

Queer Aging in North American Fiction, by Linda M. Hess.
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Though representations of LGBT aging seem to have only recently appeared in the cultural imagination (think mainstream television series, such as *Transparent* (Soloway, 2014-2018), *Grace and Frankie* (Kauffman, 2015-present), *This Is Us* (Fogelman, 2016-present), *The Cool Kids* (Day & Fruchbom, 2018-2019), and *AJ and the Queen* (Rupaul & King, 2020-present), Linda M. Hess's *Queer Aging in North American Fiction* disrupts this common misconception by tracing the long history of age relations and lesbian and gay identifications in literature and film throughout the last eight decades. Hess's monograph strives to make visible what has often been invisible or perhaps even inconceivable: queer aging. For Hess, queer aging refers to "narratives that negotiate aging at odds with and in resistance to the norms that shape aging within chrononormative culture" (11), or more simply, (hetero)normative and (re)productive culture. Though queer aging fictions do not necessarily exclude heterosexual protagonists, Hess argues that "LGBTQ persons and characters" (9) are more reliably situated to produce narratives of queer aging "by virtue of their cultural history" (9). Thus, the texts analyzed in Hess's monograph mainly focus on lesbian and gay protagonists who age queerly and possibly defiantly.

The monograph reflects a growing interest (Chazan; Sandberg and Marshall; Port; Sandberg) in the intersections of age/ing studies and queer theory, particularly queer time, and builds on a small body of literature (Goltz; Hess; Krainitzki) that almost exclusively focuses on the representation of lesbian and/or gay aging. Given that its precedents either explore lesbian and gay aging into middle life or concentrate on fictions produced solely in the twenty-first century, particularly the second decade of the twenty-first century, Hess's *Queer Aging in North American Fiction* is noteworthy for the ways in which it predominantly focuses on aging and chronologically old/er lesbian and gay characters throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This text,

therefore, is a valuable read for those interested in age/ing studies, LGBT studies, queer theory, gender studies, American and Canadian literary studies, and cultural studies.

The monograph comprises an introduction, four parts which collectively span the chronology of the post-WWII era to the first decade of the millennium “in which complex and positive representations of aging LGBTQ persons first became easily available to mainstream audiences” (21), and a conclusion. In each of the parts, Hess provides an in-depth analysis of two texts, which variously alternate between lesbian and gay protagonists. Hess’s juxtaposition of lesbian and gay characters persuasively emphasizes the significance of considering gender in addition to the intersection of “‘aging’ and ‘non-normative sexuality’” (21). For Hess, each part represents a “significant cultural moment” (10) in lesbian and gay history. The first three parts explore six literary texts: Dorothy Baker’s *Trio: A Novel* (1943), James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), June Arnold’s *Sister Gin* (1975), Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) and *The Beauty of Men* (1996), and Suzette Mayr’s *The Widows* (1998). Then, Hess shifts her focus to two films, Mike Mill’s *Beginners* (2010) and Thom Fitzgerald’s *Cloudburst* (2011), for the final part of the monograph. For Hess, a text, either literary or filmic, which deserves a “spotlight” (21) is one that “focuses on a queer protagonist” (21) and concentrates on “aging as a significant structural element” (21).

A main contention of Hess’s monograph is that queer aging fictions have the potential to challenge and disrupt (hetero)normative and ageist conceptualizations of aging and the life course. This is most convincingly illustrated in chapters four, seven, and eight through Hess’s separate analyses of Arnold’s *Sister Gin*, Mayr’s *The Widows*, and Mill’s *Beginners*. For Hess, the representation of queer aging complicates and “opposes the exclusive focus on illness and death that so often permeates narratives of aging” (152). In all three fictions, later life is framed “as a potential new beginning” (152), rather than an ending. For instance, in chapter four, “Lesbian Feminist Aging: June Arnold’s *Sister Gin* (1975),” Hess argues that Arnold’s treatment of the representation of menopause, a significant social and biological marker of women’s aging, is

notable for challenging “the negative perception, predominant at the time, of menopause as a ‘deficiency disease’” (83). Hess maintains that menopause, socially constructed as the death of reproduction and even productivity, is reconceptualized by the queer aging protagonist as “an empowering passage for herself as an individual, but also as a process that could unite women and give the ultimate feminist impulse to reject patriarchal ideology” (84). According to Hess, Arnold’s aging lesbian protagonist, once “outside of the (heteronormative) reproductive economy” (84), is able to “birth a new self, naming her anger as her daughter instead of producing biological children” (91). Employing J. Jack Halberstam’s notion of “reproductive maturity” (90), Hess reasons that menopause, far from marking the end of reproduction, is the beginning of more inventive forms of reproduction: it becomes a time to reproduce anger rather than children.

