

Aging Under Capitalism: When LGBT+ Seniors Become Invisible

How the Economic System Organizes the Discarding of Older Queer People

Autor : Curt Morgane - Le Girofard

Research : Mery Hemard & Melody Rampath - Le Girofard

Some silences weigh more heavily than others.

In our activist spaces, we talk a lot about young people. Difficult coming outs, first pride experiences, playground violence. This is legitimate, it's necessary. But there is a silence that flows through our communities like an underground river: the silence of the elderly.

LGBT+ seniors exist. Yet, we don't see them. Or rather, we have learned not to look at them. What if this isn't a coincidence? What if our economic system, in its cold capitalist logic, is methodically organizing their erasure?

Problem: How does capitalism exacerbate the marginalization of older LGBT+ people?

We will first examine how this system promotes an isolating individualism, how it constructs ageism as a tool for social sorting, and finally how it specifically renders older queer people invisible, before outlining ways to resist.

I. Capitalist Individualism or the Organization of Solitude

Family as the Only Safety Net... When You Have One

Capitalism, in its advanced form, operates on a simple principle: the individual first. Each person is responsible for their own fate, their success, their survival. Collective solidarity? Relics of another era, burdens that are being reduced, privatized, and transformed into markets.

In this vast relational wasteland, one institution remains, burdened with bearing the entire burden: the family. It is the family that must take care of children, the sick, and the elderly. It is the last bulwark against homelessness, abandonment, and loneliness.

But what do you do when you don't have a family? What happens when you're rejected by your family because you loved "wrong"? What happens when you build your life outside the well-trodden paths of heteronormativity?

As the Canadian government's report on the social isolation of LGBTQ seniors points out, many LGBT+ seniors have grown old with the conviction that it's better to keep their sexual orientation or gender

identity secret to ensure their well-being (Government of Canada, 2018). This forced invisibility, this need to hide for decades, has direct consequences for those around them: no children, no recognized partner, no extended family network. Capitalism, by making family the only recourse, condemns to isolation those who don't have access to it. It's a silent but relentless social sorting.

The value of work or the end of social utility

Why does capitalist society despise its elderly? The answer is cruel but simple: because they no longer produce. In a system where a human being's value is measured by their capacity for work, by their integration into the circuits of production and consumption, retirement is not a liberation: it is a marginalization. An exit from the world of the "useful."

Older people become burdens. Mouths to feed without any return on investment. Bodies that cost more than they bring in.

Michael Adams, in his analysis for the American Society on Aging, puts it bluntly: "Ageism is a system that assigns social, economic, and other privileges. It is part of the institutions and legal frameworks that organize our society" (Adams, 2023). It is not just a matter of individual attitudes. It is structural.

We see it in the job market: after 50, promotions stop, training programs stop, and "discreet" layoffs begin. We see it in the healthcare system: the complaints of the elderly are too often dismissed as simply as "age," as if aging were an illness in itself. We see it in public spaces: no benches, no restrooms, no accessible transportation.

The message is clear: you've had your time, now let the young through.

II. Social Identity Tested by Old Age

The Trap of Double Invisibility

LGBT+ seniors don't experience one form of marginalization, but rather several, which accumulate, multiply, and collide.

First, there is everyday ageism, the kind that erases older people from public spaces and representations. In the media, in advertising, in films, older people are absent or reduced to stereotypes. When they do appear, it is rarely as desiring subjects, as beings of passion, as people fully in control of their emotional lives.

Then there is the invisibility specific to LGBT+ communities. Paradoxically, our own spaces can reproduce these mechanisms of exclusion.

Gay bars, lesbian parties, activist spaces are often conceived by and for young people. They talk about desire, bodies, and struggles—but rarely about aging. As if our lives ended at 40. As if the community didn't have any Memory.

The Desexualization of the Elderly or Social Death

One of the most silent forms of violence inflicted upon older people is their desexualization. In the collective imagination, sexuality belongs to the young. Older people are supposedly beyond that, possessing a kind of asexual wisdom that finally makes them "acceptable."

For LGBT+ people, this violence is amplified tenfold. Because our identity has historically been built around sexuality, desire, and the affirmation of our bodies. We have had to fight to exist as desiring beings. To be relegated to asexuality simply because of age is a second death. As Michael Adams points out: "A narrow view of sexual orientation is that it is based solely on desire and sexual activity, rather than reflecting a whole range of dimensions of human life" (Adams, 2023). Reducing homosexuality to the sexual act also renders invisible the entire emotional, romantic, and relational lives of older people.

