

Age Studies Comes of Age

Cynthia Port and Aagje Swinnen

Friendship. Literacy. Creativity. Performance. Senicide. Residence homes. Disciplinary history. Pedagogy. These are some of the themes addressed in this inaugural issue of *Age, Culture, Humanities*. In recent decades, as inquiry into identity, difference, and cultural value has transformed scholarly practices in the humanities, the power of age to define and divide has frequently been left out of the critical conversation. *Age, Culture, Humanities* seeks to remedy this omission by publishing innovative research that interprets, challenges, and expands the ways in which age, aging, and old age are understood in divergent contexts. In addition, we provide a forum for opinion, debate, and interdisciplinary dialogue; offer pragmatic pedagogical perspectives on incorporating the study of age into humanities curricula; and share reviews of recent scholarly publications as well as of contemporary literature, arts exhibits, and performances. Our goal is to support a growing intellectual community that is developing humanities-based approaches to the study of age and employing them to help recalibrate cultural perceptions, generate new interpretive models, enrich the understanding of age, and, as a consequence, ultimately help enhance the lived process of aging across the lifespan.

The urgent need for greater attention to age in humanities disciplines is fed by numerous factors: a damaging binary cultural system that idealizes youth and devalues older age; dramatically shifting demographics in contemporary Western cultures; and the anxiety linked to the ever-changing instability of age identity are among them. Age is a facet of human experience that many—particularly in youth-centered Western cultures of the twenty-first century—are keen to resist, repress, or ignore. But failing to integrate age into our efforts to understand and interpret human experience leads to a distorted view that risks perpetuating ageist perspectives and policies and contributes to the widespread dread of getting older. Both as an individual experience and as an element of cultural ideology with acute social ramifications, age merits our closest attention and critical analysis.

The intersections of age and culture offer fertile ground for research initiatives within and across humanities disciplines and in social science work that engages humanist perspectives. Humanist methodologies expose the degree to which age relations and perceptions play unacknowledged roles in cultural and political ideologies and fundamentally shape the understanding of identity, relationships, and human experience. In a scholarly context that is increasingly turning to the posthuman, the transhuman, and the virtual, explorations of the embodied experience of age and its cultural resonances offer crucial insights into the uniquely human awareness of the experience of living through time. The study of age offers a fresh perspective on differences across cultures and a means of fostering connections across generations that can seem increasingly disjunctive in a rapidly changing social and technological landscape. By exploring how people think, write, and create art about what it means to age, and by developing critical systems to analyze the cultural vehicles of social power, humanist approaches have an essential role to play in the public discourse about age and aging.

Age, Culture, Humanities appears at a pivotal moment in the field of critical age studies. In 2010, the *Journal of Age, Humanities, and the Arts* (JAHA), the official publication of the Humanities and Arts Committee of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), co-edited by Anne Wyatt-Brown and Dana Burr Bradley, was discontinued by its publisher. Also in 2010, a three-year grant from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) led to the formation of the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS), which has spurred an impressive proliferation of scholarly activity and outreach on cultural approaches to aging within Europe and the United Kingdom, as well as overseas. January 2013 saw the founding of a sister organization, the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS), which serves as an interdisciplinary research hub to mobilize scholarly initiatives, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and raise the visibility of the field. *Age, Culture, Humanities* is honored to be affiliated with both of these galvanizing organizations and pleased to join such journal publications as the Humanities and Arts section of

The Gerontologist, *The Journal of Aging Studies*, and the *International Journal of Aging and Later Life* (IJAL) as potential venues for the dissemination of research undertaken by their members.

In the summer of 2012, the editors and advisory editor of *Age, Culture, Humanities* conducted dozens of interviews with leading age studies researchers in the United States, Europe, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Scholars were almost unanimous in their conviction that a journal featuring scholarship on age and aging from a humanities perspective was urgently needed and would be a welcome addition to the scholarly landscape, serving to consolidate the field and raise its visibility while enabling interdisciplinary exchange and fostering new methodological approaches. However, such unanimity was tellingly absent in respondents' definitions of age studies, delineation of its methodologies, and recommendations for the journal's focus and scope. Similarly diverse visions of the contours of the field became apparent at the initial meeting of NANAS members at Hiram College in July 2013 and have been a recurrent theme among the founding members at the ENAS experts' meetings. Some central questions emerged about the parameters of these new organizations and of the field(s) they aim to represent: Is it age studies, aging studies, or cultural gerontology, and to what do these various terms refer? Should the focus be on old age or on age as a category of identity across the lifespan? What can humanities scholars and social scientists do to advance the study of age and aging beyond data-driven investigations that, focused on reducing the health care costs expected to result from an aging population, seek to measure the effects of age and often hope to "cure" them? And how might we raise the visibility of the field so that it gets its necessary share of scholarly resources?

