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Narratives of Old Age and Gender: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives

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Introduction: Narratives of Old Age and Gender: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives

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Abstract: The editors introduce the special issue by offering a contextualisation for approaching both 'narrative' and the intersection of 'old age and gender' at this present moment, and a consideration of the implications of the intervention with reference to intellectual and methodological developments within age studies. They also reflect on the value of a multi-disciplinary approach and consider the significance of intersectionality for analysing age, ageing and ageism. The second half introduces the format of the issue and each article.

Keywords: Old age, gender, ageing, narratives, age studies, multi-disciplinary

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This collection of essays arises from the British Academy Conference, 'Narratives of Old Age and Gender', which took place at Carlton House Terrace, London, in September 2019. Our aim was to advance scholarly knowledge on narratives of ageing and longevity with a specific focus on the intersection of old age and gender from multiple disciplinary perspectives. It included contributions from leading international and UK scholars from literature, history, theatre, psychology, sociology, fashion and film, creative practitioners, campaigners, arts educators and charity workers. The conference highlighted that narrative – by which we mean the structuring, or storifying, of events – is, and has long been, situated at the centre of age studies. There is good reason for this as there is a clear affiliation between narrative and ageing in terms of understanding the life course. As Kathleen Woodward claims in her seminal work, *Aging and Its Discontents*, 'To *have* a life means to possess its narrative' (emphasis in original).[1] Lives may be understood, just like larger social histories, by the way events are ordered in time.

Yet the conference also revealed that Woodward's statement is less straightforward than it might appear. What does it mean to possess one's life through narrative? Master narratives of ageing still frequently revert to familiar patterns, which tend to see ageing as decline – as a loss of power and social relevance, producing cultural marginalisation and burdensomeness. These patterns entrench ideas about age-appropriate roles and behaviour, stereotypes that can be hard to shift and which can suppress individual voices. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette puts it, 'we learn age categories and their attributes' from culture, a culture that is undergirded by the stories we tell.[2] Narratives are by nature concerned with beginnings, middles and ends; the latter dominate in stories of ageing that foreground acceptance of limited possibilities and impose what Mark Freeman has called 'foreclosure', which is the sense that ageing brings 'few prospects for growth [and] the expectation of further decline'.[3] One by-product of the persistence of such end-determined narratives is that they have tended to occlude the different experiences of ageing for men and women, which was the other occasion of our conference. Commentators such as Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan have gone so far as to argue that historical narratives of ageing have excluded women or, rather, missed the variety of women's experiences through centring on hegemonic discourses of power, productivity and social usefulness linked to fertility.[4] Even so, it is also the case that male ageing has to negotiate, in different ways, cultural stereotypes resulting in a restrictive range of possible identities for ageing men, and the suppression of alterity. As Andrew Sparkes observes, 'making sense

[1] Woodward (1991: 83).
[2] Gullette (1998: 9).
[3] Freeman (2000); Wright-Bevans and Murray (2018: 263).
[4] Greer (1991); Friedan (1993).

of age is a gendered process', and as the papers at the conference indicated, and the essays in this special issue collectively propose, age and gender are best understood *as process* and can therefore be interrogated through attention to narrative.[5]

If narratives of ageing can produce the experience of foreclosure, then it is the conviction of the contributors who feature in this issue that they also have the potential to provide counter-voicings and creative resistance. This is integral to the function of storytelling, and it is from this assumption that *Narratives of Old Age and Gender: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives* begins. Ageing is the locomotion of life, its continuous movement understood according to time and change; as Amelia DeFalco observes, 'subjects understand their lives through narrative trajectories.'[6] The importance of narrative to age studies is strengthened by a broader philosophical appreciation of narrative as distinctively human – Fredric Jameson considers narrative the 'central function or *instance* of the human mind.'[7] Age studies scholars have become increasingly aware that narrative as a way of knowing the self in the world needs probing for its potential to be realised for age studies. This reflexive approach was foregrounded by the 2022 conference hosted jointly by the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS) and the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS), 'Narratives and Counter Narratives of Aging and Old Age: Reflexivity in Aging Studies'. That emphasis on reflexivity has also been opened up by philosophers such as Galen Strawson, whose critique of the normative restrictions of the assumption that 'a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood',[8] has initiated generative conversations within medical humanities about the limits of narrative for circumscribing personhood.[9] In this spirit, readers of this special issue will find that age studies within the humanities and social sciences has reached a place where it too can engage with and question the usefulness of totalising narratives, and assumptions about single narratives of self (at the expense of multiple, sometimes contradictory ones). It can query the limits of narrative as an explanatory frame for understanding personhood and identity, particularly in old age, and especially in connection with dementia, where narrative can become increasingly fragmented.

The essays in this issue therefore move discussions of ageing and gender on through their attention to narrative even as that means seeing its limitations. We offer new insights into narratives of old age and gender by asking, do our stories of ageing imagine the experience of late life differently for women and men? How is the figure of the older man or woman understood within different periods, societies

[5] Sparkes (2015: 137).
[6] DeFalco (2000: xiv).
[7] Jameson (2002: 13).
[8] Strawson (2004: 428).
[9] See Woods (2011).

and cultural forms? In what ways are cultural artifacts and personal narratives useful in gerontological debates and histories, and how are studies of gender enriched by attending to the category of age?

Narratives of Old Age and Gender: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives thus approaches narrative self-reflexively and from the perspective of cultural narratives, personal narratives and narratives of resistance. Our special issue builds on the achievements of age studies scholarship in critiquing ageist representations, and – in common with Elizabeth Barry's and Margery Vibe Skagen's intentions in their recent volume, *Literature and Ageing* (2020) – we anticipate forging an intervention in a new (second) wave of age studies scholarship. As part of this, our collection begins to engage critically with the discipline's own practices and theoretical frameworks, as well as offering theorisations of our world through the lens of age. Underpinning this intention are three drivers: first, bringing older age into direct dialogue with gender at the same time as attending to intersectionality more broadly, including addressing sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability and social class; second, facilitating intellectual encounters across a range of disciplines from the humanities and social sciences in order to bring to bear the dynamism of cross-disciplinary exchange to the intersection of old age and gender across different historical periods; and third, incorporating creative and practical examples of work on age and gender, including attention to the lived experience of ageing and participation in the creative process. In this context, we treat narrative as a pliable concept which has the potential to facilitate discussion of the various ways that gendered ageing is articulated both historically and in the contemporary period, and how different cultural, and sometimes non-narrative, forms – for example, the images in graphic fiction, the interludes of lyric poetry, epistolary exchange, or queer performance – can meet, rework and even bypass the strictures of narrative to provide a richer picture of ageing and its cultures.

While ageing and old age is attracting increasing attention from scholars, the intersection of old age and gender within narratives is still under-researched and this is particularly true of studies that cross disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. Important work has been undertaken in individual disciplines on gendered old age, both femininity and masculinity.[10] In addition, particular cultural forms have been addressed, including cinema,[11] media,[12] the novel[13] and popular culture,[14] and

[10] For examples of discussions of femininity, see Botelho and Thane (2001); Wray (2004); Pearsall (1997). For discussions of masculinity, see Canham (2009); Jackson (2016); Thompson (2018); Hartung *et al.* (2022).
[11] Dolan (2018).
[12] Anderson (2018).
[13] Hartung (2015); Hobbs (2016); Charise (2020).
[14] Whelehan and Gwynne (2014).

there are studies of ageing and creativity.[15] Age-related topics that are often constructed in gendered terms include: pensions,[16] care work[17] and the ageing body.[18] This multi-disciplinary volume is indebted to this scholarship, but equally forges a new intellectual path by bringing together leading scholars from literary studies, history, theatre studies, psychology, sociology, film studies, fashion, creative practitioners and a third-sector expert, to consider the long-historical and contemporary significance of our cultural constructions of ageing and gender. Collectively, the articles propose new questions and methodologies about the intersection of ageing and gender that will stimulate the transference of ideas and approaches across and between subject areas.

The issue takes a broad historical perspective with research spanning from the nineteenth century, a moment crucial to modern debates about ageing, to the present when these questions have become yet more prominent as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We address the ways in which the experience of gender is affected by life course developments and the gendered dynamic of ageing. Key areas of focus include ageism and gerontophobia and how this is inflected by gender, narratives of decline versus 'good ageing', ageing and poverty, inter- and intra-generational relationships, the gendered ageing body, late life creativity, conceptions of care and the intersections between ageing, gender, sexuality, class, disability, ethnicity and race. The issue engages with historical continuities and differences, the identification of persistent challenges and forms of discrimination as well as sites of resistance and potential counter-narratives. Contributors think across a diverse range of cultural material (including the graphic novel, the fashion of the everyday, queer performance, personal narratives, letters, contemporary theatre and film and transhistorical lyric poetry), and the volume highlights the influence of traditions, forms and genres on the representation of older people as well as the creative potential of self-expression in later life.

The issue provides in-depth qualitative analysis of cultural representations as well as some quantitative research on pensions in the UK and gendered ageing in the Middle East. It also assesses the impact of social attitudes on internalised narratives, identity and agency, and enhances understanding of the socio-economic, historical and cultural contexts that frame the experience and representation of late life. The issue addresses the ways in which old age is being creatively reimagined by including critical reflections of creative practitioners as well as showcasing their practice in which older people are the key participants. The new understandings produced

[15] Amigoni and McMullan (2019).
[16] Thane (2006); Foster and Smetherham (2013).
[17] Davidson *et al.* (2000).
[18] Twigg (2004); Calasanti and King (2005).

here have the potential to impact positively on the activities of campaigners, charities, policy makers, educators, researchers and creative practitioners.

The issue is divided into four parts. Part One 'Conceptualising Gendered Old Age' includes multi-disciplinary perspectives from history, sociology and cultural studies (including attention to film and theatre). These articles offer a broad framework for understanding narratives of gendered old age historically, socially, politically and theoretically, with attention to gendered ageing's intersection with other identities, including class, ethnicity and race. In 'Gendered Narratives of Ageing in Britain since 1900', Pat Thane identifies persistent stereotypes and generalisations regarding later life influential in Britain, particularly the 'burden' narrative. This is countered in her work by stressing the diversity of experience and positive social and economic contributions of a female majority of older people who are commonly overlooked. Thane's insight that 'contemporary narratives of old age … often have long histories which can alert us to long continuities in attitudes to later life' reminds us of the value of a historical perspective and resonates with the work of a number of our authors. Siân Adiseshiah's essay, 'Old Age, Gender and Constructions of the Contemporary', offers a theorisation of the 'contemporary' as a discursive formation that operates in ageist and sexist ways, and applies this to two contemporary texts about gendered experiences of ageing: Michael Haneke's film *Amour* (2012) and debbie tucker green's play *generations* (2005). She argues that the 'contemporary', as deployed in the cultural sphere, is associated with youthfulness (e.g., cutting edge, innovative, new/fresh) to the exclusion of older age, and especially female older age, where 'the figure of the ageing woman' in particular 'presents as a blockage in the flow of futurity.' Shereen Hussein's article 'Reflections on the Intersectionality of Gender and Ageing in the Middle East' takes a comparative, global perspective. She provides a sociological analysis of the intersections of gender and ageing perception in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region in the context of rapid transition towards population ageing and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her research establishes the disconnect between cultural and religious narratives of ageing and the complexities of lived experience through attending to the voices of older people and their families.

Part Two 'Reimagining Ageing' offers analyses of gendered ageing in life writing, lyric poetry, queer performance and the graphic novel. It includes attention to nineteenth-century and contemporary texts and contexts, and key themes include the gendered ageing body, late life creativity, mentoring, ageing and theories of time and conceptions of care. In '"How to Grow Old Gracefully": Advice, Authority and the Mentor in Women's Late Life Writing', Amy Culley focuses on the cultural narrative of the older woman as mentor in the early nineteenth century, in dialogue with the letters and biographical writing of Lady Louisa Stuart (1757–1851). The recovery of Stuart's late life writing in both print and manuscript provides a more complex picture

of the challenges and rewards of intergenerational exchange as she navigated the culturally ascribed role of mentor. Jonathon Shears' article '"Thou Breath of Autumn's Being": Voicing Masculinity in the Poetry of Late Life' examines the potential for lyric poetry focused on late life to provide a breathing space within larger cultural narratives of masculine emotional reticence. Covering Western lyric tradition (including William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Philip Larkin) that fixates on the male voice as a locus of strength or weakness, he argues that lyric poetry's attention to its history as an oral medium makes it uniquely fitted to counter-voicing masculine subjectivity. He pays particular attention to breathing spaces within poetry that presents father-son relationships in the post-war era. Jen Harvie's essay 'Queering Time, Ageing and Relationships with Split Britches' establishes the late work of experimental performance company, Split Britches, as staging radical counter-narratives of the intersection of older age, gender, sexuality and disability through a queering of normative time. Examining *Ruff* (2012), *Unexploded Ordnances* (2018), *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* (2013) and *Last Gasp* (2020–1), Harvie demonstrates Split Britches' alignment of late life with 'futurity, desire, unexplored potential, and intergenerational as well as intra-generational relationality.' In 'The Power of Graphic Narrative for Dementia Stories: Trauma, Aesthetics and Resilience in Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* (2012) and Dana Walrath's (2013) *Aliceheimer's*', E. Ann Kaplan makes the case for the suitability of graphic novels to explore dementia. She argues that Leavitt and Walrath present two types of realism – the first 'abstract' and the second 'fantastic' – which allow them to move beyond stereotypes to open up the trauma of dementia for the dementia subject and those caring for her. Kaplan proposes that the new realisms of graphic fiction act as a medium that helps correct well-meaning and idealised dementia images.

It is in recognition of Stephen Katz's claim – 'it is in the practical worlds of doing and making that profound ideas arise'[19] – that the second half of our issue focuses precisely on these areas: doing and making. Part Three 'Creative Ageing' comprises creative responses to gendered older age encompassing theatre making, performance poetry and fashion. Leah Thorn's essay presents an account of the 'Older Women Rock!' project, which creates pop-up political art spaces to explore issues facing women in their 60s and 70s. She analyses examples of the poetry, performance, retro clothes and film produced by participants and reflects on the project's aims to promote consciousness-raising and listening skills. In '"Hope Appeared Like a Flash": A Performance-Research Narrative of Passages Theatre Group', scholar-practitioner Bridie Moore offers a reflection on her work with Passages, a group of older performers with whom she made work that attempted to trouble normative narratives and

[19] Katz (2014: 20).

performances of older age and gender. The essay contextualises Moore's work with Passages with reference to theories from age and gender studies, and offers methods and models that can be adapted by age studies and theatre practitioners for their own use. Part Four 'Ageing Now' considers the material context for gendered ageing in the contemporary period. It consists of an analysis – 'The Gender Gap in Pensions: How Policies Continue to Fail Women' by Jay Ginn and Liam Foster – of the impact of gender on ageing with respect to pensions, the conclusions of which are that 'suitably generous state pensions can reduce the gender gap, while an emphasis on expanding private pensions exacerbates it.' The final contribution in this section is the editors' interview with Caroline Abrahams, the Charity Director of Age UK, about the work of her organisation as it relates to the theme of old age and gender. Our wide-ranging conversation encompasses the experience of the pandemic, the balance between the generations and the cost of living crisis and pensions. In particular, we explore the ways in which ageism and the inequalities of older age are frequently overlooked and the role of Age UK in creating influential platforms for older people to tell their own stories in order to bring to the surface hidden experiences. The collection closes with a Coda by Lynne Segal that offers a brief reflection on the contribution of the issue.

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In 2019, when the contributors to this volume first met at the British Academy Conference in London, this topic already had significant relevance in light of the growing proportion of older people worldwide and the crisis in our thinking about late life. But now – in a world fundamentally changed by the global pandemic of COVID-19 – there are few topics of more consequence. Media coverage of the pandemic risks reimposing negative images and narratives of ageing centred on vulnerability, decline and burdensomeness, at the same time as generations are positioned against each other with older people characterised as selfish and parasitic. It therefore seems more important now than ever that the research of scholars and practitioners in the arts, humanities and social sciences demonstrates ways in which we can resist and reconfigure the stigmatising subject positions of older people and engage in dialogue with the organisations that represent them. Collectively, these discussions influence current debates in the fast-moving interdisciplinary field of age studies and stimulate original responses to the place and experiences of older people in our society. We hope this issue will benefit scholars from the humanities and social sciences, and inform thinking in subjects which traditionally draw on quantitative rather than qualitative research including health care, politics and economics as well as opening up the conversation beyond academia. Through gathering critical, creative and third-sector responses to the cultural constructions of ageing and gender in different times and

places, we provide an occasion to consider how normative, circumscribed narratives are established, but also how they might be interrogated.

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PART ONE

Conceptualising Gendered Old Age

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Gendered Narratives of Ageing in Britain since 1900

Pat Thane

Abstract: There are multiple, sometimes conflicting narratives of ageing. This article surveys those influential in British culture since *c.* 1900. There is a particular focus upon gender which is often overlooked in common narratives, especially the fact that women have long outlived men, on average, and are still the majority of people defined as 'old'. This large age group, aged from their 60s to past 100, is subject to much stereotyping and generalisation, for example that they are all dependent 'burdens' upon younger people, and that they are incapable of learning new skills. This article challenges these generalisations by stressing the great diversity of the age group including between rich and poor, fit and frail, and highlighting their contributions to society and the economy through paid work, unpaid volunteering, care for aged and younger relatives including grandchildren and financial support for younger people.

Keywords: ageing; gender; discrimination; pension; protest; care; family; poverty

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Introduction

Conventional narratives of ageing are notably gendered in that they so rarely refer to the unquestionable fact that old age is and long has been a predominantly female experience, in Britain and most other countries. For convenience, when discussing age statistics, I will define 'old age' as beginning at age 65, as is the common practice, though in reality the age at which 'old age' begins is problematic and perceived as diverse in individual and sometimes collective cases, as I will discuss later in this article. By the 65+ definition older women have outnumbered older men in Britain and females have had longer life expectancy than males from birth for as long as we have had official figures, almost certainly for much longer, perhaps always. Official statistics were first published in Britain in 1841, when average expectation of life at birth was 39 for males, 42 for females. It must be noted that at this time life expectation at birth was much reduced by high infant and child mortality. By 1901 the figures were, males 51, females 58; by 1991, when child mortality had much declined, 76 and 80.8 respectively.[1] By 2017–19 they had risen to 79 and 83.[2]

It is a curiosity of narratives of old age and ageing at most times, and of most public discourse on the subject, that this female majority is so rarely mentioned, though it is an issue that has been wrestled with throughout the many centuries that such narratives have existed. To put current gendered perceptions in perspective it is worth noting that men long found it difficult to admit that women had this advantage. In his day Aristotle was not alone in believing that it was 'natural' for men to outlive women, because the male 'is a warmer creature than the female' and women dried and withered earlier in life.[3] In the thirteenth century Albertus Magnus agreed with him, but is said to have noted that, *per accidens*, women tended to live longer, because menstruation purified them of harmful humours, sexual intercourse took away fewer of their bodily fluids and they suffered less from the hazards of work.[4] In eighteenth-century France, physicians asserted that men lived longer but were puzzled by the frequency with which females 'went against nature' and outlived them. Contemporary narratives of old age are often perceived as new products of a new situation in which more people live longer lives than ever before. In reality they often have long histories which can alert us to long continuities in attitudes to later life.

[1] OPCS (1991: table 2, 5), Thane (2000: 479).
[2] Marmot *et al.* (2020: 15).
[3] Bulloch and Campbell (1980: 317).
[4] Shahar (1997: 34).

Incomes of Older Women

More older women than older men live in poverty in the UK now and as far into the past as we have evidence. 18 per cent of all people over 65 in the UK were in poverty in 2020, by the internationally accepted definition of incomes below 60 per cent of the national median.[5] In 2016–17, 17 per cent of all women over 65 were in poverty compared with 14 per cent of men.[6] This has long tended to be true of women of all ages because they have always had fewer opportunities to work than men, take time off from paid work to care for children or older relatives, and have lower earnings than men when they can work, so can save less for later life. This leads to poverty in later life unless they are married to men with good incomes and savings or inherit wealth from their families or their husbands. Currently in Britain 27 per cent of pensioners are single women, 23 per cent are single men and 13 per cent live in couples.[7] Most older women are single due to widowhood because women outlive their husbands and are less likely than men to remarry, or they are divorced, separated or never married.

The income difficulties of older women are compounded by the fact that the UK has the lowest state pensions of any high-income country, in 2018 they stood at almost half the average of the 38 high-income countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.[8] Since they were first introduced in 1908 UK state pensions have never provided enough to live on.[9] Currently only about 25 per cent of women pensioners receive the full state pension because they have not worked enough years to pay the full contributions. Following complaints about this, in 2007 the number of required contribution years was reduced from 39 to 30, but this does not eliminate the problem for many women.[10] Those with no other income can supplement the pension with a means-tested benefit, currently Pension Credit, which provides an income just about adequate for survival; but, as is common with means-tested benefits internationally, currently, according to official statistics, 37 per cent of eligible people do not apply for it, because they are unaware of their rights, find the application too complicated or feel unable to due to pride.[11]

Occupational pensions generally provide a more adequate income in old age. These are fixed in relation to earnings and years of work, so, again, women are disadvantaged by low earnings and/or by working fewer years than most men, or they are in

[5] Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021).
[6] Women's Budget Group (2018).
[7] Age UK (2021: 5).
[8] OECD (2018).
[9] Thane (2000: 216–35).
[10] Ginn (2006); Hollis (2006).
[11] Hollis (2006: 118–19).

low-paid, often part-time, insecure occupations which do not offer pensions.[12] Older women from ethnic minority backgrounds, especially Bangladeshi and Pakistani (generally the poorest minority ethnic communities in Britain) are most likely to experience poverty because they tend to work fewer years at lower pay than other women. Black, Asian and minority ethnic men of all ages are also on average poorer than white men, though there are considerable disparities among them.

Gendered disadvantages in later life are occasionally noted by politicians and official committees but they make little public impact and little is done about them. They are forgotten for example, when the current older generation – the 'baby boomers' – are attacked (generally unfairly, as we will see) for enjoying prosperous lives at the expense of the younger generation, as regularly occurs in the media.[13] Some older people are prosperous, but by no means all, including most older women. Inequalities *within* the generations, including of gender and income, are as great as inequalities between generations.

Older Women Overlooked by Younger Feminists

The poverty of older women, indeed most needs and difficulties of older women, have also been neglected by women's movements in Britain over the past century. Since the late nineteenth century women have campaigned on a wide range of significant issues: for the vote, for improved opportunities for employment and education, improved welfare especially for mothers and children, for equal pay, abortion, easier divorce, against domestic violence, rape and other forms of violence against women – and much else – but not for higher incomes and greater security for the large numbers of women in need in old age. This is partly because they have often been movements of younger women, and older women – also older men – until quite recently have been slow to speak up for themselves against discrimination and disadvantage, often seeming to internalise a common narrative that their needs matter less than those of younger people because their lives are almost over. This is discussed more fully in the section 'Protest by Older People'.

By contrast the post-1968 women's movement in the US did protest against discrimination against older women, perhaps because many older women suffered even more in the exiguous US welfare system than in Britain. They also suffered discrimination in employment. In 1968 a union of women air 'hostesses', as they were then known, won a court ruling under the Civil Rights Act against the airlines' practice of

[12] Thane (2006).
[13] Willetts (2010).

enforcing their retirement at ages between 32 and 35 – hardly 'old' ages, which may explain why they aroused more attention than the problems of women in their 60s and beyond. The airlines had rigid, stringent rules about their appearance at work and by the advanced age of their early 30s they were obviously unable to meet those standards.[14] The US later abolished fixed retirement ages at an earlier date than most countries.

I am not aware of any equivalent protest in Britain until 2003 when Deanna-Maria Williams protested at being forced by British Airways to retire as a flight attendant at age 55, when she was still a fit marathon runner. Supported by 300 former colleagues she challenged this 'ageist' policy at an employment tribunal. British Airways promised to consider changing the rule in 2006 when an EU Directive against age discrimination would come into force. They did so, raising the retirement age to 60 (matching that of pilots), to rise to 65 after a further five years, claiming that their main reason was not gender equality but to close a deficit in their pension fund.[15] Since 2011, enforced retirement at any age has been illegal in Britain, unless an employer can prove that someone is no longer competent, though the law is not always observed. It was introduced partly in response to the EU Directive and to encourage older people to remain at work as their numbers grew while younger workers were fewer due to a falling birth rate.

The State Pension Age and Women's Protests

From 1940 until 2010 the UK state pension age for women was 60, for men 65. When state pensions were first introduced, in 1908, they were aimed at the very poor, were non-contributory, state-funded, means-tested, very low and paid to women and men at age 70. This was later by at least five or ten years than it was generally believed that poor older people needed support, but the Treasury wanted to save money and fewer people survived to age 70.[16] The campaign for state pensions which began in the 1870s, led by trade unionists among others, was conducted almost wholly by men, and women's situation was rarely mentioned. But the UK pensions introduced in 1908 were tax-funded and means-tested rather than National Insurance-based as in Germany from 1889, because the government realised that lower-paid workers could not afford insurance contributions. Also, they came to realise that most older people were female and could not pay contributions because often they were not employed or

[14] Vantoch (2013).
[15] *Guardian* (2006).
[16] Thane (2000: 220).

were too low-paid and very many of them were very poor.[17] The numbers and poverty of women helped to shape the first pensions, though this was not publicly discussed, and it was probably less influential than the poverty of older men whose cause was more vigorously promoted by campaigners. Women made up more than 60 per cent of the first state pensioners. National Insurance pensions at age 65 were introduced in 1925 and went overwhelmingly to insured men and their wives and widows – rarely to single women.[18]

In the inter-war years surveys of unemployment increasingly noted that women in employment were often forced to retire at earlier ages than men due to being judged too old in appearance for the job, especially in people-facing occupations where female (though not male) looks were believed to matter. This was so, for example, in retail, as it was for US airline stewardesses, sometimes at similar ages. Also, employers argued that, as they aged, women were more likely to be sick than men, for which there was some evidence though it was not widespread; and that their competence (never as high as that of men of course) declined faster, for which there was no evidence. In 1937 an official committee reported that at least one big London store dismissed women at 35. They could rarely stay on in such work past 45 or 50.

From 1935 women organised to protest. A woman who ran a small business in Bradford founded the National Spinsters' Pensions Association to demand state pensions at 55 for unmarried women, who were the majority of full-time female workers. Very many of them experienced early retirement due to discrimination by employers. This left them impoverished with no alternative income to minimal, stigmatising poor relief until they reached age 70 and qualified for the miserable state pension. They also pointed out that many single women gave up work to care for their ageing parents, then were left destitute when their parents died, unable to return to work because employers thought them too old and without a pension.

Many women, especially in the professions, were dubious about the campaign for fear it would encourage employers to retire women earlier than men, at 55. But a government committee recognised that there was a problem of women's premature retirement. The outcome was a compromise: pensions at 60 for insured working women (which would not include all women workers) and wives of insured men, from 1940, an age limit which continued until recently. The official explanation for the change ignored the 'spinsters' and the realities of single women's lives but argued that, on average, wives were five years younger than their husbands and it made sense for them to retire together.[19] This was the outcome of a rare campaign by women against their

[17] Thane (2000: 208).
[18] Thane (2000: 194–235).
[19] Groves (1986); Thane (2000: 284–6).

treatment in later life which gained them a marginal improvement. A government survey in 1940 revealed extensive poverty among retired people, male, and especially, female. It led the government to introduce small, means-tested supplementary pensions for the poorest.[20]

In 1946 the range of working women and wives of working men who qualified for the pension was extended, following the recommendations in the Beveridge Report of 1942, but the pension remained too low for subsistence, lower than Beveridge intended.[21] Women's pension age has since been raised to equal that of men as a result of an appeal against it to the European Court of Human Rights in 1990, in a very rare instance of a British man protesting against what he believed was a case of discrimination against men. He won and the UK government responded by arranging that, gradually, between 2010 and 2020, for women born between 1950 and 1955 and after, the pension age would rise to match that of men. This received very little publicity at the time, as is so often the case with issues affecting older women, especially compared with lively discussions at the time and since about raising the state pension age for both sexes because more people were living and remaining fit and healthy to later ages. Nor were women who were directly affected by the change informed until it was too late for them to prepare for a longer working life before they qualified for the pension, or to save for five years of unpensioned retirement. They have only quite recently discovered that their pension age is rising to match the higher and rising male state pension age, which rose to 66 in 2020 and is currently (in 2023) scheduled to rise further to 67 in 2026–8. They have formed a large, active campaign group to protest, Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI).[22] Supporters do not object to the principle of gender equality in the pension age, but to the failure of successive governments to warn them about the change so that they could, financially and mentally, prepare for later retirement; their obvious personal difficulties associated with such a change were overlooked. They feel all the more concerned by the government's pledge to keep the pension age under constant review.

The report in 2018 on the alarming level of poverty in the UK by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, following his tour of the country, pointed out that poverty was particularly evident among women born in the 1950s, especially single women 'who consistently experience poverty at a higher rate than others'.[23] He reported that 'An abrupt and poorly implemented change in the state pension age for women from 60 to 66 has severely and unaccountably penalized those who were on the cusp of retirement and who had well-founded expectations of

[20] Thane (2000: 355–63).
[21] Harris (1997: 451, 494–6).
[22] https://waspi.co.uk
[23] United Nations General Assembly (2019: 15).

entering the next phase of their lives.'[24] It is another extraordinary example of older women being overlooked by policymakers even in relation to a government policy which directly affects them. Alston added that since 2010, when the 'austerity' policies of the succession of Conservative-led Coalition and Conservative governments began, 'life expectancy has stalled for women in the most deprived half of English communities and actually fallen for women in the poorest 20 per cent of the population'.[25] Male life expectancy followed the same pattern after decades in which it had steadily risen for both sexes.[26] The WASPI women have so far failed to persuade the government to change the pension-age requirements. Women who complained to the Parliamentary Ombudsman about the failure to inform them in due time about the change received minimal compensation of £500 and £750.

Age Discrimination

Women and men experience age discrimination, and have long done so in many areas, including in health care. Although medical care can keep many people fit and active, physically and mentally until later in life, all too often it has not been employed optimally for this purpose. Neglect and discrimination involving older people have a long history in medicine. William Beveridge in his influential Report on social insurance in 1942 expressed an all-too-common narrative when he wrote: 'It is dangerous to be in any way lavish to old age until adequate provision has been assured for all other vital needs, such as the prevention of disease and the adequate nutrition of the young.'[27]

In 1994 the government Medical Research Council complained about the lack of knowledge of and research into the health conditions of older people and appropriate forms of treatment, due to the 'unfortunate exclusion of older people from major epidemiological studies'.[28] A survey for the Department of Health in 2009 found that over-65s still received poorer care after suffering a stroke than younger people and poorer mental health care, their problems often being under- or misdiagnosed. Women over 80 had markedly poorer access to investigation and treatment for cancer than women in their 60s.[29] Women are still called regularly for screening for breast cancer only up to age 70, although breast cancer is more common after age 70. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, following frequent cuts to health services, such operations

[24] United Nations General Assembly (2019: 17).
[25] United Nations General Assembly (2019: 16).
[26] Marmot *et al.* (2020: 18).
[27] Beveridge (1942: 92).
[28] Medical Research Council (1994: 23).
[29] Department of Health (2012).

as cataract removal and joint replacement were first to be suspended because they do not deal with life-threatening conditions. Delays to such treatments increased further due to the impact of COVID-19 on health services. These are medical interventions in conditions most likely to affect older men and women which have transformed many of their lives since they were introduced in the later twentieth century. Their capacity to function independently and remain healthy are severely impeded if such conditions are not treated.

There were signs also during the COVID-19 pandemic that younger people were given priority for hospital care over those over 65, although this was never officially acknowledged. Many people experienced long delays in gaining treatment for cancer and other life-threatening conditions due to the demands of the pandemic on the NHS. These cuts and delays also perpetuate social inequality among all age groups. Better-off older people can afford to pay for operations privately; most older people cannot, and they are left to suffer at home, with dwindling access to care from community services, which were already declining before the pandemic due to cuts to funding, then declined further.

The Equality Act 2010, implemented in 2012, made such discrimination in health and social care illegal but there is no evident sign of change. Presumably underlying these discriminatory practices is the narrative implied by Beveridge, and often explicit in the not-so-distant 1950s and '60s, that older people are not worth as much medical effort as younger people because they do not have long to live. Again, these inequalities receive little public notice, though in recent decades older people and their families have been more likely to speak up against them, as discussed in the section 'Protest by Older People'.

Family Care

The loss of health and care services, mostly needed by women since they are a majority of older people, puts pressure upon families to provide care, mainly upon women in families, including older women. Many women in their 60s are caring for parents in their 80s and 90s, or they and others still older are caring for frail male partners. The non-governmental organisation (NGO) Age UK found in 2019 that 25 per cent of family carers in the UK were aged 65 or over, while one in seven people, mainly female, aged 80 or above provided unpaid care, most often for a partner or a disabled adult child. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has found that one in five people in their 50s and 60s are care providers, including for grandchildren.[30] It is

[30] Age UK (2019).

often forgotten that family care for older and disabled relatives has a long history in Britain.[31] It is generally willingly provided, but cuts to health and other public services in the 1980s and '90s and since 2010, then the impact of COVID-19 since 2020, have greatly increased the pressures on family care. This is especially the case with respect to care for relatives with severe health conditions, physical or mental, which family members lack the specialist skills to provide and for which they receive little expert assistance.

Protest by Older People

Since the 1990s older women and men in Britain have been more assertive than before in challenging disadvantage and discrimination. Partly this is the 1968 generation growing older, with experience of protest. Also, greater numbers of ageing women and men are better educated, more confident and less deferential than in the past. Assertiveness by older people led to some of the first official research into age discrimination, some of it sponsored by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), established in 2007, which was the first government body to include age discrimination in its brief, again owing much to protest by older people and their supporters.[32] It led to the first legislation against age discrimination, introduced – more than 40 years after the first UK legislation against sex and race discrimination – when age discrimination in health and social care became illegal under the Equality Act, 2010. However, in recent years the EHRC has given less attention to age discrimination (at any age) than to other areas of discrimination.

The age discrimination clauses of the 2010 Act have not often been tested. However, in 2011 Miriam O'Reilly successfully brought a case for age discrimination against the BBC when she was sacked as presenter of a TV show in her 50s, explicitly on grounds of age and appearance, while her visibly older male co-presenter continued in the job. As we have seen, such discrimination was not new. Women were forced into early retirement between the wars very often on grounds of their appearance, as well as due to negative assumptions about their competence. Certain physical signs – facial lines, grey hairs – even in women in their 30s, were treated negatively, as signs of old age and incompetence for work – as similar signs in men were not. These attitudes continued through the decades, though they were rarely publicly discussed until O'Reilly's case aroused media interest. She won her case, the BBC reinstated her, but she felt that she experienced continuing discrimination, along with other women. She carried on

[31] Thane (2000: 119–46, 287–307, 407–35).
[32] EHRC (2007).

campaigning, but women often still do not protest publicly at discriminatory retirement, especially if they are paid off on condition of signing non-disclosure agreements as often occurs, so we have no idea how extensive it may still be. In 2019–20 the BBC faced further much-publicised challenges by women presenters, including China editor Carrie Gracie and TV presenter Samira Ahmed, against major inequalities between their pay and that of men doing similar work and paid up to six times as much. This also, of course, affected the women's pension entitlements. The BBC was forced to pay compensation and took steps to bring salaries closer to gender equality.

Protest against discrimination by a more confident older generation continues. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK government announced that all people over 70 were vulnerable to the virus and must self-isolate. This age generalisation caused an outcry by prominent people over age 70 who argued that they and many others were fully fit while many younger people were more vulnerable. It forced the government to relax the self-isolation rule, applying it only to people with serious health conditions. More generally, public protest by older people has stimulated efforts to promote positive approaches to the ageing of both women and men, stressing that frailty in old age can be prevented or delayed including through physical and mental exercise and healthy eating.[33] Positive concepts and practices of 'active ageing' and 'successful ageing' have emerged in Britain and internationally, mainly among better-off people.[34]

The Search for Positive Ageing

These are not the first attempts to develop a narrative of competence in later life. The narrative of declining competence of all people past a certain age, which is applied to men as well as women though often at different ages, has a long history. It was seriously challenged in the 1940s and '50s in Britain, though there is no reason to believe that competence in later life was increasing at this time. Rather there was a major panic about the ageing of society – which sounds all too familiar now – because before the Second World War the birth rate fell to an historically low level and more people were living longer. There were widespread concerns about the looming 'burden' on a shrinking population of younger workers of payment for the pensions, health care and other needs of a rising older generation. The concerns stimulated some original and positive ideas and research, including questioning assumptions about the limited work capabilities of older people.[35] In the 1950s research in the new academic fields

[33] Walker (2014; 2018).
[34] Lamb (2017).
[35] Thane (1990: 283–305).

of industrial anthropology and industrial psychology showed that men (they rarely studied women, who were considered less essential to the workforce) could continue to work efficiently at least to their late 60s in a wide variety of occupations, including heavy manual labour, if they could control the pace of their work. A study of miners in a Scottish pit demonstrated that men in their 60s could perform as well at cutting coal as younger men; what caused them most strain and made them want to give up was the walk through the mine to the coalface, when the pace was set by younger, faster-moving men.[36] There were similar problems of deteriorating work efficiency among older men when the pace of work was set by machines or time bonuses fixed by management. When such practices were adjusted, older workers were highly efficient. It was discovered that older people could learn new skills, and keep up with modern technology, if they were given the training that was (and is) often denied to workers past a certain age.

Researchers also pointed out that when competence did decline with age it was compensated in most occupations by the greater skill, experience and reliability of older than of many younger workers. Also, that older, like younger, people varied considerably in their capacities and the speed at which they deteriorated, if at all. Researchers emphasised that where older people appeared conservative and inflexible about work and other practices it was often due to socialisation rather than the inevitable process of ageing, to society's low expectations of older people, which they often internalised, rather than to their actual potential.[37]

The research emerging from the panic about ageing revealed much about the capacities and the diversity of older people which challenged pervasive stereotypes and encouraged hopes that people could work to later ages and help avert the crisis that was feared. The findings could have been applied to women as well as men, but what emerged was another gendered narrative. However, it became clear in the 1950s that the birth rate was recovering, the 'baby boom' was in full swing, so worries about the ageing society died away. The positive messages about later life were also largely forgotten and stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes and practices continued, including after 1968 when the birth rate again began a prolonged decline while life expectancy continued to rise, triggering another panic about the ageing of society.[38] It has since taken many years, and much protest by older people, for more positive views to emerge.

[36] Richardson (1953: 269–84).
[37] Le Gros Clark (1955); Thane (1990).
[38] Thane (2000: 475–80).

'Growing Old Gracefully'

The old narratives persisted. Judging women 'old' at earlier ages than men due to physical signs which are represented as indicators of maturity and experience in men, increasing their prestige and authority at work and in society, has a long history. In seventeenth-century England women were conventionally labelled 'old' around age 50, men more often around 60. In response, women who could afford it often did their best to disguise the signs of ageing by colouring their hair, wearing cosmetics and dressing youthfully. Yet they were always, even in the seventeenth century, criticised by female contemporaries of similar backgrounds who believed that women should challenge negative male criticism, 'grow old gracefully', remain fit, active and dignified, but not give in to trying to look unnaturally youthful.[39]

From the late nineteenth century, and especially through the later twentieth century into the twenty-first, the pressures and techniques for disguising the outward signs of ageing grew. The techniques became more widely available, no longer accessible only to the rich, creating an influential narrative of the desirability and feasibility of an appearance of eternal youthfulness, which reinforced negative perceptions of the appearance of ageing. In the late nineteenth century, a range of electronic treatments emerged theoretically able to steam away wrinkles and restore thinning hair, and the cosmetics industry began to expand. It expanded faster from the mid-twentieth century, along with hair dyes, increasingly ambitious and available cosmetic surgery, then Botox, at the same time as visual representations of a supposed, youthful ideal of female appearance at all ages became more pervasive in magazines, film and TV, then social media.[40] The temptation to use such methods for women who feared discrimination because of their ageing appearance – indeed could be bullied to do so, for example by TV producers – or through vanity, was and is considerable. However, giving in to the temptation has always involved facing criticism from other women for succumbing to unreasonable, male-dominated norms.

From another perspective it is said that modern methods of disguising ageing can give women more freedom to create their own identities in later life. Surveys by Mass Observation (MO) in the 1990s found some women valuing the flexibility now available to them concerning appearance and behaviour – provided they remained in good health – compared with previous more rigid codes about how women should look, dress and behave in their 60s, 70s and 80s. Not that such codes had ever been universally observed, as suggested above. Many of the respondents to MO stressed

[39] Botelho (2005: 113–74).
[40] Stark (2020).

how difficult it was to estimate the ages of other women because they were so diverse in appearance and behaviour at all ages.[41]

The Diversity of Later Life

Respondents to MO expressed awareness of the diversity of later life which is too often overlooked in public discourse. A long-established narrative generalises about and stereotypes 'old people', women and men, as though, past retirement age, people are, or should be, all the same in appearance and behaviour. A narrative that it is desirable for older women to aspire to disguise their ageing by constructing a 'youthful' appearance is one more stereotype. In reality the age group defined as 'old' by pension and retirement ages is the most diverse of all age groups, increasingly so as it has grown in size, as more people live to later ages and many stay fit and active later in life, while others do not. 'Old age' is an age span lasting from perhaps around 60 to past 100. It includes some of the richest and the poorest – from Queen Elizabeth II who was publicly active until close to her death, aged 96, in 2022 to people on Pension Credit, marathon runners in their 80s to the very frail. Richer women and men live and stay healthy longer than poorer people and white men and women on average live longer than many of those of minority ethnic communities; gender, wealth and ethnic disparities have increased as poverty and inequalities grew further from 2010. According to Michael Marmot, the leading British expert in this field, the differences in expected length of life at birth between the least and most deprived areas of England in 2010–12 were 9.1 years for men and 6.8 for women, in 2016–18 it was 9.5 and 7.7 years respectively, a clear deterioration. In 2016–18 women in the least deprived areas could expect to live on average to 86.3 years, men to 83.4, in the most deprived to 78.7 and 73.9 years respectively.[42]

Another feature of diversity lies in different perceptions of when 'old age' begins. As we have seen, official definitions as represented in pension and retirement ages, change over time. Unofficial definitions can be very flexible. A 67-year-old woman responding to MO in 1992 wrote: 'The old saying "you're as old as you feel" has some truth in it and we all know people who are old at 40 and some who are much older but have an interest in life and an awareness … who give an impression of comparative youthfulness, in spite of the lines and wrinkles.'[43] A 59-year-old woman felt 'quite put out when the media describe anyone under 80 as "old": My 100-year-old mother has

[41] MO (1992); Thane (2001: 219–26).
[42] Marmot *et al.* (2020: 16–21).
[43] MO (1992: file B 60).

only just agreed to be called "old".'[44] Another woman wrote 'I regard anyone under 40 as young. From 45–65 as middle-aged. Elderly under 75 and old as 75 plus. But, although I am aged 78, I do not think of myself as old but elderly. Perhaps because I am fairly independent and can look after myself.'[45] A 39-year-old female social worker observed of her older clients: 'There are some cases where men seem to age rapidly on retirement and seem to feel their lives are over, whilst women if they survive the transition from mother to "mother-whose-children-have-left-home" often seem to gain a new lease of life. But one cannot generalise.'[46] These comments suggest that people live with everyday narratives of old age and ageing which differ from official regulations and are more diverse than academic discourse customarily recognises, and that these narratives are often deeply gendered as discourse around old age has been throughout history.[47]

Ageing 'Burdens'?

One more gendered narrative to be considered represents older people as 'burdens' on younger generations, who have to bear the financial and emotional costs of their pensions and other needs. This fails to grasp the substantial and growing contribution older people themselves make to the economy and society. Increasingly they contribute paid work because they need the money, as many do, including the WASPI women, or they enjoy their work and feel fit and active enough to continue past conventional retirement ages, assisted by the legislative abolition of the fixed retirement age. The number of over-65s in employment grew by 188 per cent from 1999 to 2019, from 5 per cent of all workers to 11 per cent or 1.31 million workers.[48] They also make valuable contributions through unpaid work. We have already seen how much they contribute as family carers. Outside the home people aged 65 to 74 are the age group most likely to engage in voluntary work in the UK, either informally helping friends and neighbours or more formally with voluntary organisations, often supplementing state welfare. 28 per cent of people in this age group served with voluntary organisations in 2018–19.[49] Voluntary work has always been an important feature of British culture. Historically, it is said to have been engaged in more by women than by men, since it was long one of the few public activities permitted to middle- and

[44] MO (1992: file B 2154).
[45] MO (1992: file B 2645).
[46] MO (1992: files B 2197, C 2070).
[47] Thane (2000: passim).
[48] ONS (2019).
[49] GOV.UK Community Life Survey (2019).

upper-class women, but we have no statistics.[50] Contemporary surveys indicate that this is still, narrowly, true, but many men find voluntary work a fulfilling use of their spare time in retirement.[51] Its importance has grown since the 1980s as volunteers have done their best to compensate for cuts to public services, including local libraries, by staffing them without payment. It is estimated that in 2013 (the most recent available estimate), people over age 65 contributed £61 billion to the UK economy through employment, caring for others and volunteering, considerably more than they cost the revenue.[52] This net contribution has certainly grown since 2013, as older people's employment, taxpaying and volunteering has increased.

But these calculations make no allowance for positive contributions that cannot be easily quantified. There is clear evidence that, far from selfishly spending their surplus wealth on expensive cruises and other pleasures while the younger generation pay for their pensions and care as has been suggested,[53] very many wealthy older people transfer substantial sums in their lifetimes to younger relatives before passing on their remaining assets at death. These transfers are not easy to trace because they are not officially recorded and may sometimes be regarded as tax evasion, though they can be seen as positive in intent and effect. It was shown in 2005, in a rare study of the topic, that 31 per cent of grandparents helped grandchildren buy a home; 16 per cent in their 60s and one-third in their 70s gave financial help to grandchildren, including paying university fees, and, increasingly as times got harder, to their children.[54] Older people gave, and give, in kind as well as cash. One researcher concluded that: 'Generally more Third Age parents were providers than recipients of help … in contravention of depictions of older adults as "burdens" on younger generations.'[55] Not surprisingly homeowners with higher incomes were most likely to give to younger relatives.

As we have seen, older men are more likely than older women to have wealth to share. Women more often provide care. Growing numbers of older people of all income levels help their adult children to work by caring for their grandchildren, sometimes giving up their own work to do so, mainly grandmothers but also some grandfathers. In 2010 one in three working mothers relied on grandparents for child-care, mostly but not exclusively in poorer families.[56] In 2017 a survey by YouGov for Age UK found that 5 million grandparents in the UK, 40 per cent of all grandparents

[50] Prochaska (1980).
[51] GOV.UK Community Life Survey (2019).
[52] Age UK (2014).
[53] Willetts (2010).
[54] Grandparents Plus (2011); Grundy (2005: 233–55).
[55] Grundy (2005: 233).
[56] Griggs (2010).

over age 50, provided regular care for their grandchildren.[57] The number has grown and is likely to continue to grow as the costs of other forms of childcare have continued to rise in Britain to the highest levels in Europe.

Conclusion

Since the late nineteenth century knowledge about old age has grown through research in a range of disciplines, but much stereotyping, age discrimination and negative representations of later life continue, despite evidence-based challenges by researchers.[58] This exceptionally large, and growing, age group appears to be more stereotyped and generalised about than any other, despite its extreme diversity, as described above. Many people in the public eye defy the 'helpless burden' stereotype, not least Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Prince Philip, who predeceased her in 2021 aged 99, but it survives. There is a need for greater public awareness of this diversity, of the number of very poor as well as comfortably-off older people, of the good very many older women and men do for society and the economy through paid and unpaid work, alongside the numbers who are sadly frail and need much greater public support than they currently receive.

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Old Age, Gender and Constructions of the Contemporary

Siân Adiseshiah

Abstract: This article argues that older people – by virtue (at least in part) of their association with the past – lack visibility in dominant conceptions of the contemporary. With its (neo-) modernist emphasis on the innovative new, 'the contemporary' – as a descriptor of the present – aligns, prejudicially, with youth. The contemporary as category or concept is frequently discussed in metaphorical terms that align it with early phases of the life course. Within this frame older women are particularly troublesome to the discourse of the contemporary, wherein they represent a blockage in the flow of futurity. After offering a theorisation of the ways in which contemporary operates in these terms, the article concludes by considering two texts – a film, Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012), and a play, debbie tucker green's *generations* (2005) – both of which craft encounters with narratives of old age and gender, and are commonly regarded as 'contemporary' according to the terms outlined.

Keywords: old age; ageing; contemporary; gender; Michael Haneke's *Amour*; debbie tucker green's *generations*

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Introduction

This article argues that the contemporary as a discursive formation tends to exclude on the basis of old age, and particularly female old age. The ways in which contemporary functions conceptually in current discourse moves beyond a factual description of a time period, to express normative evaluations and value judgements about what is, and is not, within its parameters. While increasingly alert to marginalisation based on gender, sex, sexuality and race (particularly in the context of the #metoo and Black Lives Matter movements), contemporary progressive discourse seems conversely to marginalise old people as incongruous to dynamic, forward-thinking contemporary cultures. There are examples of scholarly critiques of the ways in which the contemporary is exclusionary on the basis of gender[1] and race.[2] There are also experimental artists, such as 'The White Pube', who critique the whiteness of contemporary art. However, surprisingly (given the interest in critical temporalities shared by cultural gerontologists and critical theorists alike), there has not been scrutiny of how contemporary operates to exclude on the basis of age. Indeed, these other critiques largely ignore age, or, in the example of 'The White Pube' deploy a self-consciously brash, youthful intervention as a subversion of the (ageing) respectability of the whiteness of the contemporary – with the effect that white, reactionary and old become coarticulated.[3]

What follows is an analysis of the various ways in which contemporary is deployed and how the intersection of narratives of old age and gender produces a specific antagonism within the discourse of the contemporary. The article concludes with a reading of two visual and performance texts from the contemporary period within which gendered old age is instrumental to the ways meaning is produced: Michael Haneke's film *Amour* (2012) and debbie tucker green's play *generations* (2005). A large number of texts from a diversity of cultural forms might have formed the case studies for this article, but I have selected a film and a stage play partly in recognition of Julia Twigg's and Wendy Martin's observation that the visual has become dominant in the contemporary period 'to some extent replacing the dominance of the word', this move highlighting how 'age itself is a visual phenomenon', which is 'particularly marked

[1] Thompson (2020).

[2] See Brar (2020) for a discussion of this in relation to music, and Gilroy (1993) for an exposure of the whiteness of experimentalism.

[3] A photograph that illustrates this well is 'The White Pube' (Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad, both 23-years-old at the time the photograph was taken) standing in front of Grant Wood's iconic painting 'American Gothic' (1930) usually housed in the Art Institute of Chicago. The painting depicts a white ageing farmer and his daughter (who could be mistaken for his wife) standing outside their house, him holding a pitchfork, and both looking stern and hostile. The painting was widely considered to be a satire of rural small-town Iowa.

for women.'[4] Furthermore, I wanted to select texts that express singularity in Derek Attridge's sense,[5] and that are unambiguously contemporary, both in terms of period (twenty-first century) – and, crucially, in their exhibiting of qualities of active participation (aesthetically, culturally, politically) in the present moment.

The Contemporary

The etymological roots of the word 'contemporary' come from medieval Latin: 'con' means 'together with' and 'tempus' means 'time', 'season' or 'portion of time'. Used as an adjective, contemporary refers to the condition of living at the same time or belonging to the same historical moment, and contemporary as noun refers to one who co-exists at the same time as another. The term is equally aligned with the present moment: the first entry in the *Cambridge Dictionary* for contemporary is 'existing or happening now, and therefore seeming modern.'[6] The fourth entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) is: 'Of or characteristic of the present time; modern; (esp. of furniture, clothing, etc.) having modern, as distinct from traditional, features or styling; (sometimes) *spec*. designating music, architecture, etc., which makes use of new, often experimental, ideas and techniques.'[7]

In line with this latter definition, dominant deployments of the contemporary prize the most up-to-date or cutting-edge thinking and aesthetics. Contemporary art is 'of' the historical present (which is different to being 'in' or 'about' it), which for cultural theorists Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund means that 'it somehow addresses and expresses the present.'[8] Art that is of its present is deemed prescient, alive and more culturally relevant than art produced within the current period that is not judged to be in active dialogue with its moment. This argument is made trenchantly by the philosopher Peter Osborne in his book *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013), where he describes contemporary as a 'selective concept' that 'promotes' and 'excludes': 'To claim something is contemporary is to make a claim for its significance in participating in the actuality of the present.'[9] The attribution of the label contemporary is to imbue the recipient of such a marker with

[4] Twigg and Martin (2015: 5).

[5] Attridge (2017). Attridge develops a theorisation of singularity with reference to examples of literature that create a distinctive crafting of otherness, a singular experience of alterity produced through artistic inventiveness that stages an ethical encounter with the reader. Although Attridge focuses on literature, his theorisation of singularity can be applied to other artistic forms.

[6] *Cambridge Dictionary* (2023).

[7] *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023).

[8] Cox and Lund (2016: 9).

[9] Osborne (2013: 2).

future-facing creativity, an orientation that simultaneously acknowledges the current moment as philosophically future*less* – apocalyptic, stuck in a compressed or curtailed temporality, or an elongated present. As Osborne notes, the contemporary's radical up-to-dateness benefits from both 'the residual energies of the pre-war avant-garde, acting out a weakened version of its temporal logic of futurity' as well as its distance from 'that avant-garde's ruptural historical futurity into the more expansive present of a new beginning.'[10] The contemporary paradoxically resists periodisation: it is not a time in the sense of a definable period, but is, as art historian, Terry Smith, writes, 'perpetual advent'.[11] This gives the contemporary a locomotive quality – life experienced as a relentless, ever-unfolding present, which is at once infinite and timeless.

