

**From:**

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**Alive and Kicking at All Ages**

**Cultural Constructions of Health and Life Course Identity**

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The linking of age and ill-health is part of a cultural narrative of decline as age is often defined as the absence of good health. Research has shown that we are aged by culture, but we are also culturally made ill when we age. The cultural ambiguity of aging can thus deconstruct negative images of old age as physical decrepitude. This volume investigates the topic of health within the matrix of time and experience by addressing issues such as how our understanding of health influences our notion of agency within a subversive deconstruction of normative age concepts, and what role the notion of health plays in such an interaction.

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## Re-Thinking Material Realities and Cultural Representations of Age and Aging

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*Ulla Kriebnernegg, Roberta Maierhofer, Barbara Ratzenböck*

This issue of the *Aging Studies* series is devoted to the aspect of health, life expectancy, and life course identity. The title “Alive and Kicking at All Ages” might be read ambivalently, on the one hand as a forceful and self-confident assertion of strength, endurance, and energy at all ages of life, or on the other, as a mocking reinforcement of the stereotypical notion that it might be ludicrous to link old age to vitality, health, and well-being. Although – as gerontologists have pointed out time and again – illness and death cannot be linked to a specific age and living a long(er) life does not necessarily mean that these added years are determined by sickness and suffering, preconceived notions very often equate health with youth. In addition, one of the predominant discourses in the field of scientific anti-aging studies is the notion that old age itself is a disease that can be cured. Biomedical enhancement of the human lifespan, for example, has led to heated debates on what in essence it means to be human, and invites questions regarding the ethical and moral aspects of biogerontological research.

Susan Sontag makes the point that illness is *not* a metaphor and argues that “the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, and resistant to, metaphoric thinking” (3). She admits, however, that this is not an easy task, as the way we perceive illness as metaphor is so pervasive and influential. She wants to describe “not what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there, but the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation: not real geography, but stereotypes of national character” (3). Sontag talks about “rhetorical ownership” (181) regarding illness, and how this is “possessed, assimilated in argument and in cliché” (181-82), which determine both individual experience as well as social policy. We are sometimes seduced in accepting the detachment from meanings, as these metaphors seem “particularly liberating, even consoling” (182). Illness used as a figure or metaphor – similar to age – needs to be deconstructed. Sontag understands this well when she states, “But the

metaphors cannot be distanced just by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criticized, belabored, used up" (182).

This is exactly what the authors of the *Aging Studies* series do. As the contributions to this volume prove, Sontag's challenge has been accepted, and the notions of health and age are discussed in terms of the literal and the metaphoric, the personal and the public, the human and the environmental. Analyzing the interplay of age and health leads to a re-evaluation of established concepts of young and old, healthy and ill in historical and disciplinary contexts. In this volume, papers analyze the cultural ambiguities of social functions both of material realities as well as cultural representations from an interdisciplinary vantage point.

Focusing on the interplay between continuity and change, presence and absence of physical and mental well-being are discussed as part of life course identities and with respect to how our notions of agency are influenced by our understanding of health and illness within a subversive deconstruction of normative age concepts. The authors of this volume offer suggestions on how negative images of old age as physical decrepitude and disease can be deconstructed by presenting interpretations of material realities and cultural representations that manage to challenge both structures and narratives of what it means to grow and be old. Thus, depictions of appreciation of life even in the oldest age as forms of "successful frailty" are being reclaimed both by the authors of this volume as well as by us reading these texts.

This volume came out of the biennial conference of the *European Association of American Studies* (EAAS) in Izmir/Turkey in the spring of 2012. The conference took place under the motto of Thomas Jefferson, who wrote in a letter to John Garland Jefferson on June 11, 1790, "Leave all the afternoon for exercise and recreation, which are as necessary as reading. I will rather say more necessary because health is worth more than learning" (EAAS). US-Americanists from different disciplines engaged in discussions on illness and health, and asked fundamental questions about the state of the nation, its history and ideology. In the context of the theme of the conference, "The Health of the Nation," health was discussed as characteristic of Americans, quoting Emerson's dictum, "the first wealth is health" (EAAS). As a founding member of the *European Network in Aging Studies*, the *Center for Inter-American Studies* (C.IAS) of the University of Graz suggested two workshops with overwhelming resonance, so that for both workshops, "The Ages of Life: Health, Life Expectancy, and the Ambiguities of Living and Aging" (Maierhofer) and "Illness and its Metaphors: Challenging Medical Discourse from a Gendered Perspective" (Dominguez Rué/Kriebner) two panels each were offered. Many of the participants of these workshops later submitted papers for this volume.

