Class Notes on LGBTQ Lifespans

Scott Herring

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Children run rampant in the field of queer and trans studies. Older folks usually sit on the sidelines. As I tell undergraduate students in LGBTQ Lifespans, an upper-level course I have taught since 2021, this is our loss and theirs as well. Others before me have intuited as much, too. In a 1980 lecture presented at Amherst College and later published in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Audre Lorde (1984) lamented the noncommunication between age cohorts brought upon, in part, by youth-oriented ageism:

> As we move toward creating a society within which we can each flourish, ageism is another distortion of relationship which interferes without vision. By ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes. The "generation gap" is an important social tool for any repressive society. If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all important question, "Why?" This gives rise to a historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread. (116–17)

In this generalized commentary on generationalism and forgetting, a middle-aged Lorde does not announce her membership within queer of color communities. Still, I like to think that when this quote references "we," she has queer cultures in mind, particularly in an essay whose second paragraph identifies Lorde "as a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple" (114). Well before queer theorists began to outline the trouble with hetero- and homonormativity, Lorde's essay diagnoses "a *mythical norm*" that is "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure" (116). In the piece, titled "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," she

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prominently links age to normalizations that treat "older members" as throwaway bodies. For Lorde, the result is "a historical amnesia" stultifying both dominant and marginalized populations that she characterizes as "Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike" (123). Indeed, one form of ageism's collateral damage that her essay pinpoints is nothing less than the demise of "living memories" undercutting intergenerational exchange.

Others writing after Lorde published these remarks have made similar claims for how external and internal pressures structure queer and trans amnesia. Historian George Chauncey (1994: 1) opens *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* by observing that "the gay world that flourished before World War II has been almost entirely forgotten in popular memory and overlooked by professional historians; it is not supposed to have existed"—a theme Chauncey ([1994] 2019: xvii–xviii) returns to a quarter-century later in a new preface to this landmark volume on fairies, inverts, and normal persons that considers the queer forgetting by US-based college students in the 2010s. When Gayle Rubin (2011: 354) discusses "the prevalence of amnesia about Queer Studies's past" in a 2003 Kessler Award Lecture, the anthropologist similarly observes that we have overlooked insights to be found in decades-ago literatures including "sexological texts and the homophile corpus." She writes, "I want us to think about longer processes that have shaped the present and in which the present is deeply rooted. Any scholarly project can benefit from an accumulation of knowledge that can be evaluated, validated, criticized, updated, polished, improved, or used to provide new trails to investigate. We need to be more conscious about including the older material in the contemporary canon of Queer Studies" (355).

My sense is that these recurrent bouts of amnesia respectively identified by Lorde, Chauncey, and Rubin lead to persistent generation gaps amidst our communities, across our scholarship, and within our pedagogical practices. These three pressure points of historical memory lapse often work in tandem. A paragraph after a request that we introduce more "older material" into our research, Rubin calls for "access to older knowledge" and "the conservation, transmission, and development of queer knowledges" (355). To these incisive remarks, I add access to historical knowledge about older queer and trans people that we transmit through syllabi. While other cultural theorists celebrate amnesia for its potential to write over deadening social formations,[1] I worry as a teacher in my midlife about erasures within university-based knowledges regarding pre- and post-Stonewall queer and trans later lives—lives that, in many instances, continue well into the present.

To be sure, we ourselves are not entirely to blame. Some of "the causes of limited memory," Rubin posits, "are more structural than stylistic, and are produced less by curricular decisions than by institutional impediments" (355). When one recalls the removal of references to trans people from the National Park Service's Stonewall National Monument website following President Donald J. Trump's Executive Order 14168—a disturbing magnification of longstanding trans erasures from within queer studies itself—Rubin's insight feels incontrovertible.[2] Yet Lorde reminds us that internalized ageism within LGBTQ communities may unfortunately assist other aspects of this amnesia. Though root causes are many, the fact remains that, for those who teach sexuality and gender-based courses in higher education today, amnesia between and about generations persists. These losses, I do not hesitate to add, pervade the educational landscape. They occur at elite institutions as well as non-elite educational spaces, and they impact students across socioeconomic levels.

