

**QUEER DIS/ORDER:
Whiteness, Resistance, and Performance in The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence**

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In this proposal, I request funding to travel to New York to amass an archive of data on The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an international order of queer nuns. Using this archive, I will put the practices and philosophies of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in conversation with the theoretical frameworks of existential philosophy, queer theory, and critical race theory to conceive a more nuanced (sociogenic) approach to conceptualizing the queer, aging subject. In keeping with its unique political practices and philosophies (a convergence of political optimism, indulgent pleasure, and critical interrogation), The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence consists in a complex network of performative family relations and countercultural rituals that open up new avenues for thinking critically about the emerging field of queer aging. As such, I examine The Sisters as a case study for thinking about the complex relations of power, desire, pleasure, race, and sexuality that position the queer aging subject. With the data generated during the grant period, I hope to append rigorous, empirical data into a primarily theoretical discussion, permitting a more focused examination of the queer aging subject as it is mobilized in extant gerontology and queer aging scholarship.

I. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Histories of exclusion and marginalization among cohorts of older queer folk have been coupled by a scholarly occlusion of experiences of queer aging in the fields of gerontology¹ and queer theory. As discourse at the intersection of age studies and queer theory proliferates, the emerging field of queer aging proves to be theoretically and empirically rich. Here, queer theory opens a space for subverting prevailing, heteroliner life course narratives that previously calibrated the field of age studies. ‘Queering’ age takes up the project of breaking apart and reconfiguring cultural ideas about what it means to exist as a queer person with an aging body, imagining age in part as culturally and socially constructed rather than as a wholly asocial fact of life. Thus, a queering of age both names heteronormative iterations of aging (e.g., gerontological discourses like ‘successful aging’ and ‘decline ideology’) and deploys specific queer theoretical understandings of living outside of the norm (e.g. queer temporality, anti-assimilation, negativity, failure, and antisociality) in order to envision more nuanced ways of viewing representational discourses of age and understanding the subjective experiences and needs of queer elders. My project centers the rhetorical and discursive trends of queer aging scholarship.

Social gerontologists have taken up the project of incorporating queer folk’s experiences of aging into gerontological discourse. Much of the research on LGBT aging² comes from the life-course perspective, which takes into account the social and historical contexts that situate queer folks’ experiences of aging.³ Through engaging this perspective in empirical studies, researchers have aimed to assess the physical and mental health/wellness of LGBT older adults to better understand the relationship between sexual orientation and health outcomes. Likewise, social scientists have employed qualitative methodologies to generate insights on individuals’

¹ Gerontology is the study of aging.

² ‘LGBT aging’ is the terminology most commonly used in gerontological research on queer folks’ experiences of aging. I use this language in reference to current work in this field.

³ (Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., “The Unfolding of LGBT Lives: Key Events Associated With Health and Well-Being in Later Life,” *The Gerontologist* 57, no. suppl 1 (February 2017): S15–29, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnw185>; James D. Stowe and Teresa M. Cooney, “Examining Rowe and Kahn’s Concept of Successful Aging: Importance of Taking a Life Course Perspective,” *The Gerontologist* 55, no. 1 (February 1, 2015): 43–50, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnu055>; Angela M. O’Rand, “The Precious and the Precocious: Understanding Cumulative Disadvantage and Cumulative Advantage Over the Life Course,” *The Gerontologist* 36, no. 2 (April 1, 1996): 230–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/36.2.230>.

experiences of aging as LGBT identified persons.⁴ While this work in queer aging is valuable in its direct applicability to current gerontological praxis for LGBT identified elders (that is, living accommodations, health services, and social programs for older folk), it still locates a dearth in interdisciplinary theoretical discourse surrounding the queer aging subject. As such, there have been no systematic studies or gerontological frameworks that aim to explore resonances and dissonances between critical race theory, existential philosophy, queer theory, black feminist thought, and gerontology to bolster the theoretical rigor of queer aging scholarship; one example of such a consideration would be entering Jared Sexton’s Afro-Pessimism into conversation with gerontology’s treatment of the queer aging subject to more deliberately engage contemporary critical race studies in tandem with queer aging.

This proposal locates The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as a promising archive of evidence for engaging this interdisciplinary conversation, and in turn, for reconceptualizing the queer aging subject as it is currently regarded in queer aging and gerontological scholarship.



Images courtesy of
The Sisters of
Perpetual Indulgence
Inc. (thesisters.org)

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence first assembled in San Francisco, California (1979) during the gay liberation movement. Since its inception, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence has organized around a political commitment to relentlessly combating and exposing “the forces of bigotry, complacency, and guilt that chain the human spirit” (www.thesisters.org). The Sisters’

⁴ Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen and Anna Muraco, “Aging and Sexual Orientation: A 25-Year Review of the Literature,” *Research on Aging* 32, no. 3 (May 2010): 372–413, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027509360355>; Anna Muraco and Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, “‘That’s What Friends Do’: Informal Caregiving for Chronically Ill Midlife and Older Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 28, no. 8 (December 2011): 1073–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407511402419>; Anna Muraco and Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen, “The Highs and Lows of Caregiving for Chronically Ill Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Elders,” *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 57, no. 2–4 (2014): 251–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2013.860652>; Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., “The Physical and Mental Health of Lesbian, Gay Male, and Bisexual (LGB) Older Adults: The Role of Key Health Indicators and Risk and Protective Factors,” *The Gerontologist* 53, no. 4 (August 2013): 664–75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gns123>.

radical political organization disarticulates and appropriates many of the structuring fantasies of everyday life – here, family, biology, nationality, religion, gender, sexuality, respectability, and age all take on new meanings in response to the violences enacted by their normative political and social iterations. Herein lies the theoretical promise of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence for reconceptualizing the queer aging subject. By reimagining purportedly static elements of the life course that are incommensurable with queer folks’ experiences of aging, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence radically expands the political possibilities for experiencing and navigating aging as a queer person. Thus, a conversation staked in the practices and philosophies of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence that bridges the analytic and theoretical gap between extant queer aging scholarship and thinkers like Jared Sexton, Frantz Fanon, Cathy Cohen, and Michel Foucault will likely generate productive insights on the political fixations and possibilities future work in queer aging.

