers, the Crips and the Demented?

Conceptualizing queer temporalities and theorizing futurity have emerged as central concerns in recent queer studies. Pivotal to this work has been Lee Edelman's (2004) work *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* [30]. Edelman theorizes politics as always invested in the notion of futurity and analyzes the trope of the Child as the dominant way in which politics/futurity is both articulated and becomes impossible to refute. The bonds between heterosexuality (as naturally linked to reproduction) and the Child thus contribute to the privileging of heterosexuality and the simultaneous denunciation of queers when envisioning futures. Goltz [31] draws on this assumed negation between queers and futurity in his analysis of popular media representations of gay male aging, arguing that gay (male) futures are constructed as dreaded and miserable. Goltz illustrates this point by discussing the wizard Dumbledore from the Harry Potter series who, after the author J.K Rowling confirmed that he was gay, figures in a sketch of the U.S. comedy show Saturday Night Live. Here, Dumbledore is depicted in "deleted scenes" as old, pathetic and lonely, prowling gay bars to find young flesh. Through this and many other examples from popular culture Goltz notes the disassociations between futurity and gay aging, stating, "the concept of future within straight temporal logic is not only a *sight* of sacrifice, but aging and future are constructed *as* the punishment, *the* sacrifice that awaits the gay male [31] (p. 49, emphasis in original).

Queer theoretical critiques of the disassociation of queers and futures is extended to old age by Cynthia Port [32] who suggests, 'the old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside of mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future' ([32], p. 3). This line of thinking is thrown into sharp relief by apocalyptic demographic predictions—aligned with the politics of austerity—that warn of the potential of the 'grey tsunami' of aging populations to become a burden on future generations. However, as we have suggested, successful aging discourses challenge discourses of old age as decay and as oppositional to futures presenting instead appealing visions of active and happy aging futures—but only for some [3,4]. Old age is thus not antithetical to futures insofar as it aligns with (affluent) heterosexual, able-bodied and able-minded subjects. A project of queering aging futures must thus interrogate how *some* successfully aging futures depend on the positioning of other futures as failed, miserable or simply as non-futures.

As Sara Ahmed argues in *The Promise of Happiness* [33], following the heterosexual life trajectory is understood as the promise of a happy future. Inversely, then, to follow a queer line means ending up unhappy and lonely. If heterosexual futures are understood as the only desirable, or indeed livable, futures, then what Goltz [31] terms "heteronormativity's discursive hijacking of the future and the correctness of straight temporalities" (p. 68)—the representation of the older gay man as tragic, lonely, laughable and even monstrous—functions as a cautionary tale. For Halberstam [34], lives lived outside of the reproductive temporalities of heteronormativity—that is, "outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction and death" (p. 16)—are also denied connection to happy futures by a denial of generativity. Generativity, defined as "the concern to nurture, guide and ensure the wellbeing of future generations" [35] (p. 1094) has figured as central in gerontology's conceptions of successful aging, but has been saturated with assumptions of heteronormativity. As Hostetler [36] points out, generativity, as "an individual's

link to the future” (p. 397), is not commonly applied to conceptions of LGBTQ aging. Similarly, Melissa Baldwin [37] argues that because the intergenerational encounters that comprise generativity are so deeply rooted in “familial narratives of inheritance and knowledge transmission” (p. 2), there are restricted opportunities for intergenerational interactions which are not bound to these normative relationships. Goltz [38] adds that, in opposition to the normalization of generativity in heteronormative relationships, “queer generative opportunities are still shadowed by the spectre of adult queers . . . as predatory ‘recruiters’” (p. 141) who pose a threat to, rather than continuity with, future generations. It is here that queer theory’s challenge to heteronormative temporality might be taken up, to open spaces for what Halberstam terms ‘queer time’—that which is “unscripted by the convention of family, inheritance and child-rearing” [34] (p. 2).

