

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, *Ageing 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 novel¹³ 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 work¹⁷ 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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