There is a slippage between different meanings of the contemporary – contemporary as the present moment, as the relation between people in the same historical moment, and as signifying characteristics of the present – which produces a hermeneutic entanglement within which contemporary slides across all three meanings. Youth – as Susan Sontag notes – is 'a metaphor for energy, restless mobility, appetite'; the youthful attributes of freshness, vigour and an anticipatory trajectory are equally attributes of the contemporary.[12] There is a slippage from abstract metaphor to actual experience, or from the contemporary understood in terms of a youthful imaginary to the suppression of older age within the scope of the contemporary. Those not judged to be actively engaged in their present moments risk exclusion from the category of the contemporary, and older people are particularly vulnerable to this exclusion.

Old Age and the Contemporary

The idea that old people are out of date and reactionary has resonated in political narratives in the recent period. A striking example in the UK is the way that the success of the Leave campaign in the European Union referendum of June 2016 and in the USA with the election of Donald Trump in November of the same year have been framed. The *Atlantic* ran the headline 'Trump's Graying Army' with the subheading: 'In the Republican nominee's nostalgia-fueled campaign, older voters see their last chance to bring back the 1950s.'[13] The subheading of an *Observer* article on the Brexit vote (typical of public pronouncements on the referendum) read: 'Having overwhelmingly voted to remain, many feel betrayed by an older generation who turned their backs on

[10] Osborne (2013: 16).
[11] Smith (2008: 9).
[12] Sontag (1972).
[13] Ball (2016).

Europe but who will not be around to see the damage wreaked.'[14] That two of every five voters over 60 did not vote Leave has not been sufficiently acknowledged; nor have findings that the majority of Britain's oldest cohort – the wartime generation – voted decisively for remain.[15] The refrain that old people were responsible for voting for something they would not live long enough to be affected by revealed a deep-rooted gerontophobic scepticism of older people's right to anticipate the future. Old people were blamed for delivering the 'wrong' result in the referendum, but worse, they were resented for having voted at all. Questioning older people's right to an equal franchise led some, such as Maja Založnik from the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, to map the results of the referendum as if the votes had been weighted according to age.[16] Založnik's intervention did not go so far as to call for a new voting system, but there have been serious proposals – in Japan at least – for just such a system.[17]

As part of a similar structure of thinking that equates old age with political regression, late life is equally not considered a phase of innovation, itself a deeply ideological concept. The French anthropologist Marc Augé in his 2015 book *The Future* observes that the notion of innovation is quite old, but, he notes, 'it has never been so often brandished, celebrated and invoked as it is today.'[18] For Augé, the term innovation captures 'the neoliberal economy'; it is 'a symbol of initiative, dynamism and perpetual renewal'.[19] Innovation is also a key component of contemporary culture: contemporary cultural forms break new ground, through an aesthetics of invigoration, and with the objective of producing energising effects (note the age-inflected metaphors). This vision of innovation is understood as cutting-edge, progressive or ahead of times but what is validated as 'contemporary' is often the pronouncement of a small number of national institutions, statutory bodies, quangos, organisations or individuals.

This philosophical perception of the contemporary exists within the context of a rapid growth in the pace of ageing populations worldwide, the presentation of which tends to be in the language of crisis rather than opportunity.[20] In recent decades, there has been a move to recognise that older people are not a homogeneous demographic that can be usefully understood under the generic label of 'old'; in fact, the period of

[14] Graham-Harrison (2016).
[15] Devine (2019).
[16] Založnik (2016).
[17] Ishida and Oguro (2018).
[18] Augé (2016: 62).
[19] Augé (2016: 69).
[20] See Simmonds (2023); Adiseshiah (2022). Since 1997, the global population has increased by 2 billion with the proportion of people aged 65 and over increasing by 50% (see International Longevity Centre, 2022). According to the World Health Organization, between 2015 and 2020, 'the proportion of the world's population over 60 years will nearly double from 12% to 22%' (World Health Organization, 2022).

life from 60 (the age at which Age UK pegs the beginnings of older age) can include four, five or more, decades. British historian and co-founder of the University of the Third Age (U3A), Peter Laslett, called for a new approach to post-middle age – or the 'third age' – in *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (1989). In this formulation 'active' or 'successful' are expressions of the 'third age', and contribute to a positive reimagination of older age. Sociologists Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard have written much about the third age as a period of later life organised 'around the themes of self-realisation and the pursuit of personal interests'.[21] The third age as a space of refashioning the self, active agency, mobility and consumption works to defer old age to the 'fourth age', which in turn becomes the repository of proper old age or real old age associated with decline, frailty, dependence and burdensomeness. Thus, the discourse of the third age risks reinforcing a dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' ageing. It produces what sociologist Barbara L. Marshall terms a form of 'post-ageist ageism'.[22] The pressure is to do the impossible: to age without getting old.

Hence, the prevalence of images of active ageing in the context of the third age – particularly in marketing and popular culture discourses – actually continues the reification of notions of youth rather than validates older age. The old person is still interpellated in public discourse – as exemplified in 'elderly people's road signs', which feature graphics of figures stooping with walking sticks, sometimes with the accompanying words 'SLOW elderly people'. Older individuals who comprise 'the aged' or 'the elderly' in these formulations do not signify as active inhabitants of the contemporary moment, but as ghostly figures: as out of date or untimely. To be contemporary is to participate dynamically in the present's locomotion: 'the elderly' are wraithlike interruptions of that locomotion.

Old age is commonly articulated as untimely or anachronistic (which means against time), an equation captured in the title of Lynne Segal's seminal book *Out of Time: The Perils and Pleasures of Ageing* (2012). Identifying the past as the temporal home of older people has in turn, wider ramifications for their social recognition. In her book *Enduring Time* (2017), Lisa Baraitser offers a philosophy of contemporary time to account for a dramatic change in contemporary experiences of temporality within the context of climate change, violent conflict, slow violence, permanent debt and widening social inequalities. The contemporary, as a temporal formation, Baraitser propounds, 'renders the past old and obsolete in order for the new to emerge, precisely through its radical separation from the past disparaged *as* past.'[23] She identifies the dangers of 'repudiating the past as bygone and the present as authentic when time is

[21] Higgs and Gilleard (2014: 12).
[22] Marshall (2015: 210).
[23] Baraitser (2017: 6).

understood as linear.'[24] A linear philosophy of time means we conceive of the present moment as cutting edge and 'condemn what we think of as "false" to being out-of-date or obsolete, belonging to an earlier time, and thereby expel these ideas, modes of thought, practices, concepts from the now.'[25]

A much earlier work relevant to this discussion is Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, his unfinished opus written between 1927 and 1940 on the Parisian iron and glass shopping arcades built in the early to mid-nineteenth century, which, in their initial incarnation were charged with the promise of new modes and objects of consumption, but quickly came to signify petrified, forgotten images of the past; 'for the first time', Benjamin observed, 'the most recent past becomes distant'.[26] Susan Buck-Morss, in her study of Benjamin's work, writes: 'The other side of mass culture's hellish repetition of "the new" is the mortification of matter which is fashionable no longer.'[27] Mortification, understood in three of the *OED*'s senses as the 'Death of part of the body', 'Deadening or destruction of vital or active qualities', or 'a state of torpor and insensibility preceding death', form metonymical aspects of the discursive framing of the fourth age.[28] To mortify also means, as the *OED* says, 'To cause to feel humiliated; to cause (a person) mortification, to embarrass'.[29] Embarrassment is the affect borne by the relation of old age to the contemporary: as awkwardness, out-of-place-ness, at once politically invisible and humiliatingly conspicuous. The slippage between old age, the past, mortification and indignity forms the discursive context within which older life so easily falls out of ethical registration.

Old Age, Gender and Contemporary

This notion of the out-of-date, untimely, object of embarrassment is animated acutely in the condition of *female* old age – as an obdurate remainder in the mires of the contemporary – stubborn, slow, stuck or all three, the effects of which are overdue, late or out of time. Thinking old age, contemporary and gender together is to encounter an ideological complex within which old women exemplify a more pronounced version of the kind of ageist temporal displacement I have outlined. A key contribution to the conceptualisation of gendered time, is Julia Kristeva's essay 'Women's Time' (1981),

[24] Baraitser (2017: 34).
[25] Baraitser (2017: 34).
[26] Benjamin, quoted in Buck-Morss (1989: 65).
[27] Buck-Morss (1989: 159).
[28] *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023).
[29] *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023).

which expounds 'women's time' as radically antithetical to patriarchal time, and as unarticulated: as a temporal experience that goes against patriarchal time, one focused on reproduction and the body, sex and symbol – rather than the economics, production and social law of patriarchal time. Kristeva is interested in the generation of time: how human life forms itself through nature, which she calls 'monumental time', and in the recurring patterns and rhythms of lived female experience including menstruation and maternity – what she calls 'cyclical time'. Her emphasis is simultaneity rather than sequence, being in space rather than chronological time. In this way, women's time does not progress, it exists outside of what Rafael Núñez and Kensy Cooperrider call our 'spatial construals of time',[30] and this in turn is ontologically disruptive: 'Female subjectivity as it gives itself up to intuition becomes a problem with respect to a certain conception of time: time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival – in other words, the time of history.'[31] Without sequential history, women's subjectivity, for Kristeva, is instead produced through spatial relationality. The here, there and elsewhere are the conditions for subjectivation, not chronological time. Women's time manifests in actual happening, in being over meaning, in being over becoming.

Baraitser's *Enduring Time* is indebted to Kristeva's essay in its examination of quotidian experiences of extended time: waiting, delaying, staying, remaining, enduring, returning and repeating. She calls for our engagement with '"unbecoming" time – time that is lived as radically immoveable.'[32] These forms of non-linear time she connects to the possibility of an ethics of care, care that requires a suspended form of time. In this way, care takes time: the rhythms of the person cared for determine (in part at least) the time needed for care activities to be completed. As Baraitser observes in a later interview,

> Because we cannot control this pace, […] care seems to entail staying in time that can feel disruptive to already established rhythms, so that time stagnates, becomes repetitive yet motionless. Often "care time" is not really experienced as moving, developing, flowing or unfolding. It can be emotionally full, but more often it is time that must be endured, suffered even, rather than embraced.[33]

While Baraitser does not restrict her focus to gender (or 'women's time' like Kristeva), care is simultaneously deeply imbricated in the politics of gender: caregivers globally, both paid and unpaid, are still mostly women.[34] Care is also intimately connected with

[30] Núñez and Cooperrider (2013).
[31] Kristeva (1981: 17).
[32] Baraitser (2017: 4).
[33] Kemmer *et al.* (2021: 24).
[34] Sharma *et al.* (2016); Swinkels *et al.* (2019).

age, 'the elderly' and children constituting most receivers of care, and many caregivers being older women.

In addition to the conceptual enmeshment of the past, untimeliness, dependency, care and stagnancy that form the semantic conditions of female old age in the contemporary, old women are also penalised due to what Sontag calls in the title of her essay, 'The Double Standards of Aging': women are more afflicted than men by ageing, which she sees as 'an ordeal of the imagination – a moral disease, a social pathology'.[35] Women, more than men, are adjudicated in terms of their sexual appeal, an appeal dependent on youthfulness, a double standard that leads feminist author, Cynthia Rich, to refer to the 'twice unseen' condition of old women – 'unseen because they are old, unseen because they are women.'[36] Sontag argues that with one or two exceptions (for example, physical strength and sport), masculinity – associated with 'competence, autonomy, self-control' – is not necessarily threatened in older age, whereas femininity – aligned with 'incompetence, helplessness, passivity, noncompetitiveness, being nice' – is not improved with ageing.[37] Like Simone de Beauvoir before her,[38] Sontag argues that for 'most women, aging means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification.'[39]

Age-normative constructions of the life course depend upon a developmental model of ageing, a model itself aligned more broadly with a historical progress narrative of linear development. While the latter has been thoroughly problematised in multiple disciplines in the humanities, the former – the notion that we go through a particular pattern of developmental phases in the ageing process – is still dominant. These phases are gendered, and for women are explained with reference to the development of their reproductive biologies, which in turn frame the scene of intergenerational relations. Not subscribing to the behaviours attributed to a particular age phase – 'not acting your age' for example – is a performance of anachronism. Mary Russo describes anachronism as 'a mistake in a normative systemization of time. […] Given the common placement of women's lives within the symbolic confines of birth, reproduction, and death, the risk of anachronism is scandal.'[40] Behaving in a way that does not accord with one's age, Russo says, 'is not only inappropriate but dangerous, exposing the female subject, especially, to ridicule, contempt, pity, and scorn – the scandal of anachronism.'[41] Thus older women are expected to act according to

[35] Sontag (1972).
[36] Rich (1984: 84).
[37] Sontag (1972).
[38] De Beauvoir (1977).
[39] Sontag (1972).
[40] Russo (1999: 21).
[41] Russo (1999: 21).

age scripts, those scripts casting them in rapidly restrictive and marginal roles. Betty Friedan observed 30 years ago that 'Aging is perceived as decline or deterioration from youth,'[42] and as many of the articles in this special issue evidence, the ageing-as-decline narrative remains a prevailing frame in the public imagination for interpreting old age and gender.

Michael Haneke's *Amour*

Having theorised the contemporary and critiqued that theorisation for its ageist exclusions, this final section seeks to demonstrate how two texts, distinctive as artworks for their exemplification of contemporary, participate in this politics. The first text I discuss is the Austrian director, Michael Haneke's critically acclaimed French-language film *Amour*, which was screened at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Palme D'Or. It also won many other prestigious awards at multiple events and festivals.[43] Film has become of increasing interest to age studies scholars over the past decade and this has coincided with more attention in both mainstream and independent cinema to ageing and older age.[44] The subject matter in these films, as Aagje Swinnen has observed, spans the gamut of romantic narratives at one end of the spectrum to stories of illness and dementia at the other.[45] Haneke is an auteur with a distinctive signature, his films demanding that his audiences, as Elsie Walker observes, experience the work's 'radically reawakening possibilities of artistic construction.'[46] According to Walker, Haneke is 'committed to nothing less than a re-evaluation of what cinema can do.'[47] This formal inventiveness coupled with an attention to the pressing topic of ageing and care makes it a peculiarly contemporary artwork according to the terms I have outlined.

Amour focuses on a couple – retired piano teachers in their 80s, Anne and Georges – in their tasteful, middle-class Parisian apartment with French antique furniture, original art and brief diegetic interludes of Schubert and Beethoven. Anne has two strokes,

[42] Friedan (1993: 8).
[43] The following is a select sample: the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 85th Academy Awards; four categories including Best Film and Best Director at the 25th European Film Awards; Best Film, Best Director, and Best Actress Awards at the 47th National Society of Film Critics Awards; Best Leading Actress and Best Film Not in the English Language at the 66th British Academy Film Awards; and five awards including Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Actress in the 38th César Awards. Emmanuelle Riva who played Anne became the oldest person to win a BAFTA.
[44] See Chivers (2011); Cohen-Shalev (2012); Gravagne (2013); Garrett (2019); Falcus *et al.* (2023).
[45] Swinnen (2015: 71).
[46] Walker (2018: 15).
[47] Walker (2018: 15).

the first ten minutes into the film, which is followed a little later by a second, much more debilitating. She becomes increasingly in need of care and dependent on Georges. Georges honours Anne's wish not to move into institutional care, and much of the film's gaze is on Georges' care for Anne as emotionally and physically arduous, painfully mundane and difficult to bear. It marks Georges' caregiving as exceptionally – heroically even – patient and benevolent. The strain on him, which he rarely externalises, eventually leads to him smothering Anne with a pillow. As the cultural gerontologist, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, has claimed, this is an act the film seems not to subject to ethical scrutiny as viewers are encouraged to identify with Georges as a long-suffering and isolated caregiver at the expense of Anne's humanity. For Gullette, *Amour* is to be understood as 'a beautiful tragedy', or, she quips, as '*Othello* for the bedridden'.[48] The film is therefore rich material for thinking about the ways in which female old age figures as a blockage in the flow of time, and as an interloper in the contemporary.

In an interview for the *New York Times*, Haneke talks about *Amour* as an investigation into what the interviewer Dennis Lim calls 'the least palatable of subjects: aging, sickness and death', a comment that both links these three states and considers them – unproblematically – as self-evidently distasteful conditions.[49] Despite the film's interest in the lives of octogenarians, and the pleasures it takes in an older couple, the film's dramatic curiosity is in an encounter with an ageing-as-decline narrative, the truth of which is unquestioned. This perspective is given additional force through its casting. Georges is played by the actor Jean-Louis Trintignant, for whom Haneke wrote the script. Haneke had long been an admirer, and said of the actor: 'He radiated the warmth that I needed for the film.'[50] As a young man, Haneke had been 'captivated' by Emmanuelle Riva who played Anne.[51] These two actors were haunted palimpsestically in *Amour* by their younger selves; Larry Rohter comments in another interview with Haneke, that he had 'mental images of these two great iconic figures of the French nouvelle vague [new wave] as the younger, more vigorous and physically beautiful figures they once were.'[52] Encountering these characters through these casting narratives and performance histories intensifies the alignment of ageing with decline and the association of decline with dependency, a state assumed to be an appalling anathema to a contemporary prizing of independence.

Anne's is a body out of place, a disruption of somatic normalcy. Much of the camera's attention is on the awkwardness of her occupation of space in their apartment

[48] Gullette (2014: 212).
[49] Lim (2012).
[50] Haneke (2012).
[51] Haneke (2012).
[52] Rohter (2012).

which is configured not to accommodate ill health or disability with its collection of antiques, books and paintings, and characterful, but tricky to navigate, spatial design. Post-stroke, Anne is defined almost exclusively in terms of ill health and disability as we see multiple shots of her unable to control her body. Scenes of care with nurses show the communication as unidirectional, and Anne becomes increasingly infantilised and illegible to those around her, including her daughter, who describes Anne as 'unrecognisable', 'talking gibberish' and 'mad'. In one scene Anne is naked, being washed. Sontag writes, 'The body of an old woman, unlike that of an old man, is always understood as a body that can no longer be shown offered, unveiled. At best it may appear in costume. People still feel uneasy, thinking about what they might see if her mask dropped, if she took off her clothes.'[53] The exposure of Anne's naked body might be read as an act of recognition – a transgressive encounter with the ageing female body as fleshly, profane and potentially erotic. Yet the scene's self-conscious performance of unveiling presents the act as a cinematic transgression – as a Haneke-esque moment of spectatorial unsettlement – rather than a counternarrative to Sontag's claim that 'Aging in women is a process of becoming obscene sexually.'[54]

We glimpse Anne's suffering, but the perspective is through Georges. Much of the film's poignancy works through Georges' stoical, gentle and self-sacrificial response to what is presented as an intolerable situation. Caregivers are usually women, 'whose time', as Baraitser notes, 'can be constantly interrupted'.[55] Anne's suffering is insufferable to Georges, but her suffering is not distinguished from the strain her care has on him as caregiver, a strain made the more powerful as it is rarely registered by him. This restraint is the more appreciable because he is practising care work usually performed by women. The film seems to suggest that Georges is heroic in his commitment to suffering, which is presented as an extraordinary act of love. Resonant of Italian Neorealism, as film scholar, Kevin Bongiorni observes, the film's pace, typical of Haneke's filmmaking, is extremely slow: 'at times it is excruciating to wait for something to happen'.[56] The extended, static shots which show no sign of editing can be likened to Baraitser's suspended time, as time endured; these shots reinforce Georges' drawn-out experience of suffering, to which the viewer is anxious for a resolution, a resolution that can only mean Anne's death according to the film's logic.

Anne's dependency and decline, her rapidly physical immobilisation and cognitive deterioration, are tangibly reflected in a cinematography that frustrates the flow of time, the progress of scenes and the emotional arc of both the characters and filmic perspective. The most powerful image of Anne's disturbance of the contemporary

[53] Sontag (1972).
[54] Sontag (1972).
[55] Baraitser, in Kemmer *et al.* (2021: 24).
[56] Borgioni (2016: 31).

is the opening scene, which starts at the story's end: emergency services break into the apartment after being alerted to bad smells emanating from within. After killing Anne, Georges had sealed the room with packing tape, but the stench has leaked out. Firefighters rush round holding handkerchiefs to their noses, their disgust palpable. Anne's body has been rotting in the room for days, perhaps weeks. Georges has attempted to arrest time, to contain Anne indefinitely in a sealed space, but she is a body out of time: her persistence within the contemporary functions as a contaminant. The decomposition of her body in death signalled potently by the toxic stench so offensive to the firefighters, has, in fact, been occurring in life – since her first stroke. She has become increasingly awkward, difficult, embarrassing and repulsive in her dependency. That Georges dedicates himself to caring for Anne in spite of the offensiveness of her persistent existence underlines the depth of his humanity at the expense of hers. In Teju Cole's review of *Amour*, he judges the film to orient itself around the question: 'What does it mean when someone – particularly someone vital and beloved – becomes *no one*?' (emphasis added).[57] When Georges smothers Anne, as Gullette complained, the act is not subject to ethical scrutiny, but more than that, Georges' action brings the suffering (Anne's, his, the viewer's) to a cathartic resolution. When Georges kills Anne, the decisiveness of this action brings relief, and in doing so produces spectatorial complicity in the film's interpellation of her as, by this point, 'no one'.

debbie tucker green's *generations*

I end with some reflections on *generations* (2005), a play by Black British playwright, debbie tucker green. While acknowledging the legitimate complaints of older female actors about the lack of diverse roles in older age, there have actually been dozens of new plays produced in the UK interested in older age in the twenty-first century.[58] However, many of these plays fail to escape the ageist implications of the discourse of the contemporary I outline above, and the majority of recent plays reproduce familiar narratives of ageing as a linear process of decline, older age as burdensome and the experience of getting old as self-evidently negative.

[57] Cole (2013).

[58] A few examples include: Bryony Lavery's *The Wedding Story* (2000), which is about a mother with Alzheimer's. Alecky Blythe's *Cruising* (2006) is a verbatim piece based on love and sex among the over-60s. Abi Morgan's *27* (2011) focuses on the politics and ethics of a scientific study of Alzheimer's disease, and her *Lovesong* (2011) on an old couple who have been together for 40 years. Tim Price's *Salt Root and Roe* (2011) is about septuagenarian identical twins who drown themselves because one has dementia.

The expectation that contemporary plays signal their relevancy through age-inflected metaphors has an impact that extends beyond the work's aesthetics. Commemorating the 70th birthday of Caryl Churchill, one of the most celebrated of experimental playwrights (and who is now in her mid-80s), Mark Ravenhill shared the following anecdote:

> Recently, I was talking with a young German playwright. 'I love the British playwrights of your generation,' she said, 'Sarah Kane, Debbie Tucker Green [sic], Caryl Churchill.' Smiling, I told her that Churchill had her first stage play performed more than 35 years ago and is 70 this week. 'But how,' spluttered my colleague, 'can she write like such a young author and be such an old lady?'
>
> How indeed?[59]

Churchill's dramaturgy, striking for its experimentalism and shrewd encounter with the contemporary, is understood in this anecdote in terms of youthfulness. She is the more extraordinary because she is an 'old lady' with the innovative approach of a 'young author'.

Like Churchill, tucker green is celebrated for being at the cutting edge, and praised for her distinctive signature style, which is simultaneously aesthetically stimulative and politically bracing. Also like Churchill, tucker green's work is deeply imbricated in the ethics and politics of the contemporary. Her work *generations* is a short play first seen at the National Theatre (Cottesloe) in June 2005. The play was revived at the Young Vic, London, in March 2007, in a production directed by Sacha Wares. The play offers a more affirmative account of ageing than many contemporary plays. It largely avoids the ageing-as-decline trope and does not reproduce the familiar narrative of intergenerational exchange as competitive and hostile.[60] It produces a mapping of contemporary that draws on a repetitious rhythm of time, wherein family, memory, and history require an alternative epistemological structure to be legible. Three generations of a Black South African family – named in the character list as Boyfriend, Girlfriend (older sister), Junior Sister, Mum, Dad, Grandma and Granddad – chat, laugh, tease and bicker within the warmth of the family home. In tucker green's distinctive style, the dialogue ebbs and flows, circles and repeats, and a beautiful dirge sung by an onstage choir opens the play – with 57 names called out, repeated and lamented over. The dirge offers the context for audience understanding of the disappearances of family members over the course of the play, who leave at the end of each scene to join the choir. Although not named in the play, *generations* is concerned with

[59] Ravenhill (2008).

[60] Contemporary plays that position generations against each other in a competition over rights, resources and as part of the so-called culture wars, include Mark Ravenhill's *The Cane* (2019) and Mike Bartlett, *Snowflake* (2018).

the brutal impact of the AIDS crisis in the wider context of global inequalities and racial capitalism.

The setting of the play takes place in the gendered domestic space of the kitchen and revolves around cooking. In place of the hegemonic equation of older age with decline and burdensomeness, and of intergenerational relations with rivalry and conflict, in tucker green's play, the connections rub and spark both within and across the three age cohorts. Referring to Boyfriend, the character Girlfriend from the youngest generation says, 'He asked me if I could cook, Mum.' Mum replies, 'This is how your Father started with me.' And Grandma says, 'This is how your Father started with me'.[61] The conversational refrains are affectionate and comforting as well as teasing and provocative, their preoccupation with dating rituals and food appraising female value in terms of culinary skills. The men of all three generations reveal that the women could not cook after all. This seems like light-hearted banter, but the comedy is dependent on the alignment of femininity with domesticity, and is a joke whose humour is only intelligible through its basis in real life. tucker green is known for her prioritisation of Black women in her dramaturgy, and this is felt in *generations* too; the family's rhythmic exchanges are as replete with gendered barbs and stings, as they are with warmth and affection.[62]

These exchanges repeat across three scenes before breaking down in the fourth and fifth as characters disappear individually or in pairs – first Junior Sister, then Boyfriend and Girlfriend, then Father and finally Mother. As part of these refrains, Grandma manipulates the link between old age and deficient memory in a flirtatious tussle with Grandad, 'He don't know what he's rememberin', she says in three of the scenes, but in the fourth Grandad unexpectedly breaks the rhythm and pre-empts her line with, 'forgotten nothing […] And neither have you.'[63] This can be read through Elinor Fuchs's notion of 'estragement', a coinage that removes the 'n' from Brechtian estrangement (*Verfremdung*) to produce an amalgam of 'strange' (or 'estrange') and 'age': 'In an age-conscious *Verfremdung* scene the ageing figures may see as if for the first time.'[64] Although, here, it is equally the audience who sees as if for the first time. This instance of estragement makes visible – momentarily at least – the age-based scripts that condition social identity and family communication.

Theatre scholar, Lucy Tyler, reads the temporal structure of repetition in *generations* as reflecting a hybrid dramaturgy, which melds European playwriting traditions

[61] tucker green (2005: 73).

[62] See Adiseshiah and Bolton (2020). Lynette Goddard focuses specifically on Black mothers in tucker green's work, and draws attention to the ways in which issues are explored in her plays 'through Black women's perspectives' (Goddard, 2020: 111).

[63] tucker green (2005: 87).

[64] Fuchs (2014: 77).

and trans-African call-and-response storytelling.[65] Through circularity and repetition, the performance's articulation of old age, gender and generational exchange is not determined by linear time or developmental gendered age phases. The opening stage directions describe the conversations as '*fluid and constant, although some may be happening in different time frames between certain characters*.'[66] This fluidity extends to the choir, whose dirge begins in the prologue and continues throughout the play but with notable exceptions in the third and fifth scenes ('*Choir is silent*'),[67] which Tyler reads as the expression of 'black maternal mourning' as Mum has lost her daughter in scene three, and Grandmother her daughter in scene five.[68] It is illuminating to position Tyler's insight alongside one of Baraitser's forms of suspended time – 'repeating' – which she connects to maternal time, a time that is 'alive to the potentials of not moving on, whilst at the same time maintaining its link with the ethical principle of one's own future being bound up with the future of another.'[69] This conception of the ethical experience of Black maternal time forms the temporal conditions of *generations*, whereby the disappearance of the children of each generation is poignantly registered. Furthermore, the movement of each character from the central dramatic narrative as they step aside to join the choir, which collectively sings '*a continuous gentle dirge*'[70] is, as David Ian Rabey, writes, 'non-closural, indeed dis-closural: it dissolves both literal and conventionally mediated separations between temporal events'.[71] This eschewal of closure is additionally marked by the dead characters remaining on stage, displaced but still connected to the living in a melancholic state of incomplete mourning.

Nevertheless, the unspeakable loss of life denoted through the disappearance of family members in each scene is made the more forceful through the hegemonic notion that it is unnatural for children and parents to die before grandparents. Hence, the grandparents, who survive their children and grandchildren, are left alone on stage – appearing as social anachronisms – persisting in the present anomalously. Unlike in *Amour*, the play does not go as far as to will the grandparents' deaths, but it makes its intervention felt through registering their survival as aberrant relative to the deaths of younger family members. Social reproduction as a process of the production of time – that is, the creation of a new generation – is also the ontological norm, whose transgression is instrumental to the play's intervention. In this way, *generations* is contingent on age-normative frames about linear life course development

[65] Tyler (2020).
[66] tucker green (2005: 66).
[67] tucker green (2005: 81, 87).
[68] Tyler (2020: 145).
[69] Baraitser (2017: 79).
[70] tucker green (2005: 67).
[71] Rabey (2020: 197).

and family narratives in order to make incisive its political interjection in a racialised global public health crisis.

Conclusion

There have been growing numbers of creative outputs by artists considered to be working at the cutting edge that validate older lives as material of interest for aesthetic treatment and cultural scrutiny. This might be part of a broader epochal self-concern along the lines of art theorist, Boris Groys' claim that 'The Middle Ages were interested in eternity, the Renaissance was interested in the past, modernity was interested in the future. Our epoch is interested primarily in itself.'[72] With a marked rise in a global ageing population – the largest proportion of which, as Pat Thane notes elsewhere in this special issue, are still women – and increasing attention in the public sphere to these changes in demographics and their social, political and economic implications, it would be surprising if artists in creative encounters with the contemporary, did not produce narratives of old age and gender in their work. As part of this, there has been greater sensitivity to the complexities of ageing identities, including the heterogeneity of personality, the erotics of older age, the continuing possibility of liveliness and late life as an opportunity for creativity and self-making. These visions of active ageing jostle with older, more familiar narratives of frailty, dependency and ill health (increasingly often, dementia). All of these reflect the eclecticism of lived realities of late life, but rarely are these binary versions of old age co-produced as part of the same lived experience. One is *either* agile *or* dependent, sexually active *or* frail, creative *or* passive.

The contemporary as communicated through an age-inflected idiom provides an additional context for understanding artistic contemplations of old age and gender in the present period. Haneke and tucker green are both celebrated for their singularity as artists; working at the cutting edge; being at once aesthetically stylish *and* ethically/politically germane to the now; and for fashioning intellectually and affectively provocative encounters with audiences. To be sure *Amour* must be welcomed for insisting that old age and the performances of older actors are subjects of great cinematic fascination. In dedicating 127 minutes to this old couple – whose focus is distilled further through restricting the action to Anne and Georges' apartment – Haneke brings his stylish cinematography into an association with older age. Yet the film depends on a conventional gendered narrative of old age for its provocation. Ultimately, *Amour* reproduces a binaristic depiction of older age as either active and independent

[72] Groys (2016: 137).

(worth living) or passive and dependent (not worth living). In the brief period before Anne's stroke, and in some flashbacks, we see her as a chic exemplification of positive ageing: active, culturally discerning and complex. After Anne becomes ill, the expansive, subtle profundity of her social presence is hollowed out, and she reduces to a slow, floundering, incapacitated body. Presenting after the first stroke as a sober deceleration in movement, growth and change, Anne then rapidly regresses after the second stroke to a prattling juvenility, a grisly mix of ageing female flesh and infantile dependence. The film does not entertain the possibility that physical frailty and social dependence might not exhaust the terms by which late life is defined, or that these conditions might not, in fact, cause *only* pain, sorrow and frustration to both cared for and caregiver.

generations largely avoids producing the sexist and ageist tropes of *Amour*. tucker green's dramaturgy is radical – both in its approach to theatre making and in its probing of epistemological frameworks. What makes her drama fresh is a rousing confrontation with the urgent issues of the current period pursued through a cool melding of poetic and musical forms, and dramaturgical inheritances from Black African diasporic and European cultural traditions. In probing epistemological givens about the structure of time, life course development and generational relationships, *generations* disconnects the ageist and sexist linkages in gendered narratives of ageing that follow a linear chronology with a narrative arc determined by reproduction and stages of decline. The play's refiguration of time – as non-linear and repetitious, as suspended time in Baraitser's sense – enables an ethics of association between and across ages and generations, in its elegiac registration of the unspeakable deaths of family members. Though literally unspeakable – no one speaks of the deaths, no one mentions AIDS – the hard-to-bear horror of this situation is conveyed through the grandparents as the last family members standing, as anachronous, untimely, over-stayers.

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It is pleasing to see what has long been overdue: a growing representation, by contemporary artists working at the cutting edge, of gendered late life on our screens and stages. What is imperative now is to see more imaginative, subtle and complex narratives of old age and gender, where artists use the resources of contemporary aesthetics and culture to probe conventional frames, epistemologies and philosophies, and provide counter-depictions that envision gendered older life in all its density. If the ageing-as-decline narrative must still be encountered in some form, it is instructive to remember that decline has two meanings. Decline signifies deterioration, senescence or decrepitude, characteristics familiar to figurations of ageing, but equally decline means refusal, repudiation or eschewal. What we might like to see practised is

this latter meaning of decline, decline as wilful non-cooperation with the governing impulses of the contemporary. Decline understood in this sense potentially enables a radical form of obstinacy, which carries with it some registration of an anti-ageist politics.

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Reflections on the Intersectionality of Gender and Ageing in the Middle East

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Abstract: The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been traditionally characterised by young population demographics but is currently experiencing fast transitions into ageing societies. The region has strong narratives of respect and high regard towards the elderly that are embedded in cultural norms. However, such narratives appear to have limited practical applications as they contradict the experiences of older people. The experiences of older women and men are likely to be impacted by existing gender differentials across the life course including marriage patterns, societal expectations and access to opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated infection control restrictions have impacted the lives of older people globally, including in the Middle East. In this article, I reflect on the intersectionality of gender and ageing perception in the MENA region, drawing on qualitative data collected as part of the Middle East and North Africa Research on Ageing Healthy (MENARAH) Network between 2020 and 2022.

Keywords: COVID-19; intergenerational care; older people; social isolation; ageing perception

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Ageing in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region spans a large area and multiple countries; the exact definition is, however, rather loose. For example, the World Bank includes Iran and Malta as part of the region. At the same time, the World Health Organization's definition excludes countries traditionally regarded as an integral part of the region, such as Algeria, while including others that usually belong to other global regions, such as Afghanistan. Furthermore, countries like Turkey, situated across Europe and Asia, have many cultural and religious norms regarding ageing that are similar to those observed in the MENA region. In this article, I take a broad view of the region, where countries will likely share similar understanding and perspectives of ageing and gender roles within society. However, the MENA region is not a homogeneous group with various income levels and socio-political variabilities.

Despite these differences, the MENA region shares unique ageing features. First, while many countries are at an earlier stage of population ageing due to the 'youth bulge' and earlier trends of high fertility rates, the pace of ageing is considerably fast. For example, while France took 150 years to move from a young to an aged population,[1] most of the Gulf countries are expected to go through a similar transition in less than 20 years.[2] A few countries, including Turkey, Iran and Lebanon, have already started their ageing transition, while the rest of the region is expected to start this process in the next decade.[3]

Second, all countries experience population growth, with large cohorts of young people, at the same time as an ageing population. These create a 'window of opportunity' with population dividends and potential for economic sustainability if effectively harnessed. Most countries in the region have a median age between 25 and 35 years, which is a prime age for labour productivity. However, the optimal utilisation of working-age groups in the region is far from being achieved. Labour force participation rates in the region are generally low, particularly among women, with considerable lost economic returns. Furthermore, the labour markets in the region are dominated by informal work arrangements leading to low formal contributions to pensions and national taxation systems.[4] High unemployment rates and large cohorts of younger people create considerable policy challenges and competing priorities

[1] A country starts its ageing transition when at least 7 per cent of its population is aged 65 years or more (or when 10 per cent is aged 60) and completes it when the same percentage reaches 14 per cent (or when 20 per cent is 60+). For statistics on France see: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/10/healthy-ageing-older-people/.

[2] UN-ESCWA (2022).

[3] UN-ESCWA (2022).

[4] Gatti *et al.* (2014).

diverting societal and state attention away from the growing proportions of older people. The large proportion of younger people makes it imperative to create positive environments conducive to healthy and productive ageing for the current and fast approaching large cohorts nearing old age.

Thirdly, all countries in the region share a common set of cultural values that emphasise a duty of respect and protection for older people. These are shared within a framework of interdependency across generations governed by norms of duties, obedience, obligations and sacrifices.[5] Most countries have residual social welfare systems, where attention is directed to societal groups with the most pressing needs, with less room to invest in policies that aim to improve the quality of life of older people more generally.[6] Within this policy context, the family unit is assumed to bear most of the responsibilities for providing social and economic support to vulnerable groups, including older people.[7]

The fast-paced moves towards ageing populations necessitate a paradigm shift in the perception of ageing, including expectations of and opportunities for older people. In this reflective piece, I draw on recently collected data (2020–2) to further the understanding of the experience of older people, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Intersectionality of Gender and Ageing Perception in the MENA Region

Population ageing is a by-product of a process known as demographic transition and entails a shift in the distribution of a country's population towards older ages. Trends in fertility and mortality rates primarily determine this process. Countries in the region have all observed declines in fertility and mortality rates but with variable degrees and speeds. Women in the region live longer than men. However, they tend to have more years lived in ill health than men. For example, in 2020, women in Jordan had around two years more average life expectancy at birth but a lower healthy life expectancy than men.[8]

Women also have differential marriage patterns, including a tendency to marry at younger ages than men. Women are less likely to remarry after divorce or widowhood.[9] With gender differences in life expectancy, remarriage rates and relatively large

[5] Yazdanpanahi and Hussein (2021).
[6] Hussein and Ismail (2017).
[7] Yount and Rashad (2008); Ismail and Hussein (2021).
[8] 78.8 vs 77.0 and 67.2 vs 68.1, respectively. World Health Organization estimates: https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/gho-ghe-hale-healthy-life-expectancy-at-birth.
[9] Hussein and Manthorpe (2007).

inter spousal age gaps, women are increasingly more likely to live alone for considerably longer periods of time than men.[10] Furthermore, women in the region experience significant inequalities across different aspects. For example, The Gender Inequality Index (GII), which measures gender inequalities in three essential aspects of human development: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status, was as high as 0.8 in Yemen in 2020, compared to 0.014 in Norway. However, these inequalities vary across the region, where it is lower than 0.3 in most Gulf countries and 0.5 or more in many conflict states such as Syria and Iraq, with an average of 0.4.[11]

The increased proportions and numbers of older people bring potential benefits and social challenges shaped by how society appreciates and treats older people. The MENA region is usually presented as collective, familistic and socially connected societies that are governed by norms and principles that emphasise support, protection of the vulnerable and solidarity within families and communities. Within such a context, older people are usually presented through a narrative of respect and affection within a framework of dependency, with duty and obligations of the family to ensure their 'comfort' in the last phase of life. The religious context also strongly presents older people as a source of blessing, and caring for them as sacred.[12]

However, the realities of relationships and interactions in daily practices are far more complex than the simplified narrative of love and respect.[13] Filial obligations and intergenerational duties require conditions that enable a mutually beneficial exchange of relations and resources. The interpretation of this sense of obligation to care for older relatives is complex and shaped by societal and individual views and perceptions of ageing. Furthermore, such duties are situated within a vulnerability framework, where older people are assumed to be unable to live independently or make their own decisions.

Conceptualising Ageing Perception in the MENA Region

At least three theories might explain the different ageing perceptions across societies: cultural, modernisation and speed of population hypotheses. First, a cultural hypothesis indicates better-ageing perceptions in the global south (collective societies) than in Western (individualistic societies).[14] According to this hypothesis, the MENA

[10] Tohme *et al.* (2011); Fahmei *et al.* (2020).
[11] Hussein (forthcoming). A maximum of one represents the most (worst) gender inequality, while zero represents no gender inequalities: http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii.
[12] Arafa (2017).
[13] Yazdanpanahi and Hussein (2021).
[14] Vauclair *et al.* (2017).

region, as a collective society, is expected to have more positive views on ageing than more individualistic societies. Second, the modernisation hypothesis aligns attitudes towards ageing with levels of modernisation and industrialisation. Guided by that hypothesis, ageing perceptions should be similar across different societies if they have reached similar levels of modernisation.[15] Hence, one might expect attitudes towards older people within the MENA region to be correlated with indicators of modernisation. Finally, the speed of ageing hypothesis indicates that rapid and abrupt population ageing might lead to negative views of ageing. This hypothesis is similar to the competition over resources hypothesis, where a fast ageing process may lead to a devaluation of old age and resentment towards a growing cohort of older people.[16] According to this hypothesis, the MENA region would be expected to hold more negative views than already-aged societies.

These theories are not independent in the sense that none of them can fully explain how ageing perceptions are formulated. Each has been criticised for ignoring certain aspects or making generalisable assumptions. A recent literature review suggests that attitudes towards older people in the region are heterogeneous and do not conclusively support any of these three hypotheses.[17] Such a conclusion is, in part, affected by the limited research on this topic.

Data and Methods

The analysis in this article draws on data collected as part of the MENARAH Network[18] engagement activities in the MENA region between 2020 and 2022. The MENARAH Network was the fruition of considerable partnership-building efforts across the region and internationally, spanning several years. The Network's core aim is to address the significant phenomena of population ageing in the region, which has direct and indirect implications for almost all segments of society – recognising the scarcity of nuanced evidence required to develop tailored policies and effective practice interventions in the MENA region.

The Network is a partnership between international and regional academics, representatives of relevant organisations and charities supporting older people and their informal carers. Equitable partnership principles guide the operation of the Network,

[15] Aboderin (2004).
[16] Peterson and Ralston (2017).
[17] Ibrahim and Bayen (2019).
[18] The Network was officially launched in September 2020, facilitated by initial funding from the UK Global Challenge Research Fund, followed by various small partnership grants from multiple national and international funders.

where the views of all stakeholders, particularly older people, are sought and included. Since 2020, the Network has conducted over 10 regional engagement workshops and over 50 one-to-one and group conversations with older people, informal carers, policymakers, researchers and charitable organisations in the region. It has further undertaken initiatives such as 'Movement is a Blessing', a set of tailored physical exercise videos designed to encourage basic physical activities among older people. The Network has also supported the development of several ageing reports in the region, working closely with international organisations including the World Bank, the World Health Organization and the United Nations.[19]

In the next section I draw on qualitative conversations and group discussions with older people, family carers and academics in the region that took place at three time points: September 2019 – February 2020, January – April 2021 and February – May 2022, to understand the complexity of ageing perception. The conversations with older people, family and carers, did not follow any specific interview schedule, but covered more general topics which were guided by initial engagement stakeholders' events. The method of data collection was through conversational and storytelling techniques.[20] Participants were recruited through gatekeepers such as NGOs, snowballing and informal contacts. For the analysis, I employed a reflectivity analytical process,[21] while acknowledging my positionality as someone who is familiar with the cultural context.[22]

Findings

Ageing Perceptions

Views on ageing are formulated early in life; such views have significant influence on attitudes and behaviour at later ages.[23] The speed of changes in life expectancy[24] observed in the region is likely to have been much faster than changes in the views and perceptions of ageing. These perceptions and expectations affect older people regarding what they feel is appropriate and acceptable in old age. For example, in a blog entry, Ismail explains that in 1960 in Algeria the average life expectancy at birth was

[19] For further details on the MENARAH Network, visit: www.menarah.org.
[20] De Carteret (2008).
[21] Mortari (2015).
[22] Bourke (2014).
[23] Westerhof *et al.* (2014); Wurm *et al.* (2014).
[24] World Health Organization (2023).

as little as 46 years.[25] Hence, 80-year-olds in 2022 have grown up expecting to have a very short lifespan. Consequently, they might not have had the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of ageing or have a clear imagination or expectations from life and society beyond a certain age.

> We are lucky that we are living that long, I personally did not expect to reach this age. (Woman 83 years, living with adult son)

Similar to global experience, ageing perceptions are further affected by gender and are linked to appearance and varying societal standards when it comes to men and women.[26] Recent research indicates that women in the MENA region are perceived to age faster than men and women are consistently perceived to be old at much younger ages than men. These gender differences seem to be attributed by older people in the region to appearance and explained by biological factors, such as childbearing and the double burden of work inside and outside the home.[27]

Based on a study conducted in Syria, both men and women participants identified a much higher age to become old for men than women. These gender differentials interact with both health and employment status. For example, a 70-year-old man working as a farmer at the time of the study indicated he was not old, compared to a 50-year-old woman who felt very old due to her health status.[28] Similar observations were found in Kuwait,[29] where women were perceived to age much younger. In turn, such societal perception hindered the ability of 'older' women to participate in different activities.

Respect, Love and Dependency

The conversations highlight a narrative of respect and a high sense of duty towards older people in the region. However, this is positioned within a framework of vulnerability and limited expectations of older individuals. These views are further shaped by gender perceptions and expectations, with older women perceived as the most vulnerable with fewer capabilities. For example, when discussing the meaning of 'good' and 'healthy' ageing with a prominent academic, who described himself as an 'older person', he said:

> And then we have this tendency; we might call it respect, to treat them [older people] as handicapped ... as crippled. (Ageing researcher, 2022)

[25] Ismail (2022).
[26] Clarke and Bennett (2015).
[27] UN-ESCWA (2022).
[28] Syrian Commission for Family and Population Affairs (2019).
[29] Donnelly *et al.* (2018).

For some, respect and love operated in a way that increased dependency. An informal carer, in her 40s, explained that despite her and her two sisters being engineers, their misunderstanding of how to support their mother as she aged has led to her losing functional abilities. They, as offspring, believed that expressing their love and respect to their mother as she retired translated into preventing her from taking part in any domestic chores or any activities that might exert her physically. This led to their mother losing the ability to walk independently and she now needed to use a wheelchair:

> When my mother retired from work, my sisters and I wanted to make life easier for her. We prevented her from doing anything in the house, or outside. We did this too much over several years, she quickly lost her ability to walk, to the point that she has become a wheelchair user. (Daughter, family carer to an 80-year-old mother, 2020)

Interestingly, the same informant did not mention whether they offered the same type of support to their father who was 82 years old. In contrast, she talked about the lack of employment opportunities her father faces despite his strong technical experience and knowledge. The above example shows the poor application of love and respect when it comes to ageing and care. It also highlights the different perspectives held for older men and women; the daughter's concern was for her father to continue being economically and cognitively productive while for her mother, care meant making things easier for her by asking her not to participate in activities she felt may burden her. This has resulted in further loss of function and increased dependency.

The experience of this participant aligns with the previous quote from the ageing researcher presented above. The understanding of 'good' ageing appears to be underdeveloped with over-romantic notions that have very limited practical applications and fail to respect the rights and agency of the older individual. The gender aspect of care and support calls for further investigations into its causes. Perhaps relevant is the emphasis in religious scripture on the physical burden of motherhood and childbearing, hence, some may perceive the best care for an older mother is to elevate any physical burden as much as possible. Such observations were explored in recent research on intergenerational aged care among Muslim migrants in Denmark.[30]

Abuse, Mistreatment and Social Isolation

While research on elder abuse in the region is limited, the current evidence indicates a high presence of several forms of mistreatment and abuse (up to 48 per cent),[31] despite

[30] Ismail (2021).
[31] Abdi *et al.* (2019).

a narrative of respect and care.[32] Elder abuse is also situated within a broader context of gender violence, with higher prevalence among older women.[33] Abuse is usually inflicted upon the older person by a member of their family, in most cases an adult son or daughter. Incidences of mistreatment and isolation appear to increase when the older person develops complex needs such as dementia[34] and during crises such as COVID-19.[35]

Given the cycle of dependency and reliance within the family care dynamics, it is very difficult for older people to admit and talk openly about potential mistreatment or abuse. They might fear losing the only source of support they have at the same time as fearing the stigma and shame associated with not having a good offspring.[36] Furthermore, ageism coupled with limited awareness of older people's human rights makes it difficult for individuals involved in the care cycle, including older people, to realise and acknowledge incidences of abuse.[37] Indeed, it is estimated that 80 per cent of abuse and neglect towards older people in the region is undetected.[38]

An 80-year-old woman who was widowed at a young age and never remarried spoke about her financial arrangement with her grown-up son. She stated that since she has retired, she receives both hers and her late husband's pensions (both held professional jobs during their working lives). When her son was about to marry, she sold her marital house and moved to a smaller flat to support her son financially. Furthermore, she has given her son the right to draw the pensions on her behalf, keep the monthly income and give her a small portion to cover her basic needs. Such arrangements have been in place for 20 years. She currently has no savings or financial security in the event of needing any health or care services. However, when she spoke about this, she did not explain it in a negative way; to the contrary, she framed this as part of intergenerational obligations and duties:

> Well, my son looks after me. He lives far away so I see him every few days. I try to manage my own needs. I do not like people coming into my home and cleaning or cooking. My son does not have a stable job and he has lots of responsibilities with his family. His children need a good education. I am pleased that I can support him. I do not need much money, he manages this. … when I need something fixed in the home, or to see the doctors, I wait for the next month and ask my son when he collects the pensions. (Woman, 80 years, lives alone)

[32] Abdi *et al.* (2019); Almakki *et al.* (2020); Hussein (2023).
[33] Ennaji and Sadiqi (2011).
[34] Dong *et al.* (2014).
[35] Chang *et al.* (2021).
[36] Dedeli *et al.* (2013).
[37] Usta *et al.* (2021); Hussein (2023).
[38] UNFPA (2018).

The above quote might imply no financial abuse is taking place. However, throughout the conversation, there were clear indications of unmet needs and a lack of authority to make financial decisions. Furthermore, despite receiving a good income for a long period of time, this informant did not have any financial security in case of urgent or unexpected needs. The loss of financial independence is likely to reflect a broader sense of lack of rights as an older person. Indeed, recent research from Turkey shows that for individuals, ageing is perceived as a period of loss of independence, being useless and isolated and at the societal level regarded as undesirable or unfavourable.[39]

A sense of isolation and inability to engage in a broad set of social activities was expressed by several older people who participated in a workshop organised by MENARAH in February 2020, just before the onset of COVID-19. A 79-year-old woman who lives with her adult single son explained:

> There is not much opportunity for me [to participate]; I sometimes go to the local mosque to recite Quran with a group of older women. However, there are minimal facilities for us older people. I wish there were a nearby park that I could walk to and spend some time outdoors. However, even when you try to go out, it is impossible. The pavement is very high; how can I climb up or cross the street? They [the government] should account for older people when they design roads and pavements. (Woman, 79 years old, lives with an adult son, 2020)

Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 also intensified the feelings of isolation among older people in the region, especially among women. In early 2021, MENARAH Network conducted several phone interviews with older persons and their informal carers in Cairo to understand the impact of COVID-19 on their daily lives, including feelings of isolation and the impact on their functional abilities. All participants indicated an increased sense of isolation, particularly among older women, who felt trapped in their homes and unable to commence their usual social activities. An 81-year-old woman summarised her experience in the following terms:

> Before COVID-19, I used to go on many trips. I enjoyed seeing new places and having the opportunity to walk and feel active. However, COVID-19 made me unable to go out alone. I need someone to take me out. After many months at home, I worry about going out alone. I fear I will fall. Also, I am afraid I will meet someone with the disease. I feel isolated and reliant on my son, who is very busy and lives far away. (Woman, 81 years old, lives alone, 2021)

[39] Kalaycıoğlu (2019).

Lack of physical activities had further implications for the functional ability of older people during and post-COVID-19. An informal male carer who had relocated his mother to live with his family after his father's death explained some of these impacts:

> Mum was very active. Every day she used to go to the leisure centre. Two years earlier, she used to do this on her own. Then we recruited a domestic helper to take her. She used to climb down four floors as our building does not have a lift. Since COVID-19, she has not been active, which has affected her ability to walk, and now she needs help going to the toilet. (Male family carer, mother 90 years old, 2021)

The effect on emotional wellbeing was also pronounced. A female, paid carer, speaks about the experience of the older woman (86 years) she was caring for during COVID-19:

> Social life has almost completely disappeared, she has become afraid to see anybody and this has made her sad and depressed most of the time. It also impacted her physically; she can barely walk now. Her family has become worried about her and they do not encourage her to go out for fear of catching COVID-19. But even if they allowed her [to go out] she has become too frail to go out. (Female paid carer, caring for a woman 86 years old, 2021)

It was also interesting to hear some of the perceived positive effects of the pandemic. Another family, where the mother had moved in to live with the daughter and her nuclear family when the father died, explained that before COVID-19, none of the three generations living in the same home interacted much with each other. They felt that being forced to stay in one place and rely on each other for social activities forged new relations and appreciation. They gave an example when it was time for a religious celebration, where people traditionally ate a specific type of cookie but could not go out and buy them. They also did not know how to bake them at home. Only the grandmother knew how to bake them; this created a rare opportunity where she was the centre of knowledge and led the baking activity while everyone else participated. While sentimental, the last example also illustrates that even when older people reside with family, they might be isolated by superficial daily interactions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Cultural norms surrounding ageing and the perception of ageing in the MENA region are embedded within predominant Islamic and Christian religious codes where individuals and communities prescribe and internalise intergenerational care and duty roles. These occur within a theoretical framework of obligations, sacrifices and respect.

Within an ideal intergenerational system, older people are held in a place of honour where the responsibility for their protection and comfort is placed on, and accepted by, the younger generations. Such duties are strongly presented within the religious texts and practices. For example, in the Quran, treating parents well as they grow older is emphasised, to the extent that expressing verbal discontent to older parents is forbidden.[40] However, the practical applications of respect and protection need to be better articulated regarding the broader position of older individuals within a society.

At one end, older people are 'treasured', perceived as sources of wisdom, and portrayed as deserving of respect. However, they are simultaneously considered dependent and frail, with few social roles. These perceptions are not gender neutral: women are more likely to be perceived as vulnerable and dependent. While a narrative of respect represents a picture of love and comfort to all older people, the limited evidence indicates a minimal application of what respect means. This framework, therefore, lacks a mechanism for a meaningful exchange that acknowledges the autonomy of the older person and their actual needs and desires. The accounts of older people illustrate this gap and indicate a high level of social isolation and limited opportunities to participate in the wider society.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this experience and impacted the abilities of older people. The reliance on the family and elimination of pre-pandemic limited engagement opportunities have led to fast physiological and psychological deterioration of older people. It is likely that these effects are irreversible among many of the oldest groups, those aged 80 years or more.