Heterosexuality seems to be central to the making of successful aging futures, yet cannot stand alone as the promise of a happy later life. Notably, heterosexuality needs to be accompanied by able-bodiedness and able-mindedness to produce visions of a successful aging future. Alison Kafer has pointed to parallels between the disassociation between queers and futurity and that of disability and futurity as a politics of futures that always forecloses disability (and vice versa), writing, “the value of a future that includes disabled people goes unrecognized, while the value of the disability-free future is seen as self-evident” [1] (p. 3). It is this vision of futurity as dependent on the absence of disability that invests biomedicine with such power, seen as holding the promise for ensuring happy (non-disabled) aging futures. The links between aging futures, heteronormativity and ableism become visible from the introductory example of the health promotion film juxtaposing two future scenarios of aging. Where one scenario presents a road to successful aging through the alignment of heterosexuality, activity, health, able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and happiness, the other presents a failed future through the associations of ill health/disability with the tragic end to a relationship. Thus, queering aging futures must be a simultaneous crippling of aging futures, constantly interrogating the role disability plays in the production of ‘failed’ aging futures. This will require rapprochement of the sometimes awkward relationship between aging studies and disability studies which has often been stymied by resistance to the conflation of aging and disability [39]. In such a rapprochement, Sally Chivers [40] argues that there are important opportunities for “highlighting the important distinctions between disability and old age” and for “pointing out those moments when disability and old age could benefit each other by being connected” (p. 23). As we have seen, however, ‘successful aging discourse’ too often associates the onset of disability with the failure to age successfully.⁵

Disability as a threat to successful aging futures figures most clearly in the case of dementia. Continuously presented as an ‘epidemic’ threatening to overtake aging futures, dementia has surfaced as a number one priority in national and global health policies [42,43]. The proposed threat of dementia lies not only in the burden it puts on aging societies, but also in the manner in which the person with dementia is positioned as a threatening, monstrous, zombie-like existence between life and death [44–46]. Parallel to the monstrosity of the older gay man’s disjoint with futurity, the person with dementia emerges as monstrous partly because of her lack of—or disruption of—futures.

If the success of hetero-aging futures lies partly in its links to generativity, then dementia—through loss of memory—threatens to disrupt that generativity and represents as such a form of queer crip temporality. Thinking of the term ‘familiar’ as connoting both family and the well-known and expected, dementia disrupts the familiar both in the sense of disorientation, in that we do not know where we will end up, and a troubling of generativity in the heteronormative life course. The specter of dementia is fearful because it proposes an unknown and muddy future as well as a lost past, and this also threatens hetero-reproductive temporalities. As argued by Shildrick [47], the monstrous has historically been associated with signs of uncontrollable futurity. Thus, the imaginary of dementia as

⁵ As Chivers [41] notes, however, entirely left out of this picture are those who age *with* a disability which may change over time.

monstrous springs not only from dehumanizing discourses which associate dementia, embodiment, and subjectivity with the living dead, but also with unknown/unwanted futures [45].

4. Repairing the Future?

If dementia posits a threat to successfully aging futures, heteronormativity may, however, be viewed as holding the potential to re-establish the temporal links to past and future as illustrated by the second of our opening scenarios—the case of the twin sisters who staged wedding photos with their father with Alzheimer’s disease. In this story the father’s illness is positioned as a threat to the happy future event of a family wedding and a loss of generativity. In an interview with ABC News the sisters articulate the links of generativity and marriage/wedding culture:⁶

“For me, it’s all about the daddy-daughter dance”, Sarah said, “and having him give away his daughter to a new guy to take care of”. Becca agreed, adding, “Every girl dreams about her big wedding and her dad walking her down the aisle ... It would be awesome to have our dad there. He was our superhero. He was our Superman growing up”.⁷

As the father is assumed to be ‘lost’ to dementia by the time of the sisters’ future weddings, the staged wedding photos with him become a reparative device, an attempt to restore a lost future and reinforce the generativity disrupted by dementia. If dementia is assumed to cause unhappiness and an unwanted future, the enactment of the hetero-happiness epitomized in weddings becomes a way to enable successful aging in spite of illness/disability. Moreover, the sisters’ way of referring to their father as a superhero of the past points to the role of gender in the production of successful aging, where the father being part of the daughters’ wedding photos becomes a way of re-establishing him as a father-figure and a real man, something which is presumably lost in dementia [48].