These days I spend much of my course prep attempting to rectify this situation. My classroom energies concentrate on reintroducing later generations of queer and trans students to the near-enough past via an interdisciplinary seminar open to all majors. One primary aim of LGBTQ Lifespans is to give students a prismatic—rather than an exhaustive—sense of this topic that familiarizes them with newish materials about older queer and trans people largely from the 1970s to the 2020s. By no means does this course objective presume that older individuals are exclusively historical conduits for younger generations. Nor does it instrumentalize one age cohort in the service of another. Nor, for that matter, does it assume that younger generations have little to teach those who came before them (a lesson I relearn every academic year). Yet since my main concern in this short piece is what does and does not occur in our classrooms, I am most interested in how the university plays an important role in confirming or hindering historical memories. While I acknowledge that US classroom environments often skew younger, my wager is that readings, lesson plans, and assignments in a college course such as LGBTQ Lifespans will work as a mnemonic device for students who have ChatGPT at the ready yet don't know what they don't know about prior generations.

In keeping with the best practices of critical age studies, the seminar's first week introduces gerontologist Robert N. Butler's (1969: 243) coinage of *age-ism*, or "the subjective experience implied in the popular notion of the generation gap." Though Butler was attentive to impoverished Black and white older persons when he announced this concept in his trailblazing essay "Age-Ism: Another Form of Bigotry," he showed no interest in queer populations in a piece published the same year as the Stonewall riots. LGBTQ Lifespans does, however, and its course work

moves across disciplines and genres to examine queer takes on aging, ageism, and cross-generational matters. We read selections from Allen Ginsberg's *Death and Fame: Last Poems, 1993–1997* (1999) as well as Essex Hemphill's long poem "Vital Signs" (published in *Life Sentences: Writers, Artists, and AIDS* [1994]) on queer Black communities during the AIDS crisis. We screen a documentary about Jheri Jones, an older white trans woman living in the conservative Deep South (*The Joneses*, dir. Moby Longinotto [2016]), that contrasts with an experimental melodrama about interracial midlife crises set in and around Los Angeles (*The Owls*, dir. Cheryl Dunye [2010]). We discuss selections from a photobook, *To Survive on This Shore: Photographs and Interviews with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Older Adults* (2018), that highlights Gloria Allen, Justin Vivian Bond, Kate Bornstein, and others. We sample a biography, Justin Spring's *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade* (2010), and review writings, photographs, and realia archived in the Samuel Steward Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. We also review transcribed interviews with queer and trans Black older persons housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Together these readings testify to complex lifespans that wrestle with vagaries of the life course. Steward's materials, for instance, detail the pleasures and pains of growing older in the post-Stonewall San Francisco Bay Area up until his death in 1993 at age eighty-four: his attempts at intimacy with younger men, his commitments to writing mystery novels, and his health complications. A 2024 MacArthur Fellow, Bond at age fifty-four shares hard-earned wisdom germane to any gender-diverse age group: "I wish I had known when I was younger that I wasn't doing anybody in my family or my circle of friends—or myself—any favors by not being aggressive and asserting who I was from the get-go" (Dugan and Fabbre 2019: 108). *The Joneses* shows its protagonist navigating care institutions in her mid-seventies, recalling her flirtations with a local waiter, attending her Primitive Baptist church, and relishing everyday life in Pearl, Mississippi, as she faces down her extended biological family's transphobia. These are but three of our case studies that collectively exemplify persistence and vivaciousness on behalf of those queer and trans people who have seen a lot of living.

Since LGBTQ Lifespans never presumes such lives to be static, their respective dynamism leads us to consider the historical dynamism that infused their lifetimes. To make better sense of these case studies we anchor them in modern US histories of chronological and cultural aging that overlap with US queer and trans histories. This temporal framing typically spans from the rise of urban subcultures in the 1920s and 1930s that overlap with the passing of the Social

Security Act of 1935 to the decimation of queer lives during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis to the 2014 opening of Chicago's Town Hall Apartments providing affordable housing for LGBTQ older adults. We also spend a good deal of time scaffolding a theoretical apparatus for age studies across race, sexuality, gender, and disability that includes thinkers such as Lorde, Robert F. Reid-Pharr, Alison Kafer, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Freda L. Fair, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Arline T. Geronimus, Saidiya V. Hartman, Maggie Kuhn, and others.