The rapid shifts towards population ageing in the MENA region create tensions between different segments of society. They also challenge the very concepts of what ageing means and the expectations of older people by society, their close families and themselves. Women are more affected by ageing, as they tend to live longer, alone for extended periods and with a higher disease burden in the region. While the narrative and religious context emphasise respect for older people, the exact application of such respect remains ambiguous. Older people themselves have seen fast changes. Their understanding of ageing might not have been well formulated and is likely to have been informed by historical events they observed as children and young adults.

Reflecting on the three concepts that might shape perceptions of ageing discussed earlier: cultural, speed of ageing and modernisation, I find that the first two interact to formulate ageing perceptions in the MENA region. The cultural argument presents an ideologically positive narrative of love and respect woven within a complex intergenerational framework of duties, obligations and sacrifices. At the same time, due to the speed of ageing, this narrative is oversimplified, romanticised and abstract

[40] Quran 17: 23–5.

in nature with limited practical application. This intersectionality leads to a state of dependency, lack of empowerment and reduced quality of life among older people.

Furthermore, these concepts ignore the intersectionality of gender in formulating ageing perceptions. The data and analysis in this article emphasise the importance of including gender in such conceptualisation. Older women are presented as weak and requiring support with little acknowledgement of their own autonomy or needs. Expectations and experiences of men and women vary considerably throughout the life course with direct implications for individual older men and women. Advocacy and awareness through research and policy engagement are urgently needed to challenge the existing framing of older people within a dependency paradigm in the region. Older people – current and upcoming cohorts – should be encouraged to develop their autonomy and voice within a human rights framework while the region is at the cusp of considerable demographic and societal changes.

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PART TWO

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'How to Grow Old Gracefully': Advice, Authority and the Mentor in Women's Late Life Writing

Amy Culley

Abstract: This article considers what it meant to grow old gracefully as a woman in Britain in the early nineteenth century by focusing on intergenerational relationships and mentoring. Despite the ambivalent response to the figure of the older woman, her potential as mentor is frequently foregrounded in advice literature in this period. However, in contrast to this prescriptive ideal, the life writing of Lady Louisa Stuart (1757–1851) provides a rare opportunity to explore how older women navigated the culturally ascribed role of mentor. Stuart considers the vexed question of how to grow old gracefully in extensive correspondence with younger women and as a biographer of previous generations. The recovery of Stuart, a writer who barely published during her long lifetime, suggests how women's late life writing has the potential to complicate cultural narratives of ageing and gender and provide insight into the dynamic relationship between writing and ageing.

Keywords: gender; life writing; Lady Louisa Stuart; Lady Mary Wortley Montagu; old age; mentors; intergenerational relationships

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Introduction

In 1799 in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, moralist and religious writer Hannah More noted that 'to learn how to grow old gracefully is perhaps one of the rarest and most valuable arts which can be taught to a woman.'[1] Two years later in 1801 the periodical *The Lady's Monthly Museum* included an article entitled 'How to Grow Old Gracefully'. In its incarnation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this phrase is understood both in spiritual terms as an encouragement to readers to age piously (with grace), as well as in its more familiar, secular guise as a demand for age-appropriate behaviour, particularly in relation to fashion, cosmetics and social conduct. For More, growing old gracefully depended on educating a young woman morally and spiritually for the 'sober season of life', a period when 'admirers fall away, and flatterers become mute' and 'the mind will be driven to retire into itself'.[2] When More's phrase is then taken up by the periodical *The Lady's Monthly Museum* the article suggests that 'in this age of refinement', 'to grow old *gracefully* in the opinion of the *world*' is to defy ageing, as women engage in the 'subterfuges of art' and 'imitate the trifling frivolity of youth' in order to appear not to age at all.[3] This is regarded as a corrupting rather than instructive example, which leads to an inevitable loss of veneration for older women as 'thoughts which ought to be turned to an approaching eternity, are either engrossed by scandal, or centered in cards'.[4] It is also understood as a waste of the older woman's potential to be a source of 'wise counsel' and 'set a pattern of religion and morality'.[5]

The early nineteenth century therefore displayed an ambivalent response to the older woman, figured simultaneously as a source of corruption and a virtuous moral influence. There have been rewarding discussions of what it meant to grow old gracefully as a woman in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in work by Devoney Looser and Katharine Kittredge, and outside a British context by Joan Hinde Stewart, Terri Premo and Anne Kugler.[6] This article contributes to scholarship on narratives of gender and ageing by focusing on intergenerational relationships and mentoring. The figure of the older woman as mentor is frequently foregrounded in advice literature of the early nineteenth century. However, shifting the focus to life writing of this period enables older women to 'bring their own voices to bear on the cultural narrative of aging, thus rendering this narrative more complex,

[1] More (1799: Volume 1, 71).
[2] More (1799: Volume 1, 72).
[3] *The Lady's Monthly Museum* (February 1801: 132–3).
[4] *The Lady's Monthly Museum* (February 1801: 133).
[5] *The Lady's Monthly Museum* (February 1801: 133, 136).
[6] Looser (2008); Kittredge (2002); Hinde Stewart (2010); Premo (1990); Kugler (2002).

subjective and diverse'.[7] The extensive life writing (both print and manuscript) of Lady Louisa Stuart (1757–1851) provides a rare opportunity to explore the difficulties and possibilities for older women of the perceived accrual of wisdom and the culturally ascribed role of mentor in the early nineteenth century.

In contrast to the familiar figure of advice literature of the period in which the older woman is a middle-class wife and mother, Lady Louisa Stuart was a single woman, an aristocrat, intimately connected to public affairs as daughter of the 3rd Earl of Bute (George III's prime minister), and a prolific letter writer and biographer. Stuart's critical reputation has been hampered by her resistance to publication, which she regarded as a 'loss of caste', and her preference for a model of family authorship in which her writing was circulated in manuscript and posthumously published.[8] Despite this reticence, she has a place in the biographical records of women's writing of this period, and features in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (described as 'the least-known, but by no means the least, of the good writers of her long lifetime') and the *Orlando* series of women's writing in the British Isles as a writer 'who published almost nothing deliberately'.[9] Stuart's views on authorship, class and gender are illuminated by comments in her correspondence, in which she suggests that the celebrated author Maria Edgeworth 'drowned her gentility in her ink-bottle' and historian and salonnière Mary Berry, in encouraging others to 'print and publish', is compared to a woman who has committed a '*faux pas*' and is keen to 'draw another woman … into the same scrape.'[10] Nonetheless, Stuart's anonymous publication at the age of 79 of the biographical 'Anecdotes' of her grandmother, the well-known and controversial author, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, is the focus of studies of women's historical writing and biography, and Stuart's epistolary practice is discussed in the context of women's letter-writing. Most recently, she has been identified as a 'confidant' and critical reader to Walter Scott in a study of his literary mentors.[11] Yet despite her longevity, and her authorship of a poem suggestively entitled 'On Growing Old', Stuart's importance for studies of gender, literature and age in this period has not been addressed and her late life writing (preserved in manuscripts and nineteenth-century editions) remains largely unexplored.

In these texts Stuart considers the vexed question of how to grow old gracefully through dialogues that span the generations. She explores her identity as an older

[7] O'Neill and Schrage-Früh (2019: 2).
[8] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 407).
[9] *ODNB* (2004); https://orlando.cambridge.org/.
[10] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 170, 408–9).
[11] On the biographical 'Anecdotes', see Looser (2005); Nerio (2017); and Rubenstein (1986). For a discussion of the correspondence, see Barnes (2015) and Rubenstein (1988). Stuart's role as a literary mentor to Walter Scott is explored in Mayer (2017).

woman in her extensive correspondence with younger female friends and nieces, as well as through her role as a biographer, which began during her 60s and 70s, focusing on women of previous generations. In contrast to the older woman of conduct literature invested with a qualified moral, spiritual and domestic authority, Stuart's letters express an ambivalence regarding taking on the role of mentor in later life. Instead, she suggests that intergenerational exchange is a more complex process that prompts self-scrutiny, self-doubt and self-knowledge and is reciprocal and ongoing rather than unidirectional and based on a life foreclosed. Likewise, her role as a biographer enables her to reflect on her younger self, explore instances of women growing old (dis) gracefully, and address questions of intellectual inheritance. This article therefore suggests that the recovery of women's late life writing provides insights into the gendered experience of growing older and the dynamic relationship between writing and ageing.

The eighteenth century developed a 'vital conceptual interest in mentoring', as Anthony Lee has shown, as a period when the term 'mentor' first comes into general usage and mentoring emerges as a prominent literary theme.[12] It therefore merits more sustained attention from scholars interested in gender and older age in this period. Likewise, the cultural association between wisdom and older age, and its implications for gerontology, are the focus of debate but are rarely discussed from the perspective of women's older age in the past. Kathleen Woodward highlights the ways in which the social ideal of old age wisdom is predicated upon a loss of emotional intensity and 'carries the connotation of detachment'. This leads her to call for 'a moratorium on wisdom' for its problematic association (particularly for older women) with acceptance and disengagement rather than 'wise anger'.[13] However, in her study of the historical and conceptual complexities of the term, Ricca Edmondson encourages a more capacious definition of wisdom rooted in co-creation in interpersonal contexts and everyday transactions between imperfect individuals 'not one that seeks out sages, remote from bewilderment or confusion, but one that responds constructively to the turmoil of everyday lives'.[14] In Lady Louisa Stuart's reflections on her identity as an older woman through dialogue with her younger correspondents, she reveals both the anxieties inspired by Woodward's model of wisdom dispensed by the cool, rational exemplar and the potential of Edmondson's 'quotidian account of what wisdom might be'.[15]

[12] Lee (2009: 5–6).
[13] Woodward (2003: 63, 56).
[14] Edmondson (2015: 2).
[15] Edmondson (2015: 203).

On Growing Old: An Intergenerational Correspondence

Stuart's correspondence with Louisa Clinton, a woman 40 years her junior, began in earnest in 1818 and developed throughout her 60s and 70s. Clinton's mother apparently wrote to Stuart in 1818 encouraging Stuart to enter into a correspondence as a friend to her daughter, given her own precarious state of health, and assuring Stuart 'I am not one of those *very good mamas* who think it necessary to read all their daughters' letters.'[16] The correspondence is characterised by self-conscious reflection on the role of the mentor and provides valuable insights into how the epistolary relationship changes as the correspondents grow older together. In 1830 at the age of 73, Stuart wrote a letter to Clinton who was in her 30s:

> By the bye, apropos of verses, you will be astonished, and I daresay glad (though you ought to be *amused*) to hear that I, *at my age*, have been writing some. Those on growing old which you made me read to you so lately have always been an unfinished fragment, and the other day … they suddenly came into my head, and with them a continuation, longer (though short) than anything I have written these fourteen years. … I am disposed to prize my superannuated sermon beyond its predecessors.[17]

The poem referred to here, 'On Growing Old', is in two parts entitled 'Near fifty' and 'Past seventy' and the letter suggests that, rather than a single work of retrospection, the second part is composed more than 20 years after the first and is prompted by reading the fragment to Clinton.[18] There is a tantalising reference to the existence of a lost section of the poem entitled 'on approaching ninety', which is yet to be found.[19] An important thread in the poem, which is also central to its mode of composition, is the role of the older woman as mentor. 'Near fifty' Stuart is concerned she will be read by the young as 'a volume drily wise' with 'crabb'd characters', while at 'Past seventy' she stresses that when she sees youth pursue a path that 'we perversely trod and deeply rue' she cannot refrain from pointing out the pitfalls, but nonetheless will avoid 'chilling counsel' or the desire to 'school thee and control'.[20]

Stuart takes to heart here Samuel Johnson's advice in his *Rambler* essay 'Age and Youth' (1750), in which he suggests a vice to be avoided in older age is 'severity and censoriousness, that gives no allowance to the failings of early life.' Instead, he advocates for a model of mutual sympathy based on an ability to think flexibly across the life course:

[16] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, v).
[17] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 215–16).
[18] Clark (1898: Volume 3, 330).
[19] Clark (1898: Volume 3, 331).
[20] Clark (1898: Volume 3, 330–2).

> He that would pass the latter part of life with honour and decency, must, when he is young, consider that he shall one day be old; and remember, when he is old, that he has once been young. In youth he must lay up knowledge for his support, when his powers of acting shall forsake him; and in age forbear to animadvert with rigour on faults which experience only can correct.[21]

Older age is therefore recognised as a collective identity we all have the potential to inhabit, while the role of the mentor is implicitly undermined by the value attached to personal experience. Similarly, Stuart's poem concludes with an implied address to a youthful reader and an explicit disavowal of the role of mentor and her assumed wisdom:

> The part of monitress I dare not play,
> Nor (scarce) accept the def'rence thou would'st pay;
> But know a kind illusion gives it rise,
> And blush thy simpleness should count me wise.[22]

This is a self-deprecating distancing from the culturally sanctioned role of 'monitress' (a term for a female adviser, mentor or admonisher that came into use in the eighteenth century).[23] Stuart's epistolary identity often responds, both anxiously and playfully, to the cultural stereotype of the older woman. In writing to a friend at the age of 92 she describes her seal as 'the *arms* of an *old maid*', which depicts an owl perched on a teapot over the line 'Sometimes Counsel, Sometimes Tea'.[24] This image of the owl and the teapot, counsel and tea, coupled with the literary allusion to Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712–14) combine the association of the old maid with the feminine frivolity and gossip of the tea table, as well as wisdom, mentoring and authority. This is characteristic of Stuart's tone in the extensive correspondence with young friends and nieces, which offers a blend of personal reflection, social commentary, politics, literary criticism and travels and establish Stuart as a repository of family memory and historian of her milieu. The letters also suggest the challenges and rewards of the role of mentor from the perspective of the older woman.

In her exchange with Clinton, Stuart rehearses the conventional idea that being of 'use' to a younger woman is a consolation for growing older.[25] She movingly comments that at a time of life when 'my friends drop off one by one', Clinton's friendship is

[21] Johnson, quoted in Ottaway (2008: Volume 2, 33–4).
[22] Clark (1898: Volume 3, 332).
[23] *Oxford English Dictionary,* 'Monitress' (2023).
[24] Rubenstein (1985: 10).
[25] This ideal of the satisfaction of imparting wisdom in older age was familiar from classical authors, exemplified in this period by Cicero's popular insight in *de Senectute* that 'however infirm with age a man has become, if he is imparting to others a liberal education he cannot fail to be accounted happy'. Cicero (2004: 27). 'Nearly a hundred versions and reprints of Cicero's classic text were issued

'what Heaven has been pleased to raise up for me to cast a ray of sunshine on the gloom of my latter days'.[26] And yet, notably, this relationship often conflates the categories of young and old in its dialectic of identification and distance and therefore rejects Johnson's insight that 'the notions of the old and young are like liquors of different gravity and texture which never can unite'.[27] In fact, the chronological distance between Stuart and Clinton is lost in shared characteristics and mutual understanding, exemplified by Stuart's comment early on in their correspondence that 'different as our ages are, recent as our acquaintance is, it has more than once passed through my mind that you could perhaps enter better into my feelings than many older people'.[28] This is reinforced by Stuart's identification of Clinton as 'my contemporary', since 'I know your heart understands what your years can have allowed you no experience of.'[29]

Rather than imagining herself as a repository of wisdom to be bestowed, for Stuart interaction with a youthful correspondent prompts self-scrutiny and self-recrimination and this accumulation of self-knowledge is then made available to another generation of women. Like Johnson, she willingly dismisses the efficacy of advice as knowledge would 'come too cheap if we could get it from our elders for the mere trouble of listening while they sat and prosed.'[30] She is also highly resistant to accepting the role of wise exemplar, insisting on her own failings which she identifies as a violent temper, reclusiveness, and an unruly imagination, and she accuses Clinton of delusion regarding her merits. She positions herself as a warning rather than a model, but nonetheless uniquely valuable for Clinton, who Stuart suggests shares her flaws and therefore 'stands beside me like my youth' (a quotation scattered across the correspondence).[31] In a curious inversion of the mentoring process, Stuart notes that reading the younger woman's self-reflection 'recalls a thousand little circumstances to my memory', thereby prompting her own retrospective autobiographical narrative in the letters.[32] On one occasion she accuses Clinton of adopting a pose of premature ageing (world-weary at the age of 25), and to combat this she sends letters written in her own youth when she made the false assumption that her best days were behind her. Elsewhere, texts from the past are sent in the spirit of identification rather than correction, as she notes that Clinton's dejection 'puts me so much in mind of my own

from 1600–1800, and these were increasingly available in English in the eighteenth century.' Ottaway (2008: Volume 4, 2).

[26] Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 49).

[27] Johnson, quoted in Ottaway (2008: Volume 2, 35).

[28] Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 3–4).

[29] Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 32).

[30] Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 335).

[31] Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 197).

[32] Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 263).

old days!' that though 'I know I am spoiling you and encouraging exactly what I ought to combat … I cannot help setting down some verses that I formerly copied out of an old book, and quoted to myself morning, noon, and night.'[33] In this conversation that is often mediated through discussions of reading, the older woman's younger self speaks to her protégée as one young woman to another in a flexible approach to the life course.

At times, Stuart subscribes to the conventional idea that age naturally subdues 'violence of temper' and therefore Clinton has a false impression of her merits because: 'you come into the scene at midnight, and cannot comprehend that the day was not cool, because you find the night so.'[34] Stuart rehearses here the conventional notion that older age is (or should be) accompanied by a loss of emotional intensity. Yet in a helpful reminder of the ability of letters to disrupt linear narratives of ageing, and for lived experience to undermine the equation between older age and emotional detachment, by the end of the same year Stuart confesses a lapse of self-control:

> I flattered myself I had outlived these tempests … I thought the sunset would be calm, and I cannot tell you the humiliating sensation such a proof of the contrary has produced. Oh, that I could be a warning to you, dear girl! but that I cannot be while you persist in taking me for a model of perfection. Do not reply with a panegyric, for just now it would run a dagger into me.[35]

The culturally proscribed identity of the mentor; the wise, venerated, and calm older woman worthy of panegyric, compounds Stuart's feelings of shame regarding her own emotions. This proscription is widespread, inherent in the *Instructions for the Conduct of Females, From Infancy to Old Age* (1788), in which the 'author' who presents herself as a woman near 70, advises her 'brothers and sisters' in 'Old Age' that 'they have every opportunity of being useful to society, by their experience and example' provided they remain patient, affable, good-humoured, grateful and calm.[36] Wisdom, as Woodward suggests in a more contemporary context, is 'predicated on a lack of certain kinds of feelings – the passions in particular, including anger.'[37] However, in Stuart's acknowledgement that she has not 'outlived' the 'tempests' she moves closer to Edmondson's idea of wisdom based on 'more transient, but still illuminating, contributions to confronting everyday challenges' than wisdom based on the model of a 'distant and perfect' ideal.[38]

[33] Stuart (1901: Volume 2, 215).
[34] Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 310).
[35] Stuart (1901: Volume 1, 324).
[36] *Instructions for the Conduct of Females*, quoted in Ottaway (2008: Volume 4, 53, 58).
[37] Woodward (2003: 56).
[38] Edmondson (2015: 22–3).

In the later correspondence, the frequent regrets expressed regarding her irascible temper subside, perhaps in reaction to Clinton's own ageing into midlife. Nonetheless, the need to regulate emotion remains a continuous thread, particularly in response to the deaths of friends from early life. Stuart notes that 'the losses are now so many, and are so evidently increasing, that my life seems to be like a book from which so many pages have been torn away that the connection and interest cannot be resumed.'[39] This image of self-erasure and narrative disruption, prompted by the death of her peers, reflects the intimate expressions of grief and mourning that feature in the letters as she can no longer rely on interpreters of her story. Yet these are often accompanied by assertions of the need for emotional temperance and self-control. Writing about the death of a friend she has known since her youth to an acquaintance, Stuart reflects on her grief by claiming that 'such is the tranquillising effect of time that I have borne the blow without those violent emotions it would have produced formerly.'[40] However, in writing to Clinton, the effort of repression is revealed as she notes that 'My whole former life was connected with her and has ended with her … but though it is deep within, you would not perceive anything particular without.'[41] Stuart also shares with her younger correspondent reflections on the challenges of social interaction and marginalisation in older age, imagining on one occasion that she is perceived as 'an inoffensive piece of furniture' as the company 'think as little about me as I am apt to do about them'.[42] Likewise, following a dinner she reveals her feelings of social displacement, 'between not hearing what is said, not remembering names, and not knowing faces, I am a perfect owl in sunshine.'[43] Here the image of the owl above the teapot (the coat of arms of the old maid) is reworked, but nonetheless the symbol of wisdom is retained.

The extant correspondence with Clinton continues until 1834, when Stuart was in her late 70s, but Stuart's letters to her two nieces written during her 80s and 90s remain available in manuscript. Stuart's nieces were Clinton's contemporaries, and the three women weave in and out of Stuart's life as visitors and correspondents. During these decades, Stuart retains her role as an adviser on books, travel plans, party politics and public affairs, recent history, courtship, court etiquette and servants. However, in this later correspondence there are more frequent evocations of cultural stereotypes regarding the older woman, references to her chronological age,

[39] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 421). This poignant reflection is prompted by reading *Trevelyan* (1833) by Lady Caroline Scott which reminds Stuart of old friends and acquaintances through its semi-fictionalised portraits of her circle.
[40] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 361).
[41] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 360–1).
[42] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 227).
[43] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 380).

and apologies for her excessive longevity. In her study of eighteenth-century satirical prints, Cindy McCreery has shown that 'single old aristocratic women bore the brunt of satirists' attacks' on the figure of the ageing woman.[44] Stuart engages directly with the stereotype, comically identifying herself in the character of Lady Bluemantle, who featured in *The Spectator* in the early eighteenth century as a 'peevish old gentlewoman' renowned for malice, deceit and the circulation of unsubstantiated gossip.[45] Yet, in the letters, cultural stereotypes co-exist with more poignant reflections that articulate Stuart's concerns expressed to her niece Louisa that 'I am a sad plague to everybody'.[46] These sorrows are often concluded with self-regulation exemplified by a phrase in a letter to her niece Anna Maria: 'I had better have done, now I am got into this melancholy strain.'[47]

Her identity as an older woman is understood relationally, as the infirmities of friends and relatives provoke fears at her own future, particularly the threat of the loss of memory. She notes after a visit to a friend that 'forgetting and confounding people's names is a symptom by which decay of intellect begins.'[48] Likewise, mourning is accompanied by reflections on her status as a survivor, prompting comments such as 'it is one more gone before me whom I seemingly ought not to have survived – no wonder, considering my unreasonable length of life.'[49] At one point, she extends this theme of excessive longevity in an intriguing reworking of Shakespeare's 'All the world's a stage':

> I often think human life when prolonged resembles what one has seen at a theatre if detained there among the last of the audience – one light extinguished after another until at length all is dark and silent around.[50]

Like the image of her past as a book with pages torn out by each bereavement, the theatrical metaphor suggests a feeling of having outlived a collective narrative. While this implies an intensification of Stuart's age consciousness, references to calendar age are notably rare until she reaches 90, from which point she returns to it frequently and precisely. Her 92nd and 93rd birthdays are 'announced' in letters, but she suggests she meets them with a sense of shame and should be 'condoled with' and 'not congratulated'.[51] The letters written after this point lose some of the playfulness of the earlier correspondence and Stuart seems more anxiously aware of the figure of

[44] McCreery (2004: 253).
[45] *The Spectator*, No. 427 (1712: 10 July, 123).
[46] MS.Eng. lett.d.377. To Lady Louisa Davenport Bromley, 11 September 1841.
[47] MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 30 August 1847.
[48] MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 13 July 1845.
[49] MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 30 August 1847. Emphasis in original.
[50] MS.Eng. lett.d.377. To Lady Louisa Davenport Bromley [?], 1841 [?].
[51] MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 12 August 1850.

the garrulous old woman. There is a new self-consciousness regarding the length of her letters and choice of topics, and they become punctuated by self-admonishment such as 'what nonsense I am talking!' or fears of repetition 'perhaps I have already said all this … – but you must forgive the old fool's prosing … I am writing too much for the very little I have to say.'[52] She concludes her remarks on slippers received for her birthday with the self-criticism 'a pretty thing to write about truly! Well forgive dullness and so Adieu!'[53]

In her theorisation of the epistolary gift, Liz Stanley argues that letter writing involves 'the circulation and symbolic gifting of relationships – the reciprocity of correspondences.'[54] Stuart seems increasingly concerned that rather than reciprocity her letters represent obligation, as she imagines Louisa in receipt: 'Behold a letter from your indefatigable persecutress according to custom. I conclude you do not hold it requisite to answer every one you receive or you would do little else. The woman must be a little deranged.'[55] Stuart's epistolary performance evokes the spectre of the mad, garrulous, burdensome older woman (by custom, now a persecutress rather than a monitress). But this figure is also held at a distance through the third person reference, as her niece is counselled by her aunt to feel no compulsion to answer. In the straightforward dynamic imagined by the prescriptive literature of the period, the young might 'derive both pleasure and profit' from the 'strictures' of an 'Old Woman'.[56] But Stuart's address to her niece at the age of 87 is a more complex evocation of their relationship in which she 'can only be thankful that you have such feelings towards one who is little worthy of them in her own sight and infinitely less, I fear in the sight of Him from whom no secrets are hid.'[57]

Narratives of Ageing: The Lives of Others

Alongside the composition of her poem 'On Growing Old', and the development of her epistolary identity in the correspondence, Stuart was also engaging in life writing experiments in biography during her late 60s and 70s. She narrated a series of women's lives that forged connections across the generations in accounts of Lady Frances Douglas (1750–1817), Lady Mary Coke (1727–1811), and, most notably, her grandmother, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762). These biographies were an

[52] MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 28 October 1850, 30 October 1845.
[53] MS.Eng. lett.d.383. To Lady Anna Maria Dawson, 12 August 1850.
[54] Stanley (2011: 140).
[55] MS.Eng. lett.d.377. To Lady Louisa Davenport Bromley, 14 August 1843.
[56] *The Lady's Monthly Museum* (August 1798: 96).
[57] MS.Eng. lett.d.377. To Lady Louisa Davenport Bromley, 30 September 1844.

extension of familial and social connections and designed to create and perpetuate intergenerational memories beyond her own lifetime. Stuart's model of biographical authority rests on her longevity and her self-recognition as a precious repository of memories (both personal and inherited). Yet the textual interaction with the lives of others also inspires reflections on her own life course and a return to familiar themes of the role of the mentor and how to grow old gracefully.

The first of these works was *Memoire of Frances, Lady Douglas* which was a moving tribute to Stuart's childhood friend and cousin, seemingly written during the 1820s several years after Lady Douglas's death at the age of 67, and addressed to her middle-aged daughter the author Lady Caroline Scott.[58] Stuart establishes her authority as a biographer through the intimacy of her relationship with her subject, as the story of Lady Douglas's miserable childhood with a neglectful mother was allegedly revealed to her friend Stuart through confidential conversations in parks and by riverbanks, and in letters and visits:

> I was the first person to whom, at the distance of thirty three years, she intrusted these particulars, and I believe I continued to be the only one who knew them as long as she lived. Am I doing well in revealing them to you? … I want you to know fully the singular superiority of her character, to see clearly what she was and all she was.[59]

The biography invites Lady Douglas's daughter into this intimate friendship, revealing Lady Douglas's experience of unrequited love prior to her marriage to Caroline's father, and the transformative effects of motherhood. In a remarkable passage Stuart relates Lady Douglas's first words spoken to the newborn Caroline (now reading these memoirs herself in middle age). Lady Douglas is repeatedly identified as a character who has been undervalued and underestimated, including by Stuart herself who engages in 'self-reproach' at her own youthful misjudgements.[60] Stuart suggests the role of the late life biographer here is, at least in part, to foster posthumous sympathy between generations through removing distortions and misunderstandings. Caroline is invited to see her mother as one who recognised all too well the pain of unfulfilled passion and therefore rejoiced when Caroline was able to marry for love. Stuart suggests that 'when time has poured it's [sic] oil on the waves of life, allayed every turbulent emotion, we are all unwilling that the young people who look up to us with some share of respect should know those long past weaknesses which we have learned to blush at.'[61] Yet, in choosing to reveal the past of her friend, Stuart concludes that she

[58] The *Memoire* circulated in manuscript and remained unpublished until it was edited by Jill Rubenstein in 1985.
[59] Stuart (1985: 54).
[60] Stuart (1985: 71).
[61] Stuart (1985: 94).

tells Caroline what her mother 'perhaps' would not because 'I cannot help thinking she would not have been hurt at the idea of your ultimately hearing it from me.'[62] The biographer's 'task' notably ends once Stuart recognises 'I approach the time of your own remembrance' and the mother is fully restored to her daughter.[63]

Through the narrative of Lady Douglas's life, the biography also returns to the theme of the older woman as mentor, a discussion prompted by the maternal failures of Lady Douglas's mother and the absence of any trusted advisers in her youth. The figure of the aunt is under scrutiny, a role that was central to Stuart's identity in her relationship with her own nieces. Lady Douglas's maternal aunts are sharply criticised for claiming 'twice the authority aunts are usually held entitled to' and considering her 'under their especial tutelage'. This abuse of authority by these 'old cats'[64] meant that in return for Lady Douglas being 'noticed and caressed' as a child, 'they exacted in return nothing less than the implicit obedience of the grown-up woman: or rather, they never allowed her to grow up while they lived'.[65] Likewise, Stuart claims that Lady Douglas's marriage was regarded with envy and as a source of betrayal: 'born their vassal, bound to remain in subjection to them for life, a predestined old maid … It was a bolus that must have choked them.'[66] In contrast to the spectre of the envious and controlling older woman represented by Lady Douglas's maternal ancestors, her unmarried paternal aunt, Lady Jane, fulfils an alternative stereotype, kind but ineffectual in her guardianship. Stuart notes that were Lady Jane to have wisdom to offer (and it seems that unfortunately she does not), nonetheless, 'there are few families where an old maid of moderate fortune, keeping two women-servants, one man, and a sedan chair, would have much influence; even supposing her descent from Solomon'.[67] The social stereotype of the old maid, easily dismissed and overlooked, is identified as incompatible with a model of wisdom. Amongst the aunts the most powerful invective is reserved for Lady Mary Coke, whose animosity and criticism of Lady Douglas and Caroline 'increased with the increasing sourness of age'.[68] This is an implicit contrast to Stuart herself, who as biographer commends mother and daughter to one another and fosters intergenerational ties.

The unflattering portrait of Lady Coke as a spectre of how not to age was extended in Stuart's next biographical work focusing on her father's uncle, *Some Account of*

[62] Stuart (1985: 94).
[63] Stuart (1985: 104).
[64] Stuart (1985: 87).
[65] Stuart (1985: 60–1).
[66] Stuart (1985: 87).
[67] Stuart (1985: 61).
[68] Stuart (1985: 103).

John Duke of Argyll and his Family, written in 1827 when she was 70 years old.[69] This text is also addressed to Caroline (who was the Duke of Argyll's great-granddaughter and Lady Coke's great-niece). Stuart's conception of the role of the family biographer in later life is consistent with her earlier portrait of Lady Douglas, as she preserves stories 'often told me by my mother' combined with the memories of her youth.[70] Lady Coke, 30 years Stuart's senior, was widowed at 26 and so features in Stuart's memory as a single older woman, outmoded and displaying stereotypical vices of older age (such as avarice, spleen, envy, selfishness and a tendency to meddle in politics through 'female whisperings and caballings').[71] Lady Coke's 'superintendance' of youthful fashions, including her hostility to ostrich feathers, prompts the following refection:

> Perhaps she might abhor them the more as in some sort the test of youth or age; for, in spite of the wisdom added by increase of years, she had no relish for growing old. Twelvemonth stealing after twelvemonth, however, this inevitable evil would come; … she grew sourer in consequence of it, more overbearing, more contradictious, less regardful of common civility.[72]

As a result of Lady Coke's inability to successfully navigate the role of the older woman, the wisdom potentially accrued with age is inevitably wasted. In fact, Stuart goes further to suggest that Lady Coke achieved an 'anti-influence' and 'in an inverse ratio' to what she hoped to accomplish, as the younger generation (and Stuart in particular) were forced to 'stifle' any feelings of agreement for 'fear of being pronounced like her.' As a result, Lady Coke 'preached us out of good-breeding, regular economy, respect for authority, and many other commendable things, by dint of incessantly preaching us into them.'[73] From the double perspective of both her youthful self, and her retrospective vantage point as an older woman, Stuart assesses Lady Coke's inability to grow old gracefully. She also acknowledges the unfortunate consequences of Lady Coke's attempts to influence the younger generation in a biographical assessment that confronts her own position as an older woman and reluctant mentor.

Stuart's role as a biographer intensified during her 70s, as four years after completing the memoir of the Argyll family, she wrote a short biographical piece following the death of her friend Elizabeth Weddell, 'Some Account of Mrs Weddell' (1831). It was circulated at the request of friends and prepared for magazine publication. In contrast to Lady Mary Coke, Mrs Weddell provides a model of good temper and spirits into

[69] The account of Lady Mary Coke was inserted in this work with around 150 pages devoted to her life. The text was originally circulated in manuscript and first published in 1863.
[70] Stuart (1899: 5).
[71] Stuart (1899: 140).
[72] Stuart (1899: 136).
[73] Stuart (1899: 141–2).

her 80s for 'the outward frame alone had grown old: the mind, continuing buoyant, retained all the energy, & vivacity as well as the purity of early youth.'[74] At the age of 79 biography became a much more intimate and exposing practice as she turned closer to home to become the biographer of her maternal grandmother, the controversial author Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. In the course of her biography of Lady Coke, Stuart introduces a striking image of generational inheritance:

> The circles produced by throwing stones into water, dear Car, are no bad emblem of the influence which generations, as they pass, have on those that succeed them. That of the immediate parents upon the children is strong and visible; the grandchildren show its traces but faintly; when it widens to the great-grandchildren it vanishes wholly away.[75]

Stuart explored those faint 'traces' of generational inheritance in her own life through engagement with her maternal grandmother in a development of familial life writing beyond the more traditional territory of the maternal memoir.

The introductory biographical 'Anecdotes' were written anonymously at the request of Stuart's nephew, Lord Wharncliffe, for his collection of Montagu's correspondence of 1837, that aimed to correct the 1803 edition by James Dallaway.[76] Wharncliffe's preface implicitly revealed Stuart's identity as the long-lived author, suggesting that the 'Anecdotes' were written by 'the only person now living who could have had the means of supplying them' and noting that the texts will 'satisfy the Reader that a ray of Lady Mary's talent has fallen upon one of her descendants.'[77] However, writing in the *Quarterly Review* in February 1837, John Wilson Croker attributed the work explicitly to Stuart. Croker's lengthy review is revealing regarding the ways in which Stuart's longevity was understood as an integral part of her authorial identity and the text's reception:

> It will surprise the generality of readers to find that we have still amongst us, in the full vigour and activity of her faculties, a lady, who, herself born in the reign of George II., received the maternal caresses of Lady Mary Wortley, and who thus forms a link – the only one probably now existing – between the reigns of William III. and William IV. – between 1690 and 1837, a period of almost 150 years. The wonder and pleasure that such a circumstance is in itself sure to excite, will be greatly increased by the perusal of her anecdotes, which narrate the experience of age with all the vivacity of youth.[78]

[74] Stuart (1831: seq. 10).
[75] Stuart (1899: 41–2).
[76] For a more detailed account of the composition and publication history of this work, see Rubenstein (1986: 4–10, 19–20).
[77] Stuart (1837: Volume 1, vi).
[78] Croker (1837: 149).

Devoney Looser has identified that Croker's reviews often 'invoke[d] the rhetoric of old age' as 'he seems to have had a pronounced mean streak where *elderly* women writers were concerned', evident in his acerbic reviews of the late works of Frances Burney and Anna Barbauld.[79] In this case, readers are assumed to be surprised to find Stuart alive, but nonetheless her exceptional age establishes her authority and the recent past is understood as an ideal focus for the older woman writer. Her age is suitably defied by the vivacious, youthfulness of her text, and while 'she is in her *eightieth* year' her literary style suggests that she is 'in her *eighteenth*' (in an implicit equation between the late life writer and a loss of textual energy). Stuart reacted furiously to this public exposure as the anonymous author, noting in a letter that 'as he has thus dragged me out of the quiet hole in which I have hitherto passed my days and wished to end them, I do long for revenge.' She was sufficiently provoked to write a 'Supplement to the Anecdotes' and sent it to Wharncliffe, but ultimately decided to avoid 'directly clawing Croker' in a public defence.[80]

The 'Anecdotes' was an attempt to recover Montagu's reputation, carefully navigating her elopement and separation from her husband and public conflicts with other writers (particularly Horace Walpole and Alexander Pope). In comparison to the emphasis on personal memories in Stuart's biographies of Douglas or Coke, her relationship to her biographical subject in the case of Montagu is at once more intimate through familial connection and yet also more distant and, as a figure of notoriety, Diana Barnes suggests Stuart 'consciously defined herself against her grandmother'.[81] Stuart wrote the life of a grandmother she did not know, based on memories of conversations with her mother and her grandmother's journal which she read in her youth (a manuscript that her mother subsequently burned and from which 'nothing could be transcribed').[82] As Jill Rubenstein has argued, the 'Anecdotes' is motivated by 'the need to preserve the otherwise ephemeral past' (an implicit responsibility of longevity) and a reckoning with Stuart's own intellectual and literary inheritance.[83]

Montagu was central to Stuart's identity across the life course. She recalls in a letter to Clinton at the age of 69 that her love of learning in her youth was persistently framed as an unhealthy desire to emulate Montagu and prompted rebuke from her older siblings:

[79] Looser (2008: 38).
[80] Quoted in Grundy and Halsband (2008: 55).
[81] Barnes (2015: 573).
[82] Rubenstein (1986: 6).
[83] Rubenstein (1986: 10–11).

> 'I know as well as possible you have got it in your head that you are to be like my grandmother,' whereas it was this reproach that first informed me I had ever had a grandmother, and I am sure I heartily hated her name.[84]

She notes the lifelong influence of this imposed identification as 'to this late, *very* late hour' she is self-conscious of displaying her learning in conversation.[85] But despite this ambivalence, the 'Anecdotes' provides a means to position herself within a family genealogy of learned women who maintain their intellectual powers into older age. This encompasses her mother, grandmother (who returns to England with a 'youthful vigour which seemed to animate her mind'), and great-grandmother who is described as having 'a superior understanding' that she 'retained ... unimpaired at an extraordinary age.'[86]

The 'Anecdotes' also returns to Stuart's recurrent preoccupation with mentoring, this time through the friendship between Montagu and the feminist writer and thinker, Mary Astell, best known for her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) and 23 years older than Montagu.[87] Stuart asserts a cross-generational literary connection, claiming that Astell:

> [F]elt for Lady Mary Wortley that fond partiality which old people of ardent tempers sometimes entertain for a rising genius in their own line. Literature had been hers; and she triumphed in Lady Mary's talents as proofs of what it was her first wish to demonstrate, namely, the mental equality of the sexes; if not the superiority of woman to man.[88]

Stuart's characterisation of this friendship (that was sustained 'across a gulf of age, rank, party loyalty, and religious faith'), echoes Astell's 'Preface' to Montagu's *Embassy Letters* of 1724–5 in which Astell imagines herself as the posthumous advocate for her literary protégée.[89] Astell hopes that while the *Embassy Letters* circulated only in manuscript during the lifetimes of Astell and Montagu, it would nonetheless be published 'when I am in my grave' and her preface will 'attend them, in testimony to posterity, that, among her contemporaries, *one* woman, at least, was just to her merit.' Age does not confer superior status, as Astell seeks to place her laurels at Montagu's feet, while acknowledging 'the extent of your empire over my imagination'.[90]

[84] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 21).
[85] Stuart (1903: Volume 2, 22).
[86] Stuart (1837: Volume 1, 94, 80).
[87] For a more detailed analysis of Stuart's portrayal of Montagu as 'the complement and protégée of the celebrated Mary Astell', see Nerio (2017: 17–36).
[88] Stuart (1837: Volume 1, 50).
[89] Grundy (1999: 193).
[90] Astell (1861: 222–4).

As well as looking backwards, Montagu's letters also provided a model of mentorship that looked forwards. In her study of the mother–daughter letter across three generations, Barnes suggests that the role of 'maternal educator' modelled in Montagu's letters to her daughter were taken up in Stuart's letters to Clinton.[91] In letters to her daughter written in 1753 (four years prior to Stuart's birth), Montagu offers herself as a correspondent and adviser to Stuart's older sister, based on her relationship with her own grandmother with whom she corresponded regularly despite 'the difference of our time of Life.'[92] In the epistolary advice to her daughter on educating Lady Mary (Stuart's older sister), Montagu asserts the importance of female learning (judiciously concealed), the value of the single life, and the usefulness of a daughter who might act as a 'Secretary'.[93] As Barnes notes, Stuart's role as the recorder of her mother's memories and her grandmother's journal takes up this life that Montagu mapped out for her older sister.[94] On Stuart's death in 1851 her family engaged in an extensive correspondence regarding an appropriate epitaph for her monument (a very particular kind of late life or afterlife writing) in which questions of intellectual inheritance remained. The debated text included the suggestion that Stuart was 'blest with the full & unclouded use of extraordinary faculties to extreme old age' (speaking back to her grandmother's words on her great-grandmother who 'dy'd at 96, retaining to the last the vivacity and clearness of her understanding').[95] And yet the next generation also expressed their doubts about the lineage into which Stuart was implicitly writing herself and decided not to include reference to Montagu, who in the mid-nineteenth century was 'not perhaps a person of whom we sh^{d} boast on a tomb-stone.'[96] These complex intergenerational connections between women mediated through text continued beyond Stuart's lifetime, as Stuart's great-niece edited her letters for posthumous publication in the later nineteenth century and, Susan Tweedsmuir, a descendent of Montagu's through maternal ancestors, published a biography of Stuart in 1932.

In her valuable conception of critical age autobiography, Margaret Morganroth Gullette suggests that this genre is particularly well placed to ask: 'How do the subjects of a particular culture come up with narratives of aging – comprehensible stories, prospective and retrospective, about moving through *all* the given ages of life?' She also extends her analysis beyond autobiography to consider how our 'implicit theories of the life course' are 'constructed and revised' in 'the biographies we tell of

[91] Barnes (2015: 583).
[92] Montagu (1967: Volume 3, 27).
[93] Montagu (1967: Volume 3, 24).
[94] Barnes (2015: 580–1).
[95] Montagu (1967: Volume 3, 27).
[96] MS.Eng.misc.b.164. Miscellaneous Papers. 225.

other, older people, especially our parents.'[97] In these late life writing encounters that span the generations, Stuart explores the question of how to grow old gracefully and purposefully through epistolary exchange and biographical narratives that prompt a rereading of a former self and create textual interactions with a lost grandmother whose story informed her own. She therefore complicates the picture of the older woman as mentor in this period as, for Stuart, growing older is a 'continuous unfolding' as existence is 're-evaluated and rewritten'.[98] In the case of Stuart, life writing articulates a dynamic engagement between past and present selves, our own lives and the lives of others, that may help to challenge a narrative of older age aligned with stasis, decline, or isolation as well as suggesting the various ways in which life writing functions in women's later lives as a means to sustain a role that connects to others. Stuart's late life endeavour as a biographer of family and friends suggests she found guidance on growing old through reflecting on those who went before in writing biographical portraits of older women of a previous generation both critical and sympathetic. As the recovery of figures like Stuart shows, women's late life writing of this period has the potential to generate historical understanding of the gendered experience of ageing as well as to provide new perspectives from which to view life writing across the life course.

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[97] Gullette (2003: 102, 108).

[98] Moreno and Soler (2016: 11–12).

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'Thou Breath of Autumn's Being': Voicing Masculinity in the Poetry of Late Life

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Abstract: This article argues that lyric poetry is a form suited to contesting dominant ideas about masculinity because of its thematic and formal preoccupations with voice. It argues that voice offers a different way of viewing the social constrictions that accompany male experiences of ageing to the well-known theory of the mask of ageing. Through a study of a long history of Western lyric verse, which includes writers such as William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost and Philip Larkin, the article explores the significance of restricted breathing in relation to dominant norms of masculine reticence and the physiological deterioration of the vocal profile in age. It then explores the possibility of counter-voicings of masculinity in poems with intergenerational themes from a group of post-war British poets.

Keywords: ageing; masculinity; lyric poetry; voice; reticence; silence

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Introduction

In strictly formal terms, an essay on masculinity and ageing in lyric poetry does not fit within a special issue of a journal themed around the subjects of narrative and gender for the simple reason that lyric poetry is not narrative. As Scott Brewster puts it, lyric poetry is an 'interlude' or, more specifically, 'a unique intensification of an everyday experience'.[1] It does not narrate a story. Narrative verse does – epic, romance, even ballad – but lyric ordinarily conceived does not. However, when Brewster refines his definition of lyric's function as interlude, he describes poems as moments self-consciously 'separated from a larger narrative'.[2] It is through recognition of the way that lyrics address and offer fresh perspectives upon larger cultural narratives to which they stand adjacent, connected yet separated through their form, that this essay argues for the value of the mode in interrogating and seeking new ways to envision the relationship between narrative and gender. Without operating *as* narrative, lyric addresses, feeds into, disputes, discloses traces of, and most importantly offers space for counter commentary on, the cultural norms and dominant critical concerns of the theme of ageing masculinity in Western literature and culture.

The title of this article includes the phrase 'the poetry of late life', which signals broadness, perhaps even hinting at some totalising experience or grand claim about masculinity and old age. This is not the case, and it is widely accepted that masculinity and ageing are not universal but culturally particular. Even so, the lyric poem, time-specific, yet leaning into something atemporal, the apex of which is the notion of the poem as 'moment's monument' (l.1) in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's words,[3] and particularly reflexive in mode – which means it is allusive and interwoven with its own intertexts, as Harold Bloom made a career of arguing – is an area where cultural norms and inherited ideas, myths and motifs coincide with individual poetic utterances. Poetry is a ground which resounds to the 'moan' of 'many voices' (l.56), as Alfred, Lord Tennyson put it in his dramatic monologue *Ulysses* (1833), by which he partly means the voices of the cultural and literary past.[4] *Ulysses*, which reworks the aftermath of Homer's *Odyssey* as imagined by Dante Alighieri, foregrounds anxieties about poetic authority and fatherhood for the ageing warrior-king who hopes it is 'not too late to seek a newer world' (l.57) but is about to pass into myth as he transfers power to his son, Telemachus.

In Bloom's terms, the poem is about poetic influence as the 'many voices' of earlier poets threaten to drown out that of Ulysses who is a proxy for the young Tennyson.

[1] Brewster (2009: 6).
[2] Brewster (2009: 6).
[3] Rossetti (1957: 212).
[4] Tennyson (2007: 93). Hereafter Tennyson's verse is given by line number in the text.

But the rhetorical power of Ulysses, highly age-conscious, as he implores a group of his men to nerve themselves 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield' (l.70), is first medium and then subject of the poem as it ebbs, then flows, then ebbs again across clauses: 'you and I are old; / Old age hath yet his honour and his toil; / Death closes all' (ll.49–51). It is possible to approach these lines as evocative of the Bloomian model of anxious influence which conjures vocal impediments, where anxiety shares its roots with *angst* (from the German *enge* meaning 'tight' or 'restricted' and the Latin *augustiae* meaning 'distress'), which Bloom argues 'emphasizes the characteristic of restriction in breathing'.[5] Equally pertinent is Freud's 'equation of anxiety with symptoms of hyperventilation' where inspiration or influence – literally breathing in – results in the 'restricted expulsion' which is the poem:[6] anxiety is 'a lack of breathing space' and a 'holding-in of breath, until some space is cleared for it'.[7] And yet it is important not to miss the fact that Tennyson's lines are equally about voice conceived in biological and sociocultural terms and the way these mediate depictions of anxieties surrounding masculine ageing and loss of power. It is where the explicit focus on the ageing male voice as subject intersects with the shadows of poetic influence conceived of in Bloomian terms that *Ulysses* provides a starting point for a discussion of what I will argue is a long poetic history – or even narrative – of 'clearing space' for alternative accounts of masculinity against dominant social norms.

Poetic history, revealed through allusion or at least shared idioms, provides its own context as we will see. But, to narrow the focus within the wider subject, I will argue that the recurrent motif of 'holding-in' or restriction, applied above to breath and voice, is manifested in the common theme of linking masculinity with emotional reticence in Western culture. To guide us towards the topic of reticence, and prompted by *Ulysses*, I will first sketch what I propose is a dominant arc to lyric poetry that has addressed the qualities of the ageing male voice, necessitating some broad movement across the work of a range of poets including William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Graves and Robert Frost. Focus on the comparatively neglected topic of voice, as distinct from more familiar age-related themes such as the mask of ageing, as I set out below, aids our understanding of the theme of 'late style' in lyric poetry, which can be demonstrated by examples from Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats. But, it also invites consideration of the poetry and poetics of 'late life' in terms that are not confined simply to whether or not a poem is written during late life.[8] Indeed, some of

[5] Bloom (2005: 43).
[6] Heys (2014: 19).
[7] Bloom (2005: 84).
[8] My focus is on providing a reading of the lyrical construction of attitudes to age rather than excavating poets' biographies. These are of occasional interest to me in providing context, but, post-Barthes's 'death of the author', are usually seen as reductive if given too much prominence.

the most striking examples of the intersection of masculinity and the ageing voice in the post-war era are found in poetry of younger writers, where they reveal awareness of intergenerational friction, of the sort established by Tennyson, and the potential for, if not the full realisation of, new discourses of maleness. In the final section of this essay, I will concentrate on a selection of examples deriving from post-war British writers that are particularly concerned with reticence in father-son relationships. These poets, including A. Alvarez, David Wevill and, most extensively, Tony Harrison, offer what I regard as intergenerational commentaries on masculine power dynamics, where the business of poetry is clearing space in order to speak out of an interlude within a grander narrative characterised by emotional restraint.

Ageing Vocal Profiles: Restricted Breathing and Emotional Restraint

First a word on voice. In general use, voice is a peculiarly figurative term. It regularly means more than the sound produced in the larynx and uttered through the mouth, standing in for other words such as 'opinion', 'viewpoint' or, more politically, 'representation'. This is the case, for example, in the Latin phrase *vox populi* or 'the voice of the people', where the sound, the tonal quality of voice, is of no particular concern to the representation of the opinion of the people. This figurative notion of voice is not my primary interest here, but it needs establishing as it is a concomitant of vocal analysis in some of what follows. Voices can be suppressed, silenced or, when heard, departicularised. This is what I believe Gayatri Spivak means when she distinguishes between 'speaking' and 'speaking *as*'.[9] Spivak objects to the way her voice or viewpoint is often taken as indicative of a collected set of opinions about what it means to be, in her case, an Indian woman or a feminist. Without wanting to equate Spivak's socio-ocultural position with the poetry I examine, which represents white and male viewpoints, it is the case that her notion of 'speaking *as*', when transferred to this poetry, reveals tensions between the typical privilege assigned to masculinity and the potential marginalisation or loss of authority that Tennyson's Ulysses fears comes with old age, which would otherwise be hidden. The cultural construction of 'old man' proposes age-appropriate views or behaviour often inflected and challenged through focus on voice. These can be identified in some introductory examples of age-conscious verse from Yeats, Hardy and Graves.

It is for this reason I mostly adopt the term 'speaker' rather than poet, as is customary in literary criticism, to refer to the lyrical subject who speaks the verse.

[9] Spivak (1990: 60).

The most obvious example is the contrast, noted by Samuel Hynes, in the tonal quality of the late poetry of Yeats and Hardy. Yeats's raging voice, refusal to be marginalised and unwillingness to accept decline in sexual potency is, for Hynes, the means to understand that 'outside there is the caricature Age, and inside, the passionate heart',[10] which is another way of expressing what Featherstone and Hepworth famously called the 'mask of ageing'.[11] Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1928) is remembered for its image of the scarecrow: 'An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing' (ll.9–11).[12] The key to reading these lines is not the mask but the attention given to voice. The old man must sing even louder than in youth to be heard and to regain significance. So too 'The Spur' (1938), where the speaker defies decorum, adopting the second-person pronoun to directly confront his auditor on the subject of his attraction to younger women:

> You think it horrible that lust and rage
> Should dance attention upon my old age;
> They were not such a plague when I was young;
> What else have I to spur me into song? (ll.1–4)

These lines pulse to the provocative dance of the negative passions, 'lust' and 'rage', that rhyme on softened consonants, before the cluster of voiced and aspirated plosives in 'plague', 'young', 'spur' and 'song' assert masculine authority. The speaker will not be alienated from his own poetic subject – love – and defies social attitudes that separate ageing from sexual feeling and heightened emotion.

Where Yeats refuses to go gently into the evening of old age, Hardy's lyric poetry, following the death of his wife Emma in 1912, is notable for its hushed and hoarse tones. The most prominent example is the lyric that Hardy titled 'The Voice' (1914). The poem ostensibly addresses the feelings of a widower who misses the sound of his wife's voice and imagines he hears it only to realise it is the sound of the wind. The poem is equally concerned with the voice of the ageing male speaker. The repeated appeal for the voice to 'call to me, call to me' (l.1) prompts only a stumbling string of monosyllables: 'Saying that now you are not as you were / When you had changed from one who was all to me' (ll.2–3).[13] The wheezing, sibilant quality of the penultimate stanza that focuses on the 'breeze' (l.9) and rhymes 'listlessness' (l.9) with 'wistlessness' (l.11) is prelude to the sudden contraction of line length in the final stanza which further performs narrowing of space but also vocal range: 'Thus I; faltering

[10] Hynes (1998: 181).
[11] Featherstone and Hepworth (1991).
[12] Yeats (2008: 95). Hereafter Yeats's verse is given by line number in the text.
[13] Hardy (1984: 56). Hereafter Hardy's verse is given by line number in the text.

forward, / Leaves around me falling, / Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward' (ll.13–15). The fricatives enact vocal hesitancy, as much as the falling leaves indicate hair loss, evoking Bloom's description of anxiety as 'restriction in breathing'. They participate in the aural production of the effects of the loss of muscle mass in the larynx, thinning vocal cords and drying mucous membranes that lead to changes in the voice where characteristically men speak in a higher pitch as they age.

