Intersectional Ageing
An Anocritical Reading

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Abstract: *The intersections of gender and age require a critical cross-disciplinary investigation to reveal the complex and ambivalent nature of cultural narratives of gendered ageing as well as making further identity markers, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and disabilities, visible. This chapter proposes Maierhofer's (1995, 2000, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2012, 2019) intersectional and interdisciplinary analytical approach of Anocriticism for a reading of gender and age/ing as constructs in popular culture. It is the aim of this chapter to investigate and deconstruct cultural narratives of gender and age to reveal their socially constructed nature and highlight their potential for subversion and resistance. This anocritical approach, as an understanding of age as a chronological reality as well as a social construct, similar to the understanding of sex and gender, will be applied as an analytical lens in a reading of the contemporary novel Girl, Woman, Other (2019) by Bernadine Evaristo.*

Keywords: *Anocriticism; gender; ageing; generations; intersectionality; gendered ageing; feminist theory; popular culture; Bernadine Evaristo; Girl; Woman; Other*

Introduction

Popular culture, such as television, cinema, music, literature, and social media, shape our everyday lives and our understandings of the social

constructs of gender and age. The cultural interconnectedness of gender and age has been evident since the 1990s. However, recognition of age as a cultural category would not have been possible without the introduction of gender as a category of analysis in literary and cultural studies in the decades before. Feminist theory determined the theoretical and methodological basis that led to the establishment of Age/Ageing Studies as a field (Maierhofer 2019). Susan Sontag, the first to address the intersection of gender and age at a conference of the Institute of Gerontology in 1973, identified the "Double Standard of Aging" as applied to men and women. In a feminist tradition, Sontag early on acknowledged "ageing as a social judgement of women rather than a biological eventuality" (Maierhofer 2019, 2). Since the beginning of the 1990s, Anocriticism (Maierhofer) has been the term used for applying Susan Sontag's approach of linking theories of gender and age to cultural and literary analysis to highlight the specificity of ageing as a cultural category.

This chapter discusses the intersections of gender and age by employing Maierhofer's (1995, 2000, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2012, 2019) feminist approach of Anocriticism in an analysis of the contemporary novel *Girl, Woman, Other (2019)* by Bernadine Evaristo, which depicts several Black British female and non-binary protagonists over their lifecourses. An anocritical reading of the novel follows the parameters of highlighting intersectionality within cultural representations to explore narratives that are diverse and which provide insights into realities of gendered ageing often neglected in popular discourse. As the approach was developed in the late 1990s, its applications have been concerned with literary texts from that period and prior. It is the aim of this chapter to demonstrate the relevance an anocritical reading in the context of contemporary popular culture by investigating Evaristo's Booker Prize Winning novel through the four dimensions of Anocriticism developed by Ratzenböck (2020): (1) age and ageing's collective cultural construction and connection to gender, (2) the individual dimension of ageing, (3) peoples' interpretive power and narrative performance concerning age/ing, and (4) age and ageing's potential for resistance and social change (Ratzenböck 2020, 27).

Anocriticism – Intersections of Gender and Age

When Susan Sontag addressed the intersections of ageing and gender in 1972 in her article "The Double Standard of Ageing" and in 1973 at a conference of the Institute of Gerontology, she was the first one to highlight the cultural and social differences of ageing for men and women. In her remarks, Sontag distinguishes between age and ageing and hence describes old age as "a genuine ordeal, one that men and women undergo in a similar way" and 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). Thus, Sontag has early on addressed the social and cultural narratives that haunt women and men differently when growing old. Addressing these social perceptions, an understanding was evoked that highlighted the particular intersection of gender and age in social and cultural representations.