In March 2011, at the conference "Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics" of the University of Toronto, the *European Network in Aging Studies* was presented

and an invitation was issued to attend the inaugural ENAS conference to be held in October of that year at the University of Maastricht/Netherlands, and born out of enthusiasm and the already established need for more structural collaboration the *North American Network in Aging Studies* (NANAS) was in course established. The collaborative ties were intensified, and academic collaboration is now taking place on many levels. Examples are international teaching collaborations with Stephen Katz and Leni Marshall at the summer school of the *Center for Inter-American Studies* on the topic of "Collective Identities" at Seggau Castle in the Austrian wine country in the summer of 2013, participation in grant proposals both submitted in the US and Canada as well as to various European funding institutions, and ENAS members joining the meeting of NANAS at the idyllic campus of Hiram College in Ohio. When in October 2013, the *Center for Inter-American Studies* of the University of Graz hosted Margaret Cruikshank as a Fulbright Professor and Ros Jennings, director of the Women, Ageing and Media Research Centre (WAM) and Head of the Postgraduate Research Centre (PRC) of the University of Gloucestershire, as a guest lecturer, the network in Age/Aging Studies did in no way feel virtual anymore. True to Peg Cruikshank's statement in her pivotal book *Learning to Be Old*, where she attempts "to bring together matters usually treated separately" (x), these meeting places and collaborative opportunities have provided exactly such converging of different approaches, theoretical backgrounds, and individual interests. While discussing Cruikshank's theses concerning social myths and fears about aging, sickness, and social roles during her Fulbright stay at the University of Graz, for students as well as colleagues the practical aspects of aging merged with theoretical concerns shared. This transatlantic cooperation of critical and cultural gerontologists, Age/Aging Studies scholars, and practitioners in the field aims at shaping not only academic discourse on age and aging but also political decision making.

When the European Commission declared 2012 the *European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations* in order to raise awareness of the contribution that older people make to society, to encourage policymakers and relevant stakeholders at all levels to take action with the aim of creating better opportunities for active aging and strengthening solidarity between generations, health was one of the most important aspects mentioned in the policy papers. Employment, participation in society, and independent living were the touchstones of the goals defined by this campaign that declared active aging as a means of empowerment in order to remain in charge of our own lives as long as possible:

Worried about growing older? About your place in society when you're 60, 70 or 80? There is a lot to life after 60 – and society is coming increasingly to appreciate the contribution older people can make. That's what active aging is about – getting more out of life as you grow older, not less, whether at work, at home or in the community. And this can help not just you as an individual but society as a whole. (Europa.eu)

*Fig. 1: “Meeting of the Like-Minded.” Gertrud Simon, Barbara Ratzenböck, Roberta Maierhofer, Heidrun Mörtl, Peg Cruikshank, Ros Jennings, Ulla Kriebnernegg at the University of Graz (Austria), October 15, 2013.*



Good will and the well-meaning intentions of this campaign were underscored by the narrow definition of age as “active,” thus limiting and reducing the aspect of health and well-being in terms of preconceived notions of activity. Images posted on the website supported this interpretation as old people were presented in physical mobility ignoring mental and cognitive agility. The need for interdisciplinary cooperation and activism in the political sphere becomes evident when looking at such campaigns and strategies. In order to truly achieve the aims drafted on a political level, we as scholars in the field of Age/ Aging Studies believe that more research is necessary in terms of the cultural construction of age and aging. This volume intends to take the notion of positive and active aging a step further by deconstructing the aspect of health and illness in terms of life expectancy and life-course identity. It is divided into two sections: Contributions discussing material realities in terms of social, political, and cultural structures, and those dealing with representations of age and aging in terms of cultural expressions.



## MATERIAL REALITIES

In her article, "Ageility Studies: The Interplay of Critical Approaches in Age Studies and Disability Studies," Leni Marshall explores the many productive intersections of Disability and Age Studies. The multiple social and emotional dimensions of aging and of disability create instructive contrasts, such as the contradictions of perceived visibility and political power or the connotations and consequences of attempted "rehabilitation." Marshall convincingly argues that conscious aging as an activist response is aging with an awareness of Age Studies and with an understanding of individual identity as adaptable, capable of remaining intact even as it changes. Conscious ageility as a new form of awareness can be achieved by combining the two fields' critical understanding of the body, both in terms of theories and praxis.