According to Lesley Mathieson, 'All parameters of the vocal profile can be affected by the degenerative changes of old age'.[14] If Yeats and Hardy have a 'late style' then it is one that registers in the way poetry's attention to vocal profile impresses associations of rejecting or acquiescing to the cultural ideas of 'speaking *as*' an old man. In both cases the poem is a type of restricted expulsion of breath – a dynamic of holding in and clearing space – in terms of poetic technique but also in response to the theme of the 'caricature Age'. In Graves's 'The Face in the Mirror' (1957), the speaker likewise exhibits a critical self-awareness of the consciousness – but also, on this occasion, the risk – of speaking *as* an old man and so confirming a set of fixed ideas about age-appropriate behaviour. Graves's speaker stares into the mirror on the cusp of shaving his beard:

> Grey haunted eyes, absent-mindedly glaring
> From wide, uneven orbits; one brow drooping
> Somewhat over the eye
> Because of a missile fragment still inhering,
> Skin-deep, as a foolish record of old-world fighting.
>
> Crookedly broken nose — low tackling caused it;
> Cheeks, furrowed; coarse grey hair, flying frenetic;
> Forehead, wrinkled and high;
> Jowls, prominent; ears, large; jaw, pugilistic;
> Teeth, few; lips, full and ruddy; mouth, ascetic.
>
> I pause with razor poised, scowling derision
> At the mirrored man whose beard needs my attention,
> And once more ask him why
> He still stands ready, with a boy's presumption,
> To court the queen in her high silk pavilion (ll.1–15).[15]

The face tells a story which is a story of masculine self-fashioning. The 'pugilistic' jaw is fit for boxing, the broken nose a result of an old rugby injury. More importantly the face is that of the old soldier, with scarring from the 'missile fragment'. It is a

[14] Mathieson (2001: 183).
[15] Lucie-Smith (1985: 41–2).

personal story, although it would not be going too far to say that what stares from the mirror is the history of Western masculine norms that construct the man as hero. Pride and derision coincide. But the eyes, 'haunted' yet defiantly glaring, exude different ideas about masculine strength and vulnerability. The 'pause' is the interlude that confirms or counters the narrative to which the final stanza alludes wherein the face reoccupies its public role in the tradition of the courtier.

Notwithstanding Graves's sexuality and the issues of closeting, rather than study the mask of ageing, the poem is really a study of masculine reticence; the pause is another version of holding in or anxiety, this time against the poetic tradition of courtly love lyric and simultaneously the pain and trauma of war. Tita Chico describes the female dressing room as a space for the construction of 'progressive and retrograde versions of femininity' and here we see the same exchange in terms of masculinity.[16] If the overt message of the speaker is a half-resigned 'I should know better by my age', then that is a product of the internalisation of cues to age-appropriate behaviour, a subjective counter-voicing of a masculine stereotype, the old soldier and ageing lothario (other common stereotypes include the miser, the curmudgeon and the bore). Even so, the question is self-directed, and masculinity cannot voice its plurality publicly. It only exists in the interlude of lyric; it exists because the poem holds in its dissent, waiting for a time when it can clear space in a larger cultural narrative to which the speaker indicates he is about to return. Taking off his beard is here akin to putting on a mask or, as Spivak has it, a 'distancing from oneself'.[17] It is significant that we pick up on the shift into the silence of the inner mental life through a phonetic pun on the word 'inhering', meaning both embodiment *and* the sound of the missile still 'in hearing' for the veteran. Ironically, only acknowledgment of the spoken word, even when read silently, unlocks this.

So very different in the way they voice consciousness of ageing, 'The Spur' and 'The Voice' are nonetheless reactions to the same cultural narrative that expresses male ageing as physical decline and loss of potency. Hardy's speaker is unmanned by the narrowing range of voice; Yeats's speaker growls out his defiant and deliberately vulgar protest that seems the only alternative. But the other alternative to speaking out is holding in, and 'The Face in the Mirror' is a poem that ultimately broods and is inward-looking. Culturally, the poem partakes of one quality of Western masculinity which is what Thomas Strychaz calls the 'masculine psychic economy of emotional restraint'. Put simply, reticence is a signature of manliness. Strychaz argues that in the work of Ernest Hemingway, for example, 'restraint characterizes masculinity', where

[16] Chico (2005: 10).
[17] Spivak (1990: 60).

'narrative silences are somehow "about masculinity"'.[18] In this manner, 'The Face in the Mirror' is an example of silence as a commentary on maleness.

Manliness as 'holding-in' is also akin to the *omertà* of Southern Italian culture, or the pride in refusing to talk, where *omertà* derives from the Sicilian *omu* (meaning 'man') via the Spanish *hombredad* (meaning 'manliness'). Quiet men retain an emotional power over themselves and others that does not expose them to signs of physical – or for this article, vocal – weakness. That is not an idea confined to North America and the Mediterranean. We might supplement this tradition with the great text on manliness from the British Victorian period, Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840). Carlyle values emotional restraint, where silences are about masculinity as a category. He criticises the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau because, 'He had not "the talent of Silence"':

> The suffering man ought really 'to consume his own smoke'; there is no good in emitting smoke till you have made it into fire […] He that can walk under the heaviest weight without staggering, he is the strong man […] A man who cannot *hold his peace*, till the time come for speaking and acting, is no right man.[19]

It is important to recognise variation: as Lynne Segal argues, 'stereotypes of white masculinity – the typical silence on feelings and inability to express emotions for example – are so much at odds with the Black jazz, soul and reggae tradition.'[20] Likewise, Sam de Boise explains that extroversion is more typically female in white Western culture.[21] Graves, therefore, places his speaker within a literary history he shares with Tennyson, Hardy and Yeats, where 'emotional displays were acceptable but must not be excessive, lest a man "become … the plaything of his imaginations and passions"' as Christopher Forth puts it in *Masculinities in the Modern West*.[22] Exceptions tend to uphold the fact that the phenomenon is widely present enough to amount to a myth, in which verbosity equates to masculine weakness, which hushes counter voices.

Big Manly Voices and Masculine Decline in Western Lyrical Tradition

Lyric poetry's power to query masculine social norms comes partly through the way it highlights the quality of voice to convey or conceal emotion, which becomes

[18] Strychaz (2003: 22).
[19] Carlyle (1852: 290).
[20] Segal (1997: 188). See also, McKay (2005: 254).
[21] De Boise (2016: 31).
[22] Forth (2008: 47).

increasingly significant within the context of masculine reticence. Lyric is a form of literature that bears traces of its origins in oral culture through metrical recuperation of speech patterns, however much it happens to be engaged with print, and it is unsurprising to therefore find that voice itself is one of the main recurring focal points when masculinity and age are depicted. Three famous examples, from Shakespeare, Shelley and the Roman poet Horace, set up a dominant poetic mood and cluster of images that provide a further relevant framework for defining ageing masculinity. It has not previously been remarked that the common factor they share is the way they draw attention to the significance of vocal profile.

Horace is the father of Western lyric verse. Ageing is so embedded in his series of *Odes* as to almost consume them, most obviously in the case of the *carpe diem* philosophy, which amounts to an urgency to drag as much pleasure from youth as possible because it is short-lived and time flies. Old age has its own perspective on what it means to seize the day that responds to the ordinary way in which age is conceived by youth as a time of forthcoming regret. Horace's speaker's fire may have gone out in one sense although not another, but the poetry speaks eloquently of loss and the inability to kindle the kind of blaze of masculine power identified by Carlyle. *Ode* 3.14 announces public retreat:

> Soon palls the taste for noise and fray,
> When hair is white and leaves are sere:
> How had I fired in life's warm May […] (ll.25–7)[23]

Loss of hair pigment is associated with withered leaves – like Hardy's 'Leaves around me falling' – and a time of life where memory indicates loss, and perhaps regret, and yet the fire of life's May time, suitable to the taste of youth, now palls the older poet's palate (here 'palls', in John Conington's translation, carries its old meaning of smoke, which links it to the smouldering of the old age of the ageing socialite Lyce in 3.14). In *Ode* 4.1, the speaker dismisses Venus, goddess of love, with tears cascading, but finds without youth, he can 'relish love no more' (l.29) and is simultaneously made voiceless: 'Wherefore halts this tongue of mine, / So eloquent once, so faltering now and weak?' (ll.35–6). This contrasts with the voice of youth, which is 'n'er tongue-tied, / Master of each manly taste' (ll.14–15), centring manliness on vocal resonance in this case rather than reticence. Weakening voice is causally linked to declining sexual and social energy and increased introversion that alienates the muse and unmans the poet resulting in a creative stammer.

The 'Seven Ages of Man' speech of Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (*c.*1599), which we can take as a lyric monody within the larger scene, is so widely

[23] Horace (1865: 84). Hereafter Horace's verse is given by line number in the text.

cited in discussions of ageing as to need little reference were it not for the fact that the common focus on the boy and man playing 'many parts' through the stages of his life somewhat occludes the focus on voice and speech, and so is worth quoting again in full:

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
> His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
> Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;
> And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
> And shining morning face, creeping like snail
> Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
> Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
> Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
> Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
> Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
> Seeking the bubble reputation
> Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
> In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
> With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
> Full of wise saws and modern instances;
> And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
> Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
> With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
> His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
> For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
> Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
> And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
> That ends this strange eventful history,
> Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (II, vii, 139–66)[24]

The progress across the stages of the life course is characterised by alterations in the resonance of the male voice. Beginning with the infantile 'Mewling' and 'whining' of boyhood, graduating to the role of lover 'Sighing like furnaces' and the 'oaths' of the soldier, then to the 'wise saws' or sayings of maturity, which is demonstrated through rhetorical composure, manliness is measured in the achievement of the bass-baritone of the 'big manly voice'. Shakespeare identifies the weakening voice as an auditory accompaniment to old age that cannot be masked, the male voice returning to a

[24] Shakespeare (1998: 173).

quavering, 'childish treble', and, ultimately, the 'whistles' of non-signifying 'sound'. Departure from the prime of life is heard in the catch in the throat, the restriction in breathing space, that is taken as a symbol of, or prelude to, failing physical and mental powers.

Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* (1820), unlike the pessimistic sentiments of Jaques, is often presented as a poem of youthful, Romantic optimism. It *is* optimistic but it inherits much from Horace and Shakespeare about ageing. The poem's central metaphor is of the west wind being the 'breath of Autumn's being' (l.1), which the poet-speaker wishes to channel into his own verse.[25] The season of autumn is often a signifier of ageing, but the breath which gives the wind voice has strength, depth and resonance of the sort to which Tennyson's Ulysses rhetorically aspires. The speaker turns to the wind for inspiration not in an imaginative sense but in the older sense where inspiration means inhalation:

> Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
> What if my leaves are falling like its own!
> The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
>
> Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone (ll.57–60)

The leaves are hair, looking back to Horace and forward to Hardy. Also, like Horace, and perhaps heard in the 'Sighing like furnace' of Shakespeare too, Shelley's autumnal tones are linked to the quality to inflame:

> … by the incantation of this verse,
>
> Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
> Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
> Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth
>
> The trumpet of a prophecy! (ll.65–9)

Shelley's speaker imagines readers reading his verse aloud – 'incantation' – recuperating his own ageing voice that through his lips becomes 'prophecy', a Romantic adjustment of God's instruction to Moses in *Exodus* 4:11 that he will not 'stutter and stammer' if God speaks through him. Although a poem about ageing, it is dominated by the standards of authority poetically enshrined by the 'big manly' voice of middle years.

Horace, Shakespeare and Shelley offer a cluster of common images related to waning masculine force: youth is fire while age is cold, or fire extinguished; hair, dry, falls like leaves; age means retreat from public life. Above all, we have the dimensions of a masculine vocal profile recounting different features of ageing: where Shelley finds depth to move in the wind's breath, Shakespeare gives his account of the physiological

[25] Shelley (1977: 221). Hereafter Shelley's verse is given by line number in the text.

loss of chest capacity and diminishing vocal strength, which creates the 'treble' and 'whistles' that signify the ageing male voice, while Horace shows voice marginalised and made hesitant by the poet's alienation through age from the very topic he once sang more evocatively than others: love and lust. Biological, functional and aesthetic concerns overlap where the spoken word and the sound of the voice itself point us to issues of masculine ageing. In the final section of this essay, I will draw the interweaving threads of these traditions into a reading of a selection of the work of British post-war poets.

Clearing Space: Intergenerational Variations in Post-War Lyrics

In its reflexive way, what is striking is how frequently and with what variety lyric poetry uses its traditions of restricted breathing as typifying the ageing voice to explore ideas of masculine decline. It is in lyric verse that study of voice most clearly supplements the more commonly remarked socio-cultural theories of the mask of ageing. Many examples could be quoted from the twentieth century. The ageing man resiles from his public heroism into 'stertorous silences' (l.20) in W. H. Auden's 'After' (1926–7); the death of the gods of masculine achievement are accompanied by 'a stertorous after-dinner doze' (l.12) in W. E. Henley's 'The gods are dead' (1921).[26] Auden alludes to Shelley in 'Now the Leaves are Falling Fast' (1938), while R. S. Thomas extrapolates the Shelleyan intertexts further in 'An Old Man' (1961) who is voiceless and 'destitute as an old tree stripped / Of foliage under a bald sky' (ll.7–8).[27] When Philip Larkin rages against the resignation and submission to decrepitude in the somewhat shocking poem 'The Old Fools' (1973), amongst his harsh accusations, what is most uncomfortable is the ranting tone in the context of a care home, where the voice of youth demands some emotional reaction: 'Why aren't they screaming?' (l.12).[28] The question is directed to the reader who judges that the speaker misses something of his own later description of ageing as 'the constant wear and tear / Of taken breath' (ll.39–40). Larkin even slips in a Shakespearean intertext to underline the association when he calls old age 'The whole hideous, inverted childhood' (l.47).

These examples explore 'Autumn's being' through shortening breath and a voice that has consequently lost the ability to command or even the capacity to be heard. In contrast to Larkin's aggression, Robert Frost's 'An Old Man's Winter Night' (1916) tones down the Shelleyan resonant ageing voice into a muted memory as the old man

[26] Auden (1994: 175), Henley (1921: 74).
[27] Hewett (1989: 240, 302–3).
[28] Larkin (1988: 196). Hereafter Larkin's verse is given by line number in the text.

of the poem slumbers before his own 'unextinguish'd hearth': 'The log that shifted with a jolt / Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted, / And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept' (ll.23–5).[29] It is a poem, like Hardy's 'The Voice', about narrowing or constriction, indicated by the vocal profile, but where the 'quiet light' (l.17) (deliberately 'quiet' rather than 'dim'), is seen as sufficient in retirement. The poem turns in the final three lines on the shift from the incredulous statement of youth about the old man's apparent incapacity to run, or be happy within, his home – 'One aged man – one man can't keep a house, / A farm, a countryside' (ll.26–7) – to the softer conditional 'or if he can, / It's thus he does it of a winter night' (ll.27–8), which acts as an audible, positive counter-voicing of masculine self-containment away from the 'sounds, familiar' (l.12) of the world 'out-of-doors' (l.1).

Despite the obvious differences in their vocal profiles, the poems of Larkin (rasping, angry) and Frost (gently spoken), like Hardy and Yeats before them, share similar ideas about, though react differently to, the process of ageing as acquiescence, or even complicity, in a process of physical deterioration that is set out by earlier poets. But, as I have argued, two different types of restricted expulsion seem to recur in depictions of the male voice in the history of Western lyric verse – one physiological, one sociocultural – and the other, which I have described as emotional reticence or self-silencing, also requires incorporation in analysis of my final set of examples. For Larkin and Frost, vocal deterioration from the standard of the 'big manly voice' of Shakespeare is accompanied by an inability to emote, which is a product of mishearing by a younger voice that speaks out, to different ends, with contrasting, forthright ignorance.

That intergenerational aspect is most commonly found in poems of the post-war era that explore father–son relationships through attention to vocal profile. What is notable is that, in examples from Alvarez, Wevill and Harrison, each lyric interlude raises possibilities of counter-voices within the long cultural narratives I have set out by placing these traditions of manliness in dialogue with each other. The poems bear the traces of the inheritance of lyric poetry's obsession with the power or weakness of the male voice that I have outlined, but, through this, develop further than we have previously seen the possibility of clearing space within the long cultural shadows of male reticence. It is notable that an intergenerational context facilitates not just a possibility of throwing off the oppression of a dominant patriarchal voice, which is the case with Alvarez, but integration of different voices through focus on emotional ties, which is a position we see Wevill approaching and Harrison more fully enacting. If vocal decline indicates weakness and reticence equates to strength, the ageing voice and its impediments is the site at which the cultural signs of masculinity can be inspected and alternatives, through motifs of clearing space after a metaphorical

[29] Hewett (1989: 281). Hereafter Frost's verse is given by line number in the text.

holding in of breath, imagined. More than just metaphor, as is the case with Bloom's ideas of poetic influence, we find that the restricted expulsion of air is both content and formal device, where understanding becomes a matter of listening more attentively, unlike the speakers of 'The Old Fools' and 'An Old Man's Winter Night', as the weakening male voice in old age offers an interlude to counter emotional reticence.

Alvarez was first associated with the Movement poets, noted for their nostalgia and anti-modernity, but moved away from this ethos and some of his most powerful poetry focuses on dreaming (he published a study of dreams in 1995 titled *Night*). In 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1974), Alvarez uses the delineation of his experience of waking from a nightmare in which he revisits his father's death to explore the constriction and release of grief and feelings of guilt in relation to ideas of masculinity that haunt the present. The abruptness of the speaker's return to consciousness before full light is set in turbulent contrast to the peace inside and outside the home: 'I wake up struggling, silent, undersea / Light and a single thrush is tuning up / You sleep and the baby sleeps' (ll.13–15).[30] Reminders of his own recent fatherhood contrast with the struggle to remove the distressing image of his father's 'blue' (l.1) face from his mind's eye. Most distressingly, within the nightmare sequence that opens the poem, the father's death is attributed to '"Death from strangulation / By persons known"' (ll.9–10), suggesting perhaps an image of guilt framed as Freudian castration anxiety. The title's reference to Freud's own *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) should not pass unnoticed, wherein melancholia indicates a loss that an individual is unable to fully comprehend, occurring in the unconscious mind. The dream's image-content also plays with the idea of silencing the father in an aggressive act – strangulation – which in this case means silencing a set of values associated with the power of the father to shame the son, as the poem begins to make clear.

Breath and voice are the key ingredients to unlocking the poem's melancholia. While we are told that outside 'Foxes are out on the Heath' (l.16), where they 'sniff the air like knives' (l.17), slicing through the clear atmosphere, the speaker's bedroom forms a restrictive space, tomb-like in its construction, in ironic counterpoise to the announcement that 'Three years back my father's corpse was burnt' (l.20), or cremated, with his 'ashes scattered' (l.21) on the air. In what reads as an almost-Gothic scene of reprisal, the ashes of the father are imagined returning to restrict the breathing of the son:

> Three years back my father's corpse was burnt,
> His ashes scattered. Now I breathe him in
> With the grey morning air, in and out.
> In out. My heart bumps steadily

[30] Lucie-Smith (1985: 162). Hereafter Alvarez's verse is given by line numbers in the text.

> Without pleasure. The air is thick with ash.
> In out. I am cold and powerless. His face
> Still pushes sadly into mine. He's disappointed.
> I've let him down, he says. Now I'm cold like him.
> Cold and untameable. Will have to be put down. (ll.20–8)

These lines evoke the rhythms of panicked breathing and the constricted chest where the initial regularity of 'in and out', in response to inhaling the weight of a father's expectations, collapses through the loss of the conjunction into the more rapid 'In out', suggesting the struggle to clear space against the suffocating metaphorical ash. The repeated 'In out' captures a lack of breathing space with the speaker unable to cry out in distress or risk waking the house and, in the process, unmanning himself. In an inversion of the nightmare, the speaker experiences his own asphyxiation as he remains 'silent' while it is the voice of the father that speaks out bluntly and with authority in the present tense: 'I've let him down, he says'.

The poem comes to rest in a scene of masculine reticence linked to vocal impediment; holding in without yet clearing space, it is a 'restricted expulsion' in Bloom's terms that identifies but queries a history of masculine restraint. If the younger speaker's ventriloquising of the father's voice establishes it not, in fact, as the voice of decline but as still resonant and powerful, then the poem, and idea, can only exist as interlude. The enforced silence of the speaker indicates that the lyrical interlude within the history of manliness is, like Graves's 'The Face in the Mirror', poised, preparatory to clearing space in the cultural narrative that presents the father as distant and emotionally cold. 'Now I'm cold like him', reaffirms the role to which the speaker is about to return, but the interlude voices dissent. The dream, and the domestic context of the speaker's own new fatherhood, raises possibilities for a model of masculinity that is more tender and less domineering.

Age-consciousness, becoming or replacing the father in a Freudian psychodrama in this case, draws the contrasting ideas of vocal power and emotional reticence that I have been exploring to the fore but the poem fails to wholly clear space for alternatives. That same theme appears to work in different ways in Wevill's 'My Father Sleeps' (1961), in which he tackles even more openly than Alvarez the Calylean inheritance of the heroic, taciturn strongman embodied in the figure of his sleeping father.[31] The severity and distance of male relationships is first reflected in the physical features: 'By these lines his mouth and his eyes / Have fixed' (ll.4–5).[32] But the mouth – the eyes are closed – becomes the centre of characterisation as we are informed 'without further

[31] David Wevill is a Japanese-born Canadian poet, but he belonged to the British literary world in the 1960s 'by residence and adoption', as Edward Lucie-Smith puts it (1985: 197).
[32] Lucie-Smith (1985: 197). Hereafter Wevill's verse is given by line number in the text.

talk' (l.5), his father 'Taught me at last how to walk' (l.6). If the instruction suggests constraint and discipline, that 'at last' hints at a subsequent overcoming of the learned behaviours of boyhood. The speaker notes that there is a departure from the painful memory of his father's 'anger bred / Of disillusionment' (ll.10–11) with his son, which 'has gone with age' (l.11), that indicates emotional mellowing.

The possibility for greater emotional connection between the two men, a contestation of the cultural narrative of father–son inhibition, is presented as a product of the father's sleep. That offers an interlude, but it is not quite silence, as the father's heavy breathing provides aural accompaniment to the speaker's memories of the kind of masculine power that is associated with emotional and vocal restraint. Like King Lear, the father was, and remains, 'Afraid of words as of madness' (l.15) and 'A lover of plain-spokenness' (l.17) that marks him 'too much the hero / For our friendship's good' (ll.13–14). Out of the absence of alternatives for male communication, Wevill uses the ageing male voice to query its power to silence alternatives through its own menacing and uncompromising silence by turning to the sound of his father's breath: 'In the sleep of sixty years, jaws firm, / Breathing through the obstacle of his nose / a stubborn air that is truth for him' (ll.24–6). The stertorous breathing indicates decline in personal power that speaks back to and, ironically, contests the earlier descriptions of reticence. The obstacle in the old man's respirations is now a metaphor for the equivalent obstacle to emotional connection with his son, which cannot be spoken, and which makes the hero but mutes the father. In the silence, it is the speaker who finds 'a questioning / Depth' (ll.28–9), 'that in his sleep stirs its cruel beginning' (l.30), the motions of the poem becoming analogous to the prophecy of Shelley's west wind. Yet we are left with an *omertà* between the two men, the interlude of the poem holding in at the final moment, still fighting for a voice that would clear space in the cultural narratives that link male strength with either the manly voice or emotional restraint.

Where Alvarez and Wevill evoke varying degrees of emotional claustrophobia, it is Harrison, perhaps the poet of the British post-war movement most commonly linked to phonetic play, who offers the clearest indication of less restricted masculine expulsion. Harrison's 1978 collection, *The School of Eloquence* is well-titled given its obsession with the speaking voice and the male respiratory system. Three poems, 'Cremation', 'Working' and 'Book Ends', speak to each other in terms that realise more fully the intergenerational connection, and alternative masculinities, that we see emergent in Alvarez and Wevill. In 'Cremation', Harrison tackles the subject of what Alan Kellehear calls 'our reticence to recognize the almost inescapable link between ageing and dying',[33] but in the terms of the figure of the belligerent ageing man who is

[33] Kellehear (2011: 25).

'clearing his throat'. As with Wevill, we can take it that a vocal obstruction is an emotional one too, as his wife knows, though fails to say, that the old man is 'raking / 's death off his mind' (ll.2–3).[34] Harrison, as so often, uses a pun here, as 'raking' simultaneously applies to the action of stirring up the coals of the fire to increase their heat and to clearing the throat. Harrison repeats, as a joke, the link we witnessed in Horace and Shakespeare between the voice displaying weakness and the fire of life going out. But raking the coals is presented as a ritual that is largely a distraction from the prospect of emotional engagement – in this case that means being unable to speak to his wife and son about his fears. For Harrison, the backdrop to silence is the struggle of life worked down a Yorkshire coal mine. He has 'His, his dad's and *his* dad's lifetime down below' (l.9) deeply engrained.

There is an element of grotesquery in the description, 'He keeps back death the way he keeps back phlegm / in company, curled on his tongue' (ll.11–12). As the father finally spits contemptuously into the fire, his wife hears 'the hot coals hiss' (l.16), another negation of Shelley's 'unextinguish'd hearth', also heard in Frost's 'An Old Man's Winter Night', where there is no prophecy and are no words, only the sound of fire going out. As with several of Harrison's other poems, the mouth becomes the focus of oppression as well as repression in emotional terms, but also in a political context which can be framed through Spivak's ideas of the social construction, and silencing, of some voices in favour of others. Hence, in 'Working' from the same collection, Harrison suggests that his social commentary is partly prompted by the reluctance of an older generation of men, associated with hard manual labour, to speak out: 'Wherever hardship held its tongue the job / 's breaking the silence of the worked-out gob' (ll.15–16). The risk, as Harrison implies, is to be castigated for 'speaking *as*' a Yorkshire miner, lacking a formal education. Here 'gob', slang for mouth, but also, as a footnote informs the reader, 'an old Northern coal-mining word for the space left after the coal has been extracted',[35] is aptly rhymed with 'job'. It is implied that it is less a case of cultural assumptions about reticence and strength that silence the ageing father, but that the working man is no longer capable of voicing resistance due to the wear and tear of life's work. In this case we can align physiological and sociocultural or political ideas of what constitutes a 'voice': the physical impediment to speaking out is a product of the realities of social hardship as much as fear of social judgement. The poet's alternative 'job' is to break that silence in verse, clearing emotional space – suitably like the coal from the seam – where masculine cultural imperatives otherwise dictate it should be held in.

Next to this poem in the sequence is 'Book Ends', written in two parts, which concerns Harrison's relationship with his father following the death of his mother.

[34] Harrison (2006: 125).
[35] Harrison (2006: 124).

Here father and son are united in their reticence about the subject as he recalls the voice of his mother, indicated in the poem by italics:

> We never could talk much, and now don't try.
>
> *You're like book ends, the pair of you, she'd say,*
> *Hog that grate, say nothing, sit, sleep, stare …*
>
> The 'scholar' me, you, worn out on poor pay,
> only our silence made us seem a pair. (ll.4–8)

The mother's voice has an eloquence that is also a wilful blindness that does not remark the differences between the two men, coalmining father and poet son. The speaker reflects ironically on their overt dissimilarities, framed by power dynamics linked to eloquence. The poet-son is as equally muted as the ordinarily taciturn father. Without the mediating presence of wife and mother, the speaker rehearses silent reprisals to his father whose own silence now indicates emotional vulnerability rather than distance. The father's need for the son's 'company' (l.11) is made more poignant by the fact that his wife is no longer there to 'tell us we're alike!' (l.12).

The masculine reticence yields to some emotional thawing, however, as, despite the lack of direct or reported speech from the father in Part One, the speaker indicates a union between the two men through the adoption of signs of the spoken word:

> Back in our silences and sullen looks,
> for all the Scotch we drink, what's still between 's
> not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books (ll.14–16).

As in 'Cremation' and 'Working', the abbreviation ''s', which occurs here in line 15, is doing a lot of work. It indicates the Yorkshire accent and hence the spoken word. In 'Cremation', 'raking / 's death off his mind' suggests shorthand for 'is', just as it does in 'Working'. In, 'Book Ends', it seems to collapse 'is' into 'us', the latter often used in the Yorkshire dialect to mean 'our' in general use. That subtle shift, phonetically indicated, draws the two men back together, honouring the spoken voice and through it community (us = our), despite the distance suggested by the title of the poem and Harrison's learning that forms a barrier of 'books, books, books'. It prepares the way for Part Two of the poem in which the obstinacy on both sides finds emotional outlet.

In the stubbornness of the father's voice in Part Two, respect and understanding develops as the two men search for the right words for the inscription on the headstone:

> *You're supposed to be the bright boy at description*
> *and you can't tell them what the fuck to put!* (ll.27–8)

The son responds: 'I've got to find the right words on my own' (l.29) but recognises he cannot find more eloquence than his father's chosen words, 'beloved' and 'wife'. In masculine terms, Harrison's father admits to being a 'clumsy talker' (l.23), but this is belied by his outburst to his son and the new presence in the poem of the father's direct speech. The collective voices of the poem reveal the frailties of male defiance even in its outburst, unlike the obstacles to utterance depicted by Wevill. It is odd that in some ways Harrison honours that tradition whereby the man 'consumes his own smoke' until speaking becomes most necessary. But his own voice and viewpoint in the poem means it does not come as emotional reticence, but as emotional communication beyond the occasion of its utterance. Focus on the voice of the father is partly a case of revealing the issues of thwarted masculinity – pride and stubbornness but also resignation – for a man who is historically socially muted – in that his education and class leave him disempowered, as we see in 'Working'. In that sense, even while speaking as a poet, Harrison constructs a poetic heteroglossia, 'speaking *as*' his father and men of his generation and background. But it is attention paid to the vocal profile of these poems as examples in the long tradition of the poetry of late life – which, in this case means the interplay between the constrictions or holdings-in that characterise the ageing male voice and the space cleared through intergenerational emotional bonds – that allows us to discern conditions that might make the impediments to voicing alternative ideas of masculinity recede. That is a matter that can be tied to specific social factors, but which emerges most clearly when seen through the lens of the larger intrapoetic theme I have charted in which the ageing, weakening male voice, signifying loss of power, is, in an intergenerational context, no longer just an example of restriction but also an occasion for contesting the cultural associations of male reticence with strength. It is the subject of the ageing voice that enables a lyrical interlude that contests even as it cannot overturn the long tradition of the inability of men to emote. It sounds convenient, but that makes it no less true, to say that if Part One of 'Book Ends' constitutes holding in, then Part Two is signified by clearing breathing space in the model I have set out. The chance to contest the norms of masculine reticence through the marginalisation of the 'big manly voice' as ideal standard, where neither man assumes the privileges associated with it, is provided by Harrison in an interchange between holding in and clearing space that so frequently accompanies lyric poetry's focus on voice.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the interlude offered by lyric poetry's focus on the inheritance of masculine cultural norms can be understood by attention to what I have called

the vocal profile of poetry concerned with late life. Two traditions work independently and, at times, interdependently: the first centres on the diminishment of physical, mental and social power associated with voices that depart from the Shakespearean standard of the 'big manly voice' of the prime of life due to old age; the second comprises a study of power linked not to eloquence but to emotional reticence. Both are in fact facets of the same concern with failures to embody standards of manliness successfully. What has hitherto passed unremarked is that the weakness customarily associated with the ageing voice, when it is the focus of lyric poetry, clears a breathing space for counter-voices in the larger narratives of hegemonic masculinity that privilege reticence. The latter is a type of holding in, both in relation to poetic tradition, as Bloom would have it, but also in terms of the specific depiction of the sound and range of voice. The phenomenon fits with the American poet, Frank O'Hara's assessment that poetry is ultimately the attempt to find 'one's own measure and breath'.[36]

The tradition of considering the ageing male voice in poetry reaches back as far as Horace and rises in Shakespeare and a subsequent line of male poets that includes Shelley, Tennyson, Hardy, Yeats, Frost and Graves. But, as I have shown, it is particularly prevalent in the work of poets of the post-war period in Britain, who were often dealing with ideas of masculinity associated with war and work and the need as a younger generation to find an appropriate response. It is here that we find, through engagement with the inheritance of cultural assumptions about the ageing reality of big manly voices and lyric's diachronic concerns with its formal derivations in voice and speech, that alternative voicings of masculinity and the emotions begin to be heard in lyric poetry when it makes its business the clearing of space in order to speak out of an interlude within a grander narrative characterised by emotional restraint.

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[36] O'Hara (1975: 17).

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Queering Time, Ageing and Relationships with Split Britches

Jen Harvie

Abstract: This article begins by outlining some dominant narratives that produce ageism by socially constructing older age as a time of linear decline, social dependency, social isolation and intergenerational conflict. It then concentrates on recent work by elder lesbian feminist performance company Split Britches: *Ruff* (2012), *Unexploded Ordnances* (2018), *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* (2013) and *Last Gasp* (2020–1). It explores the alternative narratives of older age – or elder life – that Split Britches propose, as a time of futurity, desire, unexplored potential and intergenerational as well as intra-generational relationality. It also explores how Split Britches responds to chrononormative practices – which make socially produced understandings of time appear natural – by queering them. The article argues that Split Britches model socially progressive visions of elder life and relationships, both across generations and within their own, by queering dominant expectations and practices of relationships and time – including ageing.

Keywords: Split Britches; ageism; older age; futurity; desire; relationality; intergenerational; intragenerational; chrononormative; queer

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Introduction

In this article, I examine recent performances by US- and UK-based lesbian feminist theatre company Split Britches, led by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, born in 1944 and 1949 respectively. In the first part of the article, I briefly examine the ways that many dominant representations of ageing socially construct late life and I consider the limitations and violence of those narratives. I then concentrate on potential alternatives. I argue that Split Britches model socially progressive visions of older age – or elder life – and of relationships both across generations and within their own generation by queering dominant expectations and practices of both relationships and time – including ageing. I show how Split Britches' queer sensibilities and aesthetics constructively deconstruct ageist narratives and temporalities that are damaging yet culturally dominant.

Dominant and Damaging Narratives of Older Age

The four damaging narratives of older people that I address here are narratives of linear decline, social dependency, social isolation and intergenerational conflict. These narratives imagine older people becoming continuously and increasingly ill, simultaneously dependent while at the same time isolated, and in dispute with younger people, especially millennials, born between 1980 and 2000. Lynne Segal's 2013 book *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing* offers detailed description and analysis of these narratives' tenacity and violence. All these narratives are damaging because they risk not merely describing older people's conditions, sometimes inaccurately; more violently, these narratives risk influencing how people perceive – and what they expect of – older people, potentially, for some, condemning older people to a state of linear decline, dependence, and isolation, and to a role as public enemy.

First, narratives of linear decline – or, as Segal has put it, 'seamless decline'[1] – self-evidently *presume* decline. For age studies scholar Margaret Morganroth Gullette, one of the key principles of age theory is that '*decline* is the narrative about ageing-past-youth systematically taught to us from on high'; it is '*decline* ideology'.[2] Even when older people do experience illness or frailty, narratives of linear decline allow no leeway for improved or fluctuating health, for recognising the different intersecting privileges and lack of privileges that influence decline, or for a broader recalibration of expectations and appreciations that allow people to value what elders have as resources

[1] Segal (2019).
[2] Gullette (2017: xiii, xvii; emphasis in original).

and futures rather than limitations and endings. Narratives of linear decline frame change negatively as continuously increasing deficit, when it might alternatively be understood and even experienced more positively – or simply normally, or equitably – as change and process; after all, all living is process. (As Split Britches' co-founder Peggy Shaw says, 'All my shows are about all the changes I've been through: I was a lesbian, then a butch lesbian, then a mother, then a grandmother, then a grandmother to a mixed-race grandson, then I had a lesbian old age, and then I had a stroke'.)[3] By encouraging an understanding of ageing as change rather than a kind of compulsory decline, I do not mean to deny that many older people experience ill health, nor to suggest that human ageing is not, ultimately, terminal. But I do mean to argue that hegemonic narratives of linear decline – as distinct from narratives of fluctuating improvement and decline, or simply ongoing change – formulate consistent and persistent degeneration and cultural devaluation as broadly compulsory, projecting and predetermining futility and working to close down desires, ambitions, resources and futures.

Second, narratives of older people's social dependency confine them in a relational dynamic of inferiority, with the balance of power always tipped against them. Older people are framed as not capable of helping themselves or others, always recipients of unilateral support, incapable of reciprocation, unable to initiate care, and (too) expensive to care for.[4] As Segal observes, 'The one thing that both young and old people, men and women alike, seem most to hate about the notion of old age is that it symbolizes forms of "dependency".'[5] Pervasive narratives of older people's social dependency deny or at least restrict the possibility that older people care for themselves and others, whether older or younger, despite evidence that older people care extensively; in 2015, Carers UK found that 'Almost 1.3 million people in England and Wales aged 65 or older are carers.'[6] As Segal notes, 'What is rarely culturally acknowledged, least of all in any imprints of masculinity, is that differing modes of dependence are essential to the human condition.'[7] We disavow dependence at our peril.

Third, at the same time as older people are framed as onerously socially dependent, they are also understood as socially isolated. The *Encyclopedia of Ageism* reports that in a 1998 American survey on ageing, nearly 50 per cent of respondents thought, 'The

[3] Shaw (2016), quoted in Moore (2017: 193.3).
[4] Gullette (2011: 13).
[5] Segal (2013: 35).
[6] Furthermore, Carers UK found that the preponderance of elders practising so-called 'informal' care was increasing: 'The number of carers over the age of 65 is increasing more rapidly than the general carer population. Whilst the total number of carers has risen by 11% since 2001, the number of older carers rose by 35%' (Carers UK, 2015: 3).
[7] Segal (2013: 35).

majority of old people are socially isolated and lonely' and 'live alone',[8] when, actually, 'About two-thirds live with their spouse or family'.[9] Certainly, there is evidence that many older people feel lonely – in 2015, Age UK reported that 'Over 1 million older people say they always or often feel lonely'[10] – and social isolation and loneliness do need addressing. But the dominance of a narrative of isolation risks naturalising and homogenising it, when there are important differences that affect different elderly people's experiences of loneliness, such as health, location and household size. Furthermore, a 2018 report by Age UK notes that:

> The chances of being often lonely do not differ because of age – loneliness is similarly common at all ages. However, the circumstances which increase the risk of loneliness do differ by age. For example, leaving education is a commonly vulnerable time for younger people whereas the death of a loved one, and the onset of illness and disability are more often times of vulnerability for older people.[11]

The dominance of a narrative aligning older age and loneliness potentially obscures other existing and possible narratives. Through being accepted as pervasively true, through being naturalised, the narrative not only *diagnoses* isolation, lack of communication and lack of understanding about older people and their experiences, but potentially *exacerbates* those conditions by excluding alternative narratives.

The fourth and final dominant and damaging narrative of elder lives that I respond to is a narrative of intergenerational conflict.[12] This narrative portrays what Gullette calls a 'contrived war' between millennials and baby boomers, born from the mid-1940s to mid-1960s,[13] representing the boomers as unfairly advantaged competitors who take a disproportionate share of scarce resources of housing, jobs, pensions and social welfare, amongst other things. This narrative frames older people as social enemies, 'avaricious and burdensome, [and] apparently effortless and insatiable accumulators of secure pensions, owned homes, and social care'[14] who 'therefore' deny those things to younger people. Writing from the US, Gullette observes that 'Intergenerational rivalry, a factor in ageism in many countries, encourages the young to blame midlife workers for greedily holding onto their jobs.'[15] Older people, she continues, are 'held responsible for an increasing portion of the national crises

[8] Palmore (1998), in Palmore (2013: 429.2).
[9] Palmore (2013: 430.6).
[10] Davidson and Rossall (2015: 2); they cite Age Concern and Help the Aged (2009).
[11] Age UK (2018: 3).
[12] I have previously written about this in a special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* on feminisms: Harvie (2018).
[13] Gullette (2004: 41–60).
[14] Harvie (2018: 332).
[15] Gullette (2017: xx).

(fiscal deficits, high youth unemployment), serving as a scapegoat, a bogeyman, a mass of hysterical projections'[16] that conveniently mask other structural and ideological reasons for those economic crises. Former UK Conservative cabinet minister David Willetts neatly encapsulated this kind of perniciously ageist attitude in the title of his 2010 book, *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future – and Why They Should Give It Back*. As Segal has observed, Willetts '[i]gnor[ed] altogether the role of reckless fiscal gambling following the deregulation of the banking sector, as well as the gigantic accumulation of personal bonuses in that sector, … instead blam[ing] the current crisis on "the self-interest and electoral dominance of the huge generation of baby-boomers".'[17] Furthermore, as Segal goes on to note, 'Not all Boomers are affluent. Over 20 per cent of those who live in poverty are elderly pensioners, rising to around 30 per cent if they are single women, around a third of them in their 60s.'[18] Ideas of older age – many of which are violently ageist – are socially constructed, not essential aspects of older people; as Gullette insists, people are 'aged by culture'.[19] We must recognise the narratives we tell, take responsibility for their violence, and act to change them.

What We Need More of

In contrast to those dominant and damaging narratives that equate older age with futility, dependence, isolation and conflict, we need the possibility of counternarratives of hope. Instead of futility, we need a sense of older age and possibility; of time as not simply 'running out'; of time, change, life and desire as still happening, still unfolding; a sense that there remain things to do with and in time, that there is still a future and life has resources, not just deficits. Instead of a sense of elder dependency, disempowerment and inferiority, we need to recognise and credit older people's independence, resilience, agency and even, superiority, including their deep historical knowledge and their understandings of themselves, understandings that risk being ignored or disbelieved when older age is routinely pathologised.[20] As well as recognising elder independence, we need to recognise social *inter*dependence – not only how older people might rely on younger people, but also how older people might benefit younger people as well as each other and themselves. Instead of narratives of elder isolation, we need also to be able to recognise and therefore nurture elder connectedness

[16] Gullette (2017: 5).
[17] Segal (2015: 4–5).
[18] Segal (2015: 5).
[19] Gullette (2004).
[20] Segal (2013).

and social engagement. Instead of narratives of intergenerational conflict, we need the possibility of intergenerational solidarity and collaboration, the sense of mutual responsibility, and recognition of everyone's worth. We need to recognise that we are inevitably – but also valuably – interconnected, especially across generations, but also within them.

That might be what I – and many others, including age studies scholars such as Gullette, Segal and Kathleen Woodward[21] – would like, but how do we foster these alternative attitudes towards older people and their place and value in society? And how do we work towards ensuring that more constructive attitudes benefit more older people across a range of intersectional factors, including gender, race, class and sexuality? Partly, we need to see these alternatives modelled – acted out for us, made credible, made real. We need to see narratives and enactments of intergenerational collaboration, intragenerational elderly solidarity, elder knowledge and elder independence.

Crucially, we not only need alternative narratives, or narrative content; we also need alternative narrative forms to convey different ways of understanding age and time. These forms can help to challenge normative understandings of time and, hence, naturalised ageist understandings of older age. Normative understandings of time – or chrononormatives – have been thoughtfully critiqued by queer theorists such as Jack Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman. Freeman writes that chrononormative practices 'convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time'.[22] For example, life course narratives are often oppressively gendered and ageist, expecting life to peak with points of marriage, childbirth and child rearing. As theatre scholar Anna Harpin has noted, when women have outlived those 'normative stages of female life' – not to mention, I would add, when we have never lived them – 'their chronological excess makes them jut awkwardly across the arc of normative life cycles. Their aged presence exceeds the final full stop of a complete heteronormative life narrative.'[23]

Chrononormativity can be challenged by queering time – troubling its dominant conventions, for example by exploring non-normative ways of understanding it that move beyond binaries of young and old by modelling identities that are *trans*generational. These are identities that may be older but, as Segal puts it in *Out of Time*, they also accept that 'the older we are the more we encounter the world through complex layerings of identity' because 'There are many ways in which we can, and we do,

[21] See, for example, Woodward (1999).
[22] Freeman (2010: 3). See also Halberstam (2005) and Pryor (2017).
[23] Harpin (2012: 73).

bridge different ages, psychically, all the time'.[24] This kind of transgenerational temporal queering is, I argue, persistent in Split Britches' recent work: *Ruff* (2012), made while Shaw was recovering from a stroke; *Unexploded Ordnances or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love* (abbreviated by the company to *UXO*, 2018), a radical adaptation of Stanley Kubrick's 1964 Cold War black comedy *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb; What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* (2013), Weaver's socially engaged performance as her alter ego Tammy WhyNot exploring older age and intimacy; and *Last Gasp* (*Last Gasp WFH* [2020] and *Last Gasp: A Recalibration* [2021]), shows that explore, amongst other things, endings and death not with a sense of resigned futility, but with curiosity and resourcefulness.[25]

Split Britches' work demonstrates that it is both possible and valuable to have narratives of older age that are counter to hegemonic ageist narratives, and to have understandings and practices of time that challenge oppressively linear, heteronormative chronormativity. Understandings of time that are more queered – less linear, less normative, and less oppressively normalising in ways that are, for many, deeply punishing – stand to benefit the vast majority who do not hold hegemonic power.

Split Britches and Their Work

Split Britches is a lesbian feminist theatre company founded in 1980 in New York by Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw and Deb Margolin. Since about 1990, the company's work has been made by Weaver and Shaw, life and work partners whom Weaver has described as 'an off-again-on-again couple'.[26] They have produced their performances worldwide, especially in the US and UK.

Their theatre challenges normative assumptions, especially about gender and sexuality. Their first, and eponymous, show *Split Britches* from 1980 was about Weaver's great aunts who were farmers in Virginia and wore split britches so they could conveniently urinate while working in their fields. The rich allusions of 'Split Britches' make it an apt name for the company, conjuring female emancipation and independence, permissiveness and so-called impropriety, practical invention and improvisation, non-normative practices, non-binary clothing and identities, working-class pride,

[24] Segal (2013: 4, 19), quoted in Harvie (2018: 334).
[25] Moore (2017) explores in insightful detail how Peggy Shaw's solo performances *Menopausal Gentleman* (1997), *Must – The Inside Story* (2009), and *Ruff* (2013) 'disrupt the [conventional] scripts of ageing femininity by offering multi-layered representations of ageing' (2017: 189.9).
[26] Weaver, quoted in Vincentelli (2020).

feminist legacies and suggestions of sex. In her introduction to a 1996 collection of Split Britches' plays, Sue-Ellen Case explained that the company has a

> unique 'postmodern' style that served to embed feminist and lesbian issues of the times, economic debates, national agendas, personal relationships, and sex-radical role playing in spectacular and humorous deconstructions of canonical texts, vaudeville shtick, cabaret forms, lip-synching satire, lyrical love scenes and dark, frightening explorations of class and gender violence.[27]

The company's queered and feminist adaptations of canonical works include *Beauty and the Beast* (1982), *Little Women: The Tragedy* (1988) and, with Bloolips' Bette Bourne and Paul Shaw, *Belle Reprieve: A Collaboration* (1991), a reworking of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (see Figure 1). More recent work has focused on the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in *Miss America* (2008), and grief prompted by New York's gentrification in *Lost Lounge* (2009). Both Weaver and Shaw have also made solo work, Weaver especially in persona as Tammy WhyNot whom I discuss below, and Shaw in autobiographical shows that have made her an iconic butch lesbian performer, such as *You're Just Like My Father* (1993) and *A Menopausal Gentleman* (1996). Formally and aesthetically, Split Britches' work characteristically is episodic and non-linear, draws on Weaver and Shaw's personal experiences and relationship, combines pop culture references and poetic lyricism, interacts with audiences and engages consistently with feelings of queer desire.

What is especially productive about their practice in the context of this article is that it challenges assumptions about gender and, increasingly, age, through narrative, storytelling, action, engagement and queering time; in other words, through both its contents and its forms. Rather than telling stories that binarise age as young/old and gender as male/female, and rather than succumbing to ageist gendered stereotypes, Split Britches portray women in older age as narratively complex and they enact counter-hegemonic ways of being older women. Weaver, for example, performs highly physical movement around the sets of *UXO* and *Last Gasp*, challenging assumptions about frailty and older age – especially in older women. Shaw puts in plain sight – that is, without shame – the technological assistance she uses to feed her lines after her 2011 stroke, using onstage television monitors in *UXO* and *Ruff* (see Figure 2), and large, over-ear headphones in *Last Gasp*. Writing specifically about Shaw's solo performances, but in ways that apply also to Split Britches' work, Bridie Moore observes that shows like *Ruff* 'explicitly acknowledg[e] physical and cognitive fragility' at the same time as 'Shaw's performance expertise, in spite of her cognitive difficulties, confounds expectations of post-stroke dependency'.[28] Shaw's work – again, like Split Britches' – is, for

[27] Case (1996: 1).
[28] Moore (2022: 31).

Figure 1. Peggy Shaw as Mitch (left) and Lois Weaver as Stella (right) in Split Britches' and Bloolips' *Belle Reprieve: A Collaboration* (1991). Photo: Amy Meadow.

Moore, 'inflected throughout with questions of identity, taking delight in unsettling constructions through playful inversions and subversions; her "old woman" identity is modulated by a multiplicity of other designations'.[29] For Shaw, these designations include being a 'second-generation Irish, working-class, grand-butch-mother'.[30] Alongside these 'content' elements of their work, Split Britches often actively engage their audiences in discussion in their shows, meaning that the alternative narratives of ageing that *they* tell and show are also narratives that *their audiences* discuss and enact within the frame of performance. Finally, Split Britches actively dis-organise time in

[29] Moore (2017: 193.3).
[30] Shaw (2011: 41).

their shows, queering it, denying its alignment with normative life course narratives and radically destabilising those narratives.[31] They help audiences both see and experience things differently, non-normatively.

To detail these practices and the ways they respond to the problematic narratives of older age I outlined above, I will now discuss four Split Britches productions from the 2010s on: *Ruff*, *Unexploded Ordnances*, *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* and *Last Gasp*.

Ruff

Shaw and Weaver made *Ruff* beginning in 2012 in response to Shaw's stroke the previous year, at the age of 67, with both co-writing, Weaver directing and Shaw as solo performer. The text was published in 2018 in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. In *Ruff*, Shaw reflects on her experience of her stroke in what I see as a kind of lucid dreaming, with poeticism, song and chat with the audience. 'I was minding my own business', she repeatedly remembers, 'And an icicle of death hit the ocean floor of my brain'.[32] She also reflects on the deaths of her sister Norma, veteran New York theatre producer Ellen Stewart and other famous artists including Marsha P. Johnson, an African-American drag queen and transgender activist who drowned in New York's Hudson River in 1992 in her mid-40s in circumstances suggesting transphobic murder.[33] Shaw also casts back to her past, recalling, for example, a camping trip with her family where, arriving in the dark of night, she accidentally parked on a traffic island, not the campsite; and the first time she roasted a turkey for friends, when she took a tab of acid and freaked out because there was a dead bird in her oven.[34] Shaw performs songs, including one about recognising the signs of stroke: it is a public service announcement, but it is also riotous and a little punk. *Ruff* is a show that is about stroke survival, life, death, singing, remembering, storytelling, queerness and more. Like Shaw herself, it is poignant, witty and queer.[35]

It is ostensibly a solo show, but alongside Shaw, many others make appearances: Weaver is on hand in the audience and calls out cues to Shaw if she forgets lines; Shaw is joined by a video of her band projected onto the back of the set (see Figure 2).

[31] For more on Split Britches, see, for example: Shaw and Weaver (n.d.a); Shaw (2011); Case (1996); Harvie and Weaver (2015); and Dolan (2011).

[32] Shaw and Weaver (2018: e.g., 108).

[33] Shaw and Weaver (2018: 26). On Johnson, see, e.g., Born (n.d.) and France (2017).

[34] Shaw and Weaver (2018: 117, 112).

[35] I draw here on some ideas discussed in Harvie (2018). For a more detailed and extensive analysis of this show, see that article.

Figure 2. Peggy Shaw in *Ruff* (2012) with a video projection of her band upstage and a monitor feeding her lines downstage. Photo: Matt Delbridge.

Shaw's show is peopled by the myriad of others whom she invokes: artists, musicians, her sister and – importantly – many younger versions of herself – roasting a turkey as a young adult; camping at 17; and, at 13, captured in her family's one and only home movie in a green dress for her sister's wedding. As these back-and-forth references to herself across her lifetime show, *Ruff* stages non-normative life narratives, as well as portraying a life that is non-chronological/chrononormative. Similarly, Shaw presents her 'family' as both biological – including her sister – and queer, non-biological and chosen, including other queer New Yorkers. The show stages Shaw 'recovering' from a stroke but in non-normative ways for an older person. She makes a punkish public service announcement that formally rejects ageist expectations about aesthetics and propriety and, as Moore suggests, portrays Shaw not only as vulnerable herself – as someone recovering from a stroke – but also as actively caring for her audience by teaching and entertaining them.[36] *Ruff* also shows Shaw as expertly in control of new technologies like green screening which, as Moore observes, frames 'Peggy's newfound disabilities as possibilities for innovation'.[37]

[36] Moore (2022: 35).
[37] Moore (2022: 35).

Figure 3. Peggy Shaw in *Ruff* (2012) with a projected video of herself at 13 in a dress. Photo: Ves Pitts.

Importantly, *Ruff* does not stage intergenerational conflict in terms of the currently dominant adversarial narrative about boomers and millennials. Rather, it stages transgenerational collaboration between Shaw and: her then-early-teen grandson; her 30- and 40-something-year-old band members; musicians and actors from the 1950s to the 2010s with whom she identifies; and her audience, whom she calls on to assist her.[38] Most importantly, the show stages transgenerational collaboration and understanding between 60-something butch lesbian grandmother Shaw and her 13-year-old self (see Figure 3). She says:

> But when my sixty-seven-year-old self saw my thirteen-year-old self wearing a green dress,
> I could see a picture of my thoughts before I even thought them back then in the fifties,
> In a world that was not ready for me.
> …
> I was inside my young brain,
> And I felt a cold metallic tear,
> Like when I lost my lips by resting them on a freezing sled.[39]

Older butch lesbian Shaw sees her young self in a dress and her 'thoughts before I even thought them' in a kind of queer childhood 'ghosting' identified by queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton in a different context.[40] There is a shock of recognition and a powerful sense of solidarity across this lifetime generational divide: older Shaw sympathises with her younger self wearing (possibly made to wear) a dress in a 'world that

[38] See Shaw and Weaver (2018: 108–9); Solga (2015: 75); Moore (2022: 34).
[39] Shaw and Weaver (2018: 115–16).
[40] Stockton (2009), quoted in Jaffe (2018).

was not ready' for her gender disturbance. For Moore, Shaw's act of connecting her adolescent and elder selves 'implies that her uninterrupted confusion has caused her stroke and that her current cognitive "blanks" have as much to do with a long-term bewilderment over cultural notions of femininity as the physiological state of either her adolescent or her sixty-seven-year-old stroke-surviving brain.'[41] Crucially, Shaw demonstrates and embraces transgenerational solidarity.

