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Turning 75: Why Age Matters

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THEORIZING CULTURAL AND SOCIAL INTERSECTIONS OF AGE AND GENDER: THE APPROACH OF ANOCRITICISM

Presented by: Roberta Maierhofer and
Barbara Ratzenboeck (University of Graz)
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OUTLINE

Theorizing Cultural and Social Intersections of Age and Gender: The Approach of Anocriticism

Roberta Maierhofer & Barbara Ratzenböck,

Center for Inter-American Studies of the University of Graz, Austria



Two sections

This presentation addresses:

- Theoretical foundations of Anocriticism
- Application of the concept in empirical social science research



RELEVANCE

Age/ing Studies is an exciting and still developing interdisciplinary field of research investigating individual and collective experiences of human aging and cultural representations thereof.

Aging Studies Rooted in Feminist Theory

“[a]ge/[a]geing studies would not have been established as a field without the theoretical and methodological approaches established through feminist theory.” (Maierhofer 2019:2)

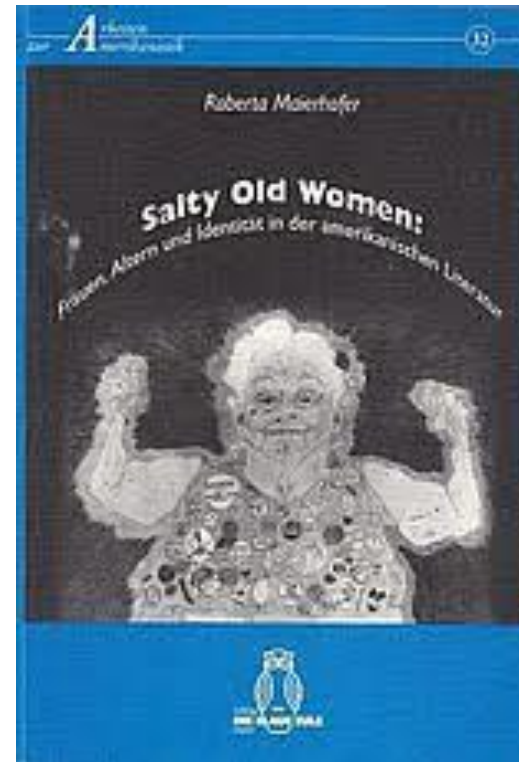
However, intersections of age and gender have not received extensive attention in cultural studies and social sciences, in comparison to works focusing either on age or gender (Calasanti & Slevin 2001:27; Denninger & Schütze 2017:7).



THE APPROACH OF ANOCRITICISM

Considering this, I have suggested the approach of 'Anocriticism' to investigate cultural intersections of age and gender and their cultural representations (Maierhofer 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2007; 2012).

Maierhofer, Roberta. 2003.
Salty Old Women: Frauen, Alter und Identität
in der amerikanischen Literatur. Essen:
Die Blaue Eule.



WHAT IS ANOCRITICSM?

Inspired by:

Elaine Showalter's "gynocriticism" (1985),

Germaine Greer's "anophobia" (1992:4)

**“a method to trace the aspect of female aging in texts of American literature in order to generate an understanding for what it means – in Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s term – to be ‘aged by culture.’”
(Maierhofer 2004a:322)**



CHRONOLOGICAL AGE VS. CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

As feminist theory distinguishes between sex and gender, so should a distinction be made between chronological age and the cultural stereotypes associated with old people, which would help escape the confining binary oppositions of young and old. Starting with the premise that age - similar to race, class, and gender - does not flow naturally or inevitably from the individual's anatomical body, scholarship could analyze the way age identity is constructed in literature and in society, for both young and old.



Susan Sontag is seen as pivotal and the most-quoted source in Age/ing Studies.

Sontag's "Double Standard of Aging" (1972)

- old age as "a genuine ordeal, one that men and women undergo in a similar way" (Sontag 1972:31)
- growing older as "an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a pathology – intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men." (Sontag 1972:31-32)

Aging is a woman's problem, as women are considered old as soon as they are no longer very young. Sontag has therefore identified aging as a social judgement of women rather than a biological eventuality, ordained by the way society limits how women feel free to imagine themselves. (Sontag 1972:36)

It is therefore the narrative (social judgement and imagination) that expresses social boundaries that limit women, not the fact of aging as such.



AMERICAN LITERATURE AS INSPIRATION

Originally, I developed Anocriticism in the context of American Studies to explore literary representations of old age (Maierhofer 2003:343).

AMERICAN LITERATURE & AGE AND GENDER

American literature offers many possibilities for learning about the intersections of age and gender.

- includes many diverse and multi-ethnic texts (Maierhofer 2003:33, 2007:121) and with that diverse portrayals of old women in literature
- emphasis on the individual in American culture and literature (Maierhofer 2003:33) supports the transgression of social norms (Maierhofer 2007:121) and transgression of established modes of interpretation.



INTERDISCIPLINARY APPLICATIONS

Although Anocriticism was developed in the context of cultural criticism and literary studies, it can similarly be used for the analysis of any other form of text. This includes for example interview transcripts, a form of text frequently used in qualitative social science research.

4 Dimensions of Anocriticism

Sociologist Barbara Ratzenböck (2020) has recently argued that the approach draws attention to 4 distinct dimensions of age and aging:

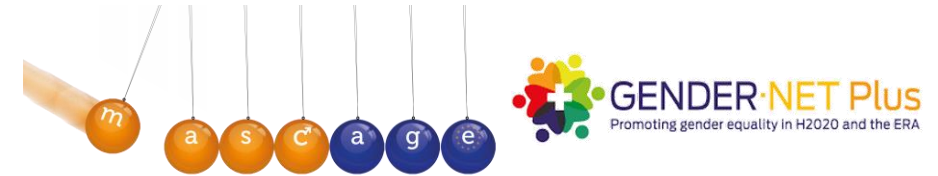
- age and aging's collective cultural construction and relation to gender
- the individual dimension of aging
- peoples' interpretative power and narrative performance with regard to age and aging
- age and aging's potential for resistance and change

To conduct an anocritical analysis of any form of text means to consider all of these four dimensions.



IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Current work within EU Gender-Net project “MASCAGE - Analyzing social constructions of ageing masculinities and their cultural representations in contemporary European literatures and cinemas”



Extending Anocriticism

- How could Anocriticism be used as a theoretical lens to study older men's experiences and representations?
- What are commonalities and differences in modes of text analysis in the humanities and social sciences with regard to age and gender?
- How could we develop Anocriticism further for interdisciplinary projects investigating age and gender?





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THANK YOU

[Geron.org/2020](https://geron.org/2020)

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DISCLOSURE(S)

I have no commercial relationships to disclose.