Claiming identity over the life course is Beverly Lunsford's thrust in her article "I May be Old and Sick, But I Am Still a Person." The potential bias by the general public as well as attitudes of healthcare professionals toward aging can affect healthcare provided for older adults. The *Center for Aging, Health and Humanities* established at George Washington University in 1995 addresses stereotypes of age and aging by conducting research on the creative potential of older adulthood. In 2009, a curriculum with a more person-centered approach to care of the older adult was developed in order to minimize biases toward aging. This approach encourages individualized care rather than the tendency to provide a "one size fits all" type of healthcare. Lunsford presents this person-centered approach as a means of providing safe and effective care for older adults with chronic illnesses, while supporting and respecting their quality of life. To achieve person-centered care, the humanities and creative arts are facilitators as a meaningful way to gain perspective of the older adult as a person with potential, rather than a healthcare problem to solve.

In the contribution "Health and Everyday Bodily Experiences of Old Mexican Women," Meiko Makita explores the ways in which a group of women (60-89 years of age) experience physical aspects of aging and old age. By exploring women's narratives of health, Makita focuses on embodied age and the women's tendency of equating "feeling good" with being healthy. These women experience their bodies as vulnerable to disease, distress and dysfunction, and objectify their bodies as outside of their control. As health is something owned, it is the mind that becomes the site for personal agency in terms of experience.

By focusing on the dynamics of individual differences of experiencing the speed of time passing, Elena Bendien discusses temporality as both existential as well as personal. In her article "Kwik-fit versus Varying Speeds of Aging," particular speed frames, especially in institutional care, are analyzed in terms of personal aspects of experiencing time.

In his contribution “Preemptive Biographies: Life and the Life Course in the Age of Security Administration,” Rüdiger Kunow discusses recent developments in biotechnology. Neoliberal governance – so Kunow – has, especially in the United States, fundamentally changed the understanding of human life and the life course. Aging and old age are now the ultimate frontier of preemptive thinking and offer fulfillment of the ancient dream of eternal youth, if not eternal life. Biotechnical interventions increase pressure to ameliorate or altogether avoid old age. Aging and old age have for the longest part of human history been understood as fate; preemptive thinking is now turning this into a matter of choice.

Julian Wangler’s article “Internalization or Social Comparison? An Empirical Investigation of the Influence of Media (Re)Presentations of Age on the Subjective Health Perception and Age Experience of Older People,” focuses on media representation in the Federal Republic of Germany. Although the concept of “activating” older people by presenting positive images and avoiding negative portrayals of old age is at the heart of most political initiatives, little empirical research has so far been undertaken to establish the effect of such media campaigns on successful health communication. The question whether and to what extent media (re)presentations of the elderly can influence subjective health perception and age experience is unexpectedly answered, as the images do not have the effect intended.

At the end of this section, Elisabeth Boulot discusses the consequences of ageist positions in terms of employment and provides legal insights into job related age discrimination. In her article “Combating Age Discrimination in the Workplace. A Study of the United States’ Rights-Based Response,” Boulot examines whether the Age Discrimination in Employment Act passed by the Johnson administration in 1967 has managed to achieve higher employment of older workers. Boulot presents an overview of the history of ADEA, and suggests possible explanations why workers still face similar discriminatory practices despite the established legislation. By comparing the US to other discrimination legislations, Boulot raises the question whether discrimination in the work-force can be fought by a rights-based response, or whether other measures might be necessary.

## **CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS**

The paper “‘There’s a reason we’re here’: Performative autobiographics and age identity in performer-created intergenerational theater” co-authored by Sally Chivers, David Barnett, Jacque Eales, and Janet Fast offers a textual analysis of archival materials of the intergenerational theater company, GeriActors & Friends (GF). Examining materials from the first decade of the theater company in relation to interviews with members of the theater company, this con-

tribution shows how a “library of experience” can be made public in a culture determined to see older adults as physically problematic, if they are noticed at all. The article convincingly argues that progression from reflecting common experiences to a more deliberate practice of collective and collaborative autobiography offers insight into the role of age identity in contemporary theater practice, and the potential for overtly intergenerational collaboration to result in the telling of new stories of growing old in a graying world, stories that challenge images of aging as tied only to physical decrepitude and disease, without ignoring that health is a key part of aging.

Ricca Edmondson and Eileen Fairhurst examine in their article “Images of Living and Aging: Counter-Cultural Constructions of Health and Wisdom” two calendars intended for daily use that feature older people, their activities, and how they should be seen. These calendars – one from the UK, one from Ireland – are specifically intended to impact on public perceptions of older people; in different ways, they offer creative subversions of everyday expectations about the life course and what it has to offer. Using dynamic interplays of words and images, they urge counter-cultural ways of imagining the activity, health and also the wisdom of older people. These modes of imagining accentuate productive, mutual, social and intergenerational relationships and take different forms in their different cultural contexts.