Ruff also stages intragenerational solidarity and kinship, especially between Shaw and her on-hand collaborator/partner/director Weaver, ever ready to cue Shaw in a supportive but not subservient way. There is also intragenerational solidarity and kinship between Shaw and her present self, as Shaw narrates the ways she is using the show to, as she puts it, 'try to recover some of my documents' after her stroke.[42] Against dominant narratives of elder isolation, Shaw is deeply connected to herself and others.

Ruff also queers time. As I've already noted, Split Britches' productions generally eschew temporal linearity and this is true here. For one thing, Shaw is a kind of time traveller, at once here, post-stroke, but at the same time, here at 13, 17 and so on. She narrates having the stroke as though it had already happened as she was having it; 'I was practising', she says.[43] Time is queered for the audience too. Explaining that a cough is a symptom she has been left with post-stroke, Shaw gives an audience member a cough drop to hold and says,

> If you see me start to cough, you could either wait for me to get a cough drop,
> Or you could say, 'That's OK, take all the time you need to cough.'
> I guess we could call that audience participation.[44]

But this is also audience *anticipation*, with the audience cued by a story of Shaw's past behaviour to anticipate possible future behaviour.

So, as much as *Ruff* is a narrative of post-stroke older age, it is perhaps more importantly a reminder of the transgenerational, intragenerational and intergenerational relationships that Shaw has (instead of undiluted dependency or isolation). Furthermore, it is a temporal queering that explicitly, implicitly and thoroughly challenges normative 'life-course' narratives of linear decline.

[41] Moore (2017: 212.2).
[42] Shaw and Weaver (2018: 109).
[43] Shaw and Weaver (2018: 110).
[44] Shaw and Weaver (2018: 109).

Unexploded Ordnances

Unexploded Ordnances or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love (*UXO*) is a performance Split Britches made in 2018 with other artists including several women in their 20s and early 30s.[45] Its main set is formed of a large ring of long tables, making a space that Split Britches calls the *Situation Room*.[46] In this space, *UXO* weaves together two main strands. The first is pre-scripted and draws on Stanley Kubrick's 1964 satirical Cold War film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Shaw plays the General and Weaver, the President (see Figure 4); both are given to lethargy and ineptitude (see Figure 5), despite the imminence of global disaster. Against this backdrop of impending catastrophe unfurling in a political vacuum, *UXO*'s second and only partly pre-scripted strand gradually invites the eldest 10 or so members of the audience to sit at the onstage tables as a Council of Elders and, led by Weaver, to explore potential solutions to current social crises (see Figure 6). The Elders are invited individually to share what worries them, from the personal to the global; to select a single topic from those shared; to discuss it as a group; then, using their ambitions and fantasies (their 'unexploded ordnances'), to suggest some solutions.[47]

The worries expressed by the elders may appear intractable. Quoting some recorded by Weaver and 20-something collaborator Hannah Maxwell, the worries include: 'the entrenched social divisions, the warming earth, the mass violence, disease and misery in so many parts of the world'.[48] But *UXO*'s scenography and Weaver's guidance support the Council of Elders to address these worries. As Weaver and Maxwell have written, 'People begin to speak with authority and urgency, empowered by the theatricality and the fantasy. The *Situation Room* becomes the floor of the United Nations, the basement of the White House, a town-hall talkback on our shared future.'[49]

The elders are asked to share personal desires – 'the place they always meant to travel, the instrument they wish they'd learnt, the lover they should have stayed in contact with'[50] – and then creatively apply these desires as solutions to the problems using the phrase, 'We could'. Weaver says, 'When I say, "How might we use the desire to help us approach a situation?", it's a question that I hope people can go home with'.[51] The

[45] This section draws on material in Harvie (2021).
[46] The *Situation Room* has been staged independent of *UXO* at, for example, London's Wellcome Collection as part of the 2019 Sick of the Fringe Festival focusing on Care and Destruction (The Sick of the Fringe, 2019). This is one of Weaver's Public Address Systems (Shaw and Weaver, n.d.b).
[47] Weaver with Maxwell (n.d.).
[48] Weaver with Maxwell (n.d.).
[49] Weaver with Maxwell (n.d.).
[50] Weaver with Maxwell (n.d.).
[51] Weaver and Harvie (2019a).

Figure 4. Lois Weaver orchestrating the action as the President in *Unexploded Ordnances* (2018). Photo: Theo Cote.

Figure 5. Lois Weaver as the President – collapsed atop a table – in *Unexploded Ordnances* (2018). Photo: Rosie Powell.

Figure 6. Peggy Shaw (left) as the General, Lois Weaver (standing, right) as the President, and audience members conscripted as the Council of Elders in *Unexploded Ordnances* (2018). Photo: Theo Cote.

concluding emphasis on desire and creativity stresses their importance as tools for recalibrating expectations about what can be done, both through desire, and by elders. Weaver and Maxwell write,

> In reminding us of our human creativity, and what the mass accumulation of our personal goals may be able to achieve, we experience a mental repositioning of ourselves in relation to these huge problems. … There is.… a glimmer of something through the new space that has opened, space in which we might find the room to act, to make change, in our own finite lives and perhaps the wider world.[52]

UXO explores older age, anxieties and as-yet-unexplored potential, validating elders' unexplored potential through hearing their desires and proposing that those desires might collectively achieve great things.[53]

Again, this show demonstrates intragenerational collaboration, as the elders work together with Weaver's guidance to problem-solve with each other. Again, the show

[52] Weaver with Maxwell (n.d.).

[53] In another context (Harvie, 2021), I have addressed in greater detail how the show enacts care, especially for elder audiences, recognising their needs to express anxieties about the future and not just their reminiscences about the past, and to express their desires or unexplored potential in a culture that tends normatively to focus on the potential of youth.

is not about linear elderly decline, but about future solutions, asking how elders, in particular, can fix the future, with their expertise but importantly also their desires, which are so often excluded from narratives of older age. The show queers temporality. It mashes the Cold War with now and the future, but more importantly it refuses the countdown of the timebomb. Near the show's start, audiences are asked to set their phone timers for 60 minutes, but the show deliberately carries on when all the timers go off (the ordnances explode). Furthermore, the show reimagines the negative concept of the timebomb (the 'unexploded ordnance') as something that portends not catastrophe but potential, as older people are invited to reflect on something they have always wanted to do and do it, to realise their desires. *Unexploded Ordnances*' emphases on elders' agency, creativity, desires, capacity to solve problems and future-facing potential decisively challenge ageist narratives of older age and dependency.

What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex

Weaver originally created alter ego Tammy WhyNot in 1977 and began to play her as an independent researcher-performer from 2004 (see Figure 7).[54] Tammy is reported to have been a successful country singer who experienced a calling to become a lesbian performance artist. From her country background, she brings big blonde wigs, spangly cowboy shirts, a southern drawl and charm; from performance art, she brings a queer sensibility and an applied theatre practice of public engagement and social research. The combination allows her to approach potentially intimate questions with a disarming cultural naivety. As I wrote in the book I co-edited with Weaver about her practice, Tammy WhyNot 'coaxes input and wisdom from her collaborators through a combination of gentle teasing, humour, and tenderness.'[55] As Weaver has put it to WhyNot in an interview with herself as WhyNot, 'you are my greatest source of courage. … You're that part of me that allows me to be ridiculous and to take on serious subjects in a humorous way.'[56]

Weaver started work on the show *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* in 2008, when, in her own words, 'as I was ageing I was starting to feel a lack of sexual energy and sexual desire and wasn't quite understanding whether that was hormonal, because I had gone through menopause, or my situation, circum-

[54] For more detail on Tammy's history and Weaver's work with and as her, see the section 'Why Tammy? Why Not?' in Harvie and Weaver (2015: 218–55). I discuss *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex* in relation to care in Harvie (2021); this section draws on some of that material.

[55] Harvie and Weaver (2015: 237).

[56] Harvie and Weaver (2015: 221, 223).

Figure 7. Lois Weaver as Tammy WhyNot (2012). Photo: Christa Holka.

stance, or my busy-ness, or is it just what happens when we age. I had no idea.'[57] She used her persona of Tammy WhyNot to explore questions of intimacy and desire with older people whom she went to meet at tea dances and other spaces of elder gathering. The show evolved into 'a sort of variety talk show with Tammy as the host', and the setting a front room.[58] It continued to evolve into 'a kind of concert or rehearsal of a concert – "Tammy's comeback tour"'.[59] Tammy sang songs she wrote incorporating her participants' stories. Participants sang and danced in the show, came on stage to do interviews with Tammy, and sat in the audience to help generate answers to fill-in-the-blank statements about desire that Tammy posed to the audience: '"When I think about sex I …", or "When I feel desire I …".'[60]

Clearly, this show also challenges normative assumptions about older people, and especially older people and desire, putting desire and intimacy at its centre. Importantly again, it is not about decline but about ongoing desire; unlike much socially engaged theatre for older people, it does not focus on reminiscence and the past. Again, it is future-oriented, asking participants and audiences what they desire. And it is pro-actively about elder intragenerational kinship, combatting ageist narratives of elder

[57] Weaver and Harvie (2019b).
[58] Weaver and Harvie (2019b).
[59] Weaver and Harvie (2019b).
[60] Weaver and Harvie (2019b).

Figure 8. Lois Weaver as Tammy WhyNot (left) and WhyNets (right) in *What Tammy Needs to Know about Getting Old and Having Sex*. Photo: Dahlia Katz.

isolation. In an interview with me, Weaver described how the participants who performed in the show became the WhyNets (see Figure 8), a set of collaborating co-performers for whom the collective was important. Weaver observed that, 'In performance, the care [the WhyNets] demonstrate for one another – in moving on and off stage, reminding each other of choreography and words, applauding their individual set pieces and anecdotes – empower them in the eyes of the audience, as a collaborating ensemble rather than lone participants.'[61]

This show is perhaps less about queering time than the other two I have discussed thus far, but it is very much about intragenerational solidarity, mutual care and perhaps even queer care, as the participants care for each other, whatever their genders and sexualities. Elder life is marked in this show by collaboration rather than isolation, and by mutual care rather than dependency; furthermore, the show's important intragenerational care challenges the ageist assumptions not only that older people are dependent, but also that they are asymmetrically (even unfairly) dependent on younger people.

[61] Weaver with Maxwell (2018: 92).

Last Gasp

Originally composed so that it might be presented as two separate solo pieces,[62] *Last Gasp* is a non-linear performance of interleaved movement sequences (mostly performed by Weaver) and monologues by both Shaw and Weaver but with passages of dialogue near the end. Its range is capacious. Topics engaged with span from the myth of Echo and Narcissus to not knowing, dealing with emergencies, surviving loss, luck (or masculine privilege), climate crisis, righteousness, charisma, using Black male singers as 'butch role models',[63] singer and writer Johnny Ray, race inequalities and the criminal justice system, cancel culture and the importance of words, relativity, dying on stage and the last word. Its mood, too, ranges from the reflective and sometimes sombre to the wryly funny (a sense of which might be conjured by the promotional image of Figure 9). Reviewers have called it 'weird, unruly, and organic' with a structure 'resembl[ing] a storytelling jukebox set on shuffle',[64] and 'fleet, surprisingly entertaining … alternately playful, surreal, pointed and poignant'.[65] After its originally planned stage version fell victim to COVID-19 lockdowns, *Last Gasp* has had two lives as I write in autumn 2022: as *Last Gasp WFH* (working from home), a pre-recorded film for Zoom created by Split Britches in lockdown in London and screened online by New York's La MaMa theatre in November 2020; and as *Last Gasp: A Recalibration*, a live stage performance incorporating elements of pre-recorded film, presented at London's Barbican Pit in October 2021 and (in a slightly revised version) at La MaMa in October 2022. (I am writing here mostly – but not exclusively – with reference to the film version, but the two have vast amounts in common.) Given the show's complexity of content, forms and history, the reading I offer is necessarily highly selective. I take up the show's engagement with the 'last gasp' to explore a handful of the many ways it contributes to constructive thinking about older age. I show how *Last Gasp* depicts older age as ordinary, demonstrates the value of 'working with what you've got', and invites reflection on how to live with loss in a kind of ultimate queering of chrononormatives (or [hetero- and age-] normative understandings of the so-called 'life course').

The Ordinariness of Older Age

It might sound counter-intuitive for me to argue that Weaver and Shaw depict older age as ordinary if what I meant by 'ordinary' were 'unimportant'; but what I mean

[62] Weaver in La MaMa Podcast (n.d. [2020]: 8:44).
[63] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 14).
[64] Liedke (2021: 226, 225).
[65] Vincentelli (2020).

Figure 9. Lois Weaver (behind) and Peggy Shaw (in front) in a promotional image for *Last Gasp* (2021) created in 2019. Photo: Christa Holka.

more accurately is an understanding of older age as neither exceptional nor unusual in a world where, as the United Nations points out, 'we are getting older',[66] and, more importantly, older age is not the problem dominant ageist narratives would have people believe. Where ageist cultures treat older people as exceptional in terms of the extreme social difficulties attributed to them, and therefore often both age-shame elders and encourage elders to feel age-shame, Split Britches treat being older as ordinary, unexceptional and certainly nothing to be ashamed of. 'I am old without realizing it', says Peggy.[67] This approach to representing – or simply inhabiting – older age as ordinary is one of the main ways Split Britches queer older age in *Last Gasp*. It is informed by their career-long approach to representing lesbianism, also something they have never been ashamed of and simply take as understood. In discussing with me the place of care in Weaver's and Split Britches' work, Weaver talked about how care – including for audiences and one's fellow performers – is so deeply embedded as part of the work's structure that it becomes unexceptional. 'It's not about exceptionalising the need for care', Weaver said. 'Just like we didn't exceptionalise what it meant to be lesbians, we just were lesbians making work, or older people making work.'[68] This ordinariness of lesbianism is the fabric of their lives as well as their work; in *Last Gasp*, Peggy notes that her 'kid at 5 years old would shake everyone's hand and say "nice to meet you, are you gay?"'.[69] Split Britches' oldness, likewise, is ordinary in the sense of standard. At the same time, their oldness repudiates the limitations, stasis and age-shame that are so often attached to older age. This combination means their taken-for-granted version of older age is dynamic, mobile and proud.

Split Britches' ordinary-old is not held back by old-age typecasting: near the end of the show they perform the famous argument scene from Noah Baumbach's 2019 film *Marriage Story*,[70] a scene originated by 30-something actors Scarlett Johansson and Adam Driver. Split Britches' ordinary-old is not a time of stasis, even romantic stasis; throughout *Last Gasp*, their 'off-again-on-again' relationship is still evolving, dealing with jealousies and uneven privileges. Their ordinary-old is highly mobile and physically capable: reviewer Regan Harle writes that 'Lois has restless energy, constantly performing dance moves open to interpretation. Her movements seem natural and fluid'.[71] Their ordinary-old is highly competent; they handle the technology to

[66] 'Older persons (ages 65 and above) today comprise the world's fastest growing age group. Globally, for the first time in 2018, older persons outnumbered children under the age of five, and by 2050, older persons will outnumber adolescents and youth (ages 15 to 24)' (United Nations, n.d).
[67] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 10). I call Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw by their first names when I refer to them in the performance, and by their surnames when I refer to them as the show's makers.
[68] Weaver and Harvie (2019a), quoted in Harvie (2021: 325).
[69] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 12).
[70] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 29–31).
[71] Harle (2021).

make what Shaw calls a Zoomie (an online Zoom movie).[72] It is also resilient. They repeatedly changed the show, adapting what was originally created for stage into a different form for the online Zoomie, then adapting that material twice for presentation on stage in London and New York. They also made the initial changes to online performance-making with the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning they were simultaneously transitioning Weaver's in-person university teaching online, moving into an empty house, and 'populat[ing] the house with things' such as furniture and sheets.[73] In a podcast interview with La MaMa theatre, and discussing how they adapted to the threat of COVID-19, Shaw says, 'I think queers immediately know how to do emergencies 'cause of all our life of emergencies',[74] including HIV/AIDS.

Furthermore, Split Britches' ordinary-old acknowledges their changing abilities, including impairments, but does not treat these as negatively-defining disabilities. Split Britches here subscribes to the social model of disability, which 'holds that people with impairments are "disabled"' not by their impairments or difference but 'by the barriers operating in society that exclude and discriminate against them'.[75] Shaw acknowledges that she wears headphones in the show (visible in Figure 10) so that Weaver can feed her lines, but points out that the headphones are large, over-ear models because 'I couldn't fit little headphones into my ears because I already have hearing aids'.[76] In Split Britches' ordinary-old, there is no shame in either memory loss or hearing loss. Finally, not only Weaver and Shaw are older in *Last Gasp*; so is the house they filmed in, loaned to them while it awaited gutting and renovation on the other side of lockdown. On one hand, this house too is ordinary, an apparently blank canvas for their inventions. On the other hand, this old house is also, as Weaver says, an 'amazingly beautiful, empty house that's a little bit like a fairy tale'.[77] It is capacious, adaptable, characterful and supportive of them; reviewer Tulis McCall calls it their 'supporting cast'.[78] Like other old – and, for many, obsolete – things that *Last Gasp* references – including 45rpm records, the record player stylus, the jukebox, even the word 'woman' – the show revels in the pleasures of the old. The old house joins Weaver and Shaw in presenting what is ordinary and obvious to them – that older people (and things) are capable, dynamic and richly interesting.

[72] Shaw, quoted in Vincentelli (2020).
[73] La MaMa Podcast (n.d. [2020], 4:50–5:10 and 6:25–6:27).
[74] La MaMa Podcast (n.d. [2020], 5:52–5:59).
[75] Inclusion London (n.d.).
[76] Vincentelli (2020).
[77] La MaMa Podcast (n.d. [2020], 3:45–3:48).
[78] McCall (2020).

Figure 10. Lois Weaver (outside, left) and Peggy Shaw (inside, right) in *Last Gasp* WFH (2021). Photo: Split Britches.

Working with What You've Got

'[W]e work with what we've got. We've always just worked with what we've got'[79]. 'Work with what you've got' is a Split Britches mantra. It encourages them (and those they engage with, including students and audiences) not only to accept given circumstances – including things like hearing and memory loss, COVID-19 lockdown and an empty old house – but to embrace those circumstances as inspiring resources. Like the social model of disability, this approach rejects negative understandings attributed to any given circumstances and explores instead what they have to offer. This mantra is enabling not only for performance making, but also for ageing. Split Britches model the mantra in action in *Last Gasp*, making the show with what they had when they went into lockdown: the clothes and few props they had with them, two laptops, 'the only pair of headphones we had',[80] domestic lighting, Zoom technology, themselves, the house, the remote collaborators they were already working with and furniture they had in storage from earlier shows such as *UXO*.[81] The result is aesthetically focused,

[79] Weaver, quoted in La MaMa Blogs (2020).
[80] Shaw, quoted in Vincentelli (2020).
[81] La MaMa Podcast (n.d. [2020]: 6:37–6:42).

with a limited costume palette of black and yellow apparent in Figure 9 (echoing the bees Lois references in a dance as well as the hand-painted Black Lives Matter poster we see in the front window of their house);[82] and brilliant work with framing, depth of field and scale (with, for example, Lois sort of ghosting Peggy in one scene by appearing behind a window while Peggy performs to camera inside; see Figure 10).[83] Similarly, they incorporated Shaw's memory loss by devising strategies to feed her lines. Strategies included Weaver vocally prompting Shaw, and posting lines in large lettering on big sheets of paper on the wall behind the filming laptop when recording scenes in which they both spoke. Some of the benefits of these approaches were a to-camera focus that was intense and exciting in the *Marriage Story* argument scene (as Shaw and Weaver looked beyond the camera at lines posted on the wall behind) and a sort of aural ghosting in the vocally prompted lines, giving a reiterative and poetically lyrical emphasis as well as a powerful formal sense of Weaver's intragenerational presence gently, whisperingly supporting Shaw. Overall, Split Britches' modelling of the practice of 'working with what you've got' in *Last Gasp* demonstrated the viability, sometimes the pleasure, and often the richness of working with what circumstances present, even if, for some, that might initially appear as a limitation, a deficit or a loss.

Living with Loss

Last Gasp explores how to survive loss. It understands loss as a frequent experience for older people, be it the loss of embodied memory, hearing, or balance; beloved peers ('your sister', says Lois); or vocation ('I have only one more show left in me', Peggy announces).[84] *Last Gasp* explores what to do, or how to live, with the inevitability of loss. Portrayed in the show as a narcissist, Peggy speculates that others might benefit from what she casts off:

> So this could be my last show
> A kind of estate sale
>
> Where you might pick up something useful
> Or just nostalgic
> Or old school[85]

Opening her scene titled 'How to Survive a Loss', Lois instructs, 'First you recalibrate', and tells the story of the Zebra Finch whose singing to her unborn chicks

[82] Shaw and Weaver (2020b: 1:02:37).
[83] Shaw and Weaver (2020b: 30:05).
[84] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 3, 6).
[85] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 16).

allows them to adapt to rising temperatures before they hatch.[86] Shaw and Weaver acknowledge the inevitability of death – 'At least I know that I'm going to die', says Peggy[87] – and they rehearse for it in a scene titled 'How to Pretend to Die Onstage'.[88] While they do not pretend to have all the answers, they also suggest that it is all right to not know, to live in the loss. Perhaps what the show most powerfully models, despite playing with Shaw's narcissistic desire to be right, is the importance of living with not knowing. 'What if we didn't know' is the refrain of Lois's opening monologue,[89] in a proposal that frames the whole show. As reviewer Brendan Macdonald observes, *Last Gasp* invites its audience to 'Sit in unknowing',[90] accept it, trust it even. The show's last line, Lois's to Peggy, is, 'You know I never know where you are going with your stories but when you get there I always say, oh yeah.'[91] This might be the ultimate queering of a chrononormative. We are all going to die, older people mostly sooner than younger people. A chrononormative understanding of the approach of death might see it as a time to be feared or given in to; *Last Gasp* explores this time with curiosity, as a process to be explored.

Conclusion

The damaging normative narratives of older age that I opened with were narratives of linear decline, social dependency, social isolation and intergenerational conflict. I have proposed that we need alternative narratives and enactments: of older age and futurity; and of older age and, not so much independence, but relationality that connects elders themselves, as well as elders and younger people in ways that are neither isolating nor adversarial. In other words, I have argued that we need intragenerational models and functional intergenerational models. I have also argued that we need to queer normative conceptions of time that are culturally restrictive, ageist and often sexist.

Split Britches model precisely these things – attention to elders' futurity and desires; appreciation of elders' intragenerational collaboration; evidence of importantly meaningful intergenerational relationships, including with one's former selves; and a queering of time that rejects chrononormatives and offers richly different engagements with time and understandings of ageing. The queer work of Split Britches demonstrates

[86] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 16–17).
[87] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 32).
[88] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 32).
[89] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 1).
[90] Macdonald (2021).
[91] Shaw and Weaver (2020a: 33).

much more progressive understandings and modellings of time, age and relationships than those that are currently dominant. Split Britches show how important it is to queer our sensibilities about time, age and relationships.

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The Power of Graphic Narrative for Dementia Stories: Trauma, Aesthetics and Resilience in Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* (2012) and Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's* (2013)

E. Ann Kaplan

Abstract: This article has three aims: it first argues that the aesthetics of graphic novels, rarely considered in Humanities dementia research, are especially suited to narratives about traumatic dementia. Second, it argues that, within the graphic narrative genre, both indirection and realism can facilitate dementia representations. Third, it argues that the realism each author uses 'corrects' well-meaning, idealising, dementia images aimed at challenging negative stereotypes. In this study of Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* and Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's*, I show that each benefits from a particular style of realism that I call, for *Tangles*, 'abstract realism', and for *Aliceheimer's* 'adapted' or 'fantastic' realism. Each graphic realism style opens up for viewers the trauma of dementia for both the dementia subject herself and for those caring for her. Images move beyond stereotypes (while not idealising), furthering, via compassion, empathy and resilience, our understanding of this challenging condition so much a part of life today.

Keywords: dementia; trauma; trauma theory; graphic narrative; aesthetics; realism; resilience

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Dementia, Trauma and Graphic Narrative Aesthetics

Stories about dementia now constitute a sizeable part of Age Studies research. Such stories have increased since the condition (often called Alzheimer's/AD) grew into a perceived 'social challenge' as the twenty-first century got underway.[1] In the early years of public awareness of the condition, largely negative images predominated in popular discourse and even in academic research, often bolstered by pervasive neuroscience studies in medical journals.[2] Diverse art forms were used to tell often traumatic dementia stories, and these included film, fiction, drama and painting, with film being the most common artistic mode from 2006 on. Much of this humanities research presented an alternative, more positive, view of AD and has arguably mitigated some negativity.[3] In any case, fewer negative images now dominate in the media.[4]

However, as Annette Leibing points out, ironically well-meaning, sometimes idealising, images aimed at challenging stereotypes may require a 'correction' because tending to leave out real bodily and psychological challenges of especially late-stage Alzheimer's.[5] In other words, the trauma that dementia may cause both for the one living with it, and those caring for her, needs to be addressed: scholars still should recognise that dementia does not necessarily involve dreadful suffering.[6] Telling the story from the position of the AD subject may help in this regard.[7]

One way that a correction may take place is by turning to a genre little studied in dementia research, namely graphic narrative. In general, because of the association with popular comic book fictions, graphic non-fiction was not taken seriously as an object worthy of academic study until artists, like Art Spiegelman (1996) and Marianne Satrapi (2004), together with critics, such as Scott McCloud (1994) and

[1] Dementia actually has many different causes, and takes varied forms. Alzheimer's is the term most often used, but I will use 'AD' (Alzheimer's Disease) so as to cover more conditions. For an overview of global increase of AD, perspective on the future and studies of the difficulty of diagnosis, see Koehn *et al.* (2012).

[2] See Kaplan and Chivers (2018) for citations and more on how neuroscience research unintentionally adds to negativity as regards AD.

[3] Kaplan and Chivers (2018).

[4] Films and plays about dementia continue to be made. These arguably respond to critiques regarding gender (too many works featuring white women with AD) while trying new storytelling techniques, as in the drama *The Father*, later made into a film starring Anthony Hopkins in 2020. This film attempted, with some success, to present the mind of the protagonist living with AD. Sally Potter's *Roads Not Taken* (2020), starred Javier Bardem as living with AD, while his daughter tries to help him. Another film, *Dick Johnson Is Dead* (2020), offers an engaging humorous perspective for a change. These new works show how dementia storytelling is evolving.

[5] Leibing (2017).

[6] De Boer *et al.* (2007).

[7] See Leibing (2017).

Hillary Chute (2014), each in their own way defended the genre and demonstrated its artistic possibilities. As Chute notes in an interview with Elizabeth Station, 'Comics shape stories into a series of framed moments',[8] which at the same time have aesthetic intimacy via a text that is entirely handwritten and drawn, what Satrapi calls 'narrative drawing'. In related research, I've argued that graphic narrative may be especially fitting for representing trauma because it is a form that permits diverse aesthetic strategies from indirection to realism.[9] This current study of the trauma of dementia adds to that project: I will look at how diverse kinds of realist techniques make vivid traumatic processes evolving as the narrative proceeds. Briefly, I contrast what I call an 'abstract' realism in Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* to an 'adapted' or 'fantastic' realism in Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's*. By 'abstract realism' I mean that while the figures resemble real people, they are presented via spare lines, their shape and colour indicating feeling or mood. By 'adapted' or 'fantastic' realism I mean the figure is, for example, indisputably a warm-hearted female, and yet she looks like nothing we have seen before. Drawing enables a light touch, as it were, avoiding the 'heaviness' of the photograph, and thus ironically enabling darker stories to be told without morbidity. Mental confusions may be imaged without the negativity of photorealism. Figures may even be drawn in a semi-comic fashion to forestall possible disgust which a photographic aesthetic may be unable to avoid. Each of the authors I study uses the form in her unique way. A comment Walrath made in an interview on the graphic narrative genre indicates one of her aims in using graphics: 'Comics', she says, 'lead us to light because, subconsciously, we associate comics with laughter, and we need permission to laugh at sickness and not just describe it in medical terms'.[10] I will show that a former belief that trauma could only be represented through indirect or experimental aesthetics is belied by how well the diverse 'realisms' of graphic narrative are able to communicate the trauma of dementia.

It is partly graphic narrative's ability to combine usually distinct literary and visual strategies that makes possible representing at least two aspects of traumatic dementia. One has to do with the psyche, the other with the body. As regards the psyche, due to changes in the brain, time and space become fluid entities. AD subjects thus have a unique way of relating to time/space co-ordinates. She may have difficulty moving between past, present and future as distinct time zones. Sometimes the past seems to be what she is living through now. Her mind relives, and enacts, a particular past while her body is firmly in the here and now. On the simplest level in graphic fiction a drawn figure may be in a frame in the 'objective' present of the narrative while bubbles reveal

[8] Chute, quoted in Station (2010).

[9] Kaplan (2022). Trauma scholars have long argued over which aesthetic devices best communicate the unique experience of trauma. Bond and Craps (2019) summarise these debates efficiently.

[10] Walrath, quoted in Stearns Bercaw (2016).

the subject's thoughts or mental images showing she's situated in another time dimension altogether. Past, present and future tend to merge into one another depending on triggers in the present. The graphic form with its ability to layer images is able to communicate this well.

On another level, that of the body, AD subjects suffer in a different way. They may lose control over bowel movements, have difficulty eating, may no longer recognise their environment or the placement of familiar objects or even know which room in a house is theirs. In general, the genre enables a candid look at the specific but diverse ways an AD subject may react to challenges without a 'state of dreadful suffering',[11] while also not covering over inevitable psychic losses and bodily changes. I will argue that, via its aesthetics, graphic fiction can avoid both the painful photorealist images of decline, and those tending to idealise AD subjects. The unique ability to render time and space as the AD subject experiences them is joined by the genre's equal ability to show multiple perspectives simultaneously across a page of panels: it is able to flatten relationships, as it were, into a kind of levelling – the antithesis of normal hierarchical and linear organisation of material. Viewers may experience (without depressing images) compassion and empathy for both the one living with AD and the carer watching her change.

Scholars who have understood comics as a serious art form include Karin Kukkonen, who, in her 2013 *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*, was one of the first to situate comics (or at least those she reads closely) in the context of postmodernism, a humanities philosophy claiming we live in a contemporary culture of relativity along with an abandonment of a secure moral ground from which to work. But she ultimately is not so much interested in linking graphic narrative to humanities critical theory as using a cognitive approach to the genre – that is attending to how the mind reads comics. Meanwhile, close to my scholarly concerns, both Andrés Romero-Jodár in *The Trauma Graphic Novel* (2017) and Harriet E. H. Earle in *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* (2017) applied humanities trauma theory to comics. Earle's study, like mine, shows that the graphic form is especially productive for representing trauma and conflict, while Romero-Jodár argues that the dissociative narrative techniques he considers natural to the graphic form emphasise 'the structural fragmentation, indirection and simultaneity that are proper to trauma narratives', as several of us had earlier argued in relation to film.[12]

But this still leaves an unproductive binary as regards the 'proper' aesthetic form for trauma narratives – one that has long troubled the field.[13] Romero-Jodár did not

[11] De Boer *et al.* (2007: 1021).
[12] Romero-Jodár (2017: 172); Kaplan (2005); Schwab (2010).
[13] Kaplan (2005); Kaplan and Wang (2004); Bond and Craps (2019).

realise that in applying trauma theory debates to comics he was making an intervention (as had Kukkonen [2013] and Earle [2017]) in introducing postmodernism to comics. If Spiegelman and others saw the potential for comics to take on serious socio-political concerns, so recent scholars saw the potential for comics to foster and further select critical theory, such as affect theory and psychoanalysis, so beautifully integrated in Alison Bechdel's haunting graphic memoir.[14]

However, the important issue in at least the dementia narratives I study, is not indirection or fragmentation versus photographic realism (the original binary trauma theorists debated) but rather developing a unique realist aesthetics appropriate for AD trauma. In analysing the two graphic texts below, namely *Tangles* and *Aliceheimer's*, I argue that graphic techniques – such as the intimacy of hand drawing, the chosen colour palette, organisation of panels on the page and the combination of words and images – offer new possibilities for presenting AD. Drawing can be expressive in ways other than photography. While every reader has her own response, the graphic process may evoke empathic emotions in viewers while at the same time avoiding turning them away, as may some of the photorealist films about dementia (e.g. *Iris* [2001], *Still Alice* [2014] or *Amour* [2012] especially).[15] It also allows artists to stay with the tragic aspects of AD, even to the moment of death, instead of an AD narrative seeming to need ending with the protagonist living relatively well, or having some sort of breakthrough.[16]

Trauma, Healing and Resilience in Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* (2012)

Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* (2012) follows a young daughter, very close to her mother since early childhood, suddenly having her busy life dramatically changed by her mother's slowly developing AD. Leavitt as author (I will use Leavitt/narrator to refer to Leavitt's fictionalised self within the memoir) keeps mainly to the daughter's perspective, but, indirectly, through the power of graphic techniques, the viewer can appreciate her mother, Midge's, challenging experiences.

Leavitt divides her detailed memoir into three parts. While the parts are not strictly chronological (Leavitt allows memories to emerge as they are triggered by what is going on in the present), broadly the parts trace Midge's worsening condition, with Part 3 being the most heart-breaking section, if also a deeply humane text, in which

[14] Kaplan (2022).

[15] *Amour* offers a case where dementia symptoms emerge from a stroke, so not a specific case of AD.

[16] New kinds of treatments and artistic practices are detailed in much of the humanities AD research including Basting (2009); Swinnen (2013); Goldman (2017); Chivers (2013); Kaplan (2013); Zimmerman (2017, 2020).

Midge dies of AD. The fragility and also pleasures of life, especially once AD is in the picture, are evident on every page as emotions shift, from frustration and trauma to lighter enjoyable family events with relatives recalling happy memories from the past. We are shown Midge and her sisters singing, Midge playing with her daughters or an exhausted but devoted husband finally understanding his wife's needs. The text as a whole offers an inspiring picture of a complex, multigenerational, middle-class, Jewish-Canadian family – the parents, teachers with liberal values. Leavitt's graphic techniques enable her not only to reveal the embarrassing and discomforting bodily aspects of late-stage AD, but also the family's (and her mother's) resilience in the face of trauma.

Leavitt uses a large page, so that many diverse images are presented over its stretch. Unlike other graphic artists, Leavitt does not have gutters between panels; instead, there is just a thin line between them. An emotion in one panel, then, is either continued or quickly replaced by an emotion in the next image, creating a different effect than the gutter offers. Gutters leave gaps for the individual reader to fill in, but, eschewing gutters, Leavitt often includes a short text explaining what is going on. This engages the viewer's cognition, stabilising feelings for a moment. Leavitt's method as regards organisation on the page varies from page to page, but frequently there is a sort of shot-counter-shot sequence, especially during frequent phone calls Leavitt/narrator has with her parents, and significantly with her mother. Here, what McCloud calls 'sequential visual art' takes place. At other times, images are far from sequential, being distributed across the large page. In this case, one's eyes can travel where they please, which is especially useful in terms of linking past, present, and future into one intense whole.

Leavitt's black and white palette effectively sets the tone of loss, absence, and grief much harder to achieve via the realism of colour. We see the world in colour, of course, so using black and white immediately moves us away from a realism I will argue does not serve dementia stories well. Leavitt's process is to draw dense, precise, but basically single line drawings, without any bright colour but, by contrast, partly filled in with dense black.[17] Images often focus on simple facial expressions (a single line face with downturned lips or with a smile); on body language (a body bending over, or shrugging shoulders); or alternatively, on hair, clothes, shawls or bed covers.[18]

Everything, then is in black and white, the black mainly (but not always) indicating trauma, fear, death, but also family tensions and crises, loss and grief. The pieces of black dispersed against the white background of most boxes adds texture and depth to the work. Notable is that Leavitt never shows anything in the white background,

[17] Leavitt (2012: 19).
[18] Leavitt (2012: 14–15).

except, from time to time, some words. It is usually white, empty space. This highlights the family figures that are her priority and concern, but also emphasises loss, absence, grief, trauma.[19]

There is a wonderfully evocative image on the cover of *Tangles* which indicates neatly how bonded Leavitt/narrator was with her mother as a child, the intimacy continuing as she grew up. Mother and daughter are shown side by side with their arms blending one into the other – a visual rendering of how Leavitt/narrator experiences their relationship. Another image on the book's title page (the title itself says much on its own) is similarly evocative of a symbiosis between mother and daughter not easy to convey in any media. Situated in a small black square, we find one composite white figure drawn with thin lines: Leavitt/narrator's head rests on her mother's shoulder and their arms are entwined without any border so that the figures seem to merge into one.

These images prepare us for Leavitt/narrator's nightmares as a young child, with which the book opens, and which uncannily anticipate her mother slipping away from her daughter as her AD progresses.[20] The dreams continue when Leavitt/narrator is a teenager and also a young adult. In the past, her mother always came to comfort her. Years later, when she is far away from home, she dreams of her mother 'floating away' from her, wearing a long nightgown.[21] Leavitt draws Midge bent over, a shawl over her shoulders, body leaning forward, clearly rushing to her daughter in the night. The panel reaches across the page, but Midge's figure is to the far left of the panel, with the word 'COMING', in black capital letters. But there's a broad space of white to the right, with just a few words about the nightmares; tension and anxiety fill that space. The panel below is even more evocative of fear and loss. It shows a line drawing of just Leavitt/narrator's head at left of the panel, with a sad expression, showing her tears; and then a series of skeleton figures (representing her mother) floating away. Some explanatory words at the right end of the panel ground the image and bring closure.

It is images such as these that I call 'abstract realism' and that show indirection and avant-garde aesthetics are not necessary for representing trauma. The delicate icons are not weighed down in thick, heavy photo-style pictures: instead, icons provide a sense of lightness and sometimes black humour that counters stereotypes so difficult to avoid in the photographic realism of film, in the presence of real bodies watching a drama, or depicting dementia in painting or photography. Leavitt usually offers just one emotion per panel, but she shows the expression on someone's face changing panel by panel as the sequence moves forward. One might think this process is not

[19] Leavitt (2012: 55).
[20] Leavitt (2012: 10).
[21] Leavitt (2012: 11).

complex, but in fact, as the sequence continues, it adds complexity through repetition with a difference. Many expressions and emotions share the same page.

Difficult bodily changes and incapacities are rarely dealt with in any graphic detail in cinematic dementia stories because in their realism they might be upsetting or embarrassing for viewers. But the abstract realism of Leavitt's graphic techniques enables her to include unpleasant bodily processes as her mother's dementia gets worse. The abstract realism means that Midge's bodily changes can be shown directly without becoming embarrassing or morbid, albeit they severely challenge her daughter. For example, in a two-page section 'Taste and Smell', Leavitt's images express first Midge's losing her sense of taste and smell (an early sign of AD), then her confusion about appropriate clothing, her inability to brush her teeth properly and finally her being unable to get to the bathroom on time. The first page of 'Taste and Smell' shows Midge in white, a stick-person on a black background; the figures are in boxes within the panel, looking almost like postage stamps. There's an image of Midge waist up, again white against black, with a caption noting that losing taste and smell frightened Midge. Her losing touch with herself is shown in a frightening couple of squares within the panel showing Midge's head in the first square and her body in the next one (white against black again). The trauma for the AD subject could not be more clearly expressed.[22]

This does not quite prepare us for what is to follow, however.[23] Leavitt/narrator tells readers that she smelled her mother, and was covered in shame. She suggests a bath, and then Leavitt draws Midge going upstairs and making a bowel movement in her pants. Leavitt inserts a panel with her own sad face in white against the black background. Leavitt/narrator's words 'Oh, God' along with the drawn expression of despair say so much about the tragic situation she and her mother are living through. There follows a series of panels about what Leavitt/narrator finds when she goes into the bathroom. Excrement is everywhere. The panels detail how Leavitt/narrator has to clean it all up, bit by bit, and get her mother clean as well. After Leavitt/narrator puts her mother in a clean nightgown and tucks her into a warm bed, there's a panel with her in the doorway. Words to the side say: 'Feel a new loneliness. And a new strength'. This is one of the first signs of the resilience that will carry Leavitt/narrator through the continuing trauma of her mother's AD.

The technique of blacking out some bodies at certain times, and leaving white space at others, offers viewers the diverse emotional registers characters are experiencing as events devolve. Scanning the page, a viewer can hold the different registers at the same time – both diverse emotions and individual reactions. Graphic techniques

[22] Leavitt (2012: 59).
[23] Leavitt (2012: 39–40).

seem especially well adapted to representing the specific bodily and psychological aspects of dementia.

Part 3 of *Tangles* is at once the saddest part of the narrative and the one showing resilience in the face of trauma. Each page of this section contains many strong emotions across the range of feelings, from utter despair and sadness, loss and grief, to humour, and even fun. As Midge's moods continue to be unstable and unpredictable, the family rallies. Leavitt/narrator continues her somewhat guilty role of documenting changes in her mother: the guilt is evident in Leavitt/narrator drawing herself blotted in black and curled up writing down what she observes, trying to hide herself from view. Perhaps through so doing, Leavitt/narrator can gain control of her own feelings. She is able to settle in to being with Midge in the place where Midge is emotionally on any one day – at least until Leavitt/narrator's repressed emotions break through.

There is a somewhat humorous couple of pages called 'Popping Up', detailing Midge's difficulty sleeping. To give her Dad a break, Leavitt/narrator agrees to sleep with her mother, but instead of staying asleep, Midge keeps 'popping up' shortly after seeming to sleep.[24] Her mother sits up and starts singing pop songs, and talking to herself, while Leavitt/narrator tries to get her to go back to sleep. The black and white is especially effective here: the black suggests the night, and Midge's white pencil-thin body drumming away to herself, with Leavitt small beside her trying to 'model deep breathing', is at once amusing and tender.

The last few sections – 'New', 'Decision', 'Subsiding' and 'The End' – offer an array of emotions. There is the excitement about Leavitt/narrator's sister's baby, as new life emerges while Midge's life nears its end; the painful decision to move Midge to a nursing home; and the very sad decline that continues once she is there. Leavitt/narrator's mixed emotions through all this are vividly drawn and communicated, but it's significant that the trauma of seeing her mother suffering can no longer be controlled. To select just a few powerful images: there is the image of her father, unable to carry Midge any more, collapsing with her on the floor. Leavitt conveys this disaster – one of the things that made clear Midge could no longer be cared for at home – by drawing heavy black stick people, all entangled.[25] Leavitt/narrator details her mixed emotions from despair and feeling empty and dead inside (like other traumatised subjects, she wants to drive her car into a wall or cut herself), to bringing her partner, Domino, to her home. She finds some solace with Domino, especially as regards Domino seeing ways to celebrate Midge (Domino describes Midge's mind as like a tangled garden with spots of brightness).[26] Significantly, Leavitt/narrator's nightmares about her

[24] Leavitt (2012: 105).
[25] Leavitt (2012: 116).
[26] Leavitt (2012: 114).

mother now turn even more frightening, traumatic even. One dream includes her cat hanging from a tree turning into her mother when the cat is cut down.[27]

The last sections deserve an article on their own, so evocative and powerfully emotional are the drawings. As Midge nears death, so the family gathers to say goodbye to her in the nursing home. One image expresses the family's grief remarkably: Leavitt shows the family finally having to leave the nursing home after an extended visit by drawing figures, small, bent over, black, moving out in a single line.[28] In the section 'After', Leavitt/narrator details her commitment to reading the Kaddish (the Jewish prayer for the dead) for the required 11 months. It gives her some comfort. Jogging amongst the trees also helps. Midge has been linked to nature and especially trees throughout the narrative, and now Leavitt/narrator senses her in the forest.

The last two powerful images I will mention are first, Leavitt's image accompanying the words 'Many times a day I was knocked off my feet by the absolute absence of my mother'.[29] The image is of a black tree, broken in half, with twigs scattered around. The very last image in the book returns to Leavitt/narrator's dreams about her mother. It is the only one offering a peaceful idea of Midge and her connection to her daughter. Leavitt/narrator dreams that her mother had planted seeds on her daughter's shoulders that were now growing into paper flowers.[30] It's as if Leavitt/narrator finally realises how much love her mother (often tough and demanding) has given her, how the 'seeds' of that giving can now bear fruit; paradoxically, however, this can only happen after her mother is no longer alive. What is remarkable about Leavitt's graphic memoir is not only how powerfully it is able to communicate the trauma of dementia for both the AD subject herself and the one caring for her, but also reveal compassion, the complexity of emotional life and death and the healing that shared grief can ensure.

Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's* (2013) and 'Adapted' or 'Fantastic' Realism

Aliceheimer's, in contrast to *Tangles*, begins with an adult daughter, somewhat estranged from her mother, deciding to bring her mother to live with her once AD has set in. To Walrath, this comes as partial compensation for their being distant most of her adult life. It is Walrath's attempt to get to know her mother, to bond deeply with her, before it is too late. Different also is that Walrath is a Professor of Anthropology

[27] Leavitt (2012: 115).
[28] Leavitt (2012: 120).
[29] Leavitt (2012: 125).
[30] Leavitt (2012: 127).

and Medicine, and a blogger, novelist and performer as well. This puts her in a position to comment on AD from a medical perspective and even introduce theoretical commentary on practices and theories of AD. But Walrath follows Leavitt in her intense reaction to her mother's condition and her strong interest in what the graphic form is able to achieve in fictionalising her experiences. Bringing humour to bear on her mother's ever-changing ways of being in the world is one self-conscious aim of Walrath's work.

As an already accomplished theorist and writer, then, Walrath, as author (again, the narrator within the text needs to be distinguished from the 'character' Dana within the story) takes the opportunity in an extended Introduction to *Aliceheimer's* to make the humanities case against over-medicalising AD subjects or insisting on narratives of decline and victimhood. From comments in this Introduction, the reader gathers Walrath's graphic narrative is aimed at both carers and AD subjects: 'The medium itself grants permission to laugh at the experience … Besides needing a laugh, carers are a tired group with limited free time. Graphic narrative has the advantage of speed. Pictures compress narrative. They establish setting and tone immediately.'[31] While Walrath's position may have some of the utopian aspects Leibing worries about, ultimately she avoids idealising AD. I see her humorous approach, made possible by the graphic form, as taking viewers more deeply into the AD subject's consciousness. We find ourselves understanding more about AD through what laughter enables.

Walrath's comic form is original. Usually, as we saw in looking at *Tangles*, comics consist of a page of discrete panels or 'boxes', separated by the so-called 'gutters' which slow down the narrative and give readers a sense of control, deciding what to look at when. The reader is not enmeshed in time, as with film.[32] In a variation from the norm, however, Walrath provides very large page-length panels, usually just one per page. Her complex drawings take up the left-hand page, and extended commentary takes up the right-hand page. The drawings vary from page to page depending on the theme Walrath poses. Sometimes there is only one image of Alice on the page; other times, there are several images with diverse meanings in barely recognisable panels. None are in the usual boxes with lines or gutters in between.

This means that the reader has to stay on the page for a while, gathering the import of what she sees. Then we can turn to the extended text on the opposite page for commentary and explanation. Originally (we learn in the Introduction) Walrath allowed the images to tell their own story, but she later decided to add the commentary. This opens up the comic to Walrath's own story, alongside her mother's: she brings us into her ongoing process vis-à-vis her mother, learning to listen carefully to Alice so as

[31] Walrath (2013: 5).

[32] For further discussion see DeKoven (2006).

to interpret for viewers observations her mother makes that otherwise seem totally random. Walrath is able to do this because she first managed to participate in the 'wonderland' her mother is creating through AD.

The first page, with the caption 'Flying Sun', is startling: we see two drawings in the two large panels; the first is a view of a woman's face squeezed between rocks with incomprehensible words coming out of her mouth. The second is a close-up of the same face with the unreadable words. There is no commentary, so we are left to make of this what we can.[33] But the next page is filled with a full-page frontal drawing of a strange but friendly figure who is introduced (on the commentary page) as 'Alice'. The face is quite clear, with neat hair surrounding it, while the body (not in proportion), is made up of a photographic collage of pieces with words we later learn are taken from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Even stranger is the shadow of the body, looking like spikes or flowing hair. Two little hands and feet peep out from the figure.[34] The overall effect is of an alert, kindly woman, in a sense larger than life, looking out at the viewer, although not meeting our gaze. This is the effect Walrath is looking for, namely to communicate the strangeness of AD while also showing it as benign, its own thing, not comparable to any other experience we know about. We do not have to be afraid of the AD subject, although Walrath herself has been slow to realise that.

Walrath, then, starts the book with the theme of strangeness, absence and loss. In accordance with this, the next page shocks the viewer: again, we find just one Alice-figure drawn up close, very similar to the previous one except that now there is the shocking absence of a face and head. Where there would have been a head, we have the words: 'Alice is Disappearing: Soon There Will Be None'.[35] It is a traumatic image for the viewer as well as showing Walrath's traumatic response to her mother's changed ways of being. Instead of the spiky lines surrounding the body (made up as before with pieces of cut-up pages from *Alice in Wonderland*) we have dense tangled circles to indicate that Alice's mind is changing. Walrath proceeds to track how Alice is changing in what follows, always with the aim of understanding rather than just describing. It is a fitting approach for a daughter trained in medicine and anthropology who has discovered graphic techniques appropriate to her task.

Walrath's statement on the next page that 'None Is Hard to Draw' implicitly takes up the aesthetic problem posed by any kind of realism, namely how to represent absence? Her solution on this page is to draw an elaborate sort of 'sampler' of diverse pencil marks, each indicating a day in Alice's life of 77 years.[36] Many of these days were shared with her daughter. Within the page-sized panel, to the right of the marks,

[33] Walrath (2013: 7).
[34] Walrath (2013: 9).
[35] Walrath (2013: 11).
[36] Walrath (2013: 13).

we can see a very dim ghostly figure that is just recognisable as Alice. The words 'Days W/O Alice' appear at the top of that panel. The barely visible Alice conveys her absence in the present and presumably time to come. To emphasise the point, on the next two pages Walrath puts the two panels side by side, with the words repeated, 'disappearing Alice …' and on the linked page, '… none is hard to draw'.[37] It is a remarkable aesthetic feat – haunting in what it expresses about someone 'disappearing'. Walrath, through her fantastic realism, has found a way to draw 'none', even as soon she will be able to draw the 'new' Alice as she begins to understand how her mother's mind works, and to be less afraid.

Effectively continuing her theme of absence, loss and change, Walrath draws a page of panels, one row of which has a close-up of Alice's face, while the lower row has small versions of the large earlier figures. The point here is that in most of the images (as per the title 'Missing Pieces' on the commentary page) something is missing from what would be a more realistic image. In one panel showing Alice's face an eye is missing; in another, the hair-curls near her face have gone; some of the body images have hands missing and in a frightening one, the entire face is wiped out. Words (scarcely visible, so as to bolster the idea of absence) can be found saying, 'She isn't losing tangible parts, though she is disappearing', as if explaining what's meant metaphorically by an eye missing.[38] Change is taking place, but Alice is still very much herself.

From this moment on, Walrath develops a new concept for her mother's situation. Alice is constructing a unique world through what is happening in her brain, and Walrath aims to join her in this world, and to 'translate' it so that it makes a certain amount of sense. But Alice's AD world is fantastical. For example, the section 'Flight' has two page-sized panels: in the first, we see Alice with all the 'pieces' (hair, hands, feet, face) in place, trying to fly towards the sun; in the second panel, we see Alice's hands close to the sun. Walrath writes in the first panel: 'she didn't take off …' and in the second, 'Though she has special powers'.[39] The idea of Alice having 'special powers' is a wonderful and reassuring concept that carries Walrath through what could have been a devastating journey with her mother living with AD. Similarly, the idea of Alice being 'ungrounded' because losing the memory that kept her grounded is comforting because freeing her mother of painful memories. Walrath draws her mother seemingly far off the ground, just her feet showing beneath the same cut-up collaged gown shown from the waist down.[40]

The section 'Aliceheimer's' about halfway through the graphic narrative seems to stabilise the story. Walrath draws a panel bringing together several of the strange

[37] Walrath (2013: 15).
[38] Walrath (2013: 17).
[39] Walrath (2013: 19).
[40] Walrath (2013: 13).

Alice-bodies from the text so far: the images form a kind of circle, suggesting there is no way out of her condition, and yet the faces look happy.[41] As in all the sections, the accompanying text details ways Walrath and her family re-conceptualise Alice's hallucinations making meaning from them, given the material reality that triggers a hallucination.

In the following sections (which now include colour for the first time), Walrath provides images of some of Alice's hallucinations, such as broccoli growing out of her ears.[42] Walrath's graphic techniques communicate brilliantly (via fantastical realism) what is going on in Alice's mind. There is certainly friendly humour in these images, but Walrath is not making light of the condition: she rather allows the family, and Alice too, to laugh at what she imagines. Especially moving are panels dealing with Alice missing her husband, Dave, who died a few years earlier. In one panel, Walrath is seen sharing her mother's hallucination of Dave (clad in a bright red top) leaping about in a tree they are standing by.[43] Walrath and her husband now understand that, after a tumultuous marriage, Alice is longing to make amends. Walrath is happy to participate in her mother's fantasies which make a certain sense when put in context.

