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Sex and Senesce: A Exploration of Aging Women's Sexual Selves
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Abstract

The sexual lives of women over the age of 50 are often forgotten from just about every medium. This research hopes to uncover how aging women interpret their current sexual selves, sexual histories, and changing bodies. In thinking about this, four women were interviewed about their life stories surrounded love, passion, and sex. Each of these women told brave accounts of their lives and through their narratives, we were able to draw theoretical conclusions about bodily shame, age performativity, and prescribed stereotypical roles. These four stories, told individually as to support each woman's personal narrative are vastly different yet intersect in many ways. The research concludes an important theoretical analysis of an aging woman's connection to life and how both age and gender are situated in a faulty timeline. Their unforgettable stories explore what life looks like as the years slip away and show how the process of aging is a universal human struggle.

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Sex and Senesce: A Exploration of Aging Women's Sexual Selves

About a month ago my mom sent me a Comedy Central clip entitled “Last Fuckable Day,” in which actresses celebrate the last day that they can be seen as “fuckable” on screen. She called me and said, “Old women are still fuckable! Who do you think has had the most sex Comedy Central!” I laughed but didn’t ignore my mom’s comment. Her body was being deemed undesirable, unwanted, and not sexy by all the media in front of her and she wanted me to know that she was still getting it on. This phenomenon, the perception that older women do not have sex is not unique the movies and television. We edit the sexual narratives of older women out of nearly everything: sex advice columns, porn, and most academic discussions interrogating questions around sex and sexuality. Throughout the history of feminist and queer studies there has been a large focus on these sexual narratives, the way that people interpret sex, their bodies, and intimacy with others. Yet, once women turn 50 there seems to be a drop off in research and curiosity around their sexual narratives. Third wave feminism empowers women to live sexually free and own their own desire and promiscuity, yet conversations around aging sexuality is still seen as taboo and even disgusting. Young feminists do not include older women into their conversations around sexual liberty or freedom of self, yet it is older women who probably know the most about their own bodies having been sexually active for over 50 years. We are 20 year olds who think we know the world about owning our orgasms and determining the terms of our sexual relationships but we seem to have forgotten to include a seat for the true masters at the table.

This research plans to integrate, problematize, and open up questions of sexuality and aging women in hopes to give light to the importance of sex as one ages and shifts within their body and self. With age comes changes in desire, intimacy, and physical ability and the research will focus on the ways that women talk about their sexual selves now in comparison to when they were younger. The research will encourage a more nuanced history of sexual liberation by interviews with women who have lived through many generations of sexual perspectives. Further, the research will study the intersections between the mental processes of aging as it pertains to sex as well as the medical processes of aging. Thinking about the way that body changes as one's natural effects of old age start to settle in. The research will focus on interviews women between the ages of 50 and 80 individually in hopes to open a more fluid and cross-generational conversation around sexuality. The research will hopefully open a conversation around sex beneficial to those involved because it allows to kinship bonds and uninhibited vulnerability. And importantly, my presence as young American researcher will allow both a multi-generational as well as cross-cultural conversation about intimacy and sexuality to encourage learning from both sides of the table.

Methodology, Demographics, and Positionality

Method

In conducting this research I have chosen to work with oral histories and participant guided interviews surrounding sexuality and aging. Through five interviews I was able draw certain conclusions of the sexual lives of aging women as well as ponder the difference between these certain women due to their upbringing, perceptions of sex, and relationships. I plan to focus on each of the four female interviewees and analyze them dependent on the topics discussed. I do this to honor the importance of individual stories and not to conflate experiences. I started each interview with a couple of specific questions and then dived deeper into other topics dependent on what the participants wanted to discuss. The topics started with sexual history to get some general background on their perspectives of sex and sexuality and see their relevant perspectives. We discussed the ways in which sex has impacted their lives and their attitudes about sexuality and their bodies now. I wanted the interviews to be self guided to anticipate any road the interview was to follow. With some participants we talked mostly about their relationships and with others their own personal ideas about their body and their sexual selves. All interviews were recorded in hopes to be able to draw on them as much as possible in my analysis and all participants agreed in verbal consent before the interview.

Demographics

I worked with two different sectors of aging women, as well as interviewed a man about his sexual relationship with his wife. I chose to focus on two specific groups of women for this

project as I wanted to try and reach as many experiences as possible. The first three women and one man were from the Humanitas Retirement Home in Deventer, and were ages 70-90. I was able to speak to them with the help of a translator due to the fact that they did not speak English. I chose this nursing home in particular due to the cross-generational living that is a pillar of this project. The some 160 residents live along side of six youth participants in order to create a healthier and flourishing community. I thought that residents at this home would be particularly open due to their access to youth as well as being accustomed to interviews. This was correct on both accounts and all four participants I spoke to in this home were very open to sharing with me as well as my translator about their experiences with sex and sexuality. I also chose to reach out to someone else who was slightly younger and living independently to gain a different perspective on aging as well as possibly the differences between in-home care and living healthily by oneself. These two situations provided many key differences in lifestyle. I achieved my goal of interviewing someone in every ten year age bracket, as I had participants 65, 74, 88, and 90. The differences in sexual perspective between those that grew up in the countryside as opposed to experiencing life in the city were drastic and very crucial to understanding the demographics of these women.

Positionality

As a young American student I wanted to be very conscious of my positionality as well as tending to the vulnerable subjects that my participants were discussing with me. I am so thankful for their openness but to not acknowledge the language barrier or inability to be able to discuss their experiences with them without a translator would be naive. It was clear that some participants were more comfortable with my questions than others and varied between giving

short one word answers and long 20-30 minute responses. Due to my age and status as an American I did not push forth on some of the harder questions surrounding assault because I did not want to force my participants to answer anything they did not feel comfortable answering and I was unsure about translated material.

Literature Review and Analysis

*To you, Primal spirit, one with rock and wave,
 One with survivors of flood and fire,
 Who have rebuilt their homes a million times,
 Who have lost their children and borne them again.
 The words I hear are strength, laughter, endurance.
 Old Woman I meet you deep inside myself.
 There in the rootbed of fertility,
 World without end, as the legend tells it.
 Under the words you are my silence.
 -May Sarton¹*

My experience with aging started when I was very young and began spending time with my grandmother. My father's mother, Michael Anne, or Mike as she was called by those around her, was nothing short of incredible in my eyes. She was strong, tough, and powerful. I think that I got a lot of my determination and strength from her in many ways. Yet, she was also very ill and from her sullen eyes and paper-thin skin it was clear that her inner battles were much more grave than she projected on the outside. Like many older women, she had taken on the role of 'stoic bearer.'² She had committed to her role of women in the household and refused to let that guard down under any circumstances. She was diagnosed with colon cancer and taking care of my grandfather who suffered from a stroke and other complications. Her tie to the production of

¹Taken from May Sarton's poem "When a Woman Feels Alone."

² This term taken from as Karen A. Roberto and Sandra G. Reynolds text discusses the women holding their pain internally as to not show any outward physical symptoms. This often happens when both members of a relationship are ill and the woman feels the need to continue to be the caregiver and bear the pain of both parties internally.

her caretaking role was so intense that the day after we moved my grandfather into a nursing home, she died. The weight of bearing others pain off her shoulders, she did not have any purpose to her life.

The complexity of aging femininity is one that is not often explored and I believe that looking critically at the intersections that reside in the lives of aging women between disability, gender performativity, sexual production of self, and death can give great insights into not only what life looks like for half the population as they grow older but also our existence and connection to mortality and death. I have chosen to specifically focus on the sex lives of older women to examine a key element of how we think about our bodies and as a lens to the construction of selfhood that these older women are facing. The story of my grandmother is one of many experiences that aging women can have, like every story, the stories that I heard were vastly different but all connected in many ways. Most of the literature that questions the intersection between sex and age comes from a medical perspective. Speaking about the changes in the body and how they will impact ones sexual lives and ability to perform desired sexual acts. There is little research that I have found that asks more theoretical questions around sex and age. Using both the few sources I have found interigating theoretical perspectives as well as theories examining other elements of femininity, gender, and medical perspectives of aging I plan to look at the bodies of aging women through the lens of queer theory and gendered self.

