

Coda: Tackling the Gendered Dynamics of Ageism

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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 inter-generational 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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