Following Sontag's pivotal work, Anocriticism has been the term used since the 1990s in cultural gerontology to discuss the intersections of gender and age (Maierhofer 1995). Maierhofer has explored US-American cultural representations, including novels, short stories, films, and biographies to create a feminist framework that allows for a systemic analysis of gendered ageing that highlights the individual potential for resistance and subversion of heteronormative and limiting assumptions of ageing (Maierhofer 2004a, 320). The exploration of the negotiation of identities is a significant component of an anocritical analysis. American literature was thus the ideal terrain to develop such an approach, as it is, firstly, characterized by diverse texts, which provide intersectional depictions of old women that create diverse narratives; and, secondly, US-American culture is highly individualized, where transgressions of social norms are encouraged (Maierhofer 2003, 33, 2007, 121). Maierhofer (2004a) has further argued that particularly American literature depicts identity as being discussed in "terms of possibilities as well as limitations of the individual within social boundaries, leading to the necessity of narrating the search of the self within the social context as an expression of this identity" (320).

Moreover, the approach aims at "linking theories of gender and age in search of a specific culture of aging" (Maierhofer 2019, 3). Elaine Showalter's term *gynocriticism* (1977, 1985) – a study of women writers and their history, styles, themes, genres, and structures – and Germaine Greer's term *anophobia* (1992) to define the fear of old women influenced the development of Anocriticism as a "method to trace the aspect of aging in cultural representations, the stories we tell ourselves, in order to generate understanding of what it means, in Margaret Morganroth Gullette's (2004) term, to be 'aged by culture'" (Maierhofer 2019, 3). Furthermore, Anocriticism demands a distinction between chronological age and cultural stereotypes associated with old people, following feminist theories' distinction between sex (biological) and gender (cultural). As an inherently feminist approach, Anocriticism thus insists on a deconstruction of binaries to escape the confining oppositions of young and old, and of male and female. Similar to race, class, and gender, age is not understood as flowing naturally or inevitably from the individual biological body but having cultural and social meanings at a particular place and time. What is considered 'young' in a certain place at a certain time depends largely on the difference to what is considered 'old.' Moreover, the relationality between the two notions is apparent and leads to the conclusion that what is considered 'age neutral/universal' in a patriarchal-capitalist society is often implicitly young and male and exclusive of the old, female and other gender identities (Maierhofer 2003, 26–27, 2004a, 322, 2004b, 156, 2012, 96, 2019, 3).

In recent years, the approach of Anocriticism travelled across disciplines and Ratzenböck (2020) developed it further by determining four crucial dimensions of it in her sociological analysis of gendered narratives of ICT use in later life: (1) age and ageing's collective cultural construction and connection to gender, (2) the individual dimension of ageing, (3) peoples' interpretive power and narrative performance concerning age/ing, and (4) age and ageing's potential for resistance and social change (27). An anocritical analysis of any form of text considers all of these four dimensions in the process of interpretation. As Ratzenböck (2020) argues regarding Anocriticism's first analytical dimension, two points are particularly relevant. Firstly, as age and ageing are culturally

constructed, they actually transmit little information about an individual per se (Maierhofer 2003, 42, 2007, 113, 2012, 100). Secondly, if we consider age and ageing to be culturally constructed, this implies that they are neither inherently 'good,' nor 'bad,' but that their interpretation depends on collectively shared meanings in specific cultural and social contexts. Thus, it is paramount that any investigation of ageing considers the basic difference between chronological and cultural age. This perspective allows for a nuanced exploration of how common understandings of age are actively produced and reproduced by writers and readers of literature alike, as well as other social agents in society (Maierhofer 2003, 27; Ratzenböck 2020, 27).

However, importantly, Anocriticism also highlights age and ageing's individual dimension (Maierhofer 2003, 53–54). The lives and experiences of older women are diverse and multi-faceted. As Maierhofer (2003) states, in fact, there simply is no single reality accessible to *all* old women (342). For this reason, any analysis of representations of age and/or ageing also needs to explore and trace individual experiences of ageing. Therefore, an anocritical analysis acknowledges the "authority of the individual female experience of age and aging" (Maierhofer 2003, 26, 2007, 115; Ratzenböck 2020, 28). In doing so, Anocriticism foregrounds people's interpretative power and narrative performance in relation to age and ageing by recognizing also their agency and creative sense-making competencies over the life-course (Maierhofer 2003, 53). At all stages of life, individuals continuously need to narrate, interpret, and re-interpret their biographies to maintain a coherent sense of self (Maierhofer 2007, 118). Anocriticism encourages in-depth exploration of these narrative efforts (Ratzenböck 2020, 28).