From the medical side of the argument there are many important aspects that must be acknowledged in creating an accurate review of the previous research in this field. Females generally, across species out live their male counterparts.³ Many researchers of gerontology

³For this portion of the text I will use the term females and males multiple times. This is to decipher those born with a vagina and those born with a penis. I use these terms because the majority of the medical

suggest the “male–female dysregulation–frailty paradox” which states that men are living shorter lives but women age with more fragility than men.⁴ Further, more men report being sexually active later than women most likely due to the fact that older men are dying leaving their partners alone and slightly younger aging men are choosing to be with younger women as opposed to women in their same age bracket.⁵ The research looking into the medical aspects of male aging have bounced between the US Baltimore Longitudinal Aging Study in the 1970s that showered an inverse linear relationship between age and sexuality and more recent research that has focused more on hormonal and vascular factors of aging.⁶ The majority of studies in recent years have focused on erectile dysfunction. This is caused by a decrease in production of the male sex hormone testosterone as one ages. As the production of testosterone slows there is a loss of sexual interest and in many cases dysfunction.⁷ As a result, researchers have coined the term “Viagra culture,” this drug along with other sexo-pharmaceuticals have become instrumental in shaping the lives of older men since their creation. Viagra, the magical little blue pill that has shaped the TV commercial and bathroom cabinets of men since it’s creation, puts male sex drive at the forefront of how we think about sexuality and aging. The risk of impotence (erectile dysfunction) for some men is so severe that they fear any intimacy without the use of Viagra or other enhancer as this mechanism of “penetration” is of utmost value not only to their sex lives but their construction of masculinity. This is key in explaining the difference between

research in this field refers to human bodies in this way. Although these are not the most inclusive terms to identify the body I have chosen these terms to follow along with the current medical research happening today. Further, all participants in this study are ciswomen and the theoretical analysis that I plan to make follows the ciswomen historical narrative so I have chosen to use female pronouns and identifies.

⁴Le Couteur, David. 2017. 140.

⁵ Bancroft, John. 2007.

⁶Bancroft.

⁷ *Ibid.*

how we view aging male bodies as opposed to female bodies. Once women go through menopause their bodies are no longer a “useful” part of society as they can not procreate, but with the invention of Viagra the male body can always be a mechanism for reproduction and therefore always an integral part of society.

As women age the story their body tells is much more complex. According to Jennifer Baumbusch, “Very little research has focused on the unique experiences of single women, particularly as they age.”⁸ The post menopausal female body is something that has not been closely studied and in many ways, I believe that researchers are afraid of the bodies of aging women because they are seen as disgusting and unimportant. What is known is menopause causes physiological changes like less lubrication (otherwise known as dry vagina) and decreased estrogen levels which causes decrease in sex drive. Compared to many of the studies done with men there is greater research around the intersection of mental health and sexuality. With women researchers seem obsessed with the mental effects of aging as opposed to men in which they purely focus on how to make their anatomy function “properly.” Research published by John Bancroft in the *New England Journal of Medicine* stated, “Whereas many women report a decrease in their sexual interest and responsiveness as they progress through midlife, they are less likely to become distressed or worried about such changes as they get older,”⁹ which I have found vastly untrue. Many of the woman that I spoke to did have some decrease in sexual interest but in fact became more worried about changes in their bodies as they got older. Further, this research drew the connection that for many women the issues involving their partners sexual satisfaction becomes more important than their own satisfaction. Much of the research studying

⁸ Mintz, Susannah B. 2007.

⁹ Bancroft.

the bodies of older women follows these same patterns, placing mental health and the satisfaction of their partners above all else. These stereotypes are not only reflected in studies researching aging populations but are widespread theories about female sexuality. The conception that women care more about their partners satisfaction than they own health or wellbeing promotes the use of the female body as a vesicle for male pleasure. I plan to challenge many of these stereotypes. Although I do not have a background in medical gerontology, many of these conclusions drawn by census and studies do not ring true to the experiences of aging that I have heard.

From a more theoretical perspective there is a small group of researchers looking into this field. Scholars are starting to pick up on the absence of aging women in the narratives and stories of feminism and are looking to bring light to this ignored group of women yet it still seems that like the media, and feminist and queer theorists as a collective are afraid to get involved with aging bodies. This might be a result of the history of queer theory as a relatively young discipline in itself but scholars like Linn Sandberg, a Swedish researcher on aging and masculinity, and Catherine Kudlick, a native Californian studying disability and the other, are challenging the notion that queer theory can only be applied to those under the age of 50. Further, Susannah B. Mintz text, "Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities," includes a chapter on the work of May Sarton, a poet and author who wrote about age and dying, whose insights into this topic are not only beautiful but critical to understanding this field.¹⁰ Sanberg's text "Getting Intimate: a feminist analysis of old age, masculinity & sexuality," is the main jumping off point for my reaserch as it draws from Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" and Elizabeth Grosz's,

¹⁰Mintz, Susannah B. 2007.

“Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism,” to analyze the ways that queer theory can be applied to old age. I am planning to use Sanberg’s analysis of aging men as a comparison study to the ways that society looks at aging women.¹¹ By using her theory of affirmative old age along a Grosz and Butler methodology of performativity and body morphology, and Mintz’s beautiful words to describe the processes of aging I plan to look deeply at the place that bodies of older women hold in society, on the street as well as in the sheets.¹²

Aging is not just a biological process, it is a process of becoming, in which interpretation of the world shifts and cultural values around sexuality drastically change.¹³ This process of becoming is important as one thinks critically about how one situates themselves in an aging timeline. As you “become” old you get cast in a multitude of stereotypes that are associated with your new physical status as aged. Magnus Nilsson describes gerontology as “a critical approach to social structures, norms, and cultural representations, rather than from individual ageing.” Sanberg uses this idea to come up with the idea of affirmative aging as a new way to conceptualize old age as opposed to the previously used term successful aging. She says “Whereas successful aging relies on mid-life body norm, and is saturated by neo-liberal discourses of activity, autonomy, and generativity, affirmative old age is an alternative challenge to decline discourses on old age.” (50) Her theory does not attempt to reject and fight ideas of old age, insisting that the aging communities are just as sexually fit as younger populations, instead it seeks to redefine and accept an aging body for what it is. Using this theory to displace the classic aging timeline and look at the ways that progression of selfhood is inherently linked

¹¹ Sandberg, Linn. 2011.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

to our idea of human. As one becomes old, they are no longer on an upward neo-liberal capitalist production of self and therefore we dissociate them useful members of society.

In “Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism,” Grosz challenges our binary way of thinking about bodies. Sandberg combines this theory with Butler’s text “Gender Trouble,” to look at the social production of gendered bodies through the aging process. This analysis allows her to look at the implications of the morphological gendered body and how it is situated in culture.¹⁴ A phallic and penetrating body represents the peak of man, humanity, and youth in opposition to the feminine body as soft and docile.¹⁵ Focusing in on the factor of impotence, the lack of erection and therefore inability to penetrate. This not only becomes a sign of aging but a signifier of loss of masculinity and therefore proximity to human.¹⁶ Pulling Grosz’s theory of morphology of the body and Butler’s concept of performed gender, Sandberg is able to discuss the process of aging as loss of gendered manhood.¹⁷ This concept is key to her argument, as the male body ages and becomes further away from the penetrating figure of masculinity and the performance of manhood becomes more difficult. These theories link the production of self and the production of gender. I plan to use these texts to discuss the morphological production of age. Through the process of aging, bodies dissociate from the traditional gender norms that these theorists discuss.

Susannah B. Mintz’s text “Unruly Bodies” tells the stories of women with disability. In her chapter, “a brief history of aging,” she explores the journals of May Sarton, a prolific writer and poet that discussed aging and sickness through words. Her analysis although not theoretical

¹⁴ Butler, Judith. 1990.

¹⁵ Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994.

¹⁶ Sandberg.

¹⁷ Butler.

in practice serves a very important purpose in exploring the inner lives of aging women. I have chosen to include Mintz's writing and further Sartons work because I believe it is important to include creatives working in the margins of theory and stories that exist outside of a more technical discourse. Mintz discusses the stereotyping of older women into specific troupes and identifies.

The cultural types representing older women—grandmother, crone, spinster, and mother-in-law—perpetuate attitudes toward female identity as defined primarily through familial status and further split the aging woman's body into a kind of sweet/sour dichotomy, an idealized fleshiness associated with physical affection and food, and the smells and fluids of infirmity or death.¹⁸

Older women exist in this category on the margins of human, no longer useful for procreation and often not able to participate in the same family structure. At the same time, as one's body changes it becomes unrecognizable to the self, "the very unfamiliarity of a recovering or altering body," and the translation of this new self and creation of gendered and aged body was Sartons particular interest.¹⁹ Sartons work spoke to many aging women as well as those whose bodies have been deemed undesirable. She said we must "quell the 'monster' that is the emotional, embodied, gendered, sexual, and aging self: "'We have to make myths of our lives or we wouldn't be able to stand them.'"²⁰ This is my favorite quote of hers as she fully faces the monstrosity that is cast upon an aging women. Theorists like Sanberg and Grosz can analyze the

¹⁸ Mintz, Susannah B. 184.

¹⁹ Mintz, Susannah B. 187.

²⁰ Mintz, Susannah B. 200.

performativity and queered aspects of aging but through this quote and many others Sarton is able to depict the experience of aging in a way unlike others.