To explore potential responses to these questions, participants at the Hiram NANAS meeting invited a selection of scholars representing diverse disciplines and perspectives to address them, to reflect on their own personal contributions to the field, and to articulate what they see as the future of the discipline. We are pleased to publish the responses of Stephen Katz (Sociology), Devoney Looser (English), Lynne Segal

(Psychology and Gender Studies), Chris Gilleard (Mental Health Sciences), Tamara A. Baker (Aging Studies), Jan Baars (Gerontology and Philosophy), Andy Achenbaum (History), and Peter Whitehouse (Medicine), curated and introduced by Andrea Charise, under the category “Credos, Manifestos, and Reflections” featured in this issue. These brief essays review the history of critical age/ing studies, deliberate on its parameters, outline potential future directions, and identify some of the challenges scholars of age and aging currently face. The productive debates that emerge here are evidence of the lively vitality of the research and teaching community *Age, Culture, Humanities* seeks to serve.

The research articles appearing in this inaugural edition of the journal showcase a range of humanist methodologies and approaches to the study of age, including biographical approaches, narrative analysis, performance studies, postcolonial analysis, documentary studies, and literacy studies. “The Literacy Narrative of Chadwick’s *The First Grader*,” Lauren Marshall Bowen’s compelling analysis of a film about an eighty-four-year-old Kenyan man who demands to be included in the government promise of free primary education, reveals that literacy can serve to displace older people from social participation and render their forms of knowing and communicating obsolete. Demonstrating ways in which cultural perspectives on age and literacy are mutually constitutive, Bowen calls for a “partnership” between age studies and writing studies, fields that both “share an interest in recovering the previously ignored work of marginalized social groups in order to make sense of the rhetorical worlds in which they write or otherwise make meaning; turn a critical eye on the ideologies that create and sustain systems of oppression through discourse; and identify opportunities for the resistance to, appropriation of, or confirmation of dominant ideologies through literate acts.” Identifying and building on fruitful connections between age studies and other fields, Bowen’s intervention reflects a central element of the journal’s animating mission.

Whereas *The First Grader*—a film based on a true story—centers on the apparent incongruity of an old man situated among school children, *Room 335*, the subject of Helen Small’s article, “Assisted Living: ‘Acting

Naturally' in *Room 335*," is a documentary about college students who locate themselves among the old. In both cases, the filmic depiction of a cross-generational environment challenges the ways in which supposed attributions of age are constructed and projected onto others. Nineteen-year-old Andrew Jenks, the director of *Room 335*, and two of his friends move into an assisted living facility to make this film about the place and its residents. Small's essay reads the film as an exploration of friendship among the residents at Harbor Place as well as between them and the young filmmakers, and argues that the film's methodology "gets in some important respects closer to the subjective and inter-subjective experience of its subjects than either the more rigorous sociological interview or the journalistic exposé" as it registers thoughtful ambivalence about the social costs and opportunities of segregating older people in assisted living residences.

An artist's struggle to remain active in the face of illness and impairment is illuminated through a biographical approach in Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon's contribution, "Creativity, Productivity, Aging: The Case of Benjamin Britten." This article highlights the crucial function of subjective life narratives, as well as their fragility, and the need for adaptive flexibility in later life. As the authors demonstrate, Britten's self-conception was predicated jointly on his youthful persona and on his effectiveness as a composer. Cardiac illness and a stroke forced Britten, though only in his fifties, to relinquish the narrative of extended youthfulness while striving to maintain his self-identity as a productive artist. By accommodating a changing life narrative, Britten was able to maintain his creative energies and produce, in his final years, some of his most outstanding works. This essay, excerpted by the authors from their forthcoming book, *Four Last Songs: Aging and Creativity in Verdi, Strauss, Messiaen, Britten*, attests to the ongoing potential for creative vitality in later life and in compromised health.

Valerie Barnes Lipscomb's essay, "Putting on Her White Hair?: The Life Course in Wilder's *The Long Christmas Dinner*," investigates the performativity of age as manifested in a one-act play and an opera by the

same name—works that speed through ninety years in the history of one family. Analyzing the ways in which Thornton Wilder indicates the continuity of the self despite the physical changes brought by age, Lipscomb argues that works that emphasize the stability of identity over time and the continuing relevance of older people can play a role in fighting ageist tendencies to marginalize and devalue the old. By offering a new reading of Wilder's work, this case study exemplifies how an age studies approach can illuminate an individual text and invigorate an established field, such as modern drama, with a fresh perspective.