Finally, Anocriticism implies a focus on age and ageing's potential for resistance and change. As ageing, similar to gender, is culturally constructed, it can also be de-constructed (Maierhofer 2012, 100–101). As a feminist approach, Anocriticism promotes self-determination and transgression of age concepts in analysis of cultural representations as well as in society more broadly. Particularly literary texts may offer a subversive potential in terms of creating and portraying 'counter world[s]'. Analysing these imaginaries highlights that our realities can

be changed (Maierhofer 2007, 114–126). Any anocritical analysis thus needs to follow Fetterley's (1977) understanding of being a "resisting reader", which implies focusing on "transgressing rather than the codification of meaning" (Maierhofer 2004b, 157, Ratzenböck, 2020, 29–30).

Therefore, the approach encourages a critical narrative analysis that challenges the status-quo that is based on masculine heteronormative and often times stereotypical notions of gender and age by investigating the complexities and ambivalences present in narratives. Hence, an anocritical reading opens up the possibility to view female ageing as an individual quest filled with contradictions and resistance. The possibilities to develop a sensual relationship with the individual ageing body occurs within the readings of ageing female narratives that question social norms by allowing their individuality to flourish while ageing in a society that regards male youth as the default and makes older women invisible. Addressing the individual narratives through a critical investigation of their time and place, Anocriticism provides the necessary tools for feminist resistance by pinpointing the acts of subversion and protest that are possible through ageing (Maierhofer 1999, 130, 2015, 112). Hence, Anocriticism declares the knowledge of one's possibilities as well as limitations as a political act of resistance (Maierhofer 2019, 7).

Moreover, Anocriticism draws on feminist theoretical premises of intersectionality. The term was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her legal discussion of Black women in 1989 to visualize the metaphorical intersection of identity markers which construct individual identities, but can be traced back as early as the 19th century. In 1851, Sojourner Truth made her now famous claim of "Ain't I a woman" at a women's convention addressing the livelihoods of Black female slaves and their exclusion in the discussion of women's right during the time. During different social movements, the discussion of interlocking and interdependent systems of oppression were apparent and led feminist discussions toward the now well-known approach of intersectionality. Since its entry into feminist scholarship, intersectionality has gained popularity across disciplines. Its epistemological and methodological debates are informed by the different experiences of women, Black people, Latinx, poor peo-

ple, LGBTQIA+ people, disabled people, and older people (Hill Collins 2019, 157). By doing so, intersectionality "addresses the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely, the acknowledgement of differences" (Davis 2011, 45).

However, intersectionality has also displayed its limitations mainly due to the vagueness of its construction and applicability. In this context, Cho, McCall, and Crenshaw (2013) address the "eponymous 'et cetera' problem" of intersectionality, as the concept often problematizes the "number of categories and kinds of subjects (e. g. privileged or subordinate) stipulated or implied by an intersectional approach" (787). Hence, focusing within an analysis on distinct intersecting identity markers whilst displaying an intersectional consciousness has proven to be an ideal strategy to contribute to intersectional scholarship (Hill Collins 2019, Davis 2011, Lykke 2011). Anocriticism can thus be viewed as a meaningful intersectional contribution. It provides a defined framework with its four dimensions (age and ageing's collective cultural construction and connection to gender, the individual dimension of ageing, peoples' interpretive power and narrative performance concerning age/ing, and age and ageing's potential for resistance and social change (Ratzenböck 2020, 27)) to look at the intersections of age and gender while regarding other identity markers as well. Therefore, a valuable route to intersectional thinking is laid out that contributes to what Hearn and Wray (2015) declare as the challenge "to theorize the interconnections of age, gender(s), sexualities, ethnicities, and other social divisions, and their location in time, place and culture" (206). The following Anocritical reading will pinpoint these interconnections to analyse how an assertion of identity is presented through the protagonists' negotiations of their own gendered and racialised ageing narratives.