The links between the threat of dementia and threatened heteronormativity, with their mutual restoration tied to the restoration of successfully aging futures, is also established by Åsberg & Lum’s [49] analysis of advertisements for anti-Alzheimer drugs. Out of four ads discussed, three feature heterosexual couples and the fourth portrays a presumed grandmother reading to a grandchild. In these ads the pharmaceuticals become promises of the restored hetero-happiness that dementia threatens to dislocate. The first ad described by Åsberg and Lum features a side profile of a woman with the top half of her head covered by a heterosexual couple on a beach watching the sunset encircled by the slogan ‘all around success with new Reminyl’ (p. 100). The second ad consists of a smiling heterosexual couple “within a poster that resembles an advertisement for a documentary style feature film, which bears the title, ‘Dignity’” and that is said to be making an ‘extended run’ (p. 104). As Åsberg & Lum suggest, these two ads contribute to a ‘romanticization of the powers of biomedicine to restore AD patients to middle- class, heterosexual normalcy’ (p. 106). To this we would add that the imagery of hetero-happiness also extends this promise into a successfully aging future. The drug becomes a simultaneous promise of re-establishing links with both the past and the future, as it both re-invokes memories of the past (ad 1) and enables the continued performance of coupledness in the future (ad 2).

Although there currently exists no cure for Alzheimer’s disease, these pharma-ads operate within what Kafer [1] refers to as a “curative imaginary” (p. 27), where there is always an expectation of intervention towards disability, if not by elimination then at least through ‘normalizing treatments that work to assimilate the disabled body/mind as much as possible’. As illustrated by the twin sisters’ wedding photos and the pharma-ads, heteronormativity supplies reparative devices within this curative imaginary, promising happy futures. It thus aligns with other ways of recuperating successful aging futures through, for example, anti-aging culture’s promotion of sexuo-pharmaceuticals and other

⁶ There is also clearly a reassertion of patriarchal linearity here, although this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

⁷ <http://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/single-sisters-stage-wedding-photo-shoot-dad-alzheimers/story?id=41845582>.

biomedical means of restoring happy futures [13,50,51]. As Emily Wentzell [52] cautions, expansion of biomedical control over non-normative bodies risks deflecting attention away from the social interventions that could create the conditions for a diversity of more livable futures.

5. Imagining Differently

So far we have discussed how successfully aging futures figure through narratives of hetero-happiness and of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness as prerequisites for aging well into the future. Still, even if queers and people with disabilities or illnesses are posited as signs of ‘no-future’ or a ‘failed future,’ we argue that the alternative is not to abandon thinking futures altogether, and Edelman’s assertion of ‘no future’ has been contested by other queer and crip scholars. José Muñoz [53] for example, proposes that:

The way to deal with the asymmetries and violent frenzies that mark the present is not to forget the future. The here and now is simply not enough. Queerness should and could be about a desire for another being in the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough (p. 96).

As Hostetler summarizes its potential, a queer vision of the future is “at its best . . . not beholden to specific narratives of the past, nor is it synonymous with the nihilism and hedonism of an eternal present; rather, it gestures toward an inclusive, equitable, and always provisional imagined future informed by the multiplicity of present lived realities” [36] (p. 419). Thus our approach to queering aging futures—of thinking aging futures differently—rejects the turn to negativity or no futures, but also rejects an unproblematic incorporation of ‘Others’ into current models of success. This tack suggests a challenge—for example to assimilationist discourses on gay and lesbian lives which deem them acceptable so long as they adhere to heteronormative conventions of monogamous coupledness.

A queering of aging futures in critical gerontology should instead involve further engagement with and affirmation of the narratives that provide alternative visions of later-life. Current examples of this include Fabbre’s study of late-life gender transitions [54], Jones’ exploration of positive images of bisexual futures [55], and Rice et al.’s [56] feminist arts-based project on disabled futures which imagines the “possibility of a desired futurity where before there was no possibility or only abjected possibility” (p. 27). As they summarize the possibilities of a theory of feminist crip time, it is to “offer a glimpse at the generative possibilities of replacing a fixed, linear understanding of a “future perfect” with multiple, shifting, affective understandings of temporality that make space for, imagine and enact futures . . . that include the bodies/minds left out of normative renderings of personhood and futurity.” (p. 8–9)

Queering aging futures thus entails thinking differently about life courses—asking what lives are understood as desirable to live and thrive well into old age—but also interrogating how desirable old age is problematically framed by the exclusionary discourses of successful aging. The question of ‘whose lives matter?’⁸ leads to other questions. Whose lives are worth preserving for old age? Whose aging is understood as livable aging? To begin to address these questions will require that a multiplicity of futures become visible.