In using Sandberg's theory of affirmative old age as well as Nilsson's definition I plan to redefine the aging woman not as something to be compared to young bodies but a different morphological entity all together.²¹ When we dissociate the aging female body from the young female body then we can fracture the timeline of sexuality and desire and allow the body to create its own narrative. Although, this is more complicated than it may seem at first glance because gender performance is inherently linked to an aging timeline. Our performance of self is based on the world around us and we cannot separate a biological timeline of femininity as much as we might like. I will argue that as one gets closer to death and further from fertility, the production of gender becomes more complex and situated in a different identification of sexual self. As the body goes through the process of senescence, I will argue that your performance identity is linked to your age before your gender.²² This process has not been deeply analyzed in aging women and I plan to use Sandberg's theory as well as much of the language that the poet May Sarton uses to discuss aging to further research this concept.

Participant Interviews

Through this process I talked to four incredible, independent women. Each of them had their own battles with aging, stories from the close and far past, and deep wisdom and strength. I wanted to honor each of their stories by recounting their narratives through individual analysis. They allowed me into their lives and I wanted to make sure their oral histories were told to the

²¹ Sandberg.

²² *Ibid.*

best of my ability. Their experiences are those of love, care, fear, and shame. All so different yet each sharing with me their war with life that they are slowly losing. A struggle that we all lose in the end and to ignore those on the margins of this sacred boundary would be a loss to all, as their stories are ever present accounts of what it means to be human. I have chosen to guide each story with a quote by May Sarton. These creative words will guide us through these souls and allow me to not only draw theoretical conclusions but shed light on the beauty that these women possess.

Roos-

So let the world go, but hold fast to joy. -May Sarton²³

When I walked up to Roos she was sitting in the window with a friend. She was my first interview of the day and one of the older participants that I talked to.²⁴ Coming in at 88, her laughter was the background to the whole interview process. Every question seemed to be met with giggles and quick glances at her friend sitting across from her. Her cheeks were pink to match her shirt and her hair was tucked behind her ear with a green beret. Roos was born in Deventor, the home of Humanitas, and has lived there ever since. She was silly throughout the interview and although she seemed quite alright with speaking to me, she kept her answers relatively short and simple. It was clear from the beginning of the interview that for Roos, any desire for sexuality had passed many years ago. Her husband died a while back, she couldn't quite remember how many years exactly, and she said she had "No desire for another man in her bed."²⁵ It felt naive for me to assume that all older women would crave the sexual aspect of a

²³ "64 Inspiring Quotes by May Sarton That Will Give You Lessons for Life." The Famous People.

²⁴ Roos, interview by Cordray McCann, November 11, 2019.

²⁵ Roos.

relationship and throughout my interview with Roos it became clear that she had no desire to be in an intimate relationship in any way.

As I listened and she laughed I came to my final question, I asked her if her changing body impacted how she felt about herself. This was my last question in many of my interviews because throughout the interview participants mostly discussed their relationships in terms of partners and I wanted to examine the way that both these relationships and the world around them impacts their experience of aging. Roos stated that, “She still feels very young, her mouth still functions the same way,”²⁶ alluding to the ability to be able to talk, laugh, and communicate with those around her. This answer seemed to contradict her adamant opinion that she did not want another person in her life even though she still thought of herself as a young person. I realized that our perception of youth and age is very tied to production. Being able to be a functioning member of society whether it is conceptualized or not is a lot about ability to produce either children or labor. My perception of young, subconsciously represented this same ideal. Roos’ idea of living youthfully had to do with experiencing every day of her life with joy, not as a means of production. In Roos’ story youth becomes linked to her words as opposed to her body, and her ability for her mouth to still function is key to her interpretation of a good life.

Lente-

Now I become myself. It's taken time, many years and places. -May Sarton²⁷

Upon knocking on Lente’s door we were greeted with a warm smile, met with a room full of plants and color, and asked to leave the door cracked behind us. Lente was wearing a green sweater and sat in the chair closest to the window with a music stand draped in needlepoint in

²⁶ Roos.

²⁷ “64 Inspiring Quotes by May Sarton That Will Give You Lessons for Life.” The Famous People.

front of her. Her walls were covered in handcrafted embroidery replicas of famous paintings, the Mona Lisa standing out right above, Sores, our translators head. In the beginning of our interview she seemed shy, closed off, almost embarrassed. We started with her name and brief background. Also from Deventer, she has lived in the home since her husband died three years ago. When her previous marriage came up in conversation, her story seemed to break open and she launched into a 20 minute recount of her traumatic abusive marriage. She told all of this with great strength and a calm demeanor. Her story although hard to listen to is not unique in its noticeable aftermath of abuse in relationships.

Lente said that she had a good marriage but then three years before her husband died he fell and something went wrong in his head, “from there on out he changed, he changed completely. It was not his fault of course but in the later stage he got dementia and he got kind of aggressive, and every time she wanted to kiss him or touch him he didn’t allow it because he didn't think it was pure, it was clean.”²⁸ She was left with the horrific decision that many women are left with as their husbands begin the processes of aging. Leaving someone who is sick and dying or staying in an abusive relationship. Lente chose to stay, but three years later after he passed, she refused to address him with love in his funeral announcement. When she told us this, at first I was confused, the absence of the word beloved before his title seemed like such a small detail that it could have almost been overlooked in passing but Lente make sure that we knew the importance of this fact. It was an intentional decision to help heal herself from all the pain that he had caused her. Not only did her age separate herself from who she used to be, but now she had this layer of abuse coating her sexual self and history of love.

²⁸ Lente, interview by Cordray McCann, November 11, 2019.

She lost a lot of her close friends after the funeral announcement was released. People around Lente were disappointed in her for not keeping on track with the regime family structure. Her decision to not address her deceased husband pushed people away because her defined role of a wife and women, to bear male pain above all else had been questioned.²⁹ Although she said that many of these people came back to her a year or so after the funeral, she refused to gain contact with them again. Lente's strength is powerful but her story still shows the cracks that remain after abuse whether that is at age 30 or 90. When asked about finding a new partner she expressed fear about seeking out someone new because, "she doesn't want to get into the same situation that she had with her previous husband, she kind of fears that situation so that is why she doesn't go for it anymore."³⁰ Her fear is not uncommon and remains a thread that runs through many of these stories, fear of falling in love again after death or in this case a combination of death and abuse.

I asked many of the participants if they talk to anyone in their lives about sex and sexuality. I was trying to gauge what conversations between older women about these topics look like. For Lente she says she did not have that many conversations about sex but did talk to Frans³¹ about her life with her husband. Frans has also been helpful in for her in recovery and she said "Sometimes she still has needs, despite her age, but those needs are longing for someone putting an arm around her shoulder or something like that. And we have the staff over here and also Frans, the guy that we just interviewed, so sometimes she does have moments with those

²⁹Mintz, Susannah B. 2007.

³⁰ Lente.

³¹ Frans is a resident at Humanitas that we interviewed at the beginning of the day. His wife suffers from dementia and he has been a support system for Lente as she is recovering from the years of abuse.

kind of people so it is a form of intimacy.”³² This type of intimacy was less about physical connection and more about presence. Lente said that after her husband, she had no desire for sexual intimacy but she still wanted to connect with others in ways that made her feel comforted and safe. Lente, like Roos, has no desire to find another relationship but does want closeness with others.

I have decided to deem these relationships as kinship care communities. Lente’s relationship with Frans and Roos’s relationship with her friend provide similar support and physical touch as a marriage but without the desire for sexual intimacy attached. Kinship is the core of social anthropology, rooted in the colonial enterprise that’s theory stretches far and wide.³³ Although in this context I choose this term as a more significant relationship than friendship but without the technicality of family. As our lives become a countdown of years instead of decades we rely on those around us for connection to humanity. This element of communication, conversation, and allegiance is the same as Roos’s comment about still having her mouth. These women do not desire the sexual intimacy that we have cast as the most important form of human connection but instead the kinship ties to those around them. Conversations between Frans and Lente have created this strong bond rooted in their commonality of struggling partners.

Whenever she comes over, Sophie³⁴ sometimes yells at her but it is because of her condition because she has dementia. Whenever there is another situation going on, and Frans wants to talk about it, he ultimately comes to her [Lente] and she gives him advice because she has experience in this area and she tells him not to go against it but go along

³² Lente.

³³ Bell, Kenton, ed. 2013.

³⁴ The wife of Frans.

with it because sometimes they can be aggressive, her husband was also aggressive, he yelled at her and he got physical. Sometimes she yelled back at him but she never got physical and she gives people advice in those kind of area.

Being able to understand and support Frans in this aspect creates a tie between them stronger than friendship. She has been able to open up about her abuse because he experiences similar aspects of her relationship in his. These connections are extremely necessary for these women as they no longer want to connect on a sexual route but do not deserve to be left alone. Being deemed no longer a productive member of society means that they are deemed almost as less than human but these kinship ties allow them to remain in patterns of growth as they are aging.

Another key question that I asked my participants was if they still felt beautiful or sexy and how do they feel about their self-esteem. Lente said that she does not still feel desirable but then discussed her performed age.

Sometimes when she walks into this building and she sees a couple of elderly she doesn't want to look that old. Sometimes when she finds out how old they are, they are younger than she is right now but she is happy as she doesn't look as old as how they look. That is why she sometimes helps the staff for example with the dishes and those kind of things because those kind of things help her feel young. She says also whenever she goes shopping and she sees a couple of nice things her son always tells her to buy those things.