An Anocritical Reading of *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019)

Girl, Woman, Other contests "the linear narratives of patriarchal and imperial discourse" (Sánchez-Palencia 2021, 3) by telling the stories of eleven Black women and one non-binary Black person from different

generations living in today's Great Britain. Moreover, *Girl, Woman, Other* poses contemporary questions on the intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and age. In a recent interview about her Booker Prize winning novel, Bernadine Evaristo reflects upon the persisting void of Black British literary voices and describes the aim of her work as to "put presence into absence", by which she emphasises her objectives to change the literary landscape with her diverse protagonists and displays of Black British womanhood (Evaristo in Sethi 2019). To highlight Britain's diversity, the author employs the narrative technique of *multi-perspectivity* (also called 'polyperspectivity') to present a mere presence of several stories and viewpoints (Hartner 2014). A polyphonic text is created where each of the twelve protagonists receives their own section within the first four chapters of the book followed by a chapter called the "After – Party" and an epilogue. By doing so, *Girl, Woman, Other* displays a spatial and temporal expansion over different continents and centuries that transgresses normative assumptions of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and age.

This transgression is further emphasized by the form of the novel. The author calls the style of the novel "fusion fiction", which can be best described as an avant-garde technique that leaves out full stops at the end of sentences and lets the written word flow over the page. Certain parts of the novel, therefore, appear as if they were small poems through the display of their words (Evaristo in Sethi 2019). The boundless writing style provides the possibilities for the individual narratives of the protagonists to fuse into each other within the designated chapters. By doing so, traditional writings styles, such as the usage of punctuations and cohesive paragraphs, are neglected and a unique form is created that supports the content and intention of the author to present non-conforming and unconventional life-stories. Moreover, the "fluid way" of the book replicates that the protagonists' "roots are all over the place," as Evaristo describes the connection between style and history of her characters in a recent interview (Sethi 2019). Finally, this technique enables the protagonists to develop in all their complexities and ambivalences as their narratives take up space on the pages of the book.

The first chapter is divided into the stories of Amma, her daughter Yazz, and her friend Dominique. It depicts the life-stories of two queer theatre directors and former actors who are now in their fifties narrating their lives on the fringes of the British art scene founding their own theatre companies and experiencing misogyny and racism during their early years. Amma describes her younger self as "a renegade lobbing hand grenades at the establishment that excluded her" (Evaristo 2019, 2). Together with her friend Dominque, they "believed in protest that was public, disruptive and downright annoying to those at the other end of it" (Evaristo 2019, 2). Years of hard work filled with numerous rejections last "until the mainstream began to absorb what was once radical and she found herself hopeful of joining it /which only happened when the first female artistic director assumed the helm of the National" (Evaristo 2019, 2) and one of her plays is accepted at the most prestigious theatre in London. Her play is about fierce female African fighters which will be staged in the final chapter of the novel. Although she finally receives the recognition for her artistic work from the mainstream art scene, "Amma will always be anything but normal and as she's in her fifties, she's not old yet" (Evaristo 2019, 3). Transgressing societal beauty norms, Amma wears her hair in what she describes as "peroxide dreadlocks that are trained to stick up like candles on a birthday cake" (3), which her daughter recently described as "a mad old woman look" (Evaristo 2019, 4). Using an ageist and sexist trope to describe her mother's extravagant hair and dressing style, Yazz emphasises how her mother counters stereotypical assumptions of middle-aged women. Her daughter's remark also does not bother Amma, rather encourages her to continue to resist societal norms on various levels and to celebrate getting older (Evaristo 2019, 4).