The winner of our first annual Graduate Student Essay Contest, Bridie Moore's "Depth, Significance, and Absence: Age-Effects in New British Theatre," provides both an overview and a detailed snapshot of contemporary theatre practices. Opening with a survey of recent British plays that feature aging as a central theme, the article proceeds to concentrate on five of those plays, reading them through the foundational age theories of Anne Basting, Anca Cristofovici, and Kathleen Woodward to identify ways in which contemporary dramatists and directors conceptualize the production of age as a performative effect. In works that feature characters at multiple ages in the same play (*Lovesong* and *One Day When We Were Young*), explore the search for embodied significance at midlife (*Jerusalem* and *Jumpy*), and mark the invisibility of frail old age (*The Last of the Duchess*), Moore sees evidence of a cultural response to an aging population—a response that often reinforces dominant stereotypes, but sometimes successfully undermines conventional projections of the aging process.

The recurring series "Age Studies in the Disciplines" invites a scholar to map the current landscape of age-centered scholarship in a given field and to envision potential directions for future research. In the first installment of this series, "Age and History as Categories of Analysis: Refiguring Old Age," Lynn Botelho issues a "call to arms," outlining the need for historians to attend to age by demonstrating the ways in which old women have generally been left out of historical accounts and exposing how this omission has distorted the historical record. Recounting "some of the ways that old age altered the meaning of womanhood" in the Early

Modern period in Europe, as well as the material circumstances faced by older women, Botelho calls for further study of “what womanhood in old age looked like from the outside” and “how it was experienced from the inside.” Better understanding of the conditions of old age in previous centuries, the essay reminds us, can “offer some guidance” to those seeking to understand contemporary circumstances affecting older people.

Margaret Gullette’s position paper, “Euthanasia as a Caregiving Fantasy in the Era of the New Longevity,” takes on the ethical questions that surround Michael Haneke’s 2012 film, *Amour*. Noting that most critics identify with the male caretaker in the film and ignore or romanticize the violent murder he enacts, Gullette asks us to consider the potential consequences of insufficiently supported caregiving and to recognize the dangerous allure of euthanasia as a cultural fantasy. In a response to Gullette’s piece that appears exclusively in the digital edition of the journal, Stephen Post contextualizes the hypercognitive theories of personhood that contribute to the rationalization of senicide in the cognitively disabled and reminds us of other elements of self-identity that persist in those he urges us to think of as the “deeply forgetful.”

The first contribution to our Pedagogical Perspectives category, Erin Gentry Lamb’s “‘Polyester Pants and Orthopedic Shoes’: Introducing Age Studies to Traditional-Aged Undergraduates,” models a four-question survey that, in a single class session, leads students to acknowledge their own ageist assumptions, introduces them to fundamental age studies concepts such as decline and progress narratives, and sets the stage for further analysis of the causes and effects of ageism. Engaging students in age criticism, Lamb reminds us, will significantly change the way those students experience the process of aging and can motivate them to impassioned advocacy on behalf of others. The skills they learn through this work will also help prepare students for professional development in an age-diverse and demographically evolving social environment.

We are excited to share these interventions in age studies research and teaching through *Age, Culture, Humanities*. Creating a venue that promotes and publishes innovative research, establishes a space for the

exchange of opinions and ideas, shares strategies for teaching age studies concepts and methods to potentially resistant students, and reviews current scholarship in the field has been made possible through the contributions and support of many within and beyond the age studies community. First, our sincere thanks to Dan Ennis, Dean of the Edwards College of Fine Arts and Humanities of Coastal Carolina University and founder of the Athenaeum Press, for his vision, faith, and support. Deepest gratitude also to our Advisory Editor, Leni Marshall, who has done so much to energize and consolidate this field and whose judicious vision has helped us navigate both expected and unanticipated challenges. Our Advisory Board members, Editorial Committee members, and Steering Committee members have generously lent their time and their support to bring this publication into being. We invite you, the readers, to build on these contributions. Share and discuss the articles and essays you find valuable. Submit your own work through our online submission system. Join NANAS and ENAS and participate in this growing scholarly community. Contribute to efforts that build recognition of the significance of age as an element of identity, a marker of difference, an articulation of culture, and a resonant category of analysis.

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