I then asked her if she worried more about looking young or looking feminine. She said it is much more about youth than anything else. This performance of youth is very similar to Butler's gender performativity.³⁵ Lente in this example not only compares herself to those around her by

³⁵ Butler.

physical ability but also appearance. She says she likes that she doesn't look as old as them even though she is 90. There is a body politic coming into play here as she plays into and tries to defy her social role of aging women. To her, the ability to wash dishes and help out around the community allows her to perform youth. This task although very simple allows her to resist the morphological body that has been attached to her personhood at 90 years old.

Flore-

I am not ready to die, But I am learning to trust death As I have trusted life. I am moving toward a new freedom. -May Sarton³⁶

Flore's story is one that I was not prepared to hear walking into the nursing home that day. She was out last interview and both the translator and I were tired and trying to figure out whether we wanted to push on to one last interview for the day. When I entered Flore's room she was sitting on her couch with the TV on and drinking tea. She ushered us inside and allowed us to sit on the couch horizontal to her so that we faced her in an L-shape. She turned off the TV to face us with strong eyes and placed her hands in her lap to rest there. The conversation started like the others, Flore told us that she was 74 years old, our youngest participant by over ten years and that she had lived here for awhile. Although the interview was relatively short and she gave us mostly short answers, her story spoke for itself. At the end of the interview, upon being asked if she had ever talked about this before, she said that we were the only people that knew, and pressed a finger to her lips in a "shh," motion. She gave a sad smile as we left her and that image of shame and sadness but also freedom of being able to have told her story will stick with me.

³⁶ "64 Inspiring Quotes by May Sarton That Will Give You Lessons for Life."

I started by asking her about her sexual history and she answered my question simply by saying, “When it started it was bad.”³⁷ After this and many more questions we discovered that she had been married three times. With her first husband, whom she married when she was young, they did not have any privacy, as a result of living with his parents. In her second marriage, she said that he was very aggressive and she was forced to have sex. I asked about her third relationship, the translator had a brief conversation with her and then turned back to me. “He died three years ago, it wasn't that good with Joost [her third husband] either because he wasn't used to it. When they met he was pretty old and before he met her he was never really in a relationship and then I asked her if he was still a virgin at the time and he said yes.”³⁸ Flore had three very different and intense sexual situations, from denial, to abuse, to discomfort, her sex life had never really been a part of how she thought about herself or her relationships. She said that this was as a result of her parents, “In her younger years, her parents never really allowed anything and she had a brother and he had a girlfriend and they allowed him to go on holiday with her and have sex with her but they never really allowed Flore to get into that situation.”³⁹ This created a culture of fear around sex that permeated all of her sexual relationships as well as conversations with her children around sex. When I asked her if she agreed with the way her parents raised her she said she didn't agree with them but still was not willing to have open conversations with her own children about sex and sexuality. Her relationship with her children is rocky and at the end of the interview asking her if she had anything else she wanted to add to her story she said, “She misses her children a lot. They are 41 and 39 now.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Flore, interview by Cordray McCann, November 11, 2019.

³⁸ Flore.

³⁹ Flore.

⁴⁰ Flore.

Flore's story is riddled with shame and regret. She was raised in an household where women were not supposed to have conversations around sex and this therefore resulted in three struggling marriages. She said she had no desire to be with another partner but unlike Roos and Lente, she did not have a community of support around her. In asking about her finding another partner she shared that she cannot control her bowel or bladder and so she does not feel comfortable in her body around other people. She said, "She doesn't want to do that to another person. She doesn't feel comfortable with it on a sexual level but also just being with someone."

⁴¹ Flore's shame about her body and inability to control herself has created an environment in which she feels uncomfortable around others. Flore's life story is a classic example of the way that we force older women and women in general to fit into specific roles of wife, mother, or sexual partner. Because she has never felt successful in these roles she feels like a failure and not able to open up to others.

Sanne

We have to dare to be ourselves, however frightening or strange that self may prove to be.

-May Sarton⁴²

I met up with Sanne at a cafe for a couple of minutes from my office. When I sat down she was already sipping on a cappuccino. Her lips were painted bright red and her eyelids glittered with golden eyeshadow. She was wearing big earrings that were almost as bright as her eyes and there was not a minute in which she was not telling an incredible story about her life. Sanne's story was unlike any other women I had talked to. Coming in at 64, she had lived hundreds of lives already and I feel so grateful to have heard about them. I felt privileged to talk

⁴¹ Flore.

⁴² "64 Inspiring Quotes by May Sarton That Will Give You Lessons for Life."

to her as she is a fluent English speaker and so I was able to partake in a different level of conversation than with others that I interviewed. Our conversations reached far and wide into corners of her life and I will not be able to properly sum up all that she shared with me although I will try to give the most accurate account of her sexual past as I can.

We started the conversation with her upbringing, as she explained that she grew up in a small town by the sea. She said she had a very lovely childhood and felt very lucky to have the caring and sensitive parents that she had. She was able to play freely and express herself. Her first serious relationship was at 14 with a boy from the town. She expressed an early free sexual spirit as a result of the contraceptive pill. The ability to have control of your own sexual freedom and the desire for independence became a clear theme throughout Sanne's story. Unlike other women that I spoke to, she had no intention of getting married, having children, or playing the typical docile roles that had systematically been cast upon her gender. Her main thought process around having sex when she was young was having fun and insuring that she did not get pregnant. It was clear from the beginning of our conversation, that this story was going to look very different from the previous ones, Sanne seemed lustful, passionate, and vivacious. Yet, as we talked and more of her story unfolded, along side of new discoveries and theoretical conclusions that I drew from our conversation, I saw elements of other stories, shame, fear, conflict woven through her narrative.

After the first couple of questions we launched into a story of her first partner. Throughout, she constantly referred to him as her husband although they were never married. She stated that she had never wanted to settle down with someone specific but meeting him at

35, she decided that this was the relationship that she wanted to have. For 22 years, they had a wonderful time, spent years in their house in France, and lived beautiful intertwined lives.

Then my husband got cancer as well and he dealt with in a way that I couldn't. He denied it, he acted as if it didn't happen, that was his way of surviving. Which of course anybody is entitled to but also because of his treatment, he had prostate cancer, and because of his treatment he was impotent and then our sex life was so dramatically bad. Just so awful that after a year and a half I said yeah I really really love you, I will never leave you, but I cannot do this any longer, we need help.⁴³

Upon opening this conversation to her husband, she was met with powerful anger. It is clear from this story that her partner's masculinity had been challenged. Sandberg talks a great deal about impotence in her text but this story gives us some light on the difficulties it can cause in a relationship.⁴⁴ As a result of Sanne's desire for sex, she wanted to find some way to aid this issue in their relationship but her partner feeling so threatened by this seeming jab at his manhood instead went out and found another younger partner. This story was clearly hard for Sanne to tell and as she explained the painful breakup for this long relationship she turned away from me and glanced into the restaurant. "He was so angry with me, still very angry, it is now nine years ago and he is very very mad."⁴⁵ After days of fighting about their relationship she left him and has not seen him since. The decision to leave is one that has plagued her for years, having left a dying man because of his inability to have an erection, yet we both knew it was about a lot more than that.

⁴³ Sanne, interview by Cordray McCann, November 12, 2019.

⁴⁴ Sandberg, Linn.

⁴⁵ Sanne.

Although there were many parts of Sanne that seemed to reject traditional roles, she didn't desire a family or to take on a submissive role, her shame around leaving her husband is a remnant of societal pressure still infiltrating this relationship.⁴⁶ Because he was ill, she felt as if she should have taken the place of the bearer of his pain instead of demanding they have a more productive sex life, but in reality her decision to leave was incredibly brave, defying how older women are supposed to act around men as they grow older. In a beautiful turn of events, three years ago Sanne met Ben, a man nine years her senior and fell hopelessly in love. She said she felt young again. There are countless ways to approach Sanne's sentiment about feeling young but like Roos and Lente, youth was about kinship, care. Upon meeting Ben she felt a new connection with another that brought her closer to a youthful self that was producing new love and compassion for another. Sanne shared that she also had these relationships with her close female friends with whom she had spent the majority of her adult life. These six women that Sanne described had always been by her side and she said she knew in the end she wanted to die among them as opposed to a romantic partner. Although Ben was a wonderful surprise, she was not seeking out a relationship as opposed to just good sex. The love that happened with Ben came out of the blue and although she is very thankful for this late-life love, she knows that it would not have happened if she had not created a community of care around her before he was in her life.

After her initial separation from her partner, Sanne reflected on walking through the world as an older woman. "You get at an age and men used to turn their heads, and women as well... But it was as if I, was invisible in a certain way. The white hair and you know..."⁴⁷ This

⁴⁶ Butler.