Similarly, in her analysis of *The Widows* in chapter seven, Hess outlines the novel’s use of birth imagery and draws on Roberta Maierhofer’s concepts of “becoming conscious” (152) and “bearing a new self” (152) to demonstrate how the narrative’s septuagenarian and octogenarian women protagonists, both heterosexual and non-heterosexual, experience a re-birth in later life. Hess illustrates that the women, after their empowering and transforming plunge over the Niagara Falls, are “alive and more than ever” (153) rather than dead as readers would expect. Finally, in chapter eight, Hess argues that the film *Beginners* creates a new story about aging. Hess points out that the aging gay protagonist challenges conventional decline narratives when he inventively reshapes his recent diagnosis of terminal cancer as simply “a new stage” (193, original emphasis) rather than the “last stage in his life before death” (193). Like *Sister Gin* and *The Widows*, *Beginners* rejects “the usual decline narrative of aging” (154) and instead re-signifies aging and later life as a time of rebirths and beginnings. As Hess impressively illustrates throughout, queer aging fictions are significant for not only the way they challenge dominant and popular conceptualizations of growing older, but also the way they boldly imagine futures for, and (sometimes) resist harmful stereotypes of, lesbian and gay subjectivities.

In the monograph's conclusion, Hess briefly considers the current cultural moment and the explosion of interest in the representation of queer aging, citing popular television shows like *Grace and Frankie* and *Transparent*, and documentaries such as Lygia Barbosa and Elaine Brum's *Laerte-Se* (2017) and Tiona McClodden's forthcoming *The Untitled Black Lesbian Elder Project*. She deems these texts, especially the latter, as "noteworthy since they broaden the scope of queer aging narratives, particularly with regard to race and class [and cisnormativity], which are topics regularly excluded in fictional representations of queer aging" (228). Her brief yet critical attention to race is necessary and appreciated. The few discussions of racialized characters and race, such as Hess's discussion of Miss May, "an elderly African-American maid" (81), in *Sister Gin* and "white, middle class feminism" (92) in chapter four, are compelling for the way they deconstruct, rather than reify, the concept of "woman" as universal. However, more critical attention to race, especially whiteness, in relation to the construction of queerness and aging subjectivities might have further strengthened Hess's analysis. Most, if not all, of the queer aging characters analyzed are white or white-passing. Thus, depictions of race, far from being "excluded in fictional representations of queer aging" (228), are evidently integral to our constructions of aging. Given the dominance of whiteness in the queer aging fictions analyzed, future scholarship might investigate the importance of whiteness alongside queerness to concepts of aging, temporality, futurity, and queer time. Moreover, Hess exclusively analyzes Canadian and American texts, rather than fully addressing North American fiction, as the title suggests. Unlike other significant keywords such as "queer" and "aging," "North American" is not defined, clarified, and/or complicated by Hess. Future scholarship might also expand the scope of analysis from just Canada and the United States to a more representative selection of texts from across North America, including Mexico and Central America.

Though fictions about queer aging have existed for several decades, as Hess's archive illustrates, these fictions have almost uniformly tended to focus on the most privileged sexual and gender minorities. Hess acknowledges as much

when she writes, “many of the newest depictions of queer aging still focus on white, middle-class, gay and lesbian characters” (228, emphasis added). Noticeably though, queer aging fictions also center *white-settler* protagonists. In addition to considering bisexual and trans characters in queer aging fictions, it is imperative for future queer aging scholarship to include discussions of two-spirit and queer Indigenous characters, or at least the lack thereof, in the context of Turtle Island, or North America. Although Hess does not consider aging two-spirit or queer Indigenous protagonists, in part because examples of those representations are lacking, Hess’s groundbreaking monograph on lesbian and gay aging fictions offers a critical foundation for future scholarly engagements with the colonial and racial dynamics of queer aging fictions. Hess’s text may emerge as even more significant as representations of LGBTQ2 aging in literature and film become more diverse and varied, and the study of queer aging continues to grow.

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