Students occasionally get the opportunity to meet one of the individuals about whom they read, if schedule availability permits. While I have yet to take this class on a field trip to see Bond perform at Joe's Pub in downtown Manhattan, I have invited JEB (Joan E. Biren), a lesbian photographer now in her early eighties, to virtually visit each semester. JEB's Zoom login from Silver Spring, Maryland, occurs during a two-week unit that concentrates on Black queer "old-age justice" (Field 2021: 39). Specifically, we look at the life of Mabel Hampton (1902–89), a gender-nonconforming lesbian who worked as a dancer in her youth during the Harlem Renaissance. By the time she was in her mid-seventies, Hampton saw herself feted by US LGBTQ communities given her subcultural work with the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), where she was "a dedicated volunteer and elder"—and, I note, a raconteur and a flirt (Read 2025: 9). Yet until Hartman critically fabulated Hampton's young adulthood in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019), relatively little had been written about Hampton's participation in queer and trans interwar Harlem scenes despite her post-liberation renown. We read selections from Hartman, review materials from the LHA's archival holdings, discuss Hampton's late-life eroticism in an interview with Joan Nestle (1979), and then turn to JEB's photographs of Hampton featured in the journal *Sinister Wisdom* as well as in *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* (1979).[3]

JEB's online meeting grants students personal insight into the photo-shoot she conducted with Hampton in 1978. That alone is valuable. As she does so, she also shares her living memories of the post-Stonewall era via a PowerPoint slideshow that rehearses the contents of *The Dyke Show* (or, alternatively, *Lesbian Images in Photography 1850–1980*, depending on the precise year that she performed the show) that JEB toured throughout North America in the late 1970s to the mid-1980s.[4] This presentation typically begins with a genealogical overview of politically engaged photographers. From there it turns to the erasure of lesbians within US visual cultures as JEB narrates *Eye to Eye*'s production history and the legal difficulties of publishing a book in the late 1970s that showcases same-sex

intimacies between women. Sometimes she then shares her most recent artistic activities with us. Last semester, for example, she mentioned in passing her preparations for a 2025 exhibition, *Queer Lens: A History of Photography*, at the Getty Center in Los Angeles that features *Eye to Eye*.

Since most students are initially unfamiliar with this photobook, JEB's contemporary slideshow for LGBTQ Lifespans is an important counter to historical amnesia (and itself a continuation of *The Dyke Show* facilitated by new communication technologies such as Zoom). Given the firehose of information that suffuses their daily lives, it can be difficult for students to conceive of an era when the photographs that *Eye to Eye* reproduced—a portrait of Hampton on a Bronx sidewalk or one of Barbara Smith and her sister Beverly—were once hard to find. Beneficial, too, are the exchanges between this photographer and students as a bridge between a yawning generation gap. JEB was in her mid-thirties when *Eye to Eye* was published, and listening to her recount its place in US lesbian art history from the vantage point of older adulthood is deeply moving. Sometimes a student will ask a question about subcultural nomenclature during the 1970s. Or they query what JEB would like their generation to know about living as a queer woman in the twentieth century. Or JEB will ask them about their studies. It can be difficult to put into words the alchemy that occurs in these unfraught exchanges, but I usually sign off with a sense that we have conserved no small amount of queer knowledge.

Another example of this Rubinesque transmission: several weeks after JEB's visit students screen an uploaded event sponsored in part by the Commonwealth Club of California (now the Commonwealth Club World Affairs of California). On July 30, 2021, this West Coast-based organization facilitated "Celebrating QTAPI Pride with AAPI Leaders and Elders," a gathering hosted by Michelle Meow. Deploying the title *elder* as a honorific to counter ageist depictions of older community activists, the program featured five speakers introduced by Meow: Chinese American writer Kitty Tsui; Randall (Randy) Kikukawa, a Japanese American man who challenged homonormative gay bars in the Castro District; Crystal Jang, a "QTAPI Auntie" who cofounded OASIS (Older Asian Sisters in Solidarity) (4:23–25); Jasmine Jubillee Gee, identified by Meow "as an advocate and activist for LGBTQ organizations [as well as] a musician (a clarinetist, by the way) and a singer in three choral groups" (3:53–4:06); and Gil Mangaoang, a Filipino American man who contributed to the volume *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience* (1996).[5]