⁴⁷ Sanne.

invisibility and beauty standards is something that Sanne continued to talk about throughout the interview. “I was with my girlfriends in France, in our house and we discussed, just before I met him [Ben] that we never could live with any man or any partner every again because everything is sagging, you have a beard, mustache. Men snore and we were very adept and we are not doing this at all.”⁴⁸ She said she was looking for a lover but a younger man or toy boy would not have worked because she said she just did not feel as confident in her body as she used to. I took this opportunity to talk about how she feels about her body in her sexual relationship with Ben.

*Well the impotence of my husband that actually finished my relationship but that was because he didn't want to face it and I must admit that this late love, you have to be courageous at this late love. Because you know I have a stomach, things are not as they, you know, I used to be, I couldn't care less and now I am... I must admit that I don't walk through the house naked which I used to. I am a little more careful, but also very lucky that I don't have like the dry vagina, and my libido is not less or changed it is just that, I always enjoyed sex a lot and still so, so I am very very blessed.*⁴⁹

More toward the end of the interview I inquired more about Sanne's view of her body and how this affected her self-esteem. She really struggled with her hair and seemed to attach a lot of negativity to the frizz that was atop her head. She used to have beautiful hair she said but then as she has aged it has gotten a lot curlier and she seemed to hold a lot of pain around the way that that reflected her age.

After talking back and forth about the pressure to get botox and other surgery I asked her where this pressure was coming from. The majority of the images we see are indeed skinny

⁴⁸ Sanne.

⁴⁹ Sanne.

beautiful women but they are all under 30 and often even younger. I asked what images were causing her to think about her body and wrinkles in the way that she was. She said, “I think that I have always connected it with a battle against dying, you just don’t want to go near that dying thing, you want to postpone it.”⁵⁰ Instead of her age coming at odds with traditional gender stereotypes, her concern about her skin and hair was a fear of aging. These features did not cause her to feel insecure because the media’s performance of gender and age felt threatening to her but instead because every time she looked in the mirror she was reminded that she was dying. The physical representation of death is something that everyone has to face, whether that is my grandmothers deeply set eyes or Sanne’s wrinkles, grey hair, and tummy.⁵¹ The universal desire to perform young age comes at odds with the inescapable fact that your outer appearance shows the world that you are dying.⁵² It is a battle everyday to not only remind those around you that you are still present in the world but remind yourself that there is days, months, years, left to still fully live.

Analysis

All four of the women that I interviewed had uniquely incredible stories. They were highly individual yet contained many similar themes of connection, fear, and love. By virtue of the society we live in the lives of older women are rarely seen as important or valuable so I decided to tell each story as its own and then pull them all together in a collective analysis. I wanted to honor each woman's narrative and then dive into the intersections that exist between them collectively. Their lives can give great wisdom into a process that we will all go through as the experience of aging is universal. Their histories have allowed me to explore themes of

⁵⁰ Sanne.

⁵¹ Butler.

⁵² Grosz.

kinship relations, productive selfhood, and performativity. Using the lens of these queer theoretical material I have been able to create new thought processes around sex, aging, and femininity.

Kinship practices have been theorized about in sociological and anthropological discourses for much of the last century. A universal familial and cultural structural system, kinship ties have now been used to describe communities of care that extend beyond friendship into a more complex constructed system. In this piece I use the term to describe not blood related connections but a more queered kinship between those that have lost their close family ties. As those we love die around us, we lean more and more on others who are going through similar experiences of pain. For Roos that was her close friend, for Lente it was Frans another member of Humanities, and for Sanne it was her female friends and new partner Ben. These valuable friendships provided love, care, and support that reached further than a friendship. There was a key interdependence and translation of hurt here that was important for both sides in creating a system of support. For Flore, she did not seem to have anyone to lean on, which became clear was a large issue in her life as a lot of her final rhetoric involved wanting to connect with her children, her closest thing to family that she knew. All three of the women that I interviewed reflected on these people and deemed them very important aspects of their current lives.

Another element of these stories that I was forced to consider was my ageist idea behind youth and productivity. I wanted to sexual empower these women going into the interviews and show them that their sexual desire was to be valued and seen as important. I theorized that as one gets closer to death and further from the age of fertility, there is less allowance for a sexual narrative. That because we view women as means of fertile production there is little space for

them to exist as sexual selves in a post-menopausal zone. But the women that I talked to did not seem all that concerned with their sex lives and even Sanne who placed a lot of value on sex, saw her contributions to society as much more than her sex life. Although of course we do not want to deduce women down to their organs, a lot of theorized body studies do but these women had a very different want to envolving pleasure and feeling productive. For them, conversation, laughter, and crafts created a lot of their will to live. They still saw themselves as functioning members of society even though they were not working or functioning in procreation.

Finally, I chose to tie Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to how these women perform age as well as gender. Like the theoretical aspects of production, as the body goes through the process of senescence and no longer is motivated to biological attraction, I questioned if gender performance changed. For almost all of the women that I interviewed, they seemed less concerned with looking feminine and more concerned with looking or feeling young yet not for the reasons that I thought. When constructing my argument about age performance I thought that older women would want to look younger because of media representation of youth and how our society looks at beauty in opposition to age. Yet, as Sanne put it best, it seems to be more about a battle against dying. These women are performing youth much more out of an internal desire than an external one. Butler theorised the way that society creates an identity politic around gender linked to the way we look, walk, and carry ourselves through the world. This is largely based on the opinions of those around us. But for the women that I spoke to, they wanted to look and feel young out of fear of getting older because saggy skin and wrinkles are one step closer to dying.

Limitations

There were many elements of this topic that I would have liked to investigate more but due to certain limitations on the project I was not able to fulfill all of my desires. As a result of the timeframe, only one month to complete this work, I was not able to interview the quantity of participants that I would have liked. Further, all participants I interviewed were white, relatively wealthy and heterosexual. If given the opportunity, I would have liked to explore how aging shifts and changes given different elements of one's life including, sexuality, race, and socio-economic status. I was only able to access one nursing home contrary to what I have originally hoped and if given the opportunity and more time, I would have liked to see if the experiences of those in other living communities differed from those that I interviewed.

Another major limitation was my inability to speak Dutch. This directly my project drastically as three out of my four participants did not speak English and I had to communicate with them through a translator. Although I am very thankful for my translators effort, this meant I could not understand the full extent of the information they were telling me and I was not able to continue the conversations with questions that followed the language that they were using. Along with that, I was not able to reach out to certain care facilities because I could not communicate with those living there and I did not have access to a translator as I did at Humanitas Nursing Home.

Conclusion

Sometimes I imagine life itself as merely a long preparation and waiting, a long darkness of growth toward these adventures of the spirit, a picaresque novel, so to speak, in which the episodes are all inward. -May Sarton

Although my grandmother passed when I was younger, her fearless attack of age and my mothers powerful personhood seeped in youth and joy were deeply impressed upon me. Surrounded by these women who were strong and inspiring to me yet still abided by many prescribed stereotypes of ageing and sexuality pushed me to pursue what this process looks like for women in the Netherlands. This research dove into the stories of four women and tried to find some commonality around their lived experiences around sexuality and aging. From 15 to 45 minute interviews each of them told a unique story of themselves, painting a collective picture into not only the life of an older woman but an experience that is universal: aging.

Their age does not define them yet in so many ways it does, biologically their bodies do not operate the same way in the world, they feel differently about how society functions around them, and their roles of caregiver have been flipped upside down and backwards. This creates an interesting theoretical analysis of how the body passes through time and the intersection of one's body morphology on sexual desire. These women shed light onto their pain and joy in an effort to complicate and dislodge an aging timeline and our connection to what youth looks like. They shared not only their narratives but their hearts, allowing us to dive deep into their fears and vulnerabilities exploring an omnipresent account of aging humanity.

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Appendix

Preliminary Interview Questions

1. Please tell me your name, age, background, and what brings you to where you are today?
 - a. For the participants at Humanitas Nursing Home, I asked how long they have lived there and if they lived alone.
2. What was the beginning of your sexual self? When was the first time you remember having sex or being sexual?
3. What does your sex life look like now? How has it changed in the last 50 or so years?
4. Do you still feel sexual? Or have the desire to have sex?
5. How do you feel like your age or gender are portrayed around you?
6. As you get older, obviously your physical body changes, how does that impact your sex life and further your self esteem?
7. Who do you talk to about sex? What do those conversations look like?

Interview Transcriptions

Interviews participant 1-4 are from Humanitas Nursing Home in Deventer. As a result of being older in age they did not speak English and so all interviews were spoken through Sores Duham, a translator with the home. All participants were given a verbal consent agreement before starting the recording process and all names have been changed to protect the anonymity and safety of the participants. The P represents the participant speaking and the R represents me speaking. Some of the wording does not quite flow due to the language barrier. All names have been altered to protect the privacy of those that took part in these interviews. WARNING: There is abuse and assault discussed in the interviews below.

FRANS:

R: Name, age, background, how long have you been here?

P: His name is Frans, he is 80 years old, he has been married for 58 years. He has been living in Humanitas for about four years and he has three daughters, 6 grandchildren, 3 great grandchildren.