Although she was often rendered invisible as a Black gay woman in a society that values white male heterosexuality, Amma shows how growing older enabled her to leave cultural assumptions of heteronormative gender roles behind. She never aimed to confirm to societal roles when it came to relationships and she always "saw commitment to one person as imprisonment" (Evaristo 2019, 20) highlighting the constrains of societal norms by using the metaphor of a prison. Nevertheless, she

decided in her thirties to have a child with a close friend, which she calls her "counterculture experiment" (Evaristo 2019, 36). The experience made her commit to conventional norms and realize that it actually completed her, which was hard to confess at first as it seemed "somehow anti-feminist" (Evaristo 2019, 36), but also displays the ambivalences of lives. In addition, Amma describes how her sexual longings also changed over the years, where she finds herself now in her fifties "craving the intimacy that comes from being emotionally, although not exclusively, close to another person" (Evaristo 2019, 21). Her continuous discovery of her sensual self and her own negotiation of her sexuality remain present elements in Amma's life which she has managed to cater to by having two partners who are independent women and even know each other. Overall, Amma's narrative breaks with conventional maternal narratives of the asexual mother who disguises her sensuality, but rather displays a contradicting narrative of a middle-aged woman which flourishes in its ambivalences and discontinuities.

The second section of the novel continues with telling three entangled life-stories of Carole, her Nigerian mother Bummi, and her classmate LaTisha. Particularly Bummi's narrative amplifies the individualized dimension of ageing and one's narrative power to challenge cultural constructs of ageing. Her narrative problematizes the intersections of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and age. Migrating to Great Britain with a university degree, she imagined better opportunities in the job market, but soon realizes "that her first class degree from a Third World country would mean nothing in her new country especially with her name and nationality attached to it" (Evaristo 2019, 167). When her husband passes away and she is left alone to take care of her daughter, the economic hardship combined with their migratory background leaves a mark on her, but at the same time encourages her to follow her dream of founding her own cleaning company, despite what her close environment thinks of the idea. Lacking the financial resources to do so, she asks the local pastor for financial support, which he only provides in return for sex. Bummi accepts the offer describing it as "her first transaction as a businesswoman" (Evaristo 2019, 173), but later swears to herself that "she would never tell anyone how low she had gone to elevate herself and her

daughter" (Evaristo 2019, 174). The contradictions of life are displayed in the incident where the protagonist feels powerful and powerless at the same time in order to overcome her burdens.

Moreover, Bummi's story is filled with unexpected turns and surprises that resist normative assumptions of older women. For her company, she hires her friend Omofe and soon starts a secret love relationship with her. Trapped in her own heterosexual normativity, their relationship is portrayed, on the one hand, as very intimate, when Bummi states that she "felt tingles down the side of her body that blended into Omofe" and that "Omofe felt like home to Bummi and her expert activities culminated in the most intense pleasure" (Evaristo 2019, 179). Yet, on the other hand, Bummi's uneasiness for being with a woman instead of a man interferes with her feelings for Omofe: "the shame she tried to suppress began walking towards her /she did not want to be that sort of person/it was not who she was" (Evaristo 2019, 180). Soon her worries drive her away from her girlfriend. Unable to accept her desire for a woman, Bummi decides to leave Omofe, and eventually finds a new male partner again with whom she eventually spends the rest of her life. Nevertheless, Bummi's story depicts how individual life-stories are often complex and discontinuing. Breaking with her own principles to elevate herself and her daughter socially shows the resistance in Bummi's character, but also how vulnerability accompanies this act of resistance. Moreover, it is visible in her story that "racialized aging bodies from low income backgrounds may entail multiple layers of exile and invisibility" (Rajan-Rankin 2018, 34), but that the individual dimension of ageing makes it possible to challenge collective heteronormative assumptions of ageing Black women.