The Internalization of Ageism

Perhaps the worst thing is when older people themselves end up believing what they are told. When they internalize the idea that they are too old to be an activist, to desire, to exist socially.

This phenomenon of internalizing oppression is well-documented in the struggles against racism and homophobia. It also operates with regard to ageism. By constantly hearing that one is a burden, a weight, a relic of another era, one ends up shrinking into nothingness. No longer taking up any space. Accepting invisibility as inevitable.

Fredriksen-Goldsen tells the story of an elderly woman whose partner of 50 years had just died, and who wanted to end it all because "no one else in the world knew about their forbidden love" (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017). This story dates back to the 1980s. But how many elderly people still experience this absolute loneliness today?

III. Resisting Erasure

Deconstructing Our Own Biases

Before any action, there is individual work to be done. We have all internalized ageist prejudices. We reproduce them unconsciously, in our words, our attitudes, our activist choices.

Deconstructing ageism means first learning to see older people. It means ceasing to treat them as a separate group, to be cared for, to be "animated." It means considering them as peers, allies, full participants in our struggles.

It also means questioning our own fear of aging. This unease we feel in the face of a body marked by time, in the face of dependency, in the face of death. This unease is political.

Building intergenerational connections

The age division is a social construct, not an inevitability. In our associations, at our events, in our activist spaces, we must consider the inclusion of older people as a priority.

This can be achieved through:

- Appropriate schedules (no meetings at 10 p.m. on a Tuesday evening).
- Accessible spaces (physically, but also psychologically).
- Content that speaks to everyone (not just 18-30 year olds).

- Spaces for sharing where older people can tell their stories, bear witness, and pass on their knowledge.

The Canadian report emphasizes the importance of fostering the involvement of all sectors—public, private, and non-profit—to build bridges between generations (Government of Canada, 2018).

Rethinking housing and living spaces

The isolation of older LGBTQ+ people is also a housing issue. Traditional retirement homes are often experienced as hostile spaces, places where one must hide, retreat into the closet.

Alternatives are emerging: supportive housing, intergenerational co-living, and participatory housing. Some initiatives, like "diversity houses," specifically aim to create spaces where LGBTQ+ seniors can age surrounded by peers, without relinquishing their identity.

These models are still too rare. We must multiply them, support them, and raise awareness of them.

Fighting media invisibility

We cannot love what we cannot see. The lack of representation of older people in the media, in culture, and in public discourse actively contributes to their marginalization.

We must demand fair and diverse representations of aging. Show older people who desire, who fight, who create, who fully exist. Give older people a voice in our own activist media. Make their visibility a political issue.

Including Ageism in the Convergence of Struggles

Too often, the fight against discrimination stops at a certain age. We fight against homophobia, racism, and sexism—but we forget that these oppressions don't end at 60. They combine, reinforce each other, and transform.

Adams states this forcefully: "Ageism and ableism are structural phenomena that negatively shape the lived experiences of older LGBTQ+ people" (Adams, 2023). Our struggles must integrate this dimension. Don't leave the elderly behind.

Conclusion: Growing old is a political victory.

Growing old, when you are LGBTQ+, is a form of resistance. It means having survived the years when homosexuality was a mental illness. It means having survived AIDS without succumbing to it. It means having built a life outside the norms, against societal pressures, in the constant invention of new ways to love and to exist.

Capitalism would have us believe that the elderly are useless. That they are a burden, a dead weight, a bad investment. But we know that the value of a life is not measured by its productivity. LGBTQ+ elders are our living memories. They are the ones who paved the paths we follow today. They campaigned, loved, suffered, resisted—often in the shadows, often alone, often without recognition.

Our responsibility today is clear: not to forget them. To include them in our spaces, our struggles, our lives. To fight against ageism as we fight against all forms of oppression. To make the convergence of struggles a concrete reality, one that doesn't stop at a particular age.

Because growing old isn't about disappearing. Growing old is about continuing. And we need all ages to build the world we want.

A world where everyone has their place. At any age.

To go further

- Gouvernement du Canada (2018). Isolement social des aînés : un regard sur les aînés LGBTQ au Canada. Forum fédéral-provincial-territorial des ministres responsables des aînés.
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- Fredriksen-Goldsen, K.I. (2017). Dismantling the Silence: LGBTQ Aging Emerging From the Margins. The Gerontologist, 57(1), 121-128.