R: My next questions are about general sex life and what that looks like here or before here? Whatever he feels comfortable with? What was the beginning of sex life? I am looking at sex and aging so as people get older how does their sex life change and particularly people who are living in Nursing Homes. How does desire change as your body ages, and as your body changes how does your biological sex life change?

P: Back in the days, when we were younger we had a lot of sex but not so much anymore.

R: So they don't currently have sex?

P: No. Not at all.

R: Do you think that is as a result of biology, as in things not working, or is it a result of desire?

P: Both, both. Because of her, it doesn't really work anymore. Because of her condition.

R: Is there still desire there? Does he still want to have sex? What does intimacy look like?

P: Cuddling and those kind of things, that is where the intimacy is.

ROOS:

R: Name, age, background, how long have you been here?

P: Her name is Roos, born in Deventer, she is 88 years old

R: What was the beginning to your sex life, what does it look like now? What does it look like here?

P: *Giggles and Laughter.* I was young, and then your kind of grow into it. She doesn't have a husband anymore so she doesn't have sex anymore.

R: When did that stop? When did her husband die? Does she still feel sexual even though she doesn't have a partner anymore?

P: No, she can't stand the thought of having another guy in her bed. *Laughter.*

R: So she doesn't feel any need for intimacy? Does she seek intimacy in any way?

P: No, no no.

R: Is that a lack of desire or the biology not working anymore.

P: It was even before her husband passed away. He had an issue with his prostate but he never told her, but the desire kind of faded away. He passed away about 14 years ago.

R: Around what age did her desire for sex stop? Around what age?

P: Oh, it was a long time ago but she can't remember exactly.

R: My last question is, as you get older obviously your physical body changes? Does that impact herself image and how she feels about herself?

P: She still feels very young, her mouth still functions so she is very young.

LENTE:

R: Name, age, where are you from, background?

P: She is 90 years old, her name is Lente. She grew up in Deventer, she has been here for three years.

R: What is the beginning of your sexual self and sex life and how has that transitioned as you have aged?

P: She was 17 years old when it started, at a younger age you are still capable of doing it but as your grow older you know, your body is not that quick anymore it will decrease the amount of time you have sex.

R: Does she have a partner now or has she had a partner in the past?

P: He passed away about three and half years ago.

R: And were they having sex and when did that stop and what was her sexual relationship like with him?

P: Her sexual life kind of stopped about three years before her husband passed away and that was due to his condition. There was one time that he fell and he got a crack or something in his brain and from there on out he changed, he changed completely. It was not his fault of course but in the later stage he got dementia and he got kind of aggressive, and every time she wanted to kiss him or touch him he didn't allow it because he didn't think it was pure, it was clean.

R: How did that impact her and her perception of her and her sense of her own sexuality because they were having this kind of aggressive relationship?

P: You don't really have it anymore, she is talking about sex and after he passed away you don't get another boyfriend or husband you don't do that. So it just kind of stops.

R: Does she have desire for sex, sexuality, or intimacy now or did she just kind of take that out of her life all together?

P: Sometimes she still has needs, despite her age, but those needs are longing for someone putting an arm around her shoulder or something like that. And we have the staff over here and

also Pemba, the guy that we just interviewed, so sometimes she does have moments with those kind of people so it is a form of intimacy.

R: It is more of that kind of desire as opposed to a sexual desire?

P: Exactly.

R: When her husband got aggressive with his medical condition, does she feel like that just stopped all desire for intimacy or was there a period of time when she still desired a type of intimacy that she wasn't able to give?

P: Yes, she was basically talking about her time with her husband and that it was a very difficult time for her and she wrote a letter, and after she wrote that letter, it was after her husband passed away and after she wrote that letter she lost a lot of her friends. The letter says, "After a sad period, my husband, our father, father-in-law, grandpa, and great grandfather" but because she didn't put sweet, the word sweet before the word husband, she lost a lot of her friends. But she didn't put the word sweet there because of the situation because he was aggressive.

R: It was intentional?

P: Yeah, yeah.

R: So that is his funeral announcement?

P: Yeah, exactly.

R: So she said it was a really hard time for her in terms of how she felt about herself afterwards?

P: Well it was more about the situation, so she lost a lot of friends but in her story she always told us that she gained a lot of new friends here in this home which is why she likes it here so much, she gets a lot of support and love from the staff and also from Peaba, the resident that we interviewed. She said that some of the friends that she lost at that moment called after a couple of years wanting to reconnect but she didn't feel like connecting again. She said it is too late now, you should have done it back then. She was just giving some additional information on how she is happy now and that she has friends here and if she wants to be by herself she can just do those kind of things. *References needle point.*

R: Does she have any desire to find a new partner, or not at all? That is obviously probably impacted from her past husband but what does that look like now?

P: No. She has thought about it a couple of times but she doesn't want to get into the same situation that she had with her previous husband, she kind of fears that situation so that is why she doesn't go for it anymore.

R: Does she talk to her friends about that? What are her conversations with her friends here, or family about sex and sexuality or interest in a partner?

P: No.

R: They never talk about it? Or like her friends' partners, do they talk about what that looks like or her interest in a partner in any way?

P: Sometimes, she was talking to other people about their relationships and sometimes she does with Peaba, she does talk to him about his relationship with Yons, his wife. Whenever she comes over, Yons sometimes yells at her but it is because of her condition because she has dementia. Whenever there is another situation going on, and Peaba wants to talk about it, he ultimately comes to her and she gives him advice because she has experience in this area and she tells him not to go against it but go along with it because sometimes they can be aggressive, her husband was also aggressive, he yelled at her and he got physical. Sometimes she yelled back at him but she never got physical and she gives people advice in those kind of area.

R: My last question is, does she still feel beautiful and sexy and what does that look like for her? Particularly as a result of having this abusive and hard relationship, what does that look like for her self-esteem?

P: No, but sometimes when she walks into this building and she sees a couple of elderly she doesn't want to look that old. Sometimes when she finds out how old they are, they are younger than she is right now but she is happy as she doesn't look as old as how they look. That is why she sometimes helps the staff for example with the dishes and those kind of things because those kind of things help her feel young. She says whenever she goes shopping and she sees a couple of nice things her son always tells her to buy those things.

R: So it is more about feeling young than feeling feminine or beautiful?

P: Yes, yeah.

FLORE:

R: Same starting questions, name, age, background?

P: Her name is Flore and she is 74 years old.

R: What was the beginning of her sex life look like and how has it changed in the last 50 years?

P: When it started it was bad.

R: Why?

P: In her first marriage together, she lived with the parents of her husband at the time so they didn't really have privacy. So they didn't have a sex life.

R: Did she have another marriage after that, or does she have a partner now?

P: Ya, her husband in her second marriage was very aggressive and she was kind of forced to have sex in her second marriage.

R: Does she have a partner now or is she still with that partner?

P: No, she got married three times and that (points to photograph) was her third husband. His name was Joost and he passed away.

R: When did he pass away? What was their sexual relationship?

P: He died three years ago, it wasn't that good with Joost either because he wasn't used to it.

When they met he was pretty old and before he met her he was never really in a relationship and then I asked her if he was still a virgin at the time and he said yes.

R: So she had three different marriages, how did that impact how she feels about sex or sexuality?

P: In her younger years, her parents never really allowed anything and she had a brother and he had a girlfriend and they allowed him to go on holiday with her and have sex with her but they never really allowed to Flore get into that situation.

R: She has had a lot of different intense sexual situations so how does she feel about her desires now?

P: She doesn't really think about it.

R: Does she have a desire to be with another partner? Or find another person?

P: Not at all.

R: Is that not feeling sexual or not wanting another marriage or another partner?

P: She said that her pee and poo she can't control it; she doesn't feel it so she is not comfortable with it.

R: With sexuality?

P: She doesn't want to do that to another person. She doesn't feel comfortable with it on a sexual level but also just being with someone.

R: Does she have the desire to be with someone else and she is afraid or just doesn't have any interest?

P: Hanging out with someone maybe for the coziness and the fun but other than that no.

R: Does that biological part of her body make her feel not sexual/sexy?

P: It makes her feel very insecure.

R: Does she talk to her friends about that?

P: Well she doesn't really have anyone.

R: Is she embarrassed to talk about this?

P: She doesn't like that idea, you know. I think it has something to do with shame. She doesn't like the idea of it.

R: Who has she talked to about sex in general in her life?

P: She never really talked to people about sex, she thinks that is due to her parents because her parents never really allowed her to get into those situations, being intimate, to have sex with someone. That is why she is pretty closed off, well she is not comfortable talking about it with other people.

R: Does she resent her parents for that? Or does she understand why they might have done that?

P: No, she doesn't agree with her parents about the way they treated her back then. She doesn't share their ideas.

R: Does she have kids?

P: Yes, two.

R: Does she have conversations with them about sex or sexuality?