Moreover, a queering of aging futures should look to the queer potentials in aging lives in the present. Returning here to the case of dementia, instructive is Judith Halberstam’s argument of forgetfulness as an “opportunity for a non-hetero-reproductive future” [58] (p. 70). Drawing on representations in mainstream film, Halberstam argues that while forgetting is commonly associated with loss of identity, history and humanity, forgetting could also involve disruptions to dominant social bonds, most notably hetero-kinship. Going back to our previous example of the sisters’ staged wedding, the father’s Alzheimer’s disease is threatening as a potential forgetting of hetero-kinship and

⁸ As Judith Butler poses this question, it is ‘whose lives are grievable?’ [57].

his gendered kin position as a father. Still, the attempts to repair or save hetero-happiness, generativity and a hetero-linear future through an arranged wedding come to represent a form of queer temporality in the jump ahead to their futures. The story ends with a queer twist in the sense that there are no grooms present and there is uncertainty as to whether the sisters will even be married in the future. While we do not want to romanticize living with dementia or minimize the grief this may entail for people diagnosed as well as those around them, it is possible to think of dementia in both its cultural and social representations and in its lived experience as a queer experience in old age.

Queer approaches to aging suggest a number of other ways that we might problematize the binaries that shape successful versus failed aging. For example, Melissa Carroll [59] explores the positioning of loneliness as the antithesis to happiness, discussing how loneliness as a pathologized mode is associated with queerness. This line of argument could also be extended to discussion of aging futures where a lonely aging future is posited as oppositional to a happy and successful aging future. Also suggested are ways of challenging binaries of health and pathology in successful/failed aging. Ward & Price [60] (p. 73), for example, suggest thinking about dementia through the ‘politics of senility.’ They argue that ‘senile’ can be reclaimed from a term of debasement to become a term of resistance, in a manner similar to the ways in which the language of ‘queer’ and ‘crip’ have been taken up. If discourses of dementia, operating within bio-medicine and the language of pathology, have closed down or circumvented “alternative realities” (p. 73), then working from the vantage point of ‘senility’ may enable other ways of relating to aging and compulsory able-mindedness in the future.

6. Conclusions

We have argued here that feminist, queer and crip studies are useful for deconstructing the heteronormativity and ableism of successful aging and critiquing the ways it presents aging futures through narrow binaries of success and failure. Expanding the engagement of cultural gerontology with these critical allies offers a way of thinking about aging futures beyond the promises of hetero-happiness and compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness that underpin discourses of successful aging. The promise of successful aging depends, as we have demonstrated, on the spectre of its unsuccessful others—those who are too queer, too disabled, too demented or too poor to reap its rewards. In calling for a queering of aging futures, we seek to challenge the dividing practices that consign some aging bodies and identities to unhappy or non-existent futures.

If mainstream visions of successful aging have difficulty in accommodating queer futures, they are also difficult to reconcile with “the frailty of aging human bodies and the inevitable failure of ideals of the embodied subject” [45] (p. 78). Perhaps what makes the iconic representations of successful aging so effective—and *affective*—is the constant awareness of the possibility of less-certain futures. For example, as Aubrecht and Keefe [42] point out, the conflation of population aging and increased prevalence of dementia constructs these two trends as ‘co-constitutive problems,’ producing “a conception of ‘normal aging’ as a process that includes, is shaped by, and interacts with abnormalcy, without the abnormalcy becoming normalized” (p. 6). The problem becomes, then, the inability to accommodate difference in other terms than as a binary. Other one must resist becoming. The project of queering aging futures then becomes one of actively imagining radically different aging futures that might accommodate difference and challenge normativity and structural inequality. Importantly, this is not just an imaginative exercise. The persistence of understanding aging futures as successful primarily through heteronormativity has material effects, intensified in austerity-driven neo-liberal regimes of care where the presence of spouses (mostly wives) and children (mostly daughters) are assumed to be ready to assume a key role in care that has been downloaded from the state [41,61].

If, as Higgs and Gilleard [62] suggest, the heterogeneity of aging experiences in the 21st century “makes generalisations about old age harder to establish and even harder to sustain” (p. 128), then generalisations about what constitutes a happy aging future and who deserves it should be even more impossible. In calling for a queering of aging futures, then, we call on cultural gerontology to further problematize the dividing practices that make some futures more valued than others, and instead find

ways to recognize diversity as more than a catch-phrase. This calls for a radical reshaping of cultural imaginaries of aging futures, a task for which cultural gerontology will find feminist, queer and crip studies to be ready allies.

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