Following Bummi's story, the third chapter depicts the life-stories of Shirly, her mother Winsome, and her colleague Penelope, where each of them highlights the different experience of growing up as Black women in Great Britain mediating what it means to live in a certain time at a certain place. Different generations have different opportunities, which Shirly and her mother Winsome represent in particular. Winsome migrated with her husband Clovis to Great Britain's country side, where there were no Black people common there. Thus, they were met with

great hostility and a lack for work and support from the local community there. Continuously, they were denied residence or service and were met with outright racism and hostility. Although Clovis wanted to remain there due to his love for nature and the country side more generally, the societal constrains and daily abuse targeted at them led the young couple eventually to settle down in London, where the anonymity of the big city life paired with a greater diversity of cultures, races, and ethnicity was more welcoming. In the city, the couple worked endlessly to create a better life for their children in a country where their skin colour continues to be seen as *Other*. Reminiscing about their hardship after their immigration to Great Britain, Winsome has a hard time relating to her daughter's discomfort with her job as a teacher as she sees it as an act of being ungrateful for their efforts to provide a good life for them.

The depiction of the mother-daughter relationship is complicated and finds its peak in the narrative when Winsome shares the intimate details about her affair with Lennox, her daughter's husband. Finding him only attractive at first, he shows up one day at her doorstep "and so it continued for over a year /once a week, sometimes twice" (Evaristo 2019, 273). Their secret makes Winsome question "who was this woman letting her son-in-law do her every which way?" (Evaristo 2019, 272) emphasizing their wild affair and her newly discovered sensuality. She also questions her own perception of herself as an older woman, who finds herself now in a secret and intense sexual relationship with a younger man, who is erotically drawn to her ageing body. After years of being determined by her maternal roles ("first she was a daughter, then a wife and mother, and now also a grandmother and great-grandmother" (257)), Winsome decides that "she deserved to have this/him" (273). The decision may appear as selfish on the surface but reveals deeper layers as the protagonist reflects on the suppression of her own desires over the years of confirming to maternal societal norms and to live up to her family's expectation as the selfish care-taker. Finally, Winsome experiences a sense of selfhood that enables her to make the decision to continue the affair whilst being aware that she finds herself in a moral dilemma that will hurt her daughter's feelings. To calm her doubts, she comes up with an explanation for herself that it is still better she satisfies the needs of her son-

in-law rather than some strange woman. Yet, eventually the affair drifts away and they return to being in-laws again. Similar to Bummi, Winsome's narrative shows her ageing as a road to her sensual self and a way of expressing her sexual feelings. Both women have raised children and been married, and yet share in their narratives their most intimate selves to highlight how intersections of age, gender, race, and sexuality are mediated to problematize heteronormative assumptions of what it means to grow old as a woman. By doing so, they destabilize gender norms, show their vulnerability in their resistance and make thus room for new gendered life narratives (Butler 2016, 18).

Finally, the fourth and last chapter of the novel tells the stories of a resilient Black genealogy of Megan, who later becomes Morgan, Hattie, and Grace. Hattie, who is the oldest character in the book with 93-years of age, provides another individualised dimension of what it means to grow old for women. As a Black farmer in the countryside in England, her life was marked by exclusion and inclusion. She presented an *Otherness* that allowed her to thrive on her own terms, but at the same time was met with reluctance and hostility by the society of the time who was very wary of the first Black woman farmer on the British countryside running one of the largest farms there. Additionally, Hattie experiences great hardship in her role as mother. Getting pregnant at a very young age from a white boy from the village, her father urges her to give the child up for adoption because he believes that "her life will be forever ruined with a bastard child/ men will have two reasons not to marry you" (370). Her father is a white aristocratic patriarch from rural Great Britain who decides the faith of her new born child and also highlights the racial biases present towards her daughter, although he was madly in love and married to her mother. Eventually, her father passes away and she marries an African-American, who happened to travel through the countryside and fell in love. Together they take over the farm and work on it until his death. Afterwards, she continues to run the farm by herself, which continues to astonish her community on the country side. She shares an experience with officials who would stop by at the farm and "poked their nose around and couldn't hide their surprise at who they saw in charge" (347) emphasizing that her gendered, racialised, and ageing body

was not what they have expected to encounter. Ignoring the hostility, she continues to be met with, Hattie lives her live on her own terms and finds great joy in deciding for herself how to live her life as a widow on a large farm.