P: No. But she said she did talk to them about sex a couple of times because of the way her mother treated her when it came down to sex and everything. For example, her daughter when she was 18 years old went to live together with her boyfriend and she never saw her since. And she swallowed the morning after pill.

R: Anything else to add?

P: She misses her children a lot. They are 41 and 39.

SANNE:

R: Name, age, where are you from?

P: My name is Sanne, I am 65 years old. I grew up in a very small village on the beach near Haarlem and I studied in Amsterdam for a while and then I studied in New York at NYU for a while. I worked there for a couple of years and then I came back to Amsterdam again.

R: So you grew up in a small village, and what was that like? What are your parents like?

P: My parents were very old when I was born, I was actually an accident. They already had my four brothers and sisters and they were almost 20 so I now have brothers and sisters who are 86 and 84. So I am very used to elderly people. My parents were pretty wonderful, I really had a very very nice childhood. And it was wonderful to grow up in the village, I was always on the street and outside.

R: What was the beginning of your sex life, sexual self, either that is feeling sexual or having sex, what did that look like?

P: I think when I was 14 I was in love with a boyfriend, that was my first sexual experience. It was more kissing and not all the way but we were really early and also the time was very

liberating because the pill just came out, anti-conception so we didn't worry so much about getting pregnant, so that was not really an issue. It was before AIDS, of course, so that has been a big influence on my life.

R: Was it a relatively good experience?

P: Yeah, yes. I always enjoyed it. I had me too experiences but um my private love was very much okay. I'm very lucky.

R: What has your love life looked like since? Obviously that is a lot of years, but like thinking about...

P: All my life or in that period?

R: In general, I would say?

P: Well, what was a big influence was that I didn't want to get married or have a steady relationship because I wanted to work in the field that I was studying which was art, cultural, experimental theatre. I wanted to work and travel the world and not be responsible for anyone else. And I did that. So I had quite a wild life until I was 35. Because the pill and I was financially independent, I earned my own career, money. I was like why would I get married? I want to do what I want. But then when I was 35 I met my husband, I am calling him my husband but we never got married, we were in a relationship for 22 years. Still didn't want any children, that was really a very interesting very we had a lot of very good experiences but we also had a lot of, oh what is the word, misfortunes. In the end he got cancer, and the way, also when I was 52, I grew up with 6 best girlfriends, whom I am still seeing. The only thing was that 5 of them had cancer and two of them had already died and that started when I was 52. And one of them was my absolute favorite best friend, I loved her to death, we didn't have a sexual relationship but we had a very very close friendship. And um that influenced my marriage at the time and then my husband got cancer as well and he dealt with in a way that I couldn't. He denied it, he acted as if it didn't happen, that was his way of surviving. Which of course anybody is entitled to but also because of his treatment, he had prostate cancer, and because of his treatment he was impotent and then our sex life was so dramatically bad. Just so awful that after a year and a half I said yeah I really really love you, I will never leave you, but I cannot do this any longer, we need help. We need to have therapy or something, I don't know there was so much going on. And I thought I made, I supported him by saying that, I thought we were doing that together but he listened and he heard me totally denying him so he was very offended and he didn't tell me and within three weeks he had another girlfriend and within three weeks I knew about it and I thought okay so this is his way of coping, escaping and if I stay with him I, then my life is for him and not for myself. The funny thing is, we were in France, we had a house there and he bought a little necklace in a shop and I noticed that because it was just before my birthday. And I thought oh how nice, and then all of the sudden I knew immediately, I didn't know about the other woman yet but I knew it was not for me. So we talked for three days, and after three days, it was very dramatic, I said "okay what did you do with this necklace, did you throw it away?" and he said no, and I said and you didn't give it to me so you are going to give it to her. So you say you are going to stay with me and love me but you haven't gotten rid of it so it is over. So it was very dramatic. Because from one day and then we never say each other again. He was so angry with me, still very angry, it is now nine years ago and he is very very mad.

R: And that is all as a result of you calling out his sexual inability?

P: Yeah, yeah. I said this sex we are having; I can't cope with it. And also he refused to discuss the death of my friends. And I thought also, I think I was about 55, 56, I really want to do a lot

with my life and I thought if I stay with him now I am going to wait and I am not going to do it. It was a very difficult choice. And also I experienced, I used to be very glamorous and easy going and I always had lots of male attention and then after the divorce with the white hair it was like I was invisible. You get at an age and men used to turn their heads, and women as well. I am more into women than men, only not sexually. I love women. But it was as if I, invisible in a certain way. The white hair and you know that was very hard, it took my four years to get that together. And you know if you turned 60 that is also a kind of turning point but I needed about five or six years to get it together and find a job and work and do all kinds of stuff and then, the most beautiful thing of the whole story is that three years ago I met the love of my life. So that, it was very funny. I was with my girlfriends in France, in our house and we discussed, just before I met him that we never could live with any man or any partner every again because everything is sagging, you have a beard, mustache. Men snore and we were very adept and we are not doing this at all. And then I met him and I said I really don't care so much for a relationship but I really miss that I am not 58, 59 and I will never have good sex again. It doesn't happen, one night stands, it doesn't happen when you are over 50. And I would have loved it so I was like this is very very bad. But this was my only really negative thing about it.

R: So you were craving the sexual relationship not necessarily like a boyfriend or anything?

P: A lover would have been fine but then also your body has changed so much to have a toyboy is like is like a lot of work?

R: Tell me about your partner now?

P: Also an interesting story, so I live really close by here, next to Artist. But what happened was that he lived there with his wife for about 25, 26 years. The funny thing is his wife was an artist and my ex-husband was a gallery owner so we were also in the same, and there is an art school that is called Artie, which is a beautiful place in the city, you have to be a member and 26 years ago I saw his wife, I knew of her. She was very loud, very wild, lots of alcohol, not very friendly to women so I watched it happen. And then I suddenly saw her come in with her new love and I thought wow that is an interesting man. I found him very handsome, and they were together and I was with my husband and I was very happy with my husband I only thought wow what a nice man and I usually not like that, only if you get to know people. So he lived in his house and she lived there so I knew of her but I actually never saw him and he was out of my life. So then a mutual girlfriend, his wife died three years ago, she was walking there and she lives in the Jordaan and people from the Jordaan don't usually come here and I was like what are you doing here? Are you coming to visit me? No, she said, I was coming to visit Luke because his wife just died and he doesn't want to be alone she said so he invited me for dinner and it was very pleasant. And she said you know him don't you? I said no I have seen him once but I really don't, she said oh you two should have some coffee one day. And it happened like that? And the fun thing is, I don't know about you but you hear about these stories of elderly people in a home, and they fall in love and I never took it very seriously and I always thought yeah that is very nice that is just, not similar to when you are young and in love, but I fell in love with Luke so much that I could not eat or sleep for three days. I was like 16, exactly the same nothing different. Still wonderful and great sex.

R: How does your body, or you were talking about your portrayal of self like I didn't feel looked at anymore, how does he impact that? Or same with him, impotence is a huge thing across every person I talked to.

P: It is awful. It is even more awful than I ever heard about, I never knew how bad it was.

R: How do those two things impact your relationship?

P: Well the impotence of my husband that actually finished my relationship but that was because he didn't want to face it and I must admit that this late love, you have to be courageous at this late love. Because you know I have a stomach, things are not as they, you know, I used to be, I couldn't care less and now I am. But of course, Luke is nine years older than I am, so he is also old and I find him extremely attractive it is so funny so it doesn't really matter but I must admit that I don't walk through the house naked which I used to. I am a little more careful, but also very lucky that I don't have like the dry vagina, and my libido is not less or changed it is just that, I always enjoyed sex a lot and still so, so I am very very blessed.

R: Does he feel the same way?

P: Yeah, he enjoys it tremendously and he also likes it that I am so liberal about it. Because he is older so from an older generation and from a more conventional family, my family was pretty unconventional and my life as well and he is a little bit more, he is a scientist and he always used to work at university and he is a clinical psychologist so he is more conventional so he likes that I am like oh let's do this. So in that sense I am very blessed it is just that, finding two loves in your life, I think that one is already a big thing but two, of course I doubted my decision for years because I left somebody who was sick, very difficult. Now I realize it was a good thing, the best thing for me to do. So it all worked out in the end, it is a very happy story. But I must admit we are, we travel a lot, and I call this our golden years because it cannot get any better and we are growing older so anything can happen. And he is older than me and we don't live very healthy lives, just in the happiness sense, we are very healthy.

R: Do you talk a lot about sex? The two of you about what that looks like, desire, what you are interested in?

P: Yeah, yeah. And we are very open about it, and we also buy toys and sometimes they are left alone for a couple of weeks it is just not a big issue, and not a big discussion all the time but that we know that it is there and we can enjoy it anyway, anytime. Only because he is older and he has a heart condition, not very severe, he has to take medicine and therefore he needs Viagra. And that is fine with me but that is limiting in the sense that he has to take the pill otherwise it is very difficult for him so that is a kind of. In the end it always works so and even if it doesn't work, the trying is also fun so who cares. It really works but of course it is not like it used to be, I am not as lean as I used to be and there is a stomach in the way but there are all kinds of ways and we are fine with that.