Over the course of more than an hour Gee, Jang, Kikukawa, Mangaoang, and Tsui share hurtful memories of their individual pasts and touch on topics such

as cross-generational activism, or what Jang characterizes as "battling for generations—prior generations and future generations—and I really believe that we have to be a multi-generational [and] intergenerational movement" (50:12–50:21). Their respective comments lead to productive discussions about interracial tensions within queer urban nightlife, the need for more cross-age cohort dialogues within queer and trans of color communities, and their own political emotions amidst ongoing "discrimination [that] was because of race, gender, sexual orientation, or now age" right up to 2021 (35:17–35:24).

As they share examples from their personal histories, they also invite us to mull over macro-historical forces that shaped—both constrained and facilitated—their lifespans well into the early 2020s. Gee, now in her mid-seventies, recounts,

> I grew up in a traditional Chinese home [and] attended an ultra-conservative church. [Sighs] I just couldn't shake it all through my years of high school. Then [in] college I saw an article in an adult magazine about Christine Jorgensen having her sex change in Denmark. So, and I thought, maybe I save some money and go there but it didn't happen because I also was told that I was crazy or sick. It took me many years. I was at least fifty when the Internet was available to people. So, either at work or at the library I researched the words *gay* and *transsexuals* and *cross-dressers* and I found that I'm okay and not crazy or sick like I've been told all my life. I joined several groups: a supportive group at City of Refuge before they moved to Oakland. Also Transgender SF and API [Wellness Center] (now SF Community Health Center). And so little by little I . . . but it took me six years before I—after going through group and individual therapy—till I was able to get a doctor to prescribe hormones. So, my journey took many years and detours because they say "third time's the charm." I went to two other surgeons, but it didn't turn out because finally the third one I was able to have my bottom surgery two and a half years ago. February 19, 2019. So, it's a long journey. (14:16–17:22)[6]

Gee's self-narration doubles as a history lesson for her audience in the summer of 2021 and our own seminar every fall semester. Her comments touch on the psychic damage wrought by religious bigotry and dominant discourses of abnormal psychology; white trans celebrityhood and the disidentifications that Jorgensen's fame allowed; therapeutic cultures facilitated by queer religious communities such as City of Refuge; and the felt experience of gender variance before and amidst the quickening of digital cultures. As she details how these historical phenomena sat-

urate her long life, Gee's recounting also stands as one of the many underreported histories of older trans Asian adulthood in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States.

Like Rubin (2011: 355) in 2003, Gee in 2021 asks us to consider "longer processes that have shaped the present"—especially those forces that shaped *her* present as she took the stage during the presidency of Joe Biden. These transmitted conditions amount to "a long journey," or what I would term trans of color longevity.[7] Repeatedly, her monologue emphasizes the arduous duration of a lifespan: "at least fifty when," "little by little," "many years and detours." Others, of course, may have more expedited experiences, but I highlight how Gee's documented narrative rehearses her age autobiography as an Asian trans woman living for decades in the late modern United States. Nearing the end of "Celebrating QTAPI Pride," Gee tells the audience that "it took me practically most of my life to get there" in reference to her epiphany that she is "a unique and special person" (51:30–51:38). At such moments the program offers up enduring lived histories and lived memories of endurance—the two go hand in hand—that typify what Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018: 237) calls "long-term survivorhood."

By witnessing queer and trans survivors such as JEB and Gee who counter historical amnesia, students not only have portions of the past introduced to them by prospering artists and activists. Paradoxically, they also acquire insight into their future queer and trans selves that advance Gang's commitments to "battling for generations." Attentive to those who contend with prolonging, they gain a sharpened sense of their own potential timelines "as a future dead person" and as a future living older person (Dinshaw et al. 2007: 184).[8] They likewise learn to view older personhood as something other than "contemptible or suspect or excess," as Lorde put it (1984: 117). They learn to yearn for this older self as much as they learn to alleviate some of their own anxieties about aging and vulnerability. Hence they leave the seminar with a new bank of keywords such as age standardization, late-life disability, and decline ideology as well as a new sense of prospective selfhood.