There are still visual surprises as the text moves forward, such as in the section 'Umbilicus'.[44] Here Walrath addresses her past relationship with her mother from an original perspective, that of imagining the moment of her birth. One panel shows a male doctor (drawn in the most realistic way of any drawing so far) bringing Walrath out of her mother's womb. A sentence: 'I first met Alice in 1960. I don't remember the details…', sits at the top of the page.[45] The commentary opposite reveals some details about how Alice was living when Walrath was born (which was in a poor area of New York City with a nasty smell from a nearby slaughterhouse). But the point of this drawing is to emphasise Alice now unable to remember Walrath's birth, or who her father was. On the next page, when Walrath expands the image of the birth now with a full-face image of Alice opposite, we find Alice saying the words 'I'm your mother. Who's your Daddy?'[46] This sequence ends with a page-length panel complementing the first sentence about remembering (i.e. Walrath noting that she does not recall her birth) with 'Neither does she.' Walrath's conclusion, 'Aliceheimer's', is a way to account for such confusions.[47]

[41] Walrath (2013: 21).
[42] Walrath (2013: 17–21).
[43] Walrath (2013: 27).
[44] Walrath (2013: 39–43).
[45] Walrath (2013: 39).
[46] Walrath (2013: 47).
[47] Walrath (2013: 43).

The next series of pages follow up on Alice's 'Who's your Daddy?' question as Alice more frequently than before seeks to find her husband, Dave. Two striking panels consist of a full-face image of Alice in the left panel looking to the right where, in the next panel, we see a small image of Dave way up in a tree.[48] Over the page, we have an image of Dave apparently reaching down to grab Alice, whose large face is now shown on the right-hand panel, looking up left at Dave. Walrath expands these two images, inserting Dave alone on the right-hand page, and with a now extreme close-up of just the top of Alice's head, her brow and her eyes on the opposite page.[49] The following pages in the section 'Alice's Wonderland' show panels where Alice and Dave try to reach one another but cannot, and finally there is a wonderful image of the two embracing, Dave in his usual red shirt and blue pants, Alice in her Alice in Wonderland cut-out strips, their house, garden and children on the opposite panel.[50]

The first sentence on the commentary page also picks up from the earlier 'Who's your Daddy?' section. It reads: 'My unclear provenance began long before Alzheimer's'.[51] Walrath evidently looked different from her siblings, often causing her to be laughed at in school. Expanding on this, and shifting gears at the same time, Walrath turns to a regular school class photograph showing Walrath at a young age. Significantly, Walrath *draws* the class photo rather than reprinting the original, finding a form in between 'adapted-' and 'photo-'realism. However, she leaves her own image from the original photorealist one, so that Walrath stands out as having much darker skin and hair than her class mates and teachers.

The drawing of the class photo makes the transition for Walrath to leave her mother's world which was drawn appropriately in what I have called 'adapted or fantastic realism'. She goes on to offer the photographic realism of family photos so as to situate herself and her mother's prior world in juxtaposition to that of Alice's Alzheimer's world. Walrath calls this section, 'Before Wonderland, NYC, circa 1944', and in effect it brings together the fantastic realism of Alice's Alzheimer's and the hard, Second World War realities of Alice's upbringing and culture.[52] Included here are Walrath's own difficult experiences growing up given her mother's inability to talk about or recognise bodily matters (such as menstruation, urination, excretory functions) due to her (Alice's) own mother's training. Social forms pass from one generation to the next, invisibly, just like traumatic memories of disastrous events. Walrath evokes the irony of Alice's present: her mother thinks the nappy she has to wear because she has

[48] Walrath (2013: 45).
[49] Walrath (2013: 49).
[50] Walrath (2013: 53–5).
[51] Walrath (2013: 55).
[52] Walrath (2013: 57–60).

become incontinent is her menstruation pad. This in turn triggers Walrath's anger that her mother could not help her at important moments of her childhood.

After the interlude of photorealism, Walrath continues with panels drawn in fantastic realism both to comment on her Armenian roots, largely not referred to by Alice as Walrath grew up, and her wish to explore her Armenian background and search for relatives still living in Armenia. The trauma of the genocide haunted Alice without her fully having known it, and now triggers Walrath's interest. Alice meanwhile is, as Walrath puts it, with each day 'becoming developmentally younger'.[53] The panels now show Alice as an adolescent, complete with red velvet bow in her hair, and then as a toddler with short hair walking unsteadily.

The text ends with two beautiful panels across which Walrath has drawn her mother's body. Alice's words in the left-hand panel describe her sense of being many selves in one day. The right-hand panel shows her with her hair radiating out like sun beams, her face peaceful with eyes closed, and dim figures, differently aged, dancing around her shoulders. Alice, now agreeably situated in a care facility, regularly interacts with Walrath via Skype. They sing together, moving between English and Armenian; the last lines of the text are:

> Alice typing: Heart. Heart.
> Me typing (while singing): I like all these hearts.
> Alice typing: Heart and Soul. (Then in Armenian, ed) Anoush es. …. Sir doo hokis yaro jan … Anoush es---you are sweet. I keep these words in case I ever need help remembering.[54]

Conclusion

Both of these texts, each in its own way, teaches us something profound about the trauma of AD through the unique aesthetic techniques of the graphic form. The visual styles each author selects could not be more different, and yet each makes an impact through developing a unique kind of realism, what I have called, respectively, 'abstract realism' and 'adapted' or 'fantastic' realism. These modalities differ from the binary common in humanities research regarding trauma, namely that of so-called indirection (or avant-garde techniques) versus a realistic/historical modality. In a sense, both abstract realism and fantastic realism manage, because of the graphic form, to combine elements of indirection with elements of realism, creating something new in the process.

[53] Walrath (2013: 54).
[54] Walrath (2013: 69).

The diverse positions the authors take up mean that very different views of AD emerge. Leavitt situates herself as observing and recording changes in her mother; viewers learn what it is like to watch a mother living and changing with AD. Meanwhile, we learn much too about Leavitt's own trauma, resilience and bravery as she confronts a very different mother over time. The drawings vividly communicate Midge's traumatic experiences as the condition worsens. Through Leavitt's empathy and concern, and how she draws her mother, we too empathise with Midge and the family. Black humour has its place at times, but on the whole the focus of this graphic text is on absence, loss and grief experienced by a young woman close to her mother. Midge's experiences are related via Leavitt rather than directly from Midge's stance.

By contrast, Walrath's position is more distanced, yet she is paradoxically closer to her mother's subjectivity than in Leavitt's case. Walrath's medical knowledge, her reading, and experience enable her to take a unique approach to the AD she finds her mother developing. Walrath manages to get inside her mother's changing views of the world, so as to participate in that world. But more significantly, this enables her mother, Alice, to convey her world to us. Walrath shows how AD can be seen to 'make sense', a position that delivers AD subjects from being pitied, rejected or neglected. Pervasive stereotypes disappear with this approach. Walrath's drawings use humour and fantasy to create something strange and beautiful, a wonderland world, indeed, that nevertheless communicates what her mother is going through. Walrath and her mother ironically get closer through her mother's experiences. That is, their lives intertwine productively as they together experience Alice's changing world. The two manage to repair a relationship that had not been close before through Walrath learning to enter into her mother's new world and forgive her. While this approach may not be appropriate in many instances, it offers a constructive model to aim for, always understanding that it may not be possible.

Graphic narrative has the power to communicate diverse experiences as regards mothers and daughters in the context of AD. Photographic realism can only go so far: the graphic form arguably takes us further into AD in constructive ways that perhaps deserve more acknowledgement than hitherto in the AD scholarly literature.

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PART THREE

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Older Women Rock!

Leah Thorn

Abstract: In this article artist/activist Leah Thorn shares the processes and rationale underpinning 'Older Women Rock!', a project creating pop-up political art spaces to raise awareness and explore issues facing early-old-age women in their 60s and 70s. Through poetry, performance, retro clothes, film, consciousness-raising and listening skills, 'Older Women Rock!' celebrates older women, unites them across differences, challenges their invisibility and subverts society's assumptions and prejudices about them. The project arose out of a 10-month Leverhulme Trust artist residency undertaken by Leah in 2015 at the Kent Academic Primary Care Unit, University of Kent, and the England Centre for Practice Development, Canterbury Christ Church University. The project was developed in 2017 through a Fellowship at Keele University Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Keywords: ageing; women; feminism; fashion; clothes; poetry; pop-ups

Note on the author: Leah Thorn is a spoken word poet, activist, workshop facilitator and speaker. Working in collaboration with filmmakers, her award-winning poetry films have been screened at feminist, Jewish and poetry film festivals internationally. Leah has extensive experience of leading expressive writing workshops across the prison estate nationally and in 2012 she undertook a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship, visiting women's prisons across the United States with theatre companies. In 2013 she received a Royal Society for Public Health Special Commendation Award for her contribution to Creative Arts and the Criminal Justice System. Leah is an Honorary Senior Fellow with the ImpACT Research Group, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of East Anglia. Her latest project, 'a:dress', is a campaign of art/activism using textile art, poetry, film and conversations to raise awareness about fast fashion and its contribution to climate crisis. The focus is on women and girls as they are disproportionately impacted by climate crisis globally and the main target, and makers, of fast fashion.
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blood memory
I am an old age, all age woman,
no way past my use-by date.
Walking in ancestral sisters' footsteps,
I am an archive on legs,
a time traveller, alive to life,
I embody time, provide testimony,
a radical, lyrical, womanist legacy
Women's blood memory speaks in me

a found poem by Leah Thorn, created after reading 'Out of Time' by Lynne Segal and 'How to Age' by Anne Karpf

'Older Women Rock!' creates pop-up art spaces in which to raise awareness and explore issues facing early-old-age women in our 60s and 70s. The project challenges our invisibility by placing us centre stage on our own terms; unites us across differences of class, race, sexual identity, physical and learning abilities; strengthens our resilience and our networks as we move into older age; and importantly, subverts society's assumptions and prejudices about us.

Figure 1. Left to right: 'Dress Your Age' crochet dress by Deborah Nash; Shoe poem by Leah Thorn; Brooch by Leah Thorn. Photos by Clare Unsworth.

Using poetry, personal stories, 'fashion', consciousness-raising and listening skills, an innovative archive of poetry-adorned clothing and films is being co-created and produced by early-old-age women.

Being an Older Woman

I am of the generation of women whose thinking and actions made decisive change. We had many victories and we are learning to acknowledge the defeats and move toward the recognition that the defeats may not be permanent. What I hope for myself and for the women of my generation is that we never give up our vision of the world we want and our intention to have it. This means leading on the major issues of our time (including climate justice), understanding how sexism and male domination impacts women at different stages of our lives and fully backing younger women to fight for themselves. It means reminding myself that old-age oppression is systemic, brutal and relentless – and not just in my mind. It means confronting fears of ageing, death and dying, the death of peers and witnessing the struggles of other elders.

As I age, I struggle increasingly with the combination of old-age oppression and sexism, which results in trivialisation, marginalisation and enforced invisibility. Daily I am inundated with messages that I am inconsequential and my thinking outmoded and no longer needed. This attempted invalidation builds on decades of oppression as a female, where our existence has been diminished and erased.

As an older woman, I have had the experience of caring for a father with dementia and committing him into psycho-geriatric care; providing company for a widowed mother; being alongside my parents as they died harsh, working-class deaths; witnessing physical deterioration of friends; acknowledging my own losses and limitations. A woman could be scared and discouraged.

I have to constantly make a decision to stay significant and powerful, to lead a meaningful life, to remember I am no less female than when I was young.

Seven years ago, when I was 65, I decided to make a creative response to gendered ageing. I wanted to explore and expose what I was feeling and thinking and to challenge the ways I was beginning to internalise invalidating beliefs about myself and other older women. And I wanted to 'hang out' with older women to contradict a sense of isolation and individualism.

Starting 'Older Women Rock!'

The project began in 2015 when I was awarded a 10-month Leverhulme Trust artist residency, working jointly with the Kent Academic Primary Care Unit at the University of Kent and the England Centre for Practice Development at Canterbury Christ Church University. Although birthed in academia, 'Older Women Rock!' has always functioned as art/activism in local communities and with specific identity groups.

At the beginning of my Leverhulme Trust residency, I was introduced to Professor Julia Twigg and was immediately inspired by her work on fashion, women and ageing. Having been raised in the 'shmutter' (rag) trade, I was excited that within academia I could unite an exploration of sexism and old-age oppression with my passion for retro clothing.

'Older Women Rock!' Workshops

As an artist/activist I am committed to the women's movement ethos that 'the personal is political'. My creative work stems from issues that I am grappling with, trying to make sense of, and contextualising within a wider political context. I then engage with others and broaden the narrative of my personal perspective and experiences by facilitating workshops and setting up opportunities for conversation.

'Older Women Rock!' followed this pattern. Alongside writing poetry about the issues I was experiencing, I led multiple series of workshops with diverse groups of women in their late 50s to early 70s in a range of settings in Kent, London and the Midlands. I worked with women who attended a centre for people with physical or learning disabilities; women in a Zumba Gold class; women in prison; a deaf women's group; women at a MIND Day Centre; lesbians in an Age UK Older LGBTQ project; daughters of Holocaust survivors; Women's Institute members; unpaid carers; women who identify as feminist and those who resolutely do not.

Recipe for creating a community of older women
Take women of a certain age
a D-cupful of expectations
a sprinkling of trepidation
an abundance of experience, finely chopped
a ladle of openness
a few drops of tears
a swirl of conversation
a pinch of depth

Gather women together. Stir ideas around. Add a dash of eye contact.
Fold and mix gradually. Whisk into soft peaks of giggles. Take turns to hold
the mixing bowl. Sprinkle in crushed chilli to add heat and spice. If too hot,
calm down with yoghurt. Fold in thick slices of laughter and a dash of recognition.
Stick together. Leave to rise. Heat slowly. Put your feet up. Taste. Share. Burst with flavour. Blog about the wonderfulness.

a group poem by Angela, Anne, Brenda, Jacqui, Karen, Leah, Lotika, Marjorie, Mo, Stella, Sujen and Suzanne, Newcastle-under-Lyme, 2017

In 'Older Women Rock!' workshops, we addressed issues including:

- the lack of older women in the media or the misrepresentation of us as a stereotype or a joke
- the fortune the beauty industry makes from the insecurity we feel that is manufactured by sexism and intensified by old age oppression
- poverty and the fact that many women have small State pensions because of low-paid work and/or breaks in employment to raise children or to care for ageing parents
- the need to conceal or be 'discreet' about physical changes, like greying hair, facial hair or incontinence
- body image
- sexuality
- being a carer

Each workshop used expressive writing, particularly poetry, as a tool for self-reflection and communication of thoughts and feelings. A sense of community was built through the creation of group poems, discussion groups and listening exercises. Key themes emerged that enabled us to see our struggles as part of structural oppression rather than individual failings:

> 'I enjoyed hearing the writing of the other women because it made me consider aspects of the subject I hadn't thought of and the multiplicity of ways we can associate with something.'
>
> 'I am energised to find that women of a certain age are discovering they have a voice and truly becoming themselves. The trust and creativity is amazing and inspirational.'
>
> 'You can laugh with other older women because of the shared secrets you know. We're our own tribe.'

Here is an extract of a group poem, this one constructed during one of the older women carers' workshops:

> Caring is a whisper turning to a scream. It is every echo drowned,
> it is listening to a voice with intent as it gradually fades away
> Caring is a day in the sun: Not Allowed. It is the rough edge of my tongue.
> Caring is the blue bit attached to my red heart, cold death
> interlaced with light, bright, desperate love
> Caring is a Jenga tower of carefully balanced, precarious pieces.
> It is almost rain, the soft, dark security of the night gone. And touching you.
> It is polka dots of time, memory and forgetfulness, laughter and tears
> Caring lives in a tunnel of love, concrete hard, baby pink soft

For the majority of women participating in 'Older Women Rock!' workshops, writing poetry was a completely new, and risky, undertaking:

> 'I don't really write – but I think I do now.'
>
> 'The structure of the workshop has been perfect for me. The steps are easily trod.'
>
> 'I never write a poem and I can't believe I've come so far and I enjoy writing a poem. I never thought I could. It makes my brain tick.'
>
> 'I love the fact that I've written and read out a poem. They usually stay hidden in a secret file on my computer.'

Considering the inexperience of participants, the quality of the work produced was high and women were eager to read their poetry at performances or in the 'Older Women Rock!' pop-up shops/exhibition spaces.

For some women to engage fully in 'Older Women Rock!', they had to overcome their initial resistance:

> 'I didn't like the title "older women" because I don't think of myself as an older woman.'
>
> 'I'm not old. I'm mature.'
>
> 'I was a reluctant member of the group. The idea of writing poetry was totally out of my comfort zone but being in this group has widened my horizons. I have discovered people in the group, people who I would not necessarily have chosen to have in a friendship group, but with whom I have so much in common.'
>
> 'I didn't want to come particularly, my friend "dragged" me. It's made me "re-frame" a lot of things in the light of other women's experience. It's been life-enhancing and I've enjoyed it.'

Within the diversity of participants, it was moving to witness the growth in awareness of the additional oppressions experienced by other women.

> 'I cried when Rosalind told us about the racism she lives with. It's made me think about what I do and say.'
>
> 'I've been thinking a lot about all the awful racist things I was taught when I was a girl and although l don't agree with them now, some of them still pop into my head and that shocks me.'

Listening Exchanges

The pilot phase of the Kent and London workshops highlighted the emotive nature of the issues we were addressing. Many women readily shared painful stories and frequently and openly showed emotion.

When the opportunity arose in 2017 to develop 'Older Women Rock!' through a Fellowship at Keele University Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences, I decided to intensify the use of listening skills by introducing more formalised listening exchanges. I taught basic theory and tools of peer counselling and encouraged women

to alternate listening and being listened to. We told each other our 'speed' life stories, we celebrated highlights of our lives, what we love about ageing and what we find hard and challenging.

Negative experience of the mental health system (or just living in a society where the showing of feelings is pathologised and medicalised) meant that a few women were very wary of exposing what they saw as vulnerability. Once they realised they were totally in charge of what they disclosed, the uncertainty about sharing attention in this way vanished. They found taking turns useful and became more at ease with disclosure and the expression of emotions, both theirs and others.

Feelings
Allowing them, describing them
admitting them, accepting them,
flowing words into feelings,
feeling power from words,
confidence from hope,
a possibility I have something in me that's useful.
Pull it all together,
these feelings, emotions and words.
Make sense of it all

Carol

Some women reported that they found the theory and practice useful in their lives outside of the workshop and that they felt more confident to support each other:

> 'Explaining my feelings is not always easy for me. You don't want others to see that side of you. This has been good for me, given me more calmness. The past can play havoc with you. This is an opening into things I didn't want to talk about.'
>
> 'We don't cry aloud. We've learned how to hide it inside because other people don't like it.'
>
> 'When my husband died I "put a brave face on" but after a while I got sick and my body showed me that I had to face the feelings.'
>
> 'The mother, grandmother, wise woman cannot break, because if she does the world splinters.'
>
> 'When we cry we say "Sorry". Why are we sorry when we cry? I wasn't going to break from crying. It makes you feel better.'
>
> 'There's a lot to cry about, now and in the past.'
>
> 'I like it when I cry with someone and they aren't worried about me but look pleased with me, like they know it's a good thing to do.'

One woman who had expressed the most resistance at the beginning went on to write a moving poem that she shared with the other women at the end of the series of workshops.

Conversation Piece
I have taken out a little part of my soul here
among this group of women. Snipped it off.
Thrown it on the floor among the scintillating fragments
of everyone else's bits.
We looked at them, sparkling on the grey carpet at our feet.
We looked down the length of our legs and over our sensible shoes.

Then with a forced groan we reached
and picked out bits of bric-a-brac to talk about
and passed them round.
Some of them jangling with bells and dangly balls,
some were quiet, dull black and soft,
some were heavy chunks of lead,
some had coloured feathers and balloons attached.
Some opened doors and others locked us in.
And then we sewed them all back in again.
But we all knew we'd touched them

Sheila

'Older Women Rock!' collection of poetry-adorned clothing

Figure 2. 'Older Women Rock!' punk-style jacket by Claire Angel. Photos by Clare Unsworth.

As well as leading workshops to support women to write poetry, I created my own body of work. Once the Leverhulme Trust artist residency finished, I wanted to publish my poetry in an accessible and impactful way that contradicted stereotypes of older women.

I collaborated with older women artists to interpret messages onto retro clothes that I sourced from local charity shops. We embroidered, burned, printed, beaded, engraved and spray-painted words and images onto clothing.

The collection has been shown through pop-up shops, a film and Subversive Catwalks in which older women 'model' the garments while I perform the poems. Venues for the catwalks have included a hotel ballroom, complete with sequin-curtained stage, dance floor and disco glitter balls, a shopping centre, an art gallery and academic conferences.

Here are a few examples of the poetry clothing:

Fear of Ageing

fanfare
You speak of me in metaphors
of catastrophe. Soon I will be
an agequake, a grey tsunami.
My age is your nightmare.
A numerical fanfare
to fan your fear

Figure 3. 'Bar of medals' by Nicholette Goff. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Figure 4. 'Fanfare' jacket by Nicholette Goff. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Sculptor Nicholette Goff interpreted my poem 'fanfare' through the adornment of a 1940s jacket. She constructed a long grey plait that hangs down the back of the jacket and snakes across a shoulder, emerging from a cuff. It is both playful and an evocation of grey hair as a thing of beauty. She also made a bar of medals in honour of our resilience and a broken mirror brooch to reflect the notion of 'agequake'. I found the jagged glass a fitting image for the painful intersection of ageism, sexism, disability oppression and loss and for the way that just by being older women, we can trigger younger women's fear of ageing.

Media Representation

screen
Only men grow old on screen.
Women disappear from film and TV by fifty,
hit dread and disgust in early middle age
and suddenly we're no longer fit for public display,
unless we're flogging stair lifts, baths or wills
or we have a frozen face
or we're de-aged by digital alteration.
It's a kind of symbolic annihilation

In the past few years, a range of older women have been ousted from news, dance and nature programmes on television and replaced by younger women who do not

Figure 5. 'Screen' jacket by Claire Angel. Photo by Leah Thorn.

possess the same deep-lived experience and lifetime of skill development. With the designer Claire Angel, I talked about the anger I feel at the relentlessness of the message that older women are dispensable, 'surplus to requirements'. We came up with the idea of burning words into a leather jacket, searing heat dangerously into skin. We chose key words to describe older women, such as 'witch', 'old bag' and 'cougar'.

For each garment, it is an interesting task to choose lines from the poetry that are succinct yet give a flavour of the nature of the interweaving of sexism and ageism. For 'screen', the one line we used to encapsulate the issue was 'Only men grow old on screen' and this has been a very useful provocation for animated discussion amongst older women.

The Beauty Industry

cream
The beauty counter screams Buy This Cream.
Stay Young, Be Happy, perpetual happiness
by virtue of a billion pound industry that drip drip feeds
the need for chemical warfare,
for cosmeceutical skin care that hydrates, replenishes, regenerates
Got taut, tight skin? You're in. Got ticking clocks? Botox. Detox.
Resist signs of ageing at all cost. Stop. Reverse. Hide. Slo mo.
Smooth your skin ego. Feel the urge for a youth surge?
Want a victory of science over time? Want to reignite your youthful light?
Deny age. Defy age.
You're in control with phenoxyethanol. Replump with sodium phytate.
No. Retaliate. Fight age hate. It's a diabolical conspiracy
for women to age agelessly, line-, scar-, crease-free.
I refuse to let the forever-young drug erase
the handwriting of life across my face

It was challenging to interpret onto a garment the impact of the beautification industry on older women. I wanted to be respectful of women who do use 'anti-ageing' products (as well as cosmetic surgery) and I certainly did not want to pathologise them. The problem lies not with individual women but rather the sexism and ageism expressed by the beauty industry, an undermining that breeds insecurity and then sells 'solutions'. Yet I wanted to contradict the notion that 'anti-ageing' products and cosmetic surgery are an issue of individual choice and if you 'choose' to do it, it is fine. I want to hold out for a society that accepts the accumulated experiences that manifest on our faces.

Figure 6. 'Cream' embroidery by Allie Lee. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Sexuality

The impetus for poems about sexuality came from frank discussions covering regrets about the loss of sexual feelings; heightened sexual feelings; shock at the sexualisation of girls and young women; disbelief about sexual products that are readily available; relief at no longer being objectified; and sadness at feeling invisible as a physical being.

Three garments were made by women in the Profanity Embroidery Group, each explicit and playful. People have found them amusing and a good contradiction to the belief that older women are de-sexed, joyless and prudish. When displayed in a pop-up shop, they moved a few younger women to talk about their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse. There was a danger that exhibiting them in Subversive Catwalks could risk reinforcing the sexualisation of women and/or seeming to make fun of older women. But audiences were very appreciative and the older women who chose to wear the garments found it an empowering experience.

landing strip
Want low-maintenance
cultivation of that
landing strip?
Here's a tip.
Axe wax.
Age.

Figure 7. 'Landing strip' corset by Dee Cartwright. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Dee Cartwright printed and sewed the poem onto a black corset. The model said, 'Wearing the corset ended up being quite a deep internal process, which I needed to go through to help free myself of the Internal Misogynist.'

button
Vulva lost its youthful lustre?
Want a quick fix?
Try My New Pink Button,
rouge for labial lips

Annie Taylor of the Profanity Embroidery Group interpreted this poem onto a vintage negligee:

vajazzled
I'll never have
a designer vagina
that vajazzle dazzles
and permanently dilates

Figure 8. 'Button' negligee by Annie Taylor. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Allie Lee of the Profanity Embroidery Group embroidered and beaded this poem, complete with grey pubic hair, onto a 1970s swimsuit:

Figure 9. 'Vajazzled' swimsuit by Allie Lee. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Historical changes

an extract from <u>in my day</u>
In my day, stockings came in black, bronze and American Tan,
opening a bank account needed the signature of a man,
girdles held in sexual urges, touching below the waist was no-go
and Dusty passed as hetero
There was no such thing as pubic hair wax and you daren't use Tampax
or have a sexual climax for fear of being thought nymphomaniacs

I wanted to include the historical reality of women's lives and the changes we've seen.

This poem proved to be a great starting point for women to remember their youth and the restrictions that we lived with as young women in the 60s and 70s.

Figure 10. 'In My Day' wedding dress, a collaboration between Leah Thorn, Nicholette Goff and the Profanity Embroidery Group. Photo by Leah Thorn.

A collaboration between members of the Profanity Embroidery Group, sculptor Nicholette Goff, and myself, an extract of this poem was emblazoned onto a vintage wedding dress.

Figure 11. Detail from 'In My Day' wedding dress, a collaboration between Leah Thorn, Nicholette Goff and the Profanity Embroidery Group. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Older Women in Prison

Having worked extensively with women in prison, I wanted to make visible the situation for older women within the prison estate. I wanted to highlight facts like women over 50 are the fastest-growing age group entering prison, make up less than 10 per cent of the women's prison population and, as a minority, have needs that are often overlooked and unmet, for example, lack of appropriate health care, less access to work and association with peers. This has a significant impact on mental and physical health as well as limiting opportunities for successful rehabilitation and preparation for release and resettlement.

Claire Angel and I customised a prison issue-type sweatshirt with handwritten notes of quotes from older women in prison and a chatelaine of chains and keys:

> 'I can't cope with a lot of noise. I just want peace and quiet.'
>
> 'Nothing is private. I don't like going to a male officer for things. I wasn't brought up like that.'
>
> 'Prison ages you. No proper nutrition, no fresh air, no medication to aid me as I age.'
>
> 'I never felt old till I came to prison.'
>
> 'You can't put two older women in a cell together. We can't get up on the top bunk.'
>
> 'If you're old and quiet they think they can move you about. We have to stick together and say "You can't do that".'

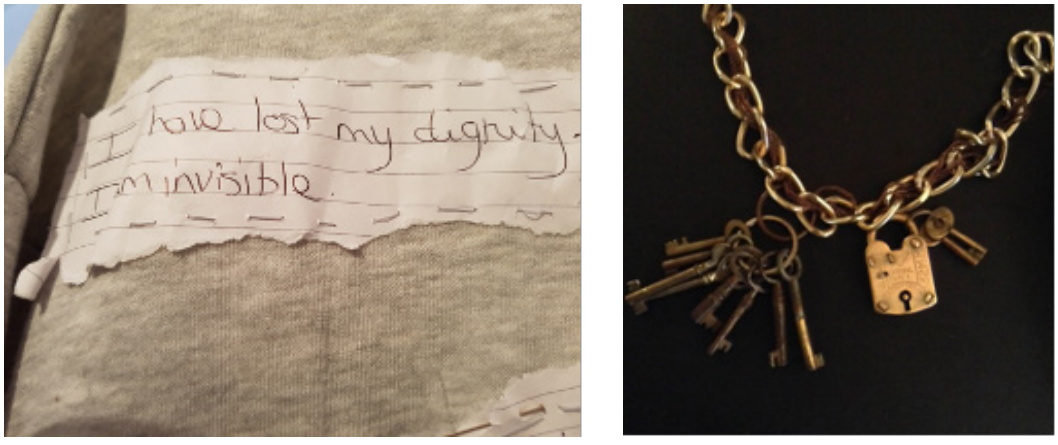

Figure 12. Prison sweatshirt and chatelaine by Claire Angel and Leah Thorn. Photos by Leah Thorn.

Older Lesbians

During workshops with Pink Link, women were asked to bring in photographs of themselves as young women and this led to some wonderful stories and reminiscences:

> 'The images of lesbians weren't me. I wish I'd known when I was fifteen that Dusty Springfield was a lesbian.'
>
> 'There were the codes, the ring on the little finger, the tell-tale signs.'
>
> 'We were walking down the street, not holding hands or anything, and these boys shouted out "Are you lesbos?" and I shouted back "Are you ASBO's?"'
>
> 'I didn't come out till I was 40 so I want to own the word "lesbian". It was hard-fought for. I'd waited so long.'

Artist Dawn Jutton printed the photos onto silk and lined the blazer with them. The women's words trail down from the jacket.

Figure 13. 'Lesbian blazer' by Dawn Button. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

The blazer served as a great awareness-raiser amongst older heterosexual women who saw the piece and were particularly moved by the quote:

> 'My youngest son has never come to terms with my sexuality. He doesn't talk to me. It breaks my heart. He was my baby. I've never seen his three children and they don't know their granny. I'm 73 and all I wish for is that before I pop my clogs, he comes to see me.'

One of the heterosexual women reported:

> 'Seeing the words of the older lesbians stayed with me all day and the next day. I told my husband about it twice. He said "You've already told me" but I just needed to keep telling. As a heterosexual woman I cannot imagine not being known to my grandchildren because of my sexuality. The emotion those words evoked in me was unexpected. A very powerful feeling.'

Carers

Older women are the largest group of unpaid carers in the UK today. The care an older woman provides could be for her partner, older relatives or grandchildren and older women often find themselves 'sandwich carers', looking after both older and younger generations at the same time.

Carers often do not actually identify themselves as such and as a result will not look for support, such as carers' assessments. Only when carers see themselves as carers will they be able to access the provision made for them, either in terms of benefits, employment options or information and support.

> 'I can't say "'No, I can't do it".'
> 'The world becomes very small.'
> 'I can't tell them she's my lover.'
> 'Ask me how I am … and listen.'
> 'Laughing helps me cope.'

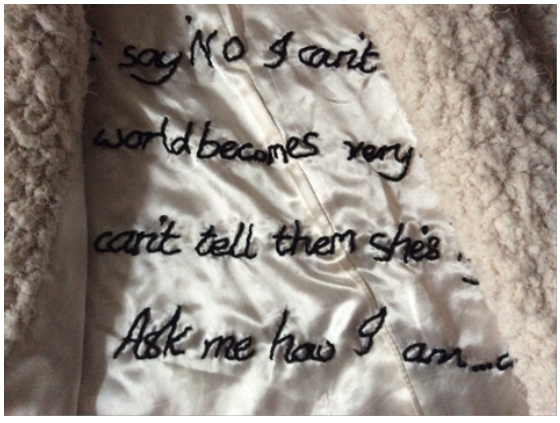

Figure 14. 'Carers' coat' by Deborah Cheworth. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

This proved to be the most challenging of all the collaborations I undertook with designers and textile artists. Deborah Chesworth of the Profanity Embroidery Group

suggested that we turn a coat into a straitjacket and line it with the words of older women carers. A series of straps that wrap the arms around the body would reflect the nature of the unpaid, unsupported, isolating role of caring for loved ones. I initially balked at the idea, as I did not welcome imagery imported from the mental health system. But in conversation with Deborah, I came to realise that it was a straitjacketing situation for women given the very limited recognition they get for the role they play and the very limited financial assistance.

Subverting a Narrative

There is a fine line to walk as an artist/activist, with the danger of reinforcing stereotypes at the very same moment that you're trying to undercut them and expose them for what they are. In 'Older Women Rock!' pop-up shops, women repeatedly asked to buy a piece of clothing and even when I pointed out the harsh issue it was addressing, women still said they would wear it, not as a political statement but because they liked the garment.

The dress most requested for purchase was the Domestic Violence dress. This is a tailored vintage dress from the 1950s, onto which are burned the words: 'Listen. Silence. Older Women. Domestic Violence'.

Figure 15. 'Domestic Violence' dress by Claire Angel. Photo by Leah Thorn.

The accompanying label gives the information that 'Services for women experiencing domestic violence are typically designed to meet the needs of younger women with

dependent children.' Older women are often invisible in estimates of demand for these services and figures from the Women's Aid federation indicate that less than 1 per cent of women using refuge services are over 60 years. The domestic violence experienced by many older women may not trigger the local government's 'high risk' threshold for accessing older adult services. Another limiting factor might be self-censorship by older women due to shame and fear.

Figure 16. Shoes containing poem by Leah Thorn. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Another example of where subversion 'backfired' was a pair of spiked shoes. Inside them I had placed a poem about how my vulnerability to sexism as a young woman meant that I ruined my feet by wearing high heels through my teens, 20s and 30s.

These were among the most coveted items in the 'Older Women Rock!' collection.

'Older Women Rock!' Pop-Up Shops/Exhibitions

There have been three pop-up exhibitions of the poetry clothing in shops in Folkestone, Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme and one extended exhibition in the art gallery of Keele University.

Many visitors commented on the use of humour in the production of the poetry clothing and laughter was frequently heard as people viewed the work. Combining

Figure 17. Pop-up shop, Folkestone, Kent. Photo by Leah Thorn.

humour with harsh realities had a markedly dramatic effect and did not detract from, or compromise, the power of the messages. Some of the issues explored, like domestic violence, were very emotive and several visitors openly shared their emotions and experiences. Some of the words and images on the clothing were confrontative, for example those highlighting older women's sexuality, and there had been an initial fear that visitors would be affronted by the material, but this did not happen.

One interactive exhibit encouraged older women to contribute their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about what they have gained and lost as a result of ageing. They wrote messages onto fabric which were then attached to the dress.

Figure 18. Pop-up shop, Folkestone, Kent. Photo by Leah Thorn.

This dress best exemplifies the poignant juxtaposition of the joy and the pain of ageing as a woman.

Gains included:

> 'The courage to speak.'
> 'I value people not stuff.'
> 'A growing sense of humour.'
> 'Grandchildren are more meaningful than any man.'
> 'At 50, I found my voice. A hidden passion.'

and losses such as

> 'Am I beautiful, still?'
> 'I have lost my best friend but I have found her in myself.'
> 'My left breast.'
> 'Fear and doubt.'
> 'My sight and my independence.'

Events

There have been several 'Older Women Rock!' programmes of talks, performances, film screenings and workshops creatively celebrating early-old-age women.

Figure 19. An extract from an 'Older Women Rock!' leaflet.

Events have included:

- A film programme curated by Nuala O'Sullivan, the Director of the 'Women Over Fifty Film Festival'. Documentaries, shorts, animation and experimental films were shown, each with a woman over 50 at its centre on the screen or behind the lens in the core creative team as writer, director or producer.
- The documentary, 'Stories from the She Punks', made up of interviews with women who played in punk bands in the 1970s. After a Q&A with the filmmaker Helen Reddington, instruments were supplied and some of the audience took part in a glorious punk jam session.
- A panel discussion with Polly Russell, British Library curator of the 'Spare Rib' digital archive and Linda Bellos from the Spare Rib collective. *Spare Rib* was an active part of the Women's Liberation Movement in the late twentieth century, running from 1972 to 1993 and challenging the stereotyping and exploitation of women, while supporting collective, realistic solutions to the hurdles women face. Several members of the audience had been *Spare Rib* readers and lively discussion was generated, and memories shared, about involvement in the women's movement.
- Two well-attended Profanity Embroidery Group workshops, one for women over 55, the other open to everyone. Profane embroidery embellished handkerchiefs, pillowcases and clothes.
- Screenings of a short film, 'watch', which I made with filmmaker Ewan Golder, about the impact of dementia on a father–daughter relationship.
- A panel, 'Older Lesbians Rock!', featured Linda Bellos, Sue O'Sullivan and Alison Read charting changes they have seen over the past decades, as well as exploring issues that impact their lives now.
- A talk by Professor Julia Twigg about her research on older women and fashion, followed by a lively and informative panel of older women presenting images of clothes they have worn through their lifetime and through their journey with feminism.
- A disco, which attracted feedback like:

> 'A big transformation was prompted by the disco last night. Despite having been someone who had loved music, the closed person I had become couldn't even hear music, let alone feel it. Then last night "Ride On Time" broke right through, lifted me off my chair and inspired me to regain my music. In the 80s I had done so much DJ-ing and had access to hundreds of singles and had the sense to make cassette tapes of the best. So this morning I spent a couple of hours listening to some of those tapes and bopping round the living room (admittedly holding on to the furniture). It was energising. Not only did it take me back to some good times but it was good exercise. If the next time you walk along the promenade it is throbbing, it will be because I am still dancing.'

- A performance line-up of older women singers, musicians and poets. One male member of the audience wrote in the visitors' book:

> 'I didn't get it at first when my partner said she was going to be part of an 'Older Women Rock!' performance. Thoughts of ageing rock chicks in leathers recalling and lamenting former glory days came to mind. I couldn't have been more wrong. 'Older Women Rock!' is for me a brilliant example of the reintegration of art into the very way we live our lives. A brilliant, thought-provoking, bloke-challenging, multi-sensory project.'

Getting the Word Out

I wanted to publicise events in innovative ways to reach a wide audience of people who might not be drawn to a feminist exhibition or talk.

Lines from a group poem on the theme of the power of older women have appeared in shop windows. I found a company that produced rhubarb and custard-flavoured 'Older Women Rock!' sticks of rock and sweets which were distributed along with flyers.

Figure 20. The 'Older Women Rock!' rock sweets. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Posters and flyers were designed with layout, colours and images to contradict 'boring' and 'bland', words often associated with ageing.

I organised a joyful Zumba Gold flashmob in Folkestone Shopping Centre. The women had never performed in public before and initially struggled with issues of confidence and feelings of vulnerability. The process of bringing the group together to perform was exciting and hopeful.

A Zumba Gold class in a local hotel attracted many older working-class women from the town. New contacts were made by approaching older women in supermarkets

Figure 21. 'Older Women Rock!' poster.

and at social events and through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and a Crowdfunder. One such contact led to the pairing of 'Older Women Rock!' with an International Women's Day flashmob of older women in Newcastle.

Film

Two 'Older Women Rock!' films have been made, both imparting a flavour of the vibrancy and power of older women.

- 'Older Women Rock!: The Documentary' by filmmaker Clare Unsworth is a creative record of the pilot project in Folkestone, showing poetry-emblazoned retro clothes, the Zumba Gold flashmob and 19 older models strutting a Subversive Catwalk. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aS5D0wEAclI.
- 'Lines', a public service announcement film was shown on performance artist Tammy WhyNot's YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9l8Q29LkGU.

'Older Women Rock!' and Me

'Older Women Rock!' accompanied me, inspired me and comforted me through my mid- to late 60s. The project demanded of me that I face full-on the harshness and

relentlessness of oppression while remaining positive so I could impart hope to the older women I was meeting. It is easy to get discouraged in the face of the collapse of an individualistic, for-profit society where older women are hit hard, especially when sexism and old-age oppression is compounded by racism, classism, poverty and disability oppression.

In running the project, I experienced the fabulousness of falling about laughing as we reminisced and talked about all the changes we have lived through. And I had to witness the isolation of older women, our fears of what the end of life will look like for us, especially women who do not have a strong support network of family and/or friends.

A major challenge in facilitating 'Older Women Rock!' workshops and events was the unpredictability of older women's lives. Continuity is key to building safety and trust and it was not always possible to rely on women's attendance for any number of understandable, age-related reasons – ill-health, hospital appointments, bereavement, caring responsibilities for parents, friends and grandchildren – and the occasional, more joyful reason of spontaneous holidays.

Society expects little of us as we age, the message is we should 'slow down', 'take it easy', 'leave the big things to the younger people.' I have no intention of doing so. Yet the project brought home to me the reality that as a child-free woman who has built my life on women's liberation activism, I have had many privileges. The majority of the women I met, especially the working-class women, had worked hard all their lives running a home, raising children, supporting a husband, while holding down paid work that was often gruelling and low-paid. They wanted to slow down and enjoy a well-earned rest. They took what they wanted from the project – companionship, new skills, an enhanced sense of their value. But as with all artist-led, time-limited projects, I will never know if the gains were sustained. Fortunately, I am still collaborating with the older women artists in East Kent and London and we remain firmly in each others' lives.

What Next?

Now, in my early 70s, I am ready to restart creative connection with women of my age.

Fashion designer and stylist Claire Angel and I have responded to requests to buy 'Older Women Rock!' jackets by creating pieces for sale, which have been featured in pop-up shops in Kent.

My goal for the next phase of 'Older Women Rock!' is 'A Woman's Lifetime'. Fundraising permitting it will be a six-month 'residency' in a women's prison, focusing on intergenerational dialogue about experiences of sexism at different stages of

a woman's life course. Prior to COVID-19, a collaboration was established between myself, Women in Prison, the Centre for Policy on Ageing, and the Social Responsibility Unit of the London College of Fashion.

I plan to lead workshops featuring the 'Older Women Rock!' collection of clothing to:

- assist women to experience new insights into life transitions by learning from each other.
- provide a peer support environment which nurtures resilience, confidence and self-esteem and promotes enhanced emotional wellbeing.
- create garments, adorned with poems and facts about experiences of sexism across the life course of women.
- evaluate benefits of the intervention, including group cohesion, raised awareness of issues facing women as they age, the development of understanding of fashion and ageing and fashion as a tool for social change.

A spin-off from 'Older Women Rock!', 'a:dress' is a Folkestone-based campaign about women, fast fashion and climate justice. Clothes have been embellished with poetry and messages about the devastating contribution fast fashion makes to the climate crisis. A beautiful collection of poetry clothing has been created by women and girls, taken onto the local streets in intergenerational Subversive Catwalks and recorded on film. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qTjVxyNt_SCNEbneMz2At5QRCkLOcazp/view?usp=sharing.

And finally, as a woman who acquired a tattoo to mark her 70th birthday and another to mark the death of her life-partner, I am excited to identify and interview older women who have been tattooed as a later-life 'rite of passage'. A vintage ballgown will be covered with our poetry, images of our tattoos and the stories behind them.

How to Find Lost Stuff
Arm yourself with a map, a letter,
a photo, a diary, a document of murky
provenance.
Learn digging etiquette. Learn to crack code.
Pack a detector, a small shovel, tweezers.
Buy a techno gadget that counts tears.
Travel to remote, difficult-to-access locations
[islands are excellent].
Discover stuff right under your feet.
Mine complex tunnels. Drill deep.
Notice clues, the blackbird, white feathers,
camera jam, a frozen screen.

And when you do find your
shedded pubic hair and eyelashes,
your stash of memories,
the urge to dance wildly at 2am,
the cache of your long-gone monthly blood,
your mother, your father, the touch of your late lover,
make a mental note of how each sounds.
Then commit them
to your skin

Leah Thorn

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'Hope Appeared Like a Flash': A Performance-Research Narrative of Passages Theatre Group

Bridie Moore

Abstract: This article explores the work of Passages, a group of performers aged 60 and over, with whom the author researched the performance of ageing and made performance work in an experimental, intimate and participative style. The aim was to investigate if performance could disrupt or 'trouble' (Butler 1990) notions of age and ageing, as well as to acknowledge normative constructions of the figure of the old person in Western culture. It describes techniques and insights drawn from the research and shows that these were discovered by engaging – through theatre practice – with age, performance and social theory. It is hoped that practitioners may adapt the pieces and methods for use in their own work. The article evidences audience reception, demonstrates methods of performance practice-as-research and offers insight into the value of the work for Age Studies.

Keywords: practice-as-research; ageing; performance; Age Studies; Passages; participation; audience reception

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Introduction

This article explores the work of Passages, a group of performers over the age of 60, with whom I have researched the performance of age and ageing and made performance work in an experimental, intimate and participative style. Here I describe generalisable techniques and some insights drawn from the work and show how these were discovered by engaging – through theatre practice – with age, performance and social theory. I hope that interested practitioners may be able to adapt some of the pieces and methods for use in their own work. The article also demonstrates methods of performance practice-as-research and offers insight into the value of these for Age Studies.[1]

Passages began in October 2012 as part of my AHRC-funded PhD at the University of Sheffield. Through a series of experimental workshops and performances, the group explored the representation, meaning and lived experience of growing older and aimed to find new 'troubling' performances of age. I am borrowing Judith Butler's notion of 'trouble' explored in the seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), and extending this term to encompass the category of age, in an attempt to describe the ways that performance might be able to 'trouble' or disrupt both normative understandings of what it is to be and to become old, and the value ascribed to the figure of the old person. Such common understandings are associated with decline and dependency, thus representing a negative value.[2] By engaging in experimental and postdramatic theatre practices, part of this 'troubling' included challenging stylistic expectations of elder theatre, which I perceived to be aligned with amateur theatre, reminiscence theatre or naturalistic dramas.[3] The making processes had to encompass the social, familial and health needs of Passages' 24 members so the style of devising and rehearsal was necessarily improvisational, autobiographical and incorporated a loose final performance style that allowed for a shifting membership across different performances of the same material.[4] The long-term members of the project were aged

[1] These claims, for the insights generated from the work, are explored more fully in my PhD thesis 'Effects Metaphors and Masks: Reading and Doing Age in Contemporary British Theatre' (2018), which, along with accompanying videos, can be accessed here: http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/21470.

[2] Gullette (2004); Calasanti and Zajicek (1997).

[3] At the 2012 British Society of Gerontology conference, Anne Basting, co-presenter in a symposium entitled 'Theatre, Ageing and Community Memory: Translating Research into Performance', responded to my request for advice about starting my practice-as-research group (Passages), by suggesting that old people should *not* be restricted to older dramatic forms but be formally innovative and engaged in contemporary, postdramatic theatre practices. For a discussion of the term 'postdramatic', see Lehmann (2006).

[4] For more on the creative processes and how the needs of the participants were accommodated, watch the British Society of Gerontology's Ageing Bites video (18 mins), in which Clare McManus and I explore the making, rehearsal and performance methods of the group: available at Ageing Bites.

between 60 and 90, and were recruited from the local community, particularly, though not exclusively, through the University of the Third Age Sheffield branch (SU3A), for whom the work achieved 'Special Learning Project' status.[5] The participants were of mixed ability from the absolute novice to ex-professional performer but represented – because of their age – a group of what Tehseen Noorani calls 'experts by experience'.[6] The demographic of Passages was predominantly middle-class, female, white and mostly educated to degree level.[7] While this fails to represent a diversity of experience of ageing, Passages was, at its inception, to my knowledge the only group of old people formed explicitly for the purposes of researching representations of age and ageing through performance practice-as-research.[8] Given this uniqueness, together with our focused awareness of the lack of diversity in the group, Passages could nevertheless claim its right to take a perspective and make performance about *specific* experiences of ageing.[9] The interactive work of the group has involved diverse audiences, from members of a sheltered housing community to refugees and asylum seekers at an English language learners' group. We have played to passing audiences in Sheffield's Winter Garden (2013) and academic audiences at the British Society of Gerontology's conference in Newcastle (2015). This has opened a dialogue with different communities about the performance of age and ageing. In a short article it is impossible to fully evaluate the three years of the research project, but here I offer readers a gloss of the praxis to outline methods of working and the insights I derived from these. I then focus on Passages' 2014 production *A Blueprint for Ageing*, as a case study, unpublished beyond my thesis.[10]

This practice-as-research project was inspired by Butler's notion that identity is performative, and that iterative performances of gender identity are generated not

[5] The U3A is a national organisation for retired or semi-retired people over the age of 50. See www.u3a.org.uk

[6] Noorani (2015: 32).

[7] We spoke at length about this demographic feature of the group and apart from two members, all self-identified as middle-class. Members included former teachers of the humanities (including a head teacher), an arts commissioner, a poet, a business administrator and a voice tutor.

[8] I have chosen, with Barbara Macdonald, to embrace the word 'old' rather than 'older', which as Macdonald observes, is euphemistic; she sees the 'avoidance of "old" as the clearest sign of our shame around ageing' (2001: x). I also argue that it constructs the old person only in relation to a projected age-normative citizen.

[9] There are a large number of theatre groups for old people, many of which are documented in Organ (2016); however, this community work is markedly different from a research project in that old people are central to the creation and interrogation of representations of old age.

[10] More extensive analysis of the practice-as-research can be found in my 2018 PhD thesis: Moore (2018). The very early work was discussed in Moore (2012). The analysis of the one-to-one performances in *The Mirror Stage* can be found in Moore (2019). The article published here covers practice not extensively covered in the two articles named above.

only by individuals but also by cultural apparatus.[11] Butler's ideas have been extended by others such as Anne Basting to apply to the category of age as well as to gender.[12] Seeing theatre as part of the apparatus of culture, I looked for ways that new and 'troubling' performances of age and ageing might be generated by performance-research. I read widely in age and age-identity theory and, as discussed below, researched age performance and representation, norms of age-identity, narratives, images and conceptual metaphors of ageing. I looked for common narratives about ageing and being old, asking what the figure of the old person represents in cultural productions, especially performance, and how this figure might possibly be made to subvert or 'trouble' common perceptions of age through practice-as-research. Social scientists Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth, discussing how the visual impact of the aged body and face acts as a barrier to understanding the old person as fully human, propose that 'the mask of ageing is a mask that is hard to remove'.[13] The mask of ageing and the artefact of the mirror in psychoanalytical theorist Kathleen Woodward's notion of the 'mirror stage of old age' emerged as potent experimental starting points.[14] Other, more spatial, and dynamic notions, such as the metaphorical concept of life as an up-over-and-downhill journey also emerged from research. I experimented with the ideas of writers such as Anca Cristofovici – who describes the old female body in Jeff Wall's 1992 photomontage *The Giant* as displaying 'accomplished shape' and 'significant form' – and played with the concept of *iconic* images of the body, developed out of Cristofovici's photographic theory.[15] Gullette's work helped me challenge the normative narrative of decline, obsolescence and disappearance, both within the making of the work – guiding the age-aware interpersonal relations within the group – and with respect to the contemporary performance forms created.

I applied a practice-as-research method formulated with reference to theory from Robin Nelson (2013), Anna Fenemore (2012) and Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (2009), combining this with David Kolb's work on the Experiential Learning Cycle (1984). I selected possible actions, ideas or images from my reading and, using performance facilitation skills, put these elements to the test of practice. The work that emerged generated an age praxis, which is the main contribution of this article. Below I describe and analyse some of this, with a view to offering the practitioner ways in

[11] Butler (1988, 2006 [1990]).

[12] Basting (1998: 6–10); the European Network in Aging Studies inaugural conference literature notes 'Theories of performativity claim that age identities are formed and perpetuated through the repetition of behavioural scripts connected to chronological ages and life stages. Since these repetitions can never be identical to the original scripts, there is room for subversion and change' (Maastricht, 2011).

[13] Featherstone and Hepworth (1991: 382).

[14] Woodward (1991: 53–71).

[15] Cristofovici (1999: 275); Moore (2014).

which they might approach similar work with elders. I also explore how this experimentation was perceived by the audience, firstly in the description of 'The Mask & Mirror' performance piece and then exploring Passages' performance *A Blueprint for Ageing*.

A Glossary of Praxis

Cultural Inscription

Beverley Skeggs, drawing from Marxist philosophy and developing Bourdieu's notion of a symbolic economy, proposes that bodies are culturally inscribed with value, 'one that is always a moral categorization an assertion of worth'.[16] These ideas inspired our experiments with ways that the old body might be reinscribed; we aimed to unsettle the meaning of the markers of age and disrupt the value inscribed upon the figure of the old person. We linked Skeggs's ideas about value and the aged body to the image of the mask and notions of masquerade and this drove the dramaturgy of our performance *The Mirror Stage*, which I return to below, where performers were masked in various ways, for most of the piece.[17] We also played with the ways that different costumes, movement and body styles created an impression of age or confused age assumptions, thus – as audience members' comments show (see below) – both revealing and disrupting the notions of value associated with the markers of age.

'The Mask & Mirror'

The combination of images, movement, and words that I call 'The Mask & Mirror' performance became one of the most powerful pieces in our repertoire, revealing the multiple experiences and common representations of age and ageing, and opening these for consideration by the audience. The mask and the mirror are potent images in age theory; Woodward proposes that at the end of life there is an equivalent stage to Lacan's mirror stage of infancy, in which – unlike the Lacanian infant who understands and accepts the image in the mirror as a representation of his or her own body – the old person *rejects* their mirror image as not a true representation of self.[18] This rejection brings on a psychic crisis, as the true location of the aged subject comes into doubt. Passages' work brought Woodward's notion of 'the mirror stage of old

[16] Skeggs (2004: 14).
[17] Woodward (1991: 147–65).
[18] Woodward (1991: 53–71).

Figure 1. The Mask & Mirror. © Andy Brown.

age' together with Featherstone and Hepworth's analysis of ageing as 'a mask that is hard to remove' (quoted above). The mask of ageing refers to the sags, wrinkles and other signs of ageing on the face and body which, in a society that devalues old people, obscures the legitimacy of the old person as a fully functioning citizen. This mask contributes to what Robert Butler and Myrna Lewis identify as allowing younger people to 'cease to identify with their elders as human beings'.[19] Passages' performances *Life Acts* (2013) and *The Mirror Stage* (2015) developed these ideas into a piece in which the performers danced with their masked reflections. In *Life Acts* the performers waltzed, each holding a hand-mirror as if it were a dance partner. When the music faded and the dancing stopped, in a unison gesture, performers fully revealed their faces. One by one, each performer looked at their reflection and spoke directly to the audience about what they saw, now unmasked in the mirror.