Using the data generated during the grant period, I plan to engage a theoretical reconceptualization of the queer aging subject as it is regarded in recent gerontological and queer aging scholarship. Here, I will take cues from critical race theory, queer theory, existential philosophy, and sociology to critically explore the conditions of possibility for queer aging engendered by the practices and philosophies of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. This research will complement existing scholarship by entering the analytic frameworks of critical race theory and existential philosophy into current discourse on queer aging and gerontology.⁵

II. METHODOLOGIES

My three methods of data generation will be semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and artifact collection. This variety of methods aims to produce rigorous, empirical insights on participants’ experiences in the New York Order of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence by engaging the deeply personal and intimate registers of queer subcultural involvement from various vantage points which offer participants narrative agency – a mindful

⁵ It is important to note that analyzing The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as a case study for engaging these conversations opens doors to *many* possible reformulations in the field of queer aging. In this proposal, I identify one possible avenue of inquiry which I presently view as particularly pressing and important. However, upon amassing an archive of data on The Sisters, a multitude of other analyses and projects could ensue that may contribute further to this conversation.

attempt to recognize and circumvent the researcher's influence in the co-creative process of data generation.

The primary method of data collection I will use is in-depth, qualitative interviews. Here, my list of questions reflects a semi-structured style which suggests but does not circumscribe the trajectory and content of conversations. I intend to open broad topics of conversation which allow participants to speak on whatever they find most interesting or important in their experiences of aging and time with The Sisters. This said, I have developed questions that signal the overarching themes of my current research on aging and enlance my interest in reframing the queer aging subject (the life course, resistance, temporality, race, family, etc.). While analysis will center interview transcripts from this portion of my study, I will also take notes during interviews when necessary to mark pauses, voice inflection, and body language to ensure accurate recording of the sentiments which underwrite interview comments.

My second method, participant observation, aims to glean a closer look at the relationships and dynamics between members of The Sisters as well as interactions between the Order and the wider New York community. Here, I will engage in participant observation at events hosted by and protests attended by The Sisters. 'The NYC Disorder of Sisters' Facebook page will offer a means of tracking these events and protests leading up to and throughout the grant period.

The final method of data collection will be artifact collection, which will include gathering flyers, meeting minutes, mission statements, manifestos, Facebook posts, and photo-elicitation. Artifact collection is intended as a rich adjunct of participant observation and in-depth interviews, to connect and inform the conversations and questions which drive overall data collection. For photo-elicitation, participants will be given disposable digital cameras to allow them to photograph events of their everyday lives during the grant period (participants will take pictures of the people/places/events/actions that have been most central to their experiences in The NYC Sisters and to their experiences of aging). I intend to distribute cameras during the first event held by The Sisters upon arriving in New York and will collect cameras prior to conducting interviews. Photo-elicitation, as well as other forms of artifact collection, has been found to greatly enhance participant recall and responsiveness during qualitative interviews, as a well-established technique in the social sciences.

III. EXPECTED RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

I will code and analyze the data collected during the grant period for a general research paper, which I will present at the 2019 Undergraduate Research Symposium. Here, I plan to use *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence* as a case study alongside critical race theory and existential philosophy (in particular, the work of Jared Sexton, Frantz Fanon, and Cathy Cohen) in order to assert a new analytic framework for queer aging scholarship. Moreover, I plan to coalesce findings from this project with my current work on queer aging under the *Caring and Aging with Pride* project. I hope to present elements of this combined project at the 2018 National Women's Studies Association conference and a variety of other conferences which center time studies and critical theory.

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Grant Period Schedule: May 7th – May 22nd

Monday, May 7th, 2018: Depart from LAX, arrive at NYC

Tuesday, May 8th, 2018: Distribute disposable cameras to study participants

Sunday, May 13th, 2018: Collect disposable cameras and process photos

Monday, May 14th – Monday, May 21st, 2018: Conduct interviews (with reference to collected photos)

Tuesday, May 22nd, 2018: Depart from NYC, arrive at LAX

Because The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence plan new events each year, and scheduling varies, I do not yet have a specific schedule for participant observation, interviews, and artifact collection. I estimate attending four events/protests/meetings, completing 15-20 interviews (including skype interviews which extend beyond the grant period), and spending roughly three days compiling data, artifacts, and field notes throughout the grant period. In the months leading up to May, I will be able to develop a more detailed schedule.

Budget

Travel:

- Roundtrip Flight, LAX to NYC: \$300.00
- Transportation in NYC: \$150.00

Housing:

- 16 nights: \$1000.00

Food:

- \$400.00

Research Stipend:

- \$400.00

Total: \$2250.00