Sherryl Wilson’s essay “*She’s Been Away*: Aging, Madness and Memory” explores the ways in which television drama is able to mount a challenge to the dominate discourse that positions aging as decline and mental decrepitude. Rather, old age and madness are used as a means to mount a feminist social critique. The case study is *She’s Been Away*, a TV drama written by Stephen Poliakoff and broadcast in the UK on BBC 1 in 1989, and centers on an elderly woman discharged from the psychiatric hospital in which she has been living for 60 years. The article argues that it is the combination of Lillian’s age and her intergenerational relation with her niece-in-law that subvert the well-worn tropes and reconfigures aging as wisdom able to produce a new sense of empowerment; the confluence of madness, old age and memory disrupts expectations and punctures the consciousness. As such, *She’s Been Away* is both a celebration of the unruly older woman, a critique of the cultural construction of madness, and a meditation on the power of memory to produce counter-discourse.

In her article “Illness and Love in Old Age in Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* and Elizabeth Strout’s *Olive Kitteridge*” Anne-Meike Dackweiler challenges preconceived notions of romantic love as belonging to the young. By analyzing the nexus of romantic love, old age, and illness as paradigmatic for contemporary Anglo-American literature, Dackweiler suggests that the binary opposition of the despised sexual and respectable but asexual old is being replaced by positive individual attitudes of the ‘frail old’ towards love, despite or precisely because of their illnesses.

Amelia DeFalco's essay "Uncanny Witnessing: Dementia, Narrative, and Identity in Fiction by Munro and Franzen" considers the repercussions of dementia for narrative-based models of identity. In particular, the essay examines fiction by Alice Munro and Jonathan Franzen that depicts dementia as eroding subjectivity and narrative, at the same time prompting fleeting insights into otherness that awaken caregivers to their own difference. These fictional narratives suggest that dementia may complicate assumptions about identity and selfhood, shifting attention from discrete selves to collaborative relationships. As Munro's stories, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and "Spelling," along with Franzen's novel, *The Corrections*, suggest, dementia's transformation of communication and identity tests human structures of meaning and being, revealing both the limits of understanding, and what lies beyond.

In her article "Shaking off Shackles: LTC Freedom in 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' and *The Other Sister*," Patricia Life explores two Canadian texts where the protagonists' lives are interpreted to have improved after admission to long-term care institutions. Both texts counter the 20th-century narrative of the nursing home-as-horror, and instead offer new narratives of home-as-haven and aging-as-opportunity, thus contesting the aging-as-decline narrative. Selective forgetting, remembering, and refocusing facilitated by living in a new environment allow the protagonists to live to greater advantage.

Ellen Matlok-Ziemann argues in her contribution to this volume, "'Old women that will not be kept away': Undermining Ageist Discourse with Invisibility and Performance" that both William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* and Eudora Welty's *The Purple Hat* offer valuable insights into how characters despite and because of their marginalization are empowered to resist ageist discourses.

Drawing on Michel Foucault, the article "Scrutinizing the 'medical glance': Bodily Decay, Disease and Death in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*," Marta Cerezo Moreno discusses Margaret Atwood's first novel as revolving around a two-level structure of surface and depth, visibility, and invisibility. The main protagonist's dream-like vision of her own bodily dissolution stands as the first of a series of recurrent images developed by the text as regards bodily decay, decomposition, disease, and death. Marian's body turns into a tangible and decomposing space subjected to a patriarchal medical glance in order to control and dominate her subjectivity.

Maricel Oró-Piqueras argues in her article with the title "Wisdom versus Frailty in Ursula Le Guin's *Voices* and Doris Lessing's 'The Reason for It'" that by managing and modeling our external appearance a body is perceived as vigorous and productive, whereas signs of aging are interpreted as signs of frailty and illness. Ursula Le Guin's novel *Voices* (2006) and Doris Lessing's short story "The Reason for It" (2003) present futuristic societies in which vigor and youth are predominant.

The final article of this volume “From Cane to Chair: Old Age and Storytelling in Juvenile Literature by Hawthorne, Goodrich, and Mogridge” by Eriko Ogihara-Schuck examines 19<sup>th</sup> century juvenile literary works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Samuel G. Goodrich, and George Mogridge as providing a complex view of aging. Attention is particularly paid to the representations of the elderly narrators who accept aging as an ambiguous process and offer the possibility of successful frailty.

The wide scope of the articles presented in the fifth volume of the publication series of the *European Network in Aging Studies* (ENAS) is product and mission at the same time. It is only a starting point for investigation into the deconstruction of our understanding of normative human behavior. Once we stop talking about universal concepts of shaping our life courses, we will be able to overcome preconceived notions of what it means to be and grow old.

Fig. 2: “Moving ENAS Forward.” Experts’ Meeting at the University of Lleida (Spain), April 8-10, 2013.



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