The relationship of Hattie and her grandchild Morgan as well as their transgender partner highlights how the different generations are related in their individual quest for identity and belonging. Both characters experience hostility due to their intersecting identities and diverse livelihoods, yet overcoming generational division with regard to political views, their relationship shows how individual narratives of gender and generations can provide possibilities for change. Although Hattie does not fully understand Morgan's gender transformation and her political views, her narrative expresses her own biases and how the protagonists manage to overcome them. First dictated by learned heteronormative perceptions of gender, Hattie eventually embraces Morgan's development and gives her farm to the young couple hoping to transform it into a place for other people to live their truest selves. Overcoming social burdens, Morgan accepts her grandmother's gift with greatest appreciation and finally feels accepted by her kin. By giving Morgan the farm, Hattie realises she will make other family members angry, yet does not dwell on this pressure, but rather sees her final wish as an act of political resistance out of love. Her actions can be read through an anocritical lens to interpret how everyday life decisions present also possibilities to realise social change. Hence, Anocriticism enables the reader to view their interpretative powers to highlight the complexities and ambivalences of gender and generations in cultural narratives at a certain time and place. This possibility can be seen as an act of feminist resistance that contributes to the understanding of what it means to grow old at a certain time and place.

The dominant theme of all four chapters made apparent through an intersectional investigation of the protagonists Amma, Bummi, Winsome, and Hatti is their sexuality and relationship to their racialised and ageing bodies over their life courses. Following feminists' understandings of women's bodies as contested sights of institutional and personal powers, "a discussion of female bodies aware of their own sexuality

allows for a repudiation of culturally negative, trivializing stereotypes associated with aging women" (Maierhofer 2004, 322). A new awareness of their bodies is present in the readings of these protagonists' stories, where the first three display it in their sensual relationships with themselves and through sexual relationships to others that often transgress their own perceptions of social conventions. The fourth narrative stresses more her realisation of the constructed nature of gender and sexual identity through her relationship to her grandchild and their partner. This engagement, however, can be seen as an interdependence between the generations that continues the negotiation and growing awareness of what it means to be gendered racialised ageing bodies in a society that renders them invisible. Thus, the investigation aligns with Butler's (2004) claim that "terms of gender designation are thus never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade" (10), similar to notions of ageing.

Conclusion

Summing up, Maierhofer developed Anocriticism as a distinct feminist approach to investigate the particular intersections of gender and ageing to highlight the intrinsic connection between feminist theory and Age/Ageing Studies. Similar to gender and sex, age is biologically and culturally constructed and provides thus opportunities for deconstruction and re-interpretation of what it means to grow old. As noted by Ratzenböck (2020, 27–29), who outlined four distinct dimensions of the approach, with the help of Anocriticism as a tool to critically analyse narratives, individual dimensions of experiences and representations – in relation to collectively shared meanings – become apparent. People's interpretative power and narrative performance are another crucial dimension of Anocriticism. Both create the potential for resistance and change in everyday life as well as in research. Anocritical explorations of cultural representations of gender and age in popular culture offer 'counter world[s]' (Maierhofer 2007, 118) that allow us all to move beyond established definitions of self. Reading a contemporary novel, such as Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl,*

Woman, Other (2019), through an anocritical lens allows to resist conventional notions of gendered ageing by valuing the individual quest, particular of older women, to their sensual selves and to negotiate their ageing bodies by their own terms resisting societal norms of conventional heterosexual ageing. As the novel highlights intersectionality and relationality, and inhabits an intergenerational character that enables individual narratives to develop and to define on their own complex and ambivalent terms of what it means to age, an Anocritical reading enables an exploration of the complex interplay of individuality and collectivism to demonstrate fictionally "how irreducibly complex social life is" (McCall 2005, 1773).

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