Some performers described changes that had been wrought on their faces and bodies by time; others noted aspects of their appearance that remained constant such as 'Irish red hair'. In the second iteration in *The Mirror Stage* the audience had to wait until the end of the show to see the faces of most of the company, so the masking

[19] Quoted in Bytheway (1995: 30).

of the face had thrown a kind of neutrality or anonymity over the old performing body prior to this moment. Once the masks were removed and the audience got a clearer sense of the performers' ages, the cast claimed – through their speeches – some agency over the meaning and value inscribed upon their bodies. Casting off the mask revealed a secondary mask, the aged face, one that, as Hepworth and Featherstone argue, is constructed by the marks of ageing, rendering the old person illegible as a fully admissible subject. While the male performers did claim some agency here, it was most pertinent for the women. Women – as Susan Sontag has claimed in her seminal 1972 essay 'The Double Standard of Ageing' – suffer a double jeopardy of sexism/ageism. As she says, 'for the normal changes that age inscribes upon every human face, women are much more heavily penalized than men'.[20] Interestingly, though aged women often report suffering invisibility, Woodward argues that paradoxically this can also become a sort of '*hypervisibility*' in which the face is scrutinised for signs of ageing.[21] Gullette argues, when critiquing what she calls the 'uglification industry' that 'the face receives the most minute critique'.[22] In 'The Mask & Mirror' the descriptions written and spoken by each individual – by explicitly naming the marks of ageing and holding up the face (and body) that bears them to staged scrutiny – disrupted the illegibility and hypervisibility to which the aged body is subject. Facial lines, thickening torsos and the quality of old flesh, were all brought into focus, owned and positioned as characteristics in the possession of the individual who claimed them. One audience member, in answer to a question about what was most powerful or resonant, wrote: 'The mask/mirror performance. Accepting who we are and the age we are'.[23] Another found that the performance presented 'Older people taking ownership of how they are viewed'.[24] Here we see that it is possible, when performers insist on the legitimacy of their aged faces and bodies, they claim what Dwight Conquergood calls 'the privilege of explicitness'.[25]

One member of the audience commented verbally that during the section where the ensemble was still masked, he kept having to remind himself that these were old people. His email feedback added: 'It did get rid of that automatic "these people are old people" thing in my brain – they could have been any age while they were anonymised with the costumes and masks'.[26] This response demonstrates what literature and age theory show, that the face is the corporeal site where age is primarily

[20] Sontag (1997: 23).
[21] Woodward (1991: 66, emphasis in original).
[22] Gullette (2004: 34).
[23] Audience questionnaire response, 18 April 2013.
[24] Audience questionnaire response, 18 April 2013.
[25] Conquergood (2002: 146).
[26] Email to author, 30 September 2015.

detected. The comment also confirmed that for at least one person the choice to use masks and only to reveal the faces of the whole company at the very end of the piece, had the potential to allow the audience to perceive beyond the 'thing in [the] brain' that limits the capacity of the old body to produce a wide variety of meanings.[27] It also reveals that this audience member at least is holding in tension the act of forgetting the age of the bodies on stage with the act of remembering what is 'really' the case.[28] Feeling this tension between forgetting and remembering brings into focus and unsettles the meanings that attach to age. Jacques Lecoq argues that 'the neutral mask in the end unmasks'.[29] Following this contention the mask can bring about these two states of knowing and forgetting, allowing a dual state of perception in the audience member, both of identification with and distance from the body on stage. This oscillation amounts to more than a suspension of disbelief, having the potential to simultaneously disrupt and reveal meanings that attach to old age. Masks can reveal doubleness, blending and merging identities and meanings. Richard Schechner, describing the Elema, New Guinea *Hevehe* mask ritual claims that 'neither the performed (masks)

[27] In their influential 1991 chapter 'The Mask of Ageing', Featherstone and Hepworth draw attention to the use of clothes as a method by which age-related messages are transmitted. However, in their discussion they draw on Lurie (1981) who cites elderly character The Hon. Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son* whom Dickens describes at her toilet deconstructing her youthful masquerade: 'the painted object shrivelled under her hand; the form collapsed, the hair dropped off, the arched dark eyebrows changed to scanty tufts of grey; the lips shrunk, the skin became cadaverous and loose; an old, worn, yellow nodding woman, with red eyes, alone remained in Cleopatra's place' (1991: 380). Here the prosthetics and cosmetics applied to the face and head appear to be the most potent in building the illusion. Woodward, discussing masquerade as that which 'both conceals and reveals *and* tells a certain truth of its own' (1991: 150 emphasis in the original) looks at Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, drawing attention to an early episode where the hero Aschenbach, standing at a distance mistakes a man in the crowd of young men as similarly youthful. Realising his mistake as he gets closer, Aschenbach is shocked 'to see that [he] was an old man, beyond a doubt, with wrinkles and crows' feet round eyes and mouth; the dull carmine of the cheeks was rouge, the brown hair a wig. His neck was shrunken and sinewy, […] and the unbroken row of double teeth he showed when he laughed was too obviously a cheapish false set' (1991: 150). These two examples from literature along with the propensity for age-denying cosmetic surgery to focus mainly on reconfiguring the face, confirm that age on the human body is primarily read from the neck upwards.

[28] It is important here to note that my aim was not to obscure the age of the bodies (the hands were shown, and one-to-one, face-to-face encounters were experienced in the first part of the performance) but to discover techniques that would temporarily shift the perception of what the old body can mean in performance, and therefore, by extension, in everyday life.

[29] Lecoq (2002: 39). Claiming that the masks we chose were 'neutral' (Lecoq's term) could be problematic, as the sort of masks we used may be perceived as reproducing a Caucasian and Western notion of youth and beauty. Though any mask will convey meaning of one sort or another, these plain, white masks, some petite, sculpted and approximating an ideal of feminine beauty and some larger, flatter and less conventionally beautiful, are employed specifically to challenge the meanings that attach to the aged face, rather than to project a specific meaning or identity. Further research to experiment with masks that might produce more subversive age effects would be beneficial.

nor the performers (villagers) is absorbed into each other […]. It is not that one reality reflects, represents, or distils the other: Both move freely through the same time/space. The realities confront, overlap, interpenetrate each other in a relationship that is, extraordinarily dynamic and fluid'.[30] Bruce McConachie focuses on such a blending phenomenon when – drawing on Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's 'conceptual integration' or 'conceptual blending' theory – he explains the neurological process of 'blending' or 'conceptual integration' with respect to performance. He argues that both actors and spectators are able to hold the understanding of the actor/character duality in their minds by blending seamlessly between the actor and character facets of the body on stage.[31] He comments that: '[t]he activities of the theatre encourage its participants to think about the inherent doubleness of all theatricality'.[32] The audience member, reported above, evidently noted this doubleness as they moved between multiple understandings of the old bodies on stage, confirming that this performance was able to challenge, trouble and subvert normative conceptions of the figure of the old person.

The Aged Body in Temporal Depth

Basting's theories of age in performance, particularly the concept of the aged body in its 'temporal depth' prompted and informed dramatisations of the layering and accretion of identities that happens with age.[33] Basting proposes this model of reading age in performance, reporting that when watching the then 87-year-old Kazuo Ohno's 1989 piece *Water Lilies* she perceived Ohno's aged body in 'temporal depth'. For Basting, Ohno's performance exemplified the 'powers of embodiment at all stages of age' which 'layers the selves created throughout one's life, making it impossible to isolate a single sign of one's age'.[34] In Passages' show *A Blueprint for Ageing* (discussed below) the group focused extensively on performing – and thus exposing – a layered identity, composed archaeologically of a series of successive selves, in order to test if their performance could reproduce for the audience Basting's perception of the performer in their temporal depth.

[30] Schechner (2003: 44).
[31] McConachie (2007: 18).
[32] McConachie (2013: 25).
[33] Basting (1998: 22).
[34] Basting (1998: 146, 141).

The Narrative of Decline

Gullette's critique of Western culture's attitude to ageing – which she describes as a 'decline narrative'– inspired a holistic approach to Passages' work.[35] I challenged the normative narrative of decline, obsolescence and disappearance in various ways: through the meaning of the work, the creation and touring of the three full-length performances, the age-aware interpersonal relations within the group, and the exploration of experimental performance forms. The performances were new, episodic, intimate, fragmented, participative, one-to-one, promenade and interactive, thus countering the decline-orientated adage that you can't teach old dogs new tricks.

Accomplished Shape and Significant Form

Anca Cristofovici's insightful analysis of the image of the old person in photography was central to our work. Developing the concept of the 'poetic body', Cristofovici proposes that the photographic representation of the old person can evince a sense of 'accomplished shape' and 'significant form'.[36] Embodying this notion of significance and accomplishment in performance became a regular point of reference in Passages' creative process and provided a governing philosophy that empowered the bodies of the performers in a general sense. For example, a warm-up that aimed to imbue the performers with a sense of inner and outer illumination required performers to imagine a light within that could be turned up or down; performers also imagined a spotlight tracking them wherever they went. As readers may be able to detect in Figure 2, when 'turned up', this evoked a sense of significance and accomplishment, resulting from a sense of inner inspiration and outer illumination. This practice, engaged in either on or off stage, has the potential to counter the sense of invisibility that ageing people endure.

Combining Cristofovici's and Woodward's ideas of the photographic and psychic representation of age, I proposed the notion of an 'iconic self' which inspired the live feed filming in our first performance *Life Acts*. Here the image of the aged performer is elevated to iconic status. The notion of an 'iconic self' identifies the presence of a fixed sense of self in the imagination and helps explore how that might or might not shift over time. Passages' work proposes ways an iconic status might be created for the aged person's internal image of themselves, through external (magnifying) techniques such as live feed (see Figure 3).

[35] Gullette (2004: 13).
[36] Cristofovici (1999: 275).

Figure 2. Studio work exploring 'significant form' and 'accomplished shape.' © The Author.

Figure 3. Live feed, and the iconic self. © Andy Brown.

Metaphor

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's 1980 work *Metaphors We Live By* was influential. Metaphors such as 'life is a race', 'the journey of life' or 'the stages of life' structure human understanding. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are not confined to linguistic devices but can encompass visual or gestural signals, which construct our thinking about emotions, complex and abstract concepts, and experiences. *A Blueprint for Ageing* explored the metaphors and narratives present in culture, which prescribe ways to conceptualise ageing, and consequently tend to fix understandings and expectations of the lifecourse and ageing processes. We exposed the shape these notions give to our experience of ageing and, while we challenged such notions and offered new metaphors, we also acknowledged the way lives are shaped by these metaphorical conceptualisations. *Blueprint*, discussed next, explored how metaphor can construct and challenge conceptualisations of age and ageing.

A Blueprint for Ageing

In Passages' show *A Blueprint for Ageing* (the title ironically suggests an instructional or foundational plan for the processes of living to old age) much of the praxis discussed briefly above was employed to expose and question the 'wholeness' (or universality) of certain framing structures – including ways in which particular lives do actually adhere to such essentialised constructions.[37] We explored narratives, plans, schemes, images and maps, which employ metaphors such as the journey, the race or the calendar year. These constructions, originally presented in dramatic, poetic, prose and song form, were offered up and then cut across, variously by dramaturgy, dissenting comments from the cast, audio interviews and, on occasion, contributions from audience participants. Below I focus on how the piece explored metaphor, particularly the 'age is a series of stages' metaphor.

We began with an exploration of 'The Seven Ages of Man', a speech given by the character Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599). Opening with the line 'All the world's a stage',[38] each new age-stage is exemplified by a character or identity: 'The Infant', 'The Schoolboy', 'The Lover', and so forth, so constructing a universal narrative. This corresponds to Gullette's narrative of decline, presenting a fixed account of the lifecourse that proceeds by steps up and then down, where the

[37] To verify (or dispute) some of the claims made in this section a video of this performance can be seen at A Blueprint for Ageing (a private link, please use for research purposes only).
[38] (II. vii. l.137).

individual (male in this case) achieves agency and maturity in the fourth and fifth stages and declines through the sixth and seventh. In *Blueprint* the gestural and verbal content of each player's response to playing each 'stage' often contradicted or undermined the prescription of the speech. For instance, when 'The Soldier' was introduced, performer Clare McManus – who had just played 'The Lover' – protested: 'That's rubbish! It's not honour you'll get in the cannon's mouth, it's death'. Shirley Simpson in the role of 'The Soldier' replied: 'but in the corporate world, females have to have sharp elbows to get on'. Our alternative performance debated and dramatised a gender shift, away from Shakespeare's male-orientated version. The old women played against type, both by critiquing that which is prescribed by the text and through their naughtiness, which runs counter to the normative behaviour of old women. Eventually, after performer Romola Guiton's provocative question: 'where are all the women in this?' and after the whole scene had broken down, Jasmine Warwick, who had recited the 'Seven Ages' speech, stormed off, insisting that she was 'only reading the script'.

This concept of a 'script' that constrains and generates a particular identity is explored by Butler in terms of the behavioural script of gender, an entity that

> survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. […] Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.[39]

Applying this understanding to age meant the performance focused on the ways in which cultural apparatus – texts, songs, poems and novels – might constitute such 'already existing directives'. Through performance we wanted to find out how the script of age that such works dictate might be interpreted differently and if performance could afford the actors agency to move beyond such 'culturally restricted corporeal space' and challenge age-normative prescriptions.

The 'stages of age' metaphor was also represented visually. Images of the uphill and downhill progress of life (with midlife at the apex) popular in art from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries were projected within the space. The group challenged these and Shakespeare's prescription, through a number of actions in addition to the reinterpretation of the 'Seven Ages' speech. For example, in one part of the space a team of white-coated performers, presented as researchers, wrote lists of every 'stage' they had been through in their lives, every 'identity' they had been assigned or claimed. These lists were projected, via OHPs, onto the rear wall. Other researchers encouraged the audience to talk to those writing on the OHPs and to write their own

[39] Butler (1988: 526).

Figure 4. Performers record all the identities they have ever held. © The Author.

lists on clipboards, indicating that these lists should be added to at convenient points in the performance (see Figure 4). So, audience members became fellow researchers, investigating how identity changes through time and problematising the notion of fixed stages through which people universally pass as they age.

This work expressed Basting's 'depth model of aging' one that 'encompasses a *lifetime* of changes and possibilities at the dense point of overlap between theatrical performance and theoretical performativity'.[40] At one point the cast lined up, facing the wall and these 'identities' were projected onto their backs and above their heads, inscribing or labelling these bodies as, for instance, 'tennis player' or 'Sunday school girl' (see Figure 5). These now partly anonymous bodies played a solo game of 'gentleman's excuse me', performers replacing one another after a tap on the shoulder. At this moment each new body was anonymised as the performer turned to face the wall, inscribed, as Skeggs might put it, with any number of identity values. Over this action the voices of people from outside the space were admitted as an audio montage: interviewees discussed the proposition that life is split up into different stages. This audio interjection, heard both here and later in the 'leaf-fall' section (see below),

[40] Basting (1998: 145, emphasis in original).

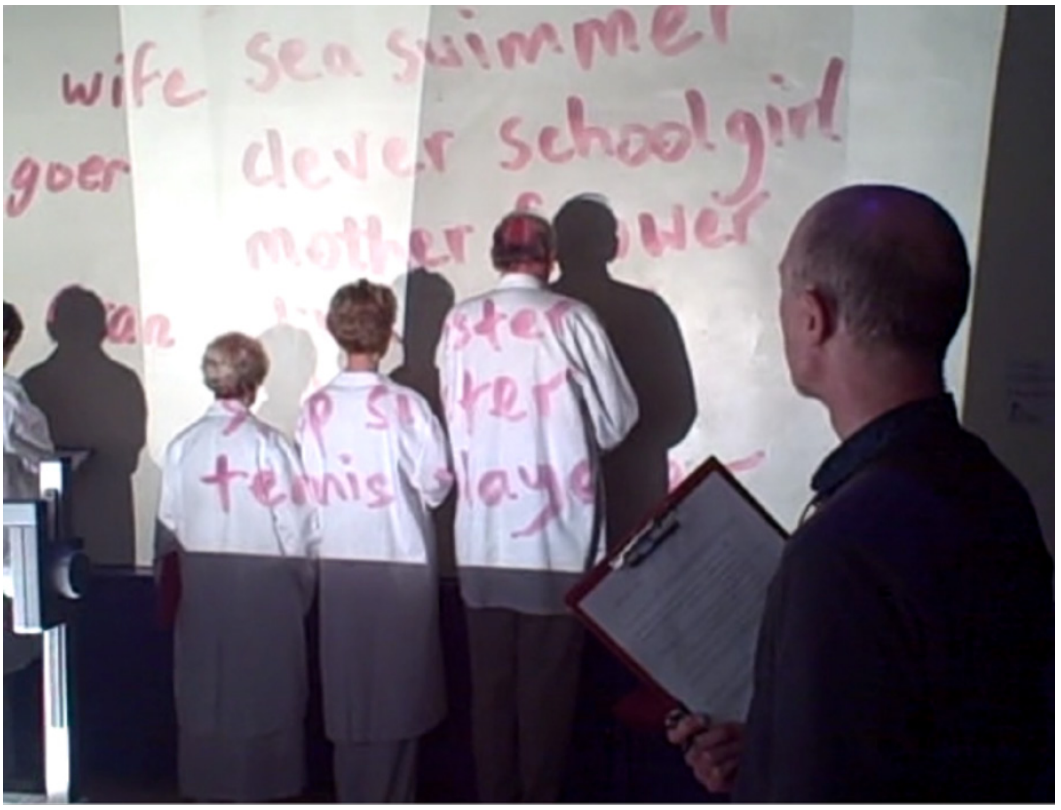

Figure 5. Identities projected above and onto the backs of the researchers. © The Author.

acknowledged lives outside the theatre, lives subject to similar questions about trajectories and popular conceptualisations of the ageing process.

The performance also enlisted Basting's depth model to dramatise and challenge the metaphor of 'life is a year' in which each season represents a stage through which human beings pass. With Ervin Drake's nostalgic ballad 'A Very Good Year' (1961), sung by Frank Sinatra playing in the background each performer stood alone, enacting their life's emotional journey. The performers employed the early Stanislavskian technique of accessing emotion memory.[41] In what might be termed a micro-enactment, performers were directed to think through the emotionally significant moments in their life and to allow their facial expressions and bodily attitude to change only as little as is stimulated by the actual memory.[42] In this way the complexity of the emotional journey as it registered in micro-movements on the faces and bodies of the performers compelled the audience's attention. The room became suffused with an atmosphere

[41] Stanislavski (1980: 163–92).

[42] This technique is also called 'affective memory'; for a short explanation see Gordon (2006: 47–8).

of concentration as the song underscored the performers' micro-enactments. These performances contradicted the simplicity of Drake's lyrics in which the male singer is framed as a consumer of a number of varieties of 'girls' at various stages in life: spring at 17, summer at 21 and again at 35, as if they are bottles of wine. Ultimately, looking back from 'the autumn' of his years (at some unspecified age after 35) the singer sees his whole life in simple terms as a 'very good year' – a vintage wine – which he has drunk 'from the brim to the dregs'. In contrast, the intensity of these women's micro-performances hinted at complex, secret lives of desire, loss and love, hints that might confirm that – as Basting proposes – 'the body itself *performs* time through practice'.[43]

Passages also enacted a comical version of the 'life is a journey' metaphor, presenting a spatial and verbal précis of the life of some performers (and also volunteer audience members), who tracked and enacted their lives as a geographical/spatial timeline. Each performer called out the names of various places they had lived in chronological order, moving to corresponding points on their imaginary 'stage map' as they did so, adding details about why they relocated there, explaining their feelings or experiences. A 'reporter' followed each performer and finally asked a question about one element of the journey: for example, why a particular relocation had happened. This piece enacted a variety of life trajectories showing lives in 'temporal depth'. In addition, the entertaining, energetic, and comic style of the performance revealed the old performers as vital, still positively engaged in their journey. One audience member enjoyed that 'things came alive when participants whizzed around the stage in their life travels'.[44] Another commented that, 'when the performers played out the places they had lived in I realised that places = times in my life but these could all be arranged spatially, all rich resources, not chronologically. I am not a story, lost happiness, remembered failure, inevitable decline'.[45] The statement 'I am not a story' shows that this neat, short, comic piece disrupted a normative narrative of ageing and challenged at least this audience member to think about their life trajectory in a more positive light than popular metaphors and narratives of ageing might prescribe.

The most potent section of the performance, one in which we created a new metaphor of ageing, was the 'Leaf Fall of Identities' piece. Across the empty playing space, as the second *vox pop* audio-montage played, Liz Seneveratne, Jen Creaghan and Romola Guiton dropped small white pieces of paper, a 'Hansel and Gretel' trail. On each piece of paper was written a word or phrase denoting a specific label,

[43] Basting (1998: 145, emphasis in the original).
[44] Audience response questionnaire, 11 June 2014.
[45] Audience response received as an email attachment, 13 June 2014.

identity or phase of their life. These linked back to the list of identities written by the white-coated researchers and the audience-participants. Slowly, as the last cast member left the space, similar pieces of white paper began to flutter down from the ceiling. Whichever way they fell the audience could read these short phrases or words and, as the papers mingled with each other, the audio piece played, discussing the idea of fixed stages of life, revealing differing views about what these stages consist of, the order they follow, how long they last and even if they exist at all.

Creaghan returned to the littered stage. She swept up the papers, then stopped and recited an excerpt from her list: 'Baby Girl, Brown-Eyed Girl, Girl with Pony-Tail, Tomboy, Bossy Boots, Grammar School Girl'. She continued sweeping and was joined by a second performer who eventually stopped. Obeying the rules of the game Creaghan stopped, and the new performer recited from her list. Having finished, the two performers began sweeping again, to be joined by a third. Following the same pattern, eventually all the cast were participating in this game. Once all cast members were present, Tricia Sweeney asked the audience if they would like to join in, using the same rules and the list they had been compiling throughout the performance. Some audience members voiced short extracts from their own catalogue of identities, and then Sweeney instructed all the audience to read out their identities simultaneously, starting from the earliest and vocally projecting any that they particularly wished to be heard.[46] Taken as a whole this last performance piece created a potent new metaphor that challenged the linear sense of progress and decline that the cultural artefacts previously explored had endorsed. In an effort to challenge the prescription of life as a set of stages we had created a new visual, gestural and spatial metaphor for communal, intergenerational and deep ageing.

Lakoff and Johnson examine the function of metaphor in prescribing human understanding arguing that,

> Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.[47]

[46] In later iterations of this piece – used in a wide variety of group settings – all participants write on individual pieces of paper (each single 'identity' inscribed on both sides), then, each person in turn, reads ten of these 'identities' in the stop-start section of the exercise, casting those pieces to the floor. When all have had their solo moment, everyone simultaneously voices their 'identities' as they move around the space, casting each small, inscribed piece of paper to the floor as they do so. At the end of the piece the floor is littered with mingled paper pieces.

[47] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3).

They go on to argue that '[t]he most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture'.[48] Ageing is what they define as a '*basic domain of experience*', one of a group of 'structured wholes within recurrent human experiences', which is organised by language as an '*experiential gestalt*' the type of experience which, as a consequence of such organising language, will 'seem to us to be *natural kinds of experience*'.[49] They elaborate: 'Such gestalts […] represent coherent organizations of our experiences in terms of natural dimensions (parts, *stages*, causes, etc.)'.[50] The types of metaphors that structure thinking about ageing and being old are internalised by subjects and therefore seen as a 'natural dimension' of existence. Consequently, a metaphor such as 'over the hill' sanctions the disappearance of old people from the visual landscape so that it becomes 'natural' not to see images of old people, or actual old people, in the public sphere. The mere presence of Passages' performers on stage directly challenged the controlling metaphor of 'life is an up, over and *down*hill journey'. The aged performers lifted their heads, evinced a sense of significance and accomplishment, 'whizzed around the stage' on their journeys and thereby challenged the body stylistics of the normative, bowed and crippled dowager who is commonly represented as lowered and stooping, nearing the grave well before she gets there.

Lakoff and Johnson also argue that

> [m]etaphor is not merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure. And conceptual structure is not merely a matter of the intellect – it involves all the natural dimensions of our experience, including aspects of our sense experiences: color, shape, texture, sound, etc. […] Artworks provide new ways of structuring our experience in terms of these natural dimensions. Works of art provide new experiential gestalts and, therefore, new coherences.[51]

The trail of paper pieces, each inscribed with a stage of the performer's life, followed by a delicate fall of similar pieces of paper from above, created a new 'experiential gestalt'. Over this scene played the audio-montage, in which interviewees discussed their idiosyncratic notions of the specific stages of life. This combination of sound and action reinforced Vern Bengtson, Glen Elder and Norella Putney's assessment that 'within pluralistic contemporary societies, lifecourse trajectories and transitions display considerable variability.'[52] While the *vox pop* debated the notion of the

[48] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 22).
[49] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 117, emphasis in original).
[50] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 117, emphasis added).
[51] Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 235).
[52] Bengston *et al.* (2012: 9).

'stages of age', the paper pieces, denoting a multitudinous intersection of individual identities, roles, labels and 'stages', fell to the ground and mingled across the stage, providing a visual representation of the myriad and relational nature of aged identity. This presents a metaphorical proposition of age as a layering of identities, which fall and mingle like leaves in the autumn to become humus and to fuel the fecundity of following seasons.

The 'leaf fall' performance piece enacts the sort of layering that Basting notes in the aged performing body; in addition, this action could propose an archaeology of interpersonal, layered identity; as Basting says, 'a performative model of aging carves out a way to speak of both youth and the aged [who] exist relationally, both generationally and within their own bodies'.[53] The paper tokens were swept centre-stage and performers voiced short extracts from their lists in which normative choices such as Hilary Taylor-Firth's 'teacher, mother (twice), grandmother now' sat alongside the idiosyncratic or historically located. For example, Liz Coatman concentrated on her educational and artistic identities: 'Philosophy Student, Girlfriend, Waitress, Graduate Student, Trainee Teacher, English Teacher, Play Producer, RSC Groupie', while McManus focused on her membership of the baby boomer generation by announcing herself as 'Dope Smoker, Acid Dropper, Hippy Chick, Biba Shopper, Stones in the Park Goer'.[54] Here was a visual and spatial representation of the proliferation and relational nature of identity in and across time, that in one audience member's eyes was 'a reminder that we are always a mixture of everything we've ever been'.[55] For at least this member of the audience it restructured understanding from the notion that our lifecourse is only a single trajectory (represented by either a normative up and down journey or a fixed series of stages) into an understanding that collectively our lives are pathways that will intertwine and collide with those of others. One audience member, acknowledging that our identities are constructed in inter-relational terms throughout our lives, observed: 'The scattering and fluttering of the pieces of paper representing identities; when they started to fall it was very powerful and then the sweeping up into the middle altogether – we are not separate in our needs'.[56]

The 'leaf fall' performance constitutes a new *performed* metaphor, which supplements and modifies the common metaphors of ageing rather than eliminating them. Yet as such it may still be said to provide 'a new experiential gestalt'. One audience member appreciated:

[53] Basting (1998: 146).
[54] In performance, 11 June 2014.
[55] Audience response questionnaire, 11 June 2014.
[56] Audience response questionnaire, 11 June 2014.

> the challenge to write down the various roles we had played in the earlier part of our lives – baby, sister, classmate etc. This provided a platform from which to consider ageing as a pathway of a functioning adult instead of just a deterioration process. In this "hope" appeared like a flash – it is not going under, it is living in more minor roles but emphasis on living [sic].[57]

The respondent's report that '"hope" appeared like a flash' indicates that Passages' interactive arts practice, and particularly this new 'leaf-fall' metaphorical construction, has the power to shift understanding. However, it also illuminates the limits of such work. On the one hand this respondent was stimulated to rethink their previously negative attitude to age as 'going under', and refigure the ageing process as 'the pathway of a functioning adult', which seems to level out the metaphorical topography that proposes the rising trajectory of youth and the falling experience of age.[58] Yet at the same time the metaphor of 'life as a series of stages, acts or roles' continues to prevail in the respondent's diminutive notion of the 'minor roles' in which we continue to function. The 'emphasis on living' comment does show that the interactive process and this new visual/performative metaphor – which might be summed up as 'life is a leaf-fall of inter-relational identities' – has had an empowering effect on this respondent. Further research is needed if other new metaphors, narratives and performances are to be created that will challenge and acknowledge common representations of age.

Conclusion

I hope to have outlined here the pertinent praxis which grew out of a practice-as-research project that aimed to contest, trouble and subvert normative understandings of age and ageing both in and through performance. I have shown ways that the practice disrupted perceptions of the figure of the old person on stage and have outlined approaches taken in applying social, performance and age theory to the aim of both acknowledging and challenging normative understandings of age and ageing.

This narrative of Passages' work has necessarily been truncated. Passages continued to work on two more performances between 2015 and 2019 and were also integral to an AHRC-funded intergenerational research project led by Jane Plastow with

[57] Audience response questionnaire, 11 June 2014.

[58] The construction 'going under' is what Lakoff and Johnson call an 'orientational metaphor' (1980: 14–21), which corresponds to the 'physical and cultural experience' (14) of 'health and life are up; sickness and death are down' (15).

Leeds and Sheffield Universities, called INTERSECTION.[59] Passages later disbanded with the onset of the pandemic. Members of the group have gone on to work in many other arts and community performance projects such as Sheffield People's Theatre and Third Bite Dance, and some members continue to meet socially to this day. It seems appropriate, at the close of this narrative, to evidence the age-critical impact that this performance making has had on the performers themselves, by recording here some reactions from members of Passages:[60]

> 'The style has been very, very new for me […] quite eye opening.'[61]
>
> 'With Passages I think I feel less as if I'm being caught by old age […] it's as if it's got less of a grip on me […] as if it's loosening it. Part of it is the actual activity of doing different, experimental things.'[62]
>
> 'It can reaffirm you in who you are because a lot of difficulty about getting older is you're not doing a valuable thing at the moment, you're not contributing to society […], and people treat you like that […], almost like you're a waste of space […]. It's remembering who you are and what you've done and being confident in that.'[63]
>
> 'After the first year of retirement I had that sort of rocking-chair mentality. So I think it has changed my perspective on my own ageing.'[64]
>
> 'Being part of Passages has enabled me to tap into this creative side that I didn't know was there and also I've let it reflect in other aspects of my life […]. It's being amongst people who are so willing to think outside the box because that doesn't come easily to me […]. That's what I've got […] that's my mantra, to be willing to look at things differently.'[65]
>
> 'So yes [it has been] terrifying, challenging but in the end really sort of meaningful and very worthwhile.'[66]
>
> 'It's made me more aware and more understanding, so that maybe, hopefully, I'm more likely to reach across the generation levels than I was before.'[67]

[59] Three different generations in Jinja (Uganda), Nanjing (China) and Sheffield (UK) were involved in a series of theatre workshops which explored 'attitudes towards environmental conservation across time and space' (see https://vimeo.com/177615603) and facilitated their responses to the theme of sustainability. Films of the project can be found, both at the link above and at https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/intersection/theatre/films.

[60] This testimony taken from audio interviews conducted at two points during the process (July 2013 and July 2015); not all members were interviewed due to availability.

[61] Shirley Fox, 28 July 2015.

[62] Ruth Carter, 8 July 2013.

[63] Tricia Sweeney, 29 July 2015.

[64] Ruth Carter, 29 July 2015.

[65] Shirley Fox, 28 July 2015.

[66] John Evans, 30 July 2015.

[67] Tricia Sweeney, 29 July 2015.

> 'It's made me slightly braver to challenge people when they start stereotyping older people. So that's been really helpful and got me in a few states [arguments] as well.'[68]
>
> 'It's like looking in a mirror and seeing who you are. In the studio where we've been working there's been that big mirror on the wall. You can sometimes get lost in who you are, and how you're perceived, and I think I've never really been one to look at myself in the mirror before, and it's almost like a search to find who you are, and then stand on who you are.'[69]

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[68] Shirley Fox, 28 July 2015.

[69] Tricia Sweeney, 29 July 2015.

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PART FOUR

Ageing Now

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The Gender Gap in Pensions: How Policies Continue to Fail Women

Jay Ginn and Liam Foster

Abstract: A large gender gap in UK pensions has been persistent, yet generally ignored by governments. The neoliberal preference since 1980 to reduce state spending on welfare has limited the redistributive potential of state pensions, to the detriment of the low paid and those whose lifecourse is characterised by discontinuous and part-time employment, mainly women. Claims of intergenerational conflict have repeatedly hit headlines over the last 50 years, providing an excuse for cutting state pensions, most recently suspending the Triple Lock. This article examines the gap between older women's and men's personal income, distinguishing state and private pensions and assessing change over time. It is concluded that suitably generous state pensions can reduce the gender gap, while an emphasis on expanding private pensions exacerbates it.

Keywords: gender pensions gap; lifecourse; employment; state pensions; private pensions; parental roles

Note on the authors: Jay Ginn was a Senior Researcher and Associate of the Centre for Ageing and Gender at Surrey University from 1990 to 2005. Her research was mainly concerned with the economic circumstances of older people and how these are influenced by gender, lifecourse events, marital status, class and ethnicity. Books include: *Gender and Later Life* (1991 with Sara Arber), *Connecting Gender and Ageing* (1995, co-edited with Sara Arber), *Women, Work and Pensions* (2001, co-edited with D. Street and S. Arber), *Gender, Pensions and the Lifecourse* (2003).

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Introduction

Women's lower retirement incomes relative to men's – the gender gap in pensions – has been persistent, despite the increasing employment of women since the 1960s and equality legislation in the 1970s. This outcome reflects not only the gender pay gap and gendered employment patterns (hours of work, occupations and career breaks), but also government policies towards pension provision. Relevant policies include: the adequacy of the state pension as a proportion of average earnings and in relation to rises in the cost-of-living indices; the extent of protection provided by the state pension entitlement for those with care responsibilities; and the use of costly subsidies to promote the expansion of private pension provision. In private pension acquisition, women's disadvantage relative to men is evident at all levels of educational qualification, reflecting the impact of a lifecourse characterised by gendered roles in responsibility for childcare.[1] Both years of membership of private pension schemes and level of contributions are reduced by women's gendered roles.

Recent research has clarified and quantified the factors responsible for the gender pay gap. Gender divergence in earnings – 'the child penalty' – was found to coincide with the timing of parenthood.[2] In 2020, reducing hours of paid work or ceasing employment altogether to care for children was roughly gender equal (4 per cent of men, 5 per cent of women) but among lone parents, mainly women, 9 per cent were badly affected. Moreover, nearly half of mothers' hours doing paid work were split between paid work and other tasks including childcare, compared with under a third for fathers.[3]

Government policy on pensions has the potential to recognise and value the unpaid labour undertaken predominantly by women, especially mothers. Following the implementation of National Insurance (NI) based on Beveridge's 1942 recommendations, employed married women were able to pay a 'small stamp' and also receive a boost to their state pension, up to 60 per cent of their husband's NI pension entitlement. However, this model became increasingly anachronistic with the rise in women's education and employment, together with rising rates of divorce, lone parenthood and cohabitation. Alongside the 1970s legislation on equal pay, 'Home Responsibilities Protection' was enacted, with the intention of compensating in the state earnings-related pension for years spent in childcare. For those who could afford it, privately run childcare services expanded.

In the 1980s, neoliberal ideology began to influence welfare policies, including on pension provision. Structural inequalities within the population aged over 65,

[1] Ginn and Arber (2002); Warren (2003); Foster and Smetherham (2013).
[2] Andrew *et al.* (2021).
[3] Wilkinson and Adams (2021).

associated with gender, occupational class and ethnicity, have increasingly been treated as the outcome of individual decisions on saving for retirement through private (non-state) pensions. Illness, disability and labour market conditions linked to gender, social class and ethnicity all affect earnings and ability to save for retirement. The COVID-19 restrictions, which closed nurseries and schools for long periods, highlighted the heavy reliance on parents, especially mothers, being able to juggle their paid work with childcare, including supervising online learning for school-age children. But all these factors are largely outside the control of individuals, as is the return on saving in the growing sector of private Defined Contribution (DC) pensions.

The effect of private pensions on the gender gap in retirement income is profound, although mitigated somewhat by increasing full-time employment of women and shorter career breaks when public childcare services have been available and affordable. The gender gap in hourly pay from 1997 to 2021 was reduced from 18 per cent to 9 per cent for full-timers and from 29 per cent to 15 per cent for all employees.[4] The question is: how far can developments in women's employment and earnings reduce the gender gap in pensions, given the policy emphasis – bolstered by claims of intergenerational inequity – on limiting the role of inclusive and redistributive state pensions?

In this article, the gendered outcome of state pension retrenchment and increasing reliance on private pension provision are quantified, using research on data from the 2001 General Household Survey and comparing it with more recent data (2018–20). The validity of claims about a demographic crisis and intergenerational conflict is challenged, as are the arguments put forward to legitimate policies for retrenchment of state pensions while promoting and subsidising the expansion of private (mainly DC) pensions where contributions made accumulate in an invested fund but with no guarantee as to the eventual amount of the fund.

Quantifying the Gender Gap in Pensions

At the start of the twenty-first century, the gap between older women's and men's personal income was substantial, women's median gross income being only 57 per cent of men's (as shown in Table 1a, col. 3). The gender gap, as usually defined, was 43 per cent in 2001 (col. 4). For married women the gender gap was largest, at 67 per cent, and much less for widows, 22 per cent, where survivor pensions from state and private pensions were included. Single (never married) women received 85 per cent of single men's income, reflecting the low likelihood, in that generation of pensioners, of having raised

[4] White (2021).

Table 1. Gender gap in total income and in private pension income among those aged 65+

	a) Median gross personal income				b) Median private pension income*				
	Men	**Women**	**W/M**	**Gender**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**W/M**
	£/wk	**£/wk**	**%**	**Gap %**	**% receiving**		**£/wk**	**£/wk**	**%**
Marital status:									
Married/cohabiting	171	56	33	**67**	74	28	92	34	37
Single (never married)	130	109	85	**15**	52	61	65	70	108
Widowed<	144	112	78	**22**	70	56	61	46	75
Divorced/separated	125	92	74	**26**	57	36	78	48	62
All	161	92	57	**43**	71	43	83	44	53
N	1,474	1,882			1,474	1,882	891	694	

Notes:
* For those receiving any private pension income
< including survivor pensions
The gender gap is calculated as 100 – (W/M) as a percentage

Source: Adapted from Arber and Ginn (2004) using General Household Survey 2001/2002

children, allowing them longer full-time employment than ever-married women.[5] The contribution of private pensions to gender inequality is clear: only 43 per cent of older women received private pension income, compared with 71 per cent of older men (Table 1b). Among those receiving income from this source, women's median amount was only 53 per cent of men's. Including the majority of older women who had no income from private pensions would show an even wider gender gap in private pension income. Thus private pensions drive the gender gap; unlike state pensions, they make no allowance for women's typical lifecourse of career breaks and part-time jobs.[6]

Comparable data on the gender gap in personal income by marital status in more recent years is unavailable but evidence of the persistence of the gender gap in pension income is provided by Prospect Union research (as shown in Table 2). Over the five years from 2014 to 2019, the gender gap in average income hovered around 40 per cent, some improvement on the 43 per cent in 2001 (Table 1a). However, among European countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and in the US, the average gender gap in pensions for those aged over 65 was much lower, at 28 per cent, than in the UK.[7]

The gender gap in pension income is still driven by inequality in private pension wealth (as shown in Table 3). The rate of accumulation is slower for women than for men, savings only rising from £8,000 to £8,500 between ages 45–64, while men's increased from £32,000 to £75,000 in the same period (Table 3a, 2006–8). The fall in

[5] Ginn *et al.* (2001); Ginn and Arber (2002); Ginn (2003).
[6] Foster and Ginn (2018).
[7] OECD (2015).

Table 2. Gender gap in total gross pension income* of pensioners from 2014 to 2019

	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17	2018–19
Gender gap %	41.6%	40.7%	39.5%	40.3%

* for those in receipt of state pensions; Table 1 results applied to all those aged over 65

Source: Prospect (2020) based on analysis of Family Resources Survey.

Table 3. Median private pension wealth (£ thousands) for all persons by sex and age group

	a) 2006–8*				b) 2016–18#				c) 2018–20^			
Age	**Men**	**Women**	**W/M %**	**Gap%**	**Men**	**Women**	**W/M%**	**Gap%**	**Men**	**Women**	**W/M%**	**Gap%**
25–34	0	0	~		1.9	1.2	63%		4.0	2.0	50.0%	
35–44	12.0	3.9	32.0%		17.0	11.0	65%		15.3	11.7	76.5%	
45–54	32.0	8.0	40.0%		60.2	30.0	50%		55.0	29.9	54.4%	
55–64	75.1	8.5	11%		146.0	46.3	32%		159.4	62.0	38.9%	
65–74	68.9	5.8	8.0%		182.4	25.0	14%		175.9	34.0	19.3%	
75+	23.8	0.6	2.5%		88.8	9.2	10%		76.1	12.9	17.0%	**83%**
All	10.0	0.2	20.0%	**80%**	22.6	6.0	27%	73%	24.7	8.0	32.0%	**68%**

Notes: W/M percentages calculated from the ONS data.
* July to June. # April to March. ^ April to March.

Source: ONS (2022) Pension Wealth in Great Britain, table 6.10

pension wealth from age 64 reflects withdrawal of pension entitlements after retirement. Comparing over the 12-year period, the gender gap in private pension wealth decreased from 80 per cent to 68 per cent. Cohort differences in women's employment and in their access to occupational pensions are likely to account for some of their increased private pension wealth. For example, among those aged over 75, women in 2006–8 had only 2.5 per cent of men's pension wealth, reflecting their previous earnings and contributions, while the later cohort at the same age 12 years later had 17 per cent of men's pension wealth (Table 3c, 2018–20). Indeed for all those aged over 35, the latest cohort showed an increase in women's share of private pension wealth relative to men's. In addition to changes in women's lifecourse, the introduction in 2012 of auto-enrolment into DC workplace pensions for those earning over the earnings threshold may have disproportionately increased women's private pension saving. However, the overall gender gap in private pension wealth by 2018–20 remained stark at 68 per cent and for those aged over 75 it was 83 per cent (Table 3c).

The gender gap in private pensions has clear effects on the living standards achievable by pensioner men and women, as shown by research carried out by the Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association (PLSA). This showed that two-thirds of women over State Pension Age (SPA) received only enough for a 'minimum' standard of living (under £15,000 pa) compared with two-fifths of pensioner men (PLSA, 2017).

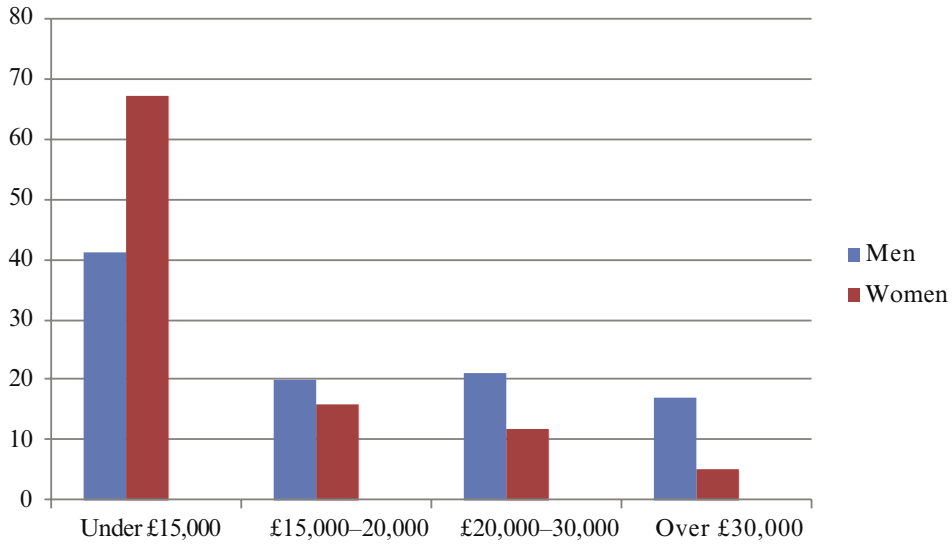

Figure 1. Percentage of men and women over state pension age (SPA) receiving each range of annual private pension income, 2017.

Source: based on data from Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association (2017).

A 'modest' standard (£15,000–20,000 pa) could be reached by 16 per cent of women and 20 per cent of men, a 'comfortable' standard (£20,000–30,000 pa) by 12 per cent of women and 21 per cent of men, while a higher standard (over £30,000 pa) was possible for 17 per cent of men but only 5 per cent of women (as shown in Figure 1). Research shows that among pensioners living in poverty two-thirds were women and half were lone women.[8]

State pensions can in principle provide a far more gender-equal income than private pensions, albeit often at a low level. In 2018, the average annual income from state pensions under the pre-2016 rules was £6,552 for women and £8,008 for equivalent men, a gender gap of 18 per cent.[9] To understand the more egalitarian outcome of state pensions, compared with private pensions, and how state pension value declined after 1980, a brief account of policy changes is required.

Designed Decline in State Pensions

The neoliberal ethos of policies since 1980 – promoting free-market capitalism, deregulation and cuts in government spending – has affected all aspects of the welfare state.

[8] Barnes (2022).
[9] Silcock (2019).

The aim has been to create individual responsibility for welfare by replacing state with private provision. In terms of state pensions, this began with breaking the link of the Basic State Pension (BSP) to average earnings and using the Retail Price Index (RPI) instead; its value (for pensioners under age 80 on their own contributions) fell from 24 per cent of average earnings to 16 per cent by 2000. Between 1980 and 2008, the BSP lost around 40 per cent of its value.[10] It slowly increased to 19 per cent after the introduction of the Triple Lock (annual indexation to the highest of the following: price inflation; average earnings; or 2.5 per cent) in 2010. Progress was slowed by the replacement of RPI with the lower CPI (Consumer Price Index) in 2011.

The State Earnings Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) was also subject to cuts, legislated in 1986 to apply from 1999, halving the 100 per cent widow's pension, and also abandoning the 'best years' formula that would have helped women with career breaks and part-time jobs while caring for children.[11] (For further details see Appendix 1.) Some employees were persuaded by a generous Treasury subsidy to transfer their SERPS entitlements to the new personal pensions introduced in the 1980s, but soon found these had been mis-sold – at a loss to themselves and to the Treasury. Despite this policy failure, in 1998 the New Labour government announced its aim to reduce the state's share of pension provision from 60 per cent to 40 per cent by 2050, while promoting private provision so that it would reach 60 per cent.[12] SERPS was abolished and replaced with the cheaper State Second Pension (S2P) in 2002. Carer Credits in National Insurance, introduced for some of the years spent in childcare and eldercare, were a helpful reform for women. However, by 2001 state pensions were so low that the financial benefit of this reform was small. Among those aged over 65, 20 per cent of single (never married) women, 20 per cent of widows and 40 per cent of divorced or separated women were poor enough to receive means-tested benefits.[13] Nearly two-thirds of those receiving Pension Credit (PC) in 2021 were women.[14]

In 2003, plans were made to further reduce state pension spending, linked to projections of increased longevity, with a predicted rise in the proportion of the adult population who would be aged over 65 from 19 per cent in 2000 to 30 per cent in 2050. State pension spending would be cut from 4.4 per cent to 3.4 per cent of GDP, but spending on means-tested benefits would rise from 1 per cent to 2.6 per cent of GDP (Table 4).

In sum, both the BSP and the S2P had features that partly compensated for women's loss of state pension entitlements due to their caring roles, but the planned decline

[10] Bozio *et al.* (2010).
[11] Ginn (2001); Ginn and Macintyre (2013).
[12] DSS (1998).
[13] Arber and Ginn (2004).
[14] DWP (2021).

Table 4. Projected changes in UK state pension spending, 2000–50

	2000	2050
% aged 65+ among 15+ population	19.0	30.0
State pension spending (age 55+ as % GDP)	4.4	3.4
Spend on means-tested benefits for retired (% GDP)	1.0	2.6

Source: Economic Policy Committee (2003); Shaw (2004)

in the value of state pensions negated the power of these reforms. With the BSP nearly £40/week below the single rate threshold for means-testing, an increasing proportion of pensioners were eligible for means tested benefits. The expectation of means-testing in retirement further discouraged saving in private pensions and was also perceived as a disincentive to finding work among those close to SPA.[15] Despite attempts to encourage private pension saving, there was still evidence of so-called undersaving for retirement.

Consequently, the government set up the Pensions Commission in 2005 to consider ways of increasing private pension saving. The Commission noted that increasing reliance on means-testing in later life would undermine incentives, especially for those with less than full state pensions such as women with caring responsibilities. Significantly, they recognised the need for women to acquire pension entitlements in their own right. The main recommendations (Pension Commission, 2005) were:

1. Index the BSP to average earnings from 2010, to provide an adequate foundation on which to build private saving;
2. Introduce Auto-Enrolment into workplace (DC) private pension schemes, with compulsory employer contributions and tax relief to make saving more attractive.

Auto-enrolment was introduced by the Conservative government in 2012 for large employers and by 2017 included smaller employers. Between 2012 and 2016, the proportion of eligible women in the private sector who were saving in private pensions increased from 40 per cent to 73 per cent;[16] the drawbacks for women and other employees with low pay or precarious employment in such DC pensions are outlined below.

In 2010, Triple Lock indexation (using the highest of earnings, CPI, or 2.5 per cent) was introduced for the BSP, bringing a gradual rise in its value relative to mean full-time earnings of about 18 per cent in 2016 and 19 per cent in 2019, still well below its relative value of nearly 25 per cent in 1979. The replacement of the BSP and S2P by the new flat rate state pension (nSP), payable to those who reached

[15] Jandrić *et al.* (2019).
[16] DWP (2017).

SPA after April 2016, enhanced redistribution towards women: for those receiving the nSP in full, the gender gap in nSP was only 5 per cent.[17] However, there will be losers from the reform, including those with less than 35 years of NI contributions or credits, mainly women. The accrual rate is less than in the pensions it replaces, and the latter required only 30 years of contributions/credits for the full amount. State pension income derived from a spouse's contributions will no longer accrue: wives and widows will in future have state pensions based only on their own contributions or carer credits. Moreover, women have faced a rapid rise in their SPA: between 2010 and 2020, women's SPA increased from 60 to 66, equal to men's. Such a steep rise, for those near to retirement, gave women insufficient time to adjust their plans, prompting the protests by WASPI (Women Against State Pension Inequality). Working longer than planned may not be an option for those with disabilities or long-term illnesses, nor for those, mainly women, who have undertaken to care for grandchildren, their partner or frail parents, limiting employment in their 60s before they have reached the later SPA.

The lost value of the BSP since 1980 has contributed to the BSP being one of the lowest among developed countries, to the detriment of women, who are more likely than men to require carer credits to count towards their BSP and also more likely to be low paid.[18] In 2019 the UK spent 4.7 per cent of GDP on state pensions, less than half that of France, Finland and Austria, and well below the OECD average of 6.5 per cent.[19] Yet the prospect of further rises in state pensions, or even stability, are uncertain, with renewed attacks on state pensions: for example, the government announced the Triple Lock was suspended for the tax year 2022–3; instead state pensions in April 2022 were raised by just 3.1 per cent, while CPI inflation had risen by 7 per cent in the year before March 2022,[20] and average weekly earnings between April 2021–February 2022 rose by around 6 per cent. Such inadequate indexation to either prices or earnings reflects the prevailing neoliberal consensus on reducing the relative value of state pensions and is often justified by claims of intergenerational inequity.

Intergenerational Inequity Claims and Ideology

A moral panic about intergenerational inequity gained political traction in the USA.[21] According to Quadagno (1989), Americans for Generational Equity (AGE) – funded mainly by the finance industry – took up the theme, advocating cuts in Social Security

[17] Silcock (2019).
[18] Foster and Ginn (2018).
[19] McInnes (2021).
[20] ONS (2022: Table 6.10).
[21] Samuelson (1958); Feldstein (1974); Preston (1984); Longman (1987).

and increased private insurance. The policy of cutting state welfare for older people in the interests of younger was formalised and publicised widely by Kotlikoff (1992) as 'Generational Accounting'. In Thatcher's Britain, too, warnings about intergenerational inequity were expressed in Johnson and colleagues (1989). The rhetoric of demographic crisis has been used to legitimise the neoliberal project of state pension retrenchment, citing the 'age support ratio' (age 20–64/age 65+) which in the UK declined from 5.5 in 1950 to 3.7 in 2014.[22] This ratio, however, is less relevant than the ratio of workers to pensioners, which takes account of the rise in employment of women aged 25–54, from 57 per cent in 1975 to 78 per cent in 2017. Mothers' employment also increased in the same period from 50 per cent to 75 per cent although the increase in full-time employment has been limited by insufficient affordable childcare.[23]

The World Bank (1994) also challenged the legitimacy of state welfare, claiming that state spending on pensioners was excessive and that the market was more efficient in providing retirement income. It was argued that state (Pay-As-You-Go – PAYG) pensions are a drain on the economy and a tax burden on workers, while private-funded pensions would provide the national savings needed for capital investment. Yet inadequate state pensions will adversely affect every generation in future, especially women.

Recently, the Intergenerational Foundation (IF) think tank has argued that spending on older people's state pensions, benefits, NHS and social care is unfair to younger generations facing lower living standards than their forebears. Yet half of pensioners are on incomes too low to be liable for income tax. Provocatively titled books on this theme include those by Willetts (2010) and Howker and Malik (2010). Alarmist accounts predict that population ageing will make PAYG state pensions unsustainable. However, projected population ageing is relatively modest in Britain over the next decades, the proportion of older people rising by about 1 per cent every five years on average. Moreover life expectancy increases have stalled,[24] and since 2019 average life expectancy has seen a greater fall (1.3 years for men and 0.9 years for women) than any since the Second World War, due to the impact of COVID-19 on older people.[25]

Pensioners have shared the impact of the austerity years. Indeed they were more likely than those in working age households to experience poverty, unmet need for social care, fuel poverty, poorly insulated damp housing and cold-related deaths.[26] Older people are far from being, as is sometimes implied, a burden on society. Research commissioned by the Women's Royal Voluntary Service showed that after a life of paid and unpaid work, they continue to make a significant contribution to the

[22] Franklin *et al.* (2016: 33).
[23] Institute for Fiscal Studies (2018).
[24] Hiam *et al.* (2018).
[25] Raleigh (2021).
[26] ONS (2015); HC Library (2015); Community Care (2015); DECC (2012); Age UK (2009).

economy, through local and national taxes, as consumers of basic goods, as carers, and as volunteers; the *net* contribution of older people to the economy in 2010 was calculated as almost £40bn.[27]

The argument that reduced spending on state pensions is in the interests of working-age generations is clearly flawed. First, private pensions face the same demographic ageing used to legitimise state pension retrenchment; the claim that population ageing requires a shift from state- to private-funded pensions is therefore at best a questionable one, at worst an irresponsible one.[28] Second, reducing state pensions enlarges the role of means testing, which is expensive to administer and fails to reach the poorest pensioners. Third, a smaller state pension entails employees paying higher contributions into private pensions to compensate – hardly a benign situation for today's and tomorrow's workers.