R: Going to more friendships and the women that you are around, how do you feel like these women or close friends, how do you talk about sex with them and what does their sex life look like?

P: We are very open about it. The funny thing is that actually most of my friends don't have relationships and are longing for relationships. I think there is a lot, what is happening in Holland, I don't know if in the states but there is a lot of women like, they are divorced when they are around 55, that is, I don't know why but that is kind of turning point or maybe their marriage was just kind of end or, and the men always look for younger women and they can, we call it "tweede nest" which means the second nest and they of course can have women that are 30, 40, the men are financially secure, they are mostly successful in their jobs. So this means that I have lots of women around me that cannot find, they can only find very old men or older men that they have to take care of and they are like I don't want to do that. So there is a lot of and I was like that too, my friends gave me a dating voucher and I did that, and it was awful awful.

Online, but I met two, but I couldn't do that I was like (*Sighs*) this is not my way and I would rather have nothing. So there is a really shortage of nice men, because the nice men are always taken. And it is actually the same thing with Luke, because we met each other when his wife had only been dead for six weeks so that caused a lot...

R: You scooped him right up?

P: *Laughter*. Well by accident, because I didn't know him. Other women around him were waiting for him but they were also very sad that their friend died so they were like I would really like to see Luke but maybe later on, and I was totally there. But we got a lot of negative criticism of people around us. And I also always condemned women that people have a divorce or a problem and there is immediately a person, a woman, that takes care of the man they don't have to develop, they don't have to grow, they don't have to look back and analyze what happened, no there is always someone to take care of them and also with men, widowers, that is also the fact that there is always somebody there and now all of the sudden I was that somebody, not even within a year no, within six weeks. So that was really strange?

R: Did you feel like you were taking care of him?

P: No, because I said so. I don't want to be, I didn't do that for my husband and I don't even know you very well, I am not going to take care of you at all. So if you are still grieving you need to do your own process and he said, Allie, my wife, was the love of my life and I will always always mourn for her but we had such a great marriage, we were so happy together that she made me this strong that I can go on and look for somebody else because I don't want to be alone. And that was for me a very good answer.

R: Do your friends look for younger men, is that something that you talk about, or is that just something that is just not an option?

P: No, they are not available. Most of the time, of course you can be lucky. I have some very interesting women around me so one of my best friends Patricia I think she will. But the fact is, is when you turn 60, the younger men are really difficult and also imagine you have a toyboy, like a really wonderful lover, that is a lot of work and also you are the older person so you are aware of your limitations physically and the men my age they look for younger women and they find them and well if you are 60, I don't want to be with an 80-year-old. I have felt that too, this is pretty hopeless, no sex, I also don't want to take care of somebody and push the wheelchair and of course that will happen now also but that is okay. *Laughter*.

R: Do you think that is out of loneliness, you said you desired sex and the relationship came as a result, do you think the women around you are similar, they desire a sexual partner or are they more looking for like a companion in their lives, or a combination of both I guess?

P: I think a combination of both, I think that is an interesting question. I will ask them the next time I see them, we have lunch with five women the other day and my impression, but I have never asked actually, is that they long for a rewarding relationship that is good for them because they are very successful women, they are very independent. Not all partners can deal with that, male or female, that can be very threatening if they have a lot of money. So I think they are looking for the real deal.

R: So they are looking for a companion?

P: Yeah, yeah. I think so. Maybe later when we are older again, let's say Luke dies in 10 years and I am alone. I don't look for the sexual thing but for companionship but I always had a feeling that I would end up with my women friends. You know house, and be very nasty to each other.

R: Do you have that fear, that you have fallen in love again, and it is really beautiful, and then he is going to die? Do you talk about that?

P: Yeah, very scary. Well the other day I said, Patricia my friend, she is 60 and she is going to do a lot of surgery now. I wanted to do my eyelids but I don't care if I am too lazy. Then I said to Luke and her, we were eating with the three of us and I said oh boy. So in five years I will be 70 and a really old little bitte and you will look the same and beautiful as you are now because you won't age. And Luke will die and then I am with you and I am the old. And Luke was like die? I die? And I said yeah, that is a scenario. I said yeah, yeah, it is not a strange thought. So I am very direct, very Dutch. But I said can't you imagine that I have these scenarios in my head of course we now have the time of our lives but it won't. Maybe it stays like this until we are 80-something but I don't know. I just, I am prepared. But that is why I said to other friends that are really desperate for some people around me that are really desperate. You have to be courageous, you have to stick out your head, you have to take risks, you can't get it exactly the way you want. We are all so spoiled we want a man that is smart, educated, successful in their joy, successful in their life balance now, not too many children or grandchildren. I had all that too I was like oh god he has two daughters for himself and three of Allies, so I have five children and they are not children they are in their 40s and 50s and they have children so I have all this family, I don't like that. You know, I like it when they come and eat and the table is, that is okay, I love that but I am not very much into the whole family thing. Even with my own family. So you can't have all these demands, they have their boxes. That won't get you anywhere.

R: Yeah, a lot of the people of the nursing home were talking about that. That they really fear falling in love because they already had one partner either divorce or die so falling in love again is really scary. I think that 80 versus 65 I think is different.

P: But still I don't understand because I have that risk now too and I was, I was already very happy with my life before I met Luke. I was already in the place that I wanted to be. I had already made those choices but on the other hand, this happiness is the healthiest thing you can imagine. I think I feel it in my skin, I think this is so healthy and so wonderful that even if we only have three years, then it was a gift. It was an extra gift. I mean why not!

R: This is going down a different path but how do you feel like older women are portrayed in the media and how does that impact you or not?

P: I am very; I mean I am not angry about it but very annoyed. I think the whole skinny thing drives me nuts. The daughters of my friends they are so frustrated and they have all these images that they have to live up to. The corrections, the Botox and such that people start at 21. And also for instance, you don't have any really older women on TV presenting programs because people find them too old after 40 or 50-something. And that annoys me terribly, I think that elderly women are in a way invisible unless you are very very successful in your job and that is still kept going by the media by social media. For instance, I am 65 and I enjoy working, I don't want to stop working as long as I can. You can say that is a false, well everybody says that when you are 65 you retire, so you don't occupy society anymore, you are put away. You are gone, so that I find is awful.

R: How do your friends talk about that, conversations around Botox or plastic surgery?

P: Well yeah Patricia my friend she is now doing the plastic surgery thing and lots of people are lifting their eyelids. And I don't have any, I must admit that I have an interesting question for her that I don't know if she is aware of it, but I wonder about herself image. She wants to be very skinny, she is a very beautiful woman, she is very skinny and she is never skinny enough she is

always dieting and also the operation, has something to do with your feeling of self or self-worth, I have a question mark about it. On the other hand, if it makes her happy I don't care that is her duty. I am also very curious for the result, if it is very beautiful then maybe I maybe I will do it also. But it is very expensive so.

R: And how do you feel about your own self-image or self-worth especially around beauty? I have come across this, do older women want to look more feminine or want to look younger, or maybe a combination of both?

P: Well I think I look like a grandma and I don't like that at all. I don't like photographs, I am actually doing some modeling once and while and then I am the grandma but I don't like that at all. I don't like my hair. I don't like to look at myself in the mirror, I find that, and on the other hand as long as I look in the very small mirror of my face I am fine.

R: So it is a lot about your hair?

P: Yeah, my hair is very very frizzy. It was always very beautiful and now it is like a grandma so I also hate it but I also don't. I also don't want to look younger I don't care about old I just don't want to be ugly, more ugly. Bleh. It is very double. I feel comfortable, and I also dress anti-aged. So I wear these shoes that not a lot of 65 year olds, and I still can wear high heels happily. So that is my little, I go, "I am not behaving like I am 60," so it is double. And I also think I am too fat, and I also think that I don't see myself in a clear way. It is mixed.

R: Where do you think that image is coming from because what this beauty is. Obviously a lot of our media is represented as this really skinny women but those are all very young people, usually like 25, so where do think this image of older women is coming from?

P: I think that I have always connected it with a battle against dying, you just don't want to go near that dying thing, you want to postpone it. That is what I always thought. And for me personally it is always that I have been very happy with my image, I was always very easy, I was a model when I was younger so I was always. And now I am like bleck. But I don't know, skinny, I lost some weight a couple of years ago and it is also not very nice because your body has all these wrinkles and things. So it is very double, I get influenced by the images also and I am also very annoyed with men that only like skinny women, like arm candy. I really really hate that. There are also men that only like Asian women or something, that I really really hate.

R: Do you have male friends around you that talk about liking younger women?

P: I think that they never admit that they like younger women, and especially not to you. Also I think that for men, if you are 65, that is a turning point in your life. I now start the last part of my life, this is the last, could be 30 years I don't know but also for men, younger women give them a feeling of still being there, still being able.