Prospective is key. Kids these days will be the first to acknowledge that longevity may be wished for but never chronologically assured. Given their generational coming of age amidst the repressions of the mid-2020s, young adults know all too well that they may not see subsequent decades of betterment. In this course they also learn that others before them came to similar realizations. When they read Sedgwick's (2003) ruminations on "the regular schedule of the generations" that contrasts with her own relational intimacies (149), they too agree that what she calls "a 'normal' generational narrative" may not always be there for the

taking given those "subject to racist violence, and for people deprived of health care, and for people in dangerous industries, and for many others" (148). But they nonetheless learn another personal history lesson when they encounter the tenacity of "still-here lives" (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018: 236): though longevity is often a thwarted ideal for many queer and trans people, that doesn't mean that you shouldn't keep at it. As one rising junior told me, they left the seminar "oldened and emboldened."

One of their final assignments concretizes that hoped-for outcome by asking students to exit the class where they began it: thinking more about their potentially older selves through an end-of-semester project focused on their creative aging. For this assignment, they get into pairs and compose an anti-ageist manifesto set seventy years after the present-day seminar that harkens back to their readings of a revolutionary document produced by Queer Nation activists in 1990. This assignment reinforces their self-valuation as older individuals while it also asks them to fantasize about potential historical arrangements that refuse to provincialize queer and trans later lives. So I have received manifestoes with titles such as "Chrono-Queer: The Testament of the Trans-cendent Time Travelers," "OLDIES (Older folks Living in Dominance In Every Sense)," "Crones, Crips, and Queers: A Manifesto for the Future We Deserve," and "Apocalyptic Aging Anarchy." The kernel of these stellar pieces can be summed up in a line from "Chrono-Queer" by Grayson Vives and Han Pimentel-Hayes (2024): "Intergenerational queer liberation is directly tied to the abolition of racism, mass incarceration, and all of that which truncates American lifespans."

From its first day to its last, LGBTQ Lifespans responds to an important question rehearsed by Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018: 244)—"*where are our queer elders?*"—as the seminar grants students a crisper sense of historicity. This query is a recurrent refrain for many of us personally and politically invested in teaching matters of aging and longevity.[9] But we should remind ourselves that the question has been answered as often as it has been asked. One fitting reply would be that *they never went away*. "You're going to stay until your time is up," Hampton once told Nestle (1979: 23), "If we *knew* that, then we'd be different." Even before we distribute our syllabi on the first day of classes, we should all do well to remember that older queers have been ever-present for decades, giving lectures, starring in films, writing poetry, managing archives, offering up oral histories, and participating in public programs. Around six years before he died of AIDS-related causes in 1988 at age forty, anthropologist Eric Michaels (1997: 129) wrote that "models exist in our very recent past. They should be recalled." More than four decades later, this invitation still stands—for the young, the old, and those somewhere in between.

Notes

1. See Halberstam (2011: 70), particularly the contention that "for women and queer people, forgetfulness can be a useful tool for jamming the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary."
2. See Stryker (2008: 153), particularly the essay's emphasis on "the micropolitical practices through which the radical implications of transgender knowledges can become marginalized."
3. Herring (2022) discusses these materials as well as Hampton's older adulthood at length.
4. My thanks to JEB for confirming these facts.
5. See also Mangaoang (1996).
6. I have edited and standardized this transcription of Gee's remarks based on closed captioning from the recorded program.
7. See Sharman (2021) for more on this topic, especially 273–74. For a comparable analysis that attends to "imaginable Black queer elder living," see Fair (2021: 608).
8. Readers should hear echoes of Kafer (2013: 44) for "a queercrip time that does not oppose queerness to longevity."
9. For another example, see Sharman's (2021: 275) request that "if we're going to learn how to look forward to aging and believe it's possible to be old, queer, and thriving, we need examples and role models."

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