Risks and Gendered Effects of Private Pensions

The choice to save in a private pension is increasingly confined to schemes in which the worker bears the risk of a poor return on their contributions. Defined Benefit (DB) pension schemes have typically provided a relatively generous employer contribution and guaranteed an annually indexed pension based on years of membership and final or career average earnings. For early leavers, mainly women requiring a career break, the eventual pension was frequently small. Recently, these schemes have often increased contributions or reduced benefits in order to meet their liabilities, whether due to decline in the proportion of contributing members relative to retired or deferred members and their dependants, contribution holidays by employers during boom years, or to lower than expected stock market returns. DB pension schemes are in decline, either closing to new members or changing their rules to the detriment of contributing scheme members. Some are experiencing funding deficits that risk default on pension promises and even insolvency of the employing organisation, in which case the Pension Protection Fund (PPF) provides some compensation, paid for by annual levies on the schemes.

Auto-enrolled DC pensions, in contrast, shift all the financial risks onto employees. The employer chooses the scheme, which may not be a sound one; investment performance may be less than expected, with no compensation for market losses suffered by contributors. For the lowest-paid employees, the contributions may be unaffordable, as feeding a family and paying rent or mortgage are prioritised; portability is

[27] WRVS (2011).
[28] Ginn and Duncan-Jordan (2019).

limited and transfers have incurred extra charges. Moreover, dramatic price inflation creates further pressure on the affordability of private pension contributions. Charges by the insurance company for investment management reduce the fund, roughly cancelling out the benefit of tax relief for those on low to average earnings. Job changes and gaps in employment have created the phenomenon of multiple 'pointless pots', so small that by retirement the charges have eroded the amount to zero.[29] Over time, the shares of contributions from employees, employers and tax relief from the Treasury have shifted, with the employer's share reducing since 2012.[30] The DWP consulted in 2021 on a proposal to remove the existing cap on the performance-based investment fee that applies to default schemes, a move that could incentivise investment managers to take more risks to maximise their fee, potentially undermining the security of an employee's pension fund. At retirement, a DC fund was generally used to buy an annuity from a chosen provider, but annuitisation declined to a small fraction of previous levels with the advent of 'pension freedoms' allowing purchase from age 55 of drawdown products, withdrawal of lump sums or reinvestment. These options carry risks of fraud, of making choices that provide poor value or that take no account of uncertain longevity. The security of annuities has also been questioned, due to the trend for annuity providers to transfer policyholders (without their consent) to another, possibly less-well-capitalised, company.

While women's participation in auto-enrolled DC pensions is growing, women are more vulnerable than men to these risks. Women are more likely than men to have unpredictable and interrupted employment records and low pay. Part-time jobs while caring for children or other family members are often too low paid to reach the threshold for auto-enrolment, causing gaps in contributions. Unlike in state pensions, there are no carer credits in private pensions to compensate for career breaks. Merely lowering the earnings threshold or the age threshold could result in even more 'pointless pots'.[31] It remains uncertain whether employees' contributions will prove to have been worthwhile but this is especially doubtful for women. It is not surprising, therefore, that women are often reluctant to engage with the financial risks and complexities of saving in a private pension. Calls for improving 'financial capability' among the public are not realistic and the associated discourse closes off critiques of market-based provision and consideration of collective solutions.[32]

In sum, those with low lifetime incomes, mainly women, are least able to bear the risks that the better-off can contemplate in DC pensions. As one critic has argued, financial managers' priority is to improve their company's share value and their own

[29] Hawthorne (2022).
[30] Prospect (2020).
[31] Hawthorne (2022).
[32] Price (2015); Foster and Heneghan (2018).

fees, with scant regard for the security of individuals' investments or the stability of the economic system.[33]

Given the disadvantages of auto-enrolled private DC pensions, and the advantages of state pension spending for women, including carer credits, automatic portability and redistribution towards the low paid, we must question why governments have promoted saving in private pensions and subsidised them through generous amounts of tax relief. This form of 'tax welfare' reinforces and widens pension inequalities, while reducing revenue for public spending. There is clear gender disparity among top earners, with 83 per cent of the top 1 per cent of earners being male and 89 per cent of the top 0.1 per cent male.[34] In 2017–18 two-thirds of the tax relief on contributions (£24bn net after deducting some £13bn tax paid on pensions in payment) went to high earners on the 40 per cent or 45 per cent tax rates (again mainly men). NI relief on these contributions (£16bn) brought the total net cost to the Exchequer to some £41bn, more than six times the £6.5bn that was spent on Pension Credit for the poorest pensioners.[35] Since the introduction of auto-enrolment in 2012, financial services have managed increasing DC funds, amounting to £280bn in 2017 and still rising. But only 15 per cent of funds have been new investment in the UK economy, the bulk being used for speculative dealing on the London Stock Exchange as 'footloose capital' that contributes to stock market bubbles. Some policy analysts argue that a crisis in state pensions has been created in order to present a political choice as an economic one and that privatisation is motivated by ideological opposition to public welfare.[36]

Conclusions

Gendered roles continue to adversely affect the gender pay gap, the lifetime earnings of women and their capacity to accumulate private pension wealth, where the gender gap was still 68 per cent in 2020.[37] Private pensions also create inequality of retirement income according to marital and parental history, occupational class and ethnicity. In contrast, state pensions have become more inclusive (mainly through carer credits) over time, and more redistributive towards the low paid. Yet the long decline in value of state pensions since 1980, still not fully restored, has eroded the power of state pensions to mitigate the effects of gendered roles interacting with private pensions. As a result two-thirds of pensioners living in poverty were women. The speed of the

[33] Blackburn (2012).
[34] Joyce *et al.* (2019).
[35] Sinfield (2019: 143–4).
[36] Walker (1990: 377).
[37] ONS (2022).

equalisation of the SPA and the subsequent increases also limits the number of women able to access state pensions, especially given there is no mechanism to receive state pensions early.[38] Raising the SPA does not represent a benign policy approach, adversely impacting those on lower incomes among whom women are over-represented, where state pension provision represents the lynchpin of income in retirement.

What are the solutions offered? The finance industry and associated think tanks call for extension of the scope for auto-enrolment in DC pensions as well as raised contribution levels by employees. These will exacerbate the risks of trivial accumulated funds and 'pointless pots'. Meanwhile policymakers maintain a tax relief system – at substantial cost to the Exchequer – to subsidise and promote auto-enrolment, resisting the need to make this subsidy fairer to those on modest earnings.

The option of more adequate state pensions for everybody, which is included as a way of alleviating low incomes of pensioners by the independent Pensions Policy Institute (PPI),[39] and recommended by other expert commentators such as Ros Altmann and Prem Sikka in the House of Lords, is ignored by policymakers, who resort to claiming a need to support intergenerational fairness. Pensioners are depicted as absorbing an unfair share of national resources through over-generous state spending on state pensions, despite the evidence that pensioners have shared the impact of recent austerity policies following the financial crash. By assuming a zero-sum game, the interests of young and old are presented as necessarily conflicting. Yet evidence of young people blaming their financial situation on older people is lacking and instead families depend on ties between the generations. Society, too, benefits from the (often ignored) contributions made by older people as family members, volunteers, local organisers and economic actors.

In the UK, policymakers have failed to take the gender gap in pensions seriously, or to recognise that older women's greater likelihood of poverty is in large part due to women's unpaid family caring, against their own financial interests. In Scandinavian countries, where high-quality affordable childcare is readily available, women have more choices and higher lifetime earnings. In terms of pension policy, a substantial shift in the private/state pensions mix towards state pensions is required; otherwise, the overall gender gap in retirement income will remain stubbornly high. Specifically, the following improvements could be made:

1. Raising the level of state pensions to 70 per cent of the Living Wage. This would not only reduce poverty and inequality among current pensioners but would also benefit today's workers when they retire. It could be partly funded by reducing tax relief in private pensions for high earners. Moreover, the

[38] Lain (2016); Foster (2022).
[39] Hurman *et al.* (2021).

indexation of the nSP and the BSP should be triple locked, to maintain their value over time.

2. A more radical alternative would be to pay a Citizens Pension similar to the longstanding and successful Dutch 'AOW' pension paid at 70 per cent of the Minimum Wage for single pensioners and at 50 per cent for each partnered pensioner, subject to 50 years residence and pro rata for less. Unsurprisingly, the gender gap in the AOW pension is minimal (although a gender gap in Dutch occupational pensions exists). Such a reform would avoid the complexity that has resulted in the DWP's recently discovered underpayment of pensions to around 200,000 women, the average underpayment being £13,500.
3. If auto-enrolment into earnings-related workplace pensions is continued, this could include a Family Carer's Top-up to reduce the gender pensions gap.[40] Another option is a Voluntary Earnings-related State Pension Addition (VESPA), which would be fully portable across jobs and career breaks. Instead of paying tax relief on VESPA contributions, government could contribute to carer credits in the scheme, avoiding the pension penalty of career breaks for childcare/eldercare.

We conclude that state pensions have been curbed as part of recent governments' political choice to privatise public welfare generally. Ensuring more equality and adequacy of retirement income and reducing the gender gap in pensions has not been a priority.

[40] Jethwa (2019).

Appendix 1

5 years of UK pension reforms 1975–2010

Labour, 1975–9

- Basic state pension indexed to average earnings (or prices if higher)
- State Earnings Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) introduced; 'best 20 years' formula to benefit those with career breaks and part-time years
- Home Responsibilities Protection (HRP) legislated, for childcare and eldercare
- SERPS widow's pension set at 100 per cent of deceased husband's pension

Conservatives, 1980–96

- Basic pension indexed only to prices (RPI)
- Legislation to raise women's pension age from 60 to 65 (phased in from 2010–20)
- SERPS accrual rate cut
- SERPS based on average lifetime earnings (HRP to apply from 1998)
- Legislation to halve SERPS widow's pension (from 2000)
- Personal pensions promoted with financial incentives (available from 1988)

New Labour, 1997–2010

- Basic pension remained price-indexed but RPI replaced by the lower CPI
- Stakeholder pensions offered - personal pensions with limited charges (2001)
- HRP in SERPS *not* introduced in 1998
- SERPS replaced by State Second Pension (S2P) (2002)
- Means-tested Pension Credit with taper indexed to average earnings (2003)

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Interview with Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director, Age UK

Caroline Abrahams, Siân Adiseshiah, Amy Culley and Jonathon Shears

Abstract: Caroline Abrahams is the Charity Director of Age UK, Britain's leading charity focused on improving experiences of later life. The interview – conducted by Siân Adiseshiah, Amy Culley and Jonathon Shears – took place on Microsoft Teams on 10 June 2022. The conversation ranges across such issues pertaining to the focus of the special issue as age as a protected characteristic; ageism as a widespread experience; the importance of language and terminology; the place of narrative in the work of Age UK; the intersection of old age with gender as well as race, class and sexuality; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older people; pensions and the gender pay gap; the suspension of the Triple Lock; and intergenerational relations.

Keywords: Caroline Abrahams; Age UK; pensions; suspension of the Triple Lock; intergenerational relations

Note on the author: Caroline Abrahams is the Charity Director of Age UK, Britain's leading charity focused on improving experiences of later life.

SA: We wanted to start with quite a broad question about the protected characteristic of age. Our feeling is that it's often overlooked in favour of some of the other characteristics – particularly of gender, sexuality, religion and race. We wondered whether you have a view on that and, if you agree, why you think that might be? And why ageism seems comparatively widespread and normalised.

CA: Yes. I do agree. It's interesting when we are in cross sector conversations about inequalities – for example health inequalities – it's not where people go, age, and I sometimes feel that they are slightly surprised if it's raised. The other thing is when there are discussions about other inequalities, for example, with the numbers of deaths through COVID-19 in the pandemic, and the overrepresentation of Black and minority ethnic people, people then forget that most of those people are older people, and it doesn't feature in how those issues get described or talked about in the public discourse. People just aren't very attuned, and I think that goes across lots of different people, whether their political proclivities are left or right; it just seems to be a general cultural thing at the moment in our society.

SA: Absolutely. Thank you for that. I've got a supplementary question. We are interested in language and terminology. Language and terminology are so important to identity – all identities – and they're important in relation to ageing and old age as well. This issue came up at our conference: there was a debate over what kind of language we should use to describe older people, and we wondered about Age UK and whether you have a set of terms that you think are appropriate.

CA: Our practice is to talk about 'older people'. We very rarely use the word 'old', and we never use the word 'elderly'. But actually, very occasionally I've deliberately used one or other word, and that's been in the context of, say, doing something with a popular newspaper where it's part of how they've been talking about it. Of course, as you'd expect we've asked older people what they think as well, and there's little consensus actually. Some people like 'senior citizens'. 'Older' is unobjectionable I think; it's probably the least controversial: that's probably why we've alighted upon it, but certainly different older people have slightly different views about it. There's no doubt about that.

JS: That chimes with the discussions we've been having. The second question we've got, and there's a bit of a run up to it: with our conference, and the journal special issue we are working on (where this interview will feature), we are interested in *narrative*, and so we are interested in storytelling, and we want to ask you about this. Our understanding of Age UK is that you offer practical support to older people

conducting educational-focused policy campaigns dedicated to improving lives. We are interested in the way that old age is narrativised or mediated through stories. Do you think, then, that narratives of ageing play a part in the work of Age UK and to what extent do you see that as challenging existing narratives and proposing alternatives? I wondered if that's linked to what you were talking about, sort of attuning people to old age. What role might narrative and storytelling play in that?

CA: I think probably the best way for me to respond to that is to explain that a lot of what we are doing publicly is trying to influence change in the best interests of older people. And as part of that we have paid staff and resources, but the main resource we have is older people themselves, and so a large part of what we are trying to do is to create platforms for older people to talk for themselves about their lives and what matters to them. That's rarely about something called 'ageing' but it's often about things that really matter to them because we are trying to achieve change around policies. We are probably a bit racier than your description of education suggested: we are quite political without being political if you see what I mean, but what we are trying to do is to get people who make decisions to make decisions that help older people, so that's politicians, whether that's in government or parliamentarians or whatever. So older people are key to how we try to do that themselves, and we call them storytellers, but what they are doing is they are telling their own stories, without interference from us hopefully, because it needs to be authentic and it's obviously their lives that they're talking about. Whether you would then say that narratives of ageing, which is a slightly more abstract way of looking at it – it's a more conceptual kind of approach – is something that we do, we probably don't really very much. We have a very small research team which is dedicated mainly to very practical kinds of work that, to put it at its simplest, gets us fantastic statistics, it gives a medium for us to make a big point in the papers, that sort of thing, at its baldest and crassest if you like. So we are spending less time these days probably in Age UK than we ever have done doing things that are closer to what you guys do, because in the past we had a much bigger research department where we were able to explore more conceptual stuff but we basically closed it because we haven't got the money to run it anymore. And there's plenty of other people who are working in those spaces. So narratives of ageing as such I think is a bridge further than we go really, but what we do do is, in lots of different ways, try to enable older people just to talk about what it's like to be an older person and what matters to them and, you know, what would make a difference to them and all of that.

JS: Yes, there are two things aren't there really. I guess there's storytelling and just allowing someone to tell their story, and then I suppose there's seeing that conceptually – analysing that as narrative – and narrative is about progress, and

change, and movement across time. You were talking about change before and those sorts of things, and I guess the one perhaps leads potentially to the other. The storytelling has to come first, doesn't it? You were talking in a clip I was watching about a project – I think it was called 'We are the Undefeatables' – and you were talking about film; so if we were analysing film we'd be analysing it in terms of a kind of narrative, and you mentioned at one point that one of the challenges you face is that people don't think this [experiences related to older age] is about them. I wonder whether that is about storytelling: it strikes me that storytelling would be key to that, of encouraging a sense of recognition, e.g., 'this is a bit like me'?

CA: Yes, maybe. I mean I guess the target for most of our work, not all of it, is policymakers and opinion formers – not particularly always older people themselves. We do do some, so-called 'behaviour change' type of work where, particularly over the winter, we run a health campaign which is basically encouraging older people to get their vaccines (obviously more important now than ever, but we've been running it for years) and to generally look after themselves through the winter, and encouraging the public to look out for older people who might be struggling in those respects. So we do that, but most of what we are doing is actually geared to trying to influence opinion formers. The 'Undefeatables' is actually a joint project funded by Sport England, and is not about older people. It's about people of all ages with long term health conditions, chronic health conditions, and the idea of the campaign is to encourage people, you know, who might be 32 but have got cancer, to feel that it's okay and actually really good for them to go out and be active, physically active, because they'll get loads of benefits from it. But of course, one of the groups is older people within that and some of the films portray older people having fun and getting a lot back from actually kicking a football or whatever it might be.

AC: Caroline, I'm dealing with the other side of the interests of our supplementary issue and our conference, which was about gender. We talked a bit about narratives and it's clear from Age UK's website and from looking at your materials and also from your answer to the first question that Age UK is very interested in the way in which age is an identity which intersects with other identities such as race or ethnicity, sexuality, and so on, and the one we are particularly interested in here is gender, and whether you think there are specific ways in which older age and gender combine to produce distinctive experiences.

CA: Well, all our research at the moment is telling us that it's older women who have found the pandemic the most difficult. We haven't published it yet, but we will. We've been tracking the experiences of older people through the pandemic; we've been

surveying; we've had thousands and thousands of people respond to our surveys; and we've done national work through polling companies as well, and the latest wave has just been analysed now. We've just got the results. And it's clear from that, that older women are coming through for example as finding life particularly difficult – for all sorts of different reasons. But more generally when we've done work in the past which has been a bit more in your neck of the woods, a bit more genuinely 'researchy' really, about wellbeing in later life, it's interesting to look at who the top ten or twenty per cent were and who the bottom ten or twenty per cent were, and the bottom ten or twenty per cent were typically women, living on their own, often widows, often in their early sixties actually – not very old anyway but sort of the younger old people if you like, as I say widowed, often people who'd been in part-time employment, and who hadn't got tertiary education, hadn't got huge amounts of skills, were often quite isolated, often renters rather than owners, with multiple health conditions, and without huge networks of friends. So there's a picture in my head as I do what I do which is often that that's the sort of person we are particularly there for – and there are a lot of them, of course in our society but they're quite hidden and they don't have a big voice. I guess part of our job is to surface those experiences and to explain to decision makers what would make life better for those people. That's the picture I often have in my head when I'm thinking about what we are doing and why we are doing it, and how we do it. So yes, absolutely undoubtedly, gender is a significant issue in later life. One of the things about getting older is all the pigeons come home to roost so it's not just that you are mirroring the inequality in that stage of life that you see throughout, it's that things accumulate through your life: so advantage does, but disadvantage does as well. So by the time you get to later life, towards the end, the disparities are really very significant and those play out in lots of different ways, but undoubtedly, less advantaged women are particularly disadvantaged I think.

AC: That's fascinating Caroline and also on the research around the pandemic as well. Is there an early sense from that research as to why the pandemic seems to have compounded (it sounds like you were suggesting the pandemic has compounded) a lot of those problems that were already present?

CA: Yes, we've done four waves of research: a lot of it's on our website; we haven't published the last lot but there's so much in it, and we have to decide what are the key points we want to draw out. So one of the key points is going to be about carers, carers coming across as absolutely knackered, and as you probably know women are over-represented amongst carers, until you get right up to eighty plus, at which point men become more significant – there are more men, I think they are still outnumbered by women but the disparity is less. That's because they are looking after their wives

with dementia to be honest. As we know, dementia is more prevalent amongst women than men.

But yes, why? I think basically these people came into the pandemic with disadvantages in the first place, so they were probably people with multiple or chronic health problems of one sort or other. They probably had less good social networks. It's interesting to see what's happened to people's social networks through the pandemic. On the latest wave, it looks as though there's a group of people for whom their social networks and their links with family actually strengthened during the pandemic, but there's another group for whom they weakened. So there's quite a polarisation of experience. I mean a lot of people found it difficult and were okay in the middle, and you've got one lot who actually had quite a good time, and another lot who have done really badly out of it. And particularly the absence of public services during the pandemic has been very significant for people with health conditions because they just didn't get treated, so things have got worse. Essentially, if you had problems to start with they've all got worse, largely as a result of inactivity: either your inactivity in terms of not moving around, which has led to deconditioning for lots of older people as it's called, or the inability to get treatment for things when you should have had it and now you are probably stuck on a waiting list with seven million other people. So yes, from that point of view therefore, it has definitely broadened the inequality within the older population. And of course, some older women are in good situations and have done quite well and are fine, but it's that subset that, as I say, people who are often, I should have mentioned and didn't, who are often dependent on means-tested benefits and pension credit because they are on a very low income, and you've got a cluster of disadvantage there, basically, for that group.

AC: Thank you, yes. As a follow up to that point on gender, in terms of the role of gender in Age UK's work, and whether it's at the level of your policy work, your media engagement work, or your communication with older people themselves, in terms of your health campaigns and so on: are there differences in the way you engage with gender in those areas? How does gender play out across those different facets of your work?

CA: Yes. I think actually it's more the reverse in the sense that we are aware that most of our service users are women. It's harder to engage men, to engage older men, and so to a great extent a lot of the effort I think has been about trying to become better at reaching out to older men who are less inclined to want to come to a coffee morning or whatever. So we see that in our service in provision where in recent years there have been initiatives like men in sheds and walking football, both of which have been really successful – and of course women can do both those things too and have become

quite involved in walking football, but these things have proved really helpful ways of engaging men and trying to actually level-up from that point of view, across the gender divide. And in terms of our influencing, obviously there's the WASPI [Women Against State Pension Inequality] campaign, which is about women who lost out because of the raising of the state pension age. We have an interesting relationship with them in the sense that we are broadly sympathetic, clearly lots of things went wrong and the communications were wrong about all of that, but it's their campaign, it's not ours, and we are here for everybody whatever their gender, so you know, it's them and not us as it were, so we've been quite helpful to them and we've run the all-party group for them, but we're slightly one step removed from that campaign which is very shouty about a specific issue, which isn't really Age UK's issue. Do you see what I mean?

AC: Yes, and on the point of women's participation, certainly in our experience of running the book group [Lincoln's Older Readers' Book Group] and in our engagement with Age UK locally, I certainly see that difference in terms of the participants. I wanted to ask you about media engagement as well. I mean is that something in terms of your campaigns around fundraising for instance: is gender something that comes into the thinking there in terms of how to generate funding, or thinking about your campaigns, is gender a framework there?

CA: In terms of fundraising, what we've tried to do over the last few years is to ensure that our fundraising is more representative of the UK population as a whole, so lots of efforts to try to ensure they are not just white men – white faces for example. And also, that there's a reasonable balance with enough men as well as enough women. I don't think we generally seek to exploit gender for the purposes of Age UK if you like. But I guess as with everything we are doing we are trying to accurately represent what's going on for older people, because there are lots of women but there are lots of men too, do you see what I mean? We are not sort of strategic about gender from that point of view I don't think, although as I've said, we may choose to focus a particular press release around gender when we are putting out the results of this latest round of research into the impact of the pandemic.

AC: Great, thank you. We did have on our original list a question about health inequalities and the ways in which for the poorest 10 per cent of women life expectancy is going backwards. I think in some sense, Caroline, you've addressed that question in relation to your results about the experience of the pandemic and inequalities in older age: how the chickens are coming home to roost. If there's anything else that you wanted to say on that please do but otherwise I'll pass on to my colleagues.

CA: I should have mentioned that before, I mean that's the starkest possible evidence isn't it: the extent of inequality for women on low incomes really. Really, really sad, and obviously something we worry about a lot.

AC: Thank you. I'll pass on to Siân at this point.

SA: Well, it's a question that follows on very logically from the discussion you've just been having. It's a question specifically about pensions. There's quite a bit of attention to pensions and the unevenness of experience of pensions in our journal issue; there's an article called 'The Gender Gap in Pensions: How Policies Continue to Fail Women'. We were interested about the place of pensions in the work of Age UK and whether you pay attention to the specific kind of gendered experience of pensions as well.

CA: Yes. Very, I mean, pensions are a really, really important part of our work. Never more so than at the moment of course because of the cost-of-living crisis for people. In 2023 the government has to decide whether it's going to raise the state pension age for future people. There's a review going on and seeking to influence that is quite an important part of our work. It has been slightly eclipsed of course by the cost-of-living crisis, but it remains an important area for us in that space. Where our general sense is, our general position is, that with life expectancy stalling, there's not really any evidence to justify the government raising the age still further for younger people. But our real interest, what we see is, people in the run up, groups in the run up to retirement, among whom I think women are definitely over-represented, so people in their late 50s, early to mid-60s, who for one reason or another can't stay in the labour market, aren't able to earn and therefore get into a real mess in the run-up to retirement, and, if they have savings, end up using them just to get by in that period and then they haven't got anything left for later on. And they are typically going to be people for example with long-term health problems but also carers. Lots and lots of women in those age groups give up work to care for an older relative or partner, so we want more support for those people, and we'd like them for example maybe to get early access to the state pension, for niche groups for whom it's clear that there's no possibility of being able to work.

Insofar as the gender gap in pensions, again it's the chickens coming home to roost thing. If you work part-time, if you've taken time out, etc., obviously far fewer women have private pension provision even now than men. It's changing over time gradually, but slowly, and there are huge inequalities in what people are getting, and we quite often get contacted by older people about issues, all kinds of issues as you can imagine. Someone was just writing recently about how unfair it was that they were a much older person, and they weren't getting the so-called new state pension

which is more generous. But of course, not more generous for everybody, and what the government decided to do a few years ago for financial reasons was to improve provision, or to change the game really for people who were just retiring, but it meant that everybody else stayed on their existing state pension, and a lot of that group – a lot of whom are women – feel that they've been disadvantaged. But actually, it does rather depend on your circumstances; not everyone's a winner from the new pension, but people who took time out to care for children and so forth probably are, so actually from that point of view our system is a little bit more responsive. Is that enough, all of that?

SA: That's brilliant, yes. I'm just wondering, as I understand it there's been a suspension of the Triple Lock and I just wondered: did you intervene in relation to that?

CA: Yes, that's all very controversial. So what happened was, last year, or rather, for this financial year, the government decided to suspend the Triple Lock, and the reason it did that was because of the way the Triple Lock is calculated on the basis of various figures from the year before. And because inflation was high – although it wasn't because of inflation but because of what had happened to economic activity during the pandemic – it put older people in line for a really significant increase in their pensions – as a statistical quirk really, and at the same time as younger people were being deprived of a £20-uplift for universal credit. So one of the issues we do think about, and I probably spend more time thinking about, actually, than gender, is the kind of balance between the generations and how to protect older people in those debates, to kind of counter the notion that all older people are having the life of Riley, and that all young people are having a terrible time. So we do keep an eye on that because that's quite a threat I think to older people really, in terms of sort of solidarity across the generations. And the government decided it was going to suspend the Triple Lock for those reasons, and we didn't disagree. And we partly didn't disagree because at the time the government made that decision, which was September 2021, they were also wobbling on whether to make reforms on social care, and I said, from Age UK, that if the cost of getting the social care reforms through was suspending the Triple Lock for a year, it was worth it. Which was a controversial thing to say and I'm not sure whether I'd have done it again, but actually it felt like the right decision at the time. Now meanwhile, looking forward to next year the government is now on the record as committed to bringing the Triple Lock back in, and it will lead to a big increase in pension for older people, but that's because inflation is high and that's one of the measures against which the Triple Lock is assessed, so hopefully, from April 2023, older people will get basically between nine and ten per cent extra on the state pension, which will only allow them to keep up with inflation, but it will make a difference, so yes that's

quite a complicated answer to what was quite a simple question but it's quite complex, both the issue and the politics around it are quite complex basically.

SA: No that was great, thank you. I'm going to pass on to Jon.

JS: It's fascinating to find out more about that. This is just a quick question. Obviously we've been focusing on gender. We were interested in the rising cultural consciousness of rights and lived experiences of non-binary and transgender people, and whether you could tell us something about how Age UK has approached that.

CA: Yes. Well again, at its simplest we want Age UK to be here for everybody who's an older person, regardless of any other characteristics they might have. And so one of the things we have done, and we've done over the last few years, is to ensure that the information and advice we offer reflects people's lives. So we have got a fact sheet about transitioning, for example, and what that might mean for an older person – sorts of things they might want to think about, and obviously signposting them to other sources of information. And we are pleased to do that, that's part of our job, and when we said we did that, that got quite a lot of attention in the media, although I think the media has probably grown up a bit and moved on a bit; these issues are more familiar now, but certainly a couple of years ago they were quite prominent, and we got quite a lot of publicity for it. But that's pretty much what we do in this space, so we've not sought to intervene in the public debates; in fact, we've absolutely not sought to intervene in the public debate about this because they do look a bit like a no-win, and I suppose the honest truth is I've worked quite hard to keep us out of them.

One of the things that governs how we work is we have a series of policy principles which sort of determines what we say and do to a degree. They were drafted before I was involved with Age UK, but they are jolly good. And one of them is, where there's a legitimate difference of view between older people about a really important issue, Age UK should stay out of it on the whole. Which is really good, because it means we don't get dragged into debates about assisted dying, which is the obvious one, but actually you equally could say that about this one too, where obviously older people – they are all different, you know 12 million of them in England; they are all going to have different views about that. So yeah, basically we stay out of it, but our emphasis really is on trying to ensure that we are there to support people regardless, whoever they are we want them to be able to come to us. And actually one of the people on our sounding board was one of the first people to transition in this country, and is now really quite an old lady, and is a great friend of ours, so we are very pleased to be working with her.

JS: That's fantastic. Okay I'll pass back to Siân then. I think it's our last question.

SA: This is our last question. You spoke about the pandemic earlier and it was interesting to hear some detail about the particular challenges of the pandemic as you see them for older people. But I suppose we are interested in this question about whether it's also a moment of possibility. Loneliness and isolation have been in the press a lot, and in relation to all communities actually not just older people, because the pandemic has affected everybody, so I'm just wondering whether you are kind of hopeful about the space that that's created, about these particular issues being further up the agenda. Do you think that there's been a shift in attitude, in a kind of positive way, towards older people and do you see it as giving Age UK opportunities perhaps that they didn't have before?

CA: Well, I mean certainly, you know, we had quite a good pandemic if you like. We were certainly able to raise our profile because obviously, sadly, older people were in the firing line, weren't they, of COVID-19. So we got lots of attention really. Older people got lots of attention during the pandemic. I think the sense now though and the sense we get from the research that we carry out and the attitudinal research we do, is that the public's had enough of the pandemic and has very much moved on now. So I mean there were some really good things that happened for older people during the pandemic. Particularly early on with the first wave, communities did come together – not everywhere, there were plenty of places where nothing happened at all – but in lots of places people did volunteer, NHS volunteers, loads and loads of people got involved and are still involved. So the upsurge in more kinds of community activism really was very positive, and I'm sure, that new relationships were built at that time which endure, and I think that's really important. How sustainable all that is I think is really interesting because a lot of the voluntarism that happened in communities was younger people helping out older people: fantastic, but then when they had to go back to work they haven't got the same sort of time that they did have. It will be really interesting to see what happens with this but, you know certainly where I live in London which is, depending on which newspaper you read, the area where people are least inclined to want to go back into the office five days a week, I suspect that's there to stay. However hard politicians and others try to drive people back into that way of working I think the genie's out of the bottle and it's too useful for too many people, for lots of reasons, to be able to have a hybrid approach really. That's going to change what happens in local neighbourhoods I think, so whereas traditionally what's happened is if you are around a local community during the day, the only people around are sort of young mums, typically with kids, and older people and tradesmen – and that's about it. I think it will enrich areas to have more people around more often and

I think the pandemic led to more people of all ages taking an interest in making better use of their local resources. That's all good for older people, because typically that's where older people are, because they're not going into the office in the morning. Of course, some people work way into their retirement, past their state pension age, but by and large older people become more local. So I think that could make quite a difference to older people and to community life more generally, so it will be interesting to see what happens over time I think.

SA: That was fascinating. Just following up, so you've given us a really good picture there at the level of the community. What about government? Do you think that there's been any kind of shift there in relation to older age and the kinds of campaigns that you are advancing? Is there more responsiveness do you think?

CA: I'm being tempted to be really rude here, aren't I, but I'd better not! I think governments are quite responsive to older people because they vote, but you know the challenge is usually directing attention towards those who need more help than others. The people at the bottom as it were. And so one of the things that was really refreshing about the package of support that the chancellor announced for the public, over the last few weeks, the help with inflation, was that it was finally, at last, targeted at those at the bottom, of all ages actually, which is great because obviously when times are tough when inflation is eating into the pound in your pocket, if you haven't got many of them, you're the people who need more help, and that's true whether you're a young family or whether you're an older person. So that was great. A lot of the policies I think which purport to be supportive of older people are actually tending to be supportive of older people who are pretty well off, or are okay, and social care's a really good example of that, that the government's decided, you know, social care's a big mess, it's a big expensive problem to sort out. You could attack it in lots of different ways. The government deserves credit because it hasn't turned away, like most other governments have done before, but what it has chosen to do is to support people who have assets as opposed to those who don't. That's what its intervention is designed to do. It will help reduce the cost for people who need care for a long time who have got assets to protect. It doesn't do very much for anyone else. It doesn't get more staff, doesn't put more money in the system, doesn't help you if you haven't got assets. So, I think that's relatively characteristic of government policy, so our struggle, our battle really as a charity, is to try always to explain what the people who need most help need, and you know they're not always people with very low incomes. You can be quite well off but profoundly isolated and not very well, and have care needs, and you are definitely one of the people we worry about a lot as well. But yes, trying to focus, it comes back to what we were saying earlier on really, on the people who are hidden

at home, who are struggling to get by for one reason or other; they are the people we think a big part of our job is to try to support and help and to try to get governments to do more to help.

SA: Thank you. Just one last supplementary question here. It was interesting to hear you talk earlier about intergenerationality; you were saying in relation to the Triple Lock (and I think you made that argument really well) about the importance of defending older people within that situation where generations are pitted against each other. I just wondered if you could say anything more about that or whether that's becoming more a part of the work of Age UK, to think about intergenerational relationships.

CA: Yes. Okay. So, we do think about it, there's no doubt about it. It is something I worry about, because part of the problem for us is we kind of want it both ways. So we want to be able to say that older people are just like everybody else, and shouldn't be discriminated against, but we are also wanting to say, please can you give them this, that and the other. So, that's the tightrope that my job is to tread if you like, and that we as Age UK have to tread. So we are definitely in Boris Johnson's camp of wanting our cake and eating it, so I concede that to start with really. And there's a sort of balance around those things. Some people would say, there's no reason to privilege age at all. I would disagree: there are still reasons to do that, but whilst being really clear that if there's extra support around it should go to those who need it the most.

When it comes to the intergenerational debate, a lot of it is kind of driven by the media really, I think. You can quote this if you want: one of my favourite phrases I'm known for at Age UK is 'it's all bollocks', and actually, I do think a lot of the intergenerational narrative is all bollocks really. Largely for a really simple reason, which is that if you look at it objectively, the differences in assets within generations are greater than those between them, and I think it's quite divisive, I think it is deliberately divisive, this narrative actually. Not everybody of course by any means who adopts it is doing it for that reason, but I think some people probably are. It definitely suits establishments, as it were, to be able to divide people on low incomes, people who haven't got much and have got plenty to complain about, by age, because it focuses attention away from perhaps what's the bigger issue. But we are very careful at Age UK not to ever, hopefully, be seen to be unsupportive of young people, because I used to work in the children's sector, that's where most of my career was spent, and, you know, I'm really sympathetic towards the situation for young people. You know, life has got tougher for young people in lots of different ways. I guess my argument is that's not older people's fault. At its simplest, sometimes, at its most extreme the intergenerational narrative sort of suggests that, you know, it's my fault for example, or if I was ten years older it's

my fault that these things have happened, which is absolutely absurd of course. It's to do with political decisions and all sorts of much bigger forces that have happened, but I think young people are entitled to feel they could do with some more support. And personally it's not my job at Age UK to make that point, but I'd be very supportive of that. But it's the pitting of one group against the other which we object to. And there are lots of ways in which actually young people and older people have got quite a lot in common, and it's always lovely when various activities happen which bring them together and there's lots of friendships, and if you talk to young people, of course some young people are feeling quite embittered about where they are and particularly if they look at what seem to be the easier lives of their parents, I think that's part of what's going on here. But that's very much also about the middle classes: no one has ever given much to young people on low incomes any more than they have to their families. This is very much driven I think by if you are a young person who has grown up in a middle-class home and you know that your mum and dad were able to buy a house and they've got a nice pension and all the rest of it, and you look at your life chances, and they don't look nearly so rosy at the moment. It's very much a middle-class debate, I think. It's less relevant, I think, to people at the bottom, frankly, who've never had anything in the first place, so that's broadly my view about that debate. So, we monitor it, we watch it, we tend to keep out of it. One of the things we discovered as Age UK is, if you intervene in it, it just gives it momentum. So quite often we resist the temptation, even if someone says something ridiculous, that we profoundly object to. Mostly our strategy has been to be cross about it but not say anything otherwise the papers love that and you get more of a tit-for-tat type of debate. Similarly we sometimes decline invitations to go on platforms to discuss it for exactly the same reason, that it gives it oxygen, in a way that I don't think's very helpful.

SA: Yes, great, thank you. That was fantastic. It's been brilliant and wonderful that you've shared so much: you've been so open, and said so many fascinating things. Thank you very much!

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Coda: Tackling the Gendered Dynamics of Ageism

Lynne Segal

Abstract: How do we tackle the enduring prejudice against the very idea of old age, resulting in the habitual marginalisation and disparagement of the elderly by people of all ages, including old people themselves? It remains a challenge, especially knowing that women have always been aged by culture, and frequently discarded in their public and personal lives, far faster than men. However, in this wide-ranging collection the diverse authors help us to subvert the troubling ties between ageism and sexism, showing how we can instead deliver far more complex narratives of the ageing lives and experiences of all old people.

Keywords: ageism; respect; dementia; desire; gender contrasts; ageist resisters; time

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What do we know about the differing experiences of old age? Not so much, for when we pay heed to public narratives of ageing, they tend to be either disparaging or dismissive of old people. How should we understand this negativity, the many forms of ageism still culturally rampant, when – short of an early death – we all grow old. As others note, in this sense ageism is prejudice against our future selves. Yet all the latest reports on ageing still find that hostile associations with older people dominate every area of society, including the media, advertising and central and local government. Indeed, they are present across all age groups, including the elderly, although strongest of all in middle age.[1] Thus, the closer we come to that fluctuating definition, the definitively 'old', the greater the aversion expressed towards the 'elderly'.

It explains why the very first thing old people usually say when interviewed is simply 'I don't feel old', whatever their age. 'Old' age, the 'elderly', trail such pejorative connotations that Caroline Abrahams, the current Charity Director of Age UK, when interviewed at the close of this issue says that she never uses them: only the expression 'older is unobjectionable'. That is a disconcerting observation from a charity dedicated to promoting positive images of old age. Such rapid repulsion from the use of the term 'old' is also why Age Concern renamed itself in 1971, discarding its original name – Old People's Welfare Committee – which was first set up and chaired by the independent, feminist MP, Eleanor Rathbone in 1940. Attempts to combat ageism and understand its underlying gendered dynamics provided the rationale behind this rich anthology, each of its articles aiming to help us grapple with and try to topple the long impact of prejudice against old people.

It is always useful to try to gain some historical footing in dealing with the most troubling dimensions of prejudice. Here, the eminent historian of welfare practices and old age, Pat Thane, stresses that there have always been very different experiences of ageing across gendered, class and ethnic groups. Yet, looking back over the last century, old age was always viewed negatively, and women were routinely aged far faster than men. Thus, in the early twentieth century women were habitually forced into early retirement on reaching their 30s, as soon as they began showing any marks of ageing, although similar signs were ignored in men. Today, there are many more older women in the workforce, although even now their position is often somewhat precarious.

Moreover, it is still the case, as it was in the past, that more women than men can be found living in poverty in old age. Indeed, the percentage of very poor older people has not changed greatly over the last century. This is hardly surprising when, as Thane notes, UK state pensions have never been sufficient to live on, since their inception in

[1] One of the most comprehensive and useful is the report from the Centre for Ageing Better, *Reframing Ageing: Public Perceptions of Ageing, Older Age and Demographic Change* (2021).

1908. But women overall have tended to receive lower work pensions than men, with their jobs usually worse paid and their working lives interrupted by caring commitments. Indeed, given recent cuts in welfare, longevity has been falling for the poorest 20 per cent of the population since 2010, and it is predominantly old women who are living in poverty. This is highlighted by Jay Ginn and Liam Foster in their article for this collection, explaining why pension policies continue to fail women. These two British scholars of ageing and social policy note that women's lifetime earnings continue to be almost a third less than those of men, while the long decline in the value of state pensions since 1980 has eroded the power of welfare policies to mitigate this inequality. It explains why two-thirds of pensioners living in poverty are women, even though pensioners overall are still denounced as receiving an unfair share of welfare.

An additional pitfall of living in poverty is the likelihood of greater loneliness. We know that it is always older women who are the most likely to end up living alone, which is especially hard for those with financial constraints. Recent research in the UK shows that 60 per cent of women over 75 live alone, compared to 49 per cent of the whole population, and that those who do live alone are more likely to feel lonely, including the half a million older women today who say they are severely lonely.[2] The cutback of welfare and resources has meant the closing down of many of the community resources where older people might once have gathered, generating more need than ever for state funding for lunch clubs and daycare centres where older people can meet.

This is not just a Western story. It's not unusual to be told of the greater respect and dignity accorded to old people in Middle Eastern and North African cultures. However, as medical demographer Shereen Hussein argues here, there is another side to this story. Older people in these countries often find their lives restricted, both inside and outside the house, in places where there are few job opportunities for older people. She also mentions reports of elder abuse in these countries, especially against older women with dementia who are being cared for by families, with little if any provision for state care. Hussein closes her account with a call for older people, wherever they are, to organise to develop their own voices and autonomy, using a broader human rights framework.

Nowadays, fears of dementia threaten to submerge any other stories we might hear about ageing. Some years ago, the Canadian feminist scholar Sally Chivers concluded from her survey of representations in cinema in the twenty-first century that old people, but especially old women, were increasingly depicted with dementia, with dementia increasingly made synonymous with normative ageing.[3] This is far from the case, nev-

[2] Campaign to End Loneliness (2023).
[3] Chivers (2011).

ertheless we do need better ways of dealing with dementia. Here, New York feminist and literary scholar E. Ann Kaplan highlights the value of graphic narratives in assisting communication with people with cognitive challenges. Kaplan reveals how certain graphic texts can serve to evoke emotional reactions and hold the attention of those grappling with dementia. These visual stories therefore facilitate contact between those with cognitive impairment and their carers enabling the sharing of experiences, most notably between ageing mothers and daughters, however fanciful the stories evoked. It is usually memory that gives us access to experiences we have shared throughout our lives, allowing us to revisit our younger selves, and to retain some abiding sense of self. However, what is even more crucial is to feel affirmed by those around us, at least now and then. Yet for those experiencing dementia it is important to find other ways of forging possible associations. It means sharing whatever stories can be triggered in the minds of those losing their cognitive skills even when they may seem strange.

One significant reason we hear and read far too little about the differing experiences of ageing is that most of us prefer not to think about it. We know that with old age our status in the world drops, and even our visibility – again, especially if we are women. Above all, we lose authority, as the Nobel Prize-winning Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk writes in her acclaimed thriller, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*: 'Once we have reached a certain age it's hard to be reconciled to the fact that people are always going to be impatient with us.'[4] Some may see this as an exaggeration, yet there is no doubt that assumptions of physical and mental weakness, along with increasing 'ugliness', underpin the legendary derision projected onto women once we become 'old ladies'. These negative stereotypes of ageing remain ubiquitous, even though we all age differently, becoming even less alike in old age.

There is such a long history behind this abhorrence of old age, but as Siân Adiseshiah argues in these pages, today it comes with firmer twists. For decades we have seen an ever-greater emphasis on the value of the cutting-edge or the 'contemporary' – only novelty, the very latest instantiation of anything, is thought interesting. As Adiseshiah notes, this tendency is not so new, and she mentions Walter Benjamin's account of the perpetual dismissal of the recent past in his classic Arcades project in the early twentieth century: each new moment is quickly rendered obsolete before the next repetition of much the same. However, such disparagement of the very recent past as 'old' has been further exaggerated in our ongoing neoliberal times. With all emphasis placed only on the 'productive' future, anything 'old' is seen as 'futureless', continually marginalised or excluded from the daily treadmill of imagined renewal. Adiseshiah quotes the striking words of American scholar, Susan Buck-Morss, also glossing Benjamin, as she describes 'mass culture's hellish repetition of "the new",

[4] Tokarczuk (2018: 38).

leading to the mortification of all that can be dismissed as no longer fashionable'. Old people, women in particular, always have to work hard to avoid the painful mortification of such dismissal. This is all the more critical now that most of us will be living several decades beyond waged employment.

So, one key task of narratives of ageing, more significant than ever today, is to beat back the market mindset that in post-retirement we become 'unproductive', and hence less valuable in the world. For, as Adiseshiah also emphasises, the search for better understandings of the past, as well as for differing forms of self-realisation in the present, is essential for ageing well. It is also the patient, flexible use of time that is necessary for the crucial work of caring, which is why caring remains more devalued than ever today. The urgency of confronting our current crises of care, in a world that literally leaves no time to care adequately, if at all, formed the basis for the widely read and translated manifesto I helped to write: *The Care Manifesto*. In that call to arms, involving the need to construct entirely different economies based on care, we questioned the very notion of 'productivity', and insisted – like other feminists before us – that caring itself is not only productive in its maintenance of life, but a way of relating to others and to non-human life that enriches all our personal interactions across the life span.[5]

Such thoughts are reflected in most of the articles in this collection, which all succeed in their goal of creating more complex accounts of ageing, indeed sometimes in complicating our understanding of time itself, exploring how each moment might be fully lived rather than instantly displaced onto thoughts of the future. These are stories in which fears of physical frailty and hence of 'dependency' do not engulf the nuanced multiplicities of ageing lives and experiences. They also underline the ways in which gender features in ageing narratives, when not only do women outnumber men in late life, but old age itself tends to be gendered as female, given the entirely misleading association of the 'feminine' with 'frailty'. This is what haunts men in general, so often evident in men's narratives in literature, as they fear they might be seen to be losing their 'virility', and along with it their youthful illusions of manly impregnability, which become harder for men to enact in old age. Although, as I found in studying men's writing in my book *Out of Time: The Perils and Pleasures of Ageing* (2013) fears of growing frailty often accompanied a steadfast refusal to accept any decline in sexual potency.[6]

This is well illustrated in Jonathon Shears's study of expressions of masculinity in older men's poetry. For the most part such writing determinedly depicts old men still desiring sex and proclaiming their lustful thoughts, still 'sick with desire' (1.21),

[5] The Care Collective (2020).
[6] Segal (2013).

though 'fastened to a dying animal' (1.22). As in his 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1928), from which I just quoted, it is, of course, William Butler Yeats who is most memorable on this topic, as also here in 'The Spur' (1938): 'You think it horrible that lust and rage / Should dance attention upon my old age' (11.1–2). Other poems Shears highlights include Thomas Hardy's sad and wistful sense of loss, after the death of his first wife, which contrasts with Robert Graves's combination of derision for old age, combined with a continued masculine assertiveness. Thus, reminiscent of Yeats, Graves describes his own haunted, yet defiant eyes, eager to retain some sense of male prerogative as he concludes 'The Face in the Mirror' (1957): 'He still stands ready, with a boy's presumption, / To court the queen in her high silk pavilion'. However, when not still fantasising about their permanent phallic yearnings, Shears finds his ageing poets proclaiming forms of emotional resilience and restraint, along with a certain 'pride in the refusal to talk' that is the necessary ingredient for a rational manhood, one that will never admit its faultlines of frailty.

In striking contrast, Amy Culley's article looks at women's late life writing under the heading 'How to Grow Old Gracefully'. The theme that dominates her historical delving into the life of an ageing spinster Lady Louisa Stuart (1757–1851) is her engagement and pleasure in mentoring a relative, 40 years her junior. Writing hundreds of letters of advice over the years, right up to her death in very old age, Culley shows how Stuart's epistolary skills give her an identity and keep her refreshed and engaged with the lives of others, retaining some sense of her own dignity and usefulness. The letters also reveal a certain self-scrutiny, rather than bigoted certainties in the communication across the generations, with Stuart confessing to having an 'irascible temper' and worrying about her own garrulousness. It was in looking both ways, backwards and forwards, that Stuart also composed biographies of family and friends, thereby sustaining rewarding engagements with others to the very end of her life.

As Culley suggests, we need so many more accounts of older women's writing to enrich our understanding of women's varied experiences of ageing, and fortunately, once we look closely, we can find them. Not unlike Culley's historical account of Lady Stuart's epistolary pleasures, my own research on contemporary women's narratives of ageing for *Out of Time* also largely found older women tending to provide accounts that were both cheerier than men's writing and also, with interesting exceptions in lesbian writing, usually assertively platonic. This was evident in Germaine Greer's influential text *The Change* (1992), where this former sex radical expressed only a certain relief at leaving sexual passion behind. However, I was – and remain – suspicious of such stark gendered contrast, with old men insisting upon their continued sexual interests and old women seeming to eschew sex altogether. Might this not be women's greater fears that their aged bodies will no longer be seen as attractive, with any

expression of sexual interest, beyond marital enclosures, leaving them open to ridicule? So, it's good to find more complex accounts in some of the performative pieces in this collection.

Today we can find many more stories from people calling themselves 'ageist resisters', those determined to tackle our continuing amplified cultural aversion towards even discussing old age. They are overwhelmingly old women who, as we know, remain the prime targets of gerontophobia. They remind me of some of my recently departed heroines, such as Ursula Le Guin, who was also determined to celebrate old age: 'For old people, beauty doesn't come free with the hormones, the way it does for the young … It has to do with who the person is. More and more clearly it has to do with what shines through those gnarly faces and bodies.'[7] As she and all the contributors to this collection know, it is not any loss of beauty, always such a culturally inflected term, but the loss of identity, of belonging and above all of engagement with the world that can become most frightening for old people.

However, as all ageist resisters know, we must tread carefully when meditating on possibilities for expressing desire, pleasure and living well in old age, given the vast differences in possibilities for different groups of women. It can be all the more confounding amid the deluge of market promises pretending we can stay 'forever young'. All we need to do is buy pricey skincare lotions, swallow DNA repair drugs, pursue hormone replacement therapy or undergo plastic surgery – the list is endless – all supporting the massively profitable longevity industry. No one was more critical of these invasive, class- and race-blind, rejuvenating regimes than the much missed, recently departed Barbara Ehrenreich. Approaching 80, in her last book, *Natural Causes*, she ridiculed the widely promoted fiction that we can stay in full control of our minds and bodies with a little more self-love and self-care. In reality, we cannot control the decay of our bodies. What this ageing socialist feminist insisted upon, as she had throughout her extraordinary life, was that *mutual care*, not *self-care*, is what we need if we are to live a good life at any age: 'We could talk to each other, we could have more parties and celebrations, we could do more dancing. I know this sounds a little crazy, but I think that it's something that's very much missing in our lives.'[8]

Thankfully, today, such thoughts are heard more often. A few years ago, the US ageing activist, Ashton Appleton, published her joyful celebration, *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism*. It calls for us all to celebrate old age, and to join her in exposing ageist myths: 'the sooner growing older is stripped of reflexive dread, the better equipped we are to benefit from the countless ways in which it can enrich us.' Writing up her interviews with other oldies, she quotes the 88-year-old folk artist

[7] Le Guin (2004: 142).
[8] Quoted in Edwards (2018).

Marcia Muth, who tells her, 'Your life does change as you get older … you get into what's important and what's not.'[9]

What's important to us in understanding and celebrating old age is just what can be found in most of the articles in this compilation. It is especially evident in the defiant, often joyful performances of Leah Thorn and her collaborators, described here, as well as in the enduring, remarkable work of the acting duo, Split Britches, captured vividly by Jen Harvie in her contribution. The poet and writer Leah Thorn founded 'Older Women Rock!' on reaching 65, over five years ago. As she illustrates in her article, this project involves poetry, retro clothes, performance, all drawing upon conversations with other older women in order to explore ageing issues. Thorn and her companions not only stage theatrical events wearing exquisite clothes emblazoned with colourful anti-ageist quotes but have opened pop-up spaces challenging the ways in which women are harmed by the beauty industry and predatory markets targeting older women, while also raising issues of climate justice and the poverty some face from pension inadequacy. We see here so many crucial narratives of ageing, while at the same time Thorn and her companions boldly refuse to conceal or be 'discreet' about their physical changes, from greying hair to incontinence.

Harvie's article on Split Britches is a compelling account of the ways in which the intimate acting duo Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver have maintained all their humour, insight and thoughtful engagement with ageing over more than four decades. In the process they have been queering time and chronology, breaking down binaries between young and old, male and female and much more besides in their butch-femme personae. Weaver's determination to hold on to ageing desire in her sexy performance as Tammy WhyNot is uplifting and joyful. Shaw and Weaver both share with us the secrets of maintaining an enduring intimate partnership, with shifting distance and closeness over the years, while recently displaying ways of dealing tenderly with the loss of toughness and abilities following Shaw's stroke. We also see them embracing intergenerational solidarities. In every performance Split Britches enact ways of disrupting normative understandings of age and ageing, in ways also celebrated by Bridie Moore in her account of the brief but exhilarating life of the over-60s acting group Passages.

There are so many stories of ageing here, expanding our horizons on its multiplicities. Surveying them all has been inspiring for me, reinforcing my belief that whatever our age, and wherever we can, we need to try to savour each moment, reaching out to embrace life with love, friendship, openness and care for each other, thereby helping us to capture time as it passes.

[9] Appleton (2019).

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