

The Future Is Certain: Manifesting Age, Culture, Humanities

Andrea Charise

Every movement needs a manifesto, a pronouncement against which old idols are smashed and vital new energies launched into being. “The oldest among us are not yet thirty,” declaimed F.T. Marinetti in *The Futurist Manifesto* (1909), voicing the same renovating impetus that links the French Revolution’s abolishment of the *ancien régime* with the virtual gauntlet thrown by the digital humanities. The first issue of this new journal calls out for just such a galvanizing statement of purpose. Why age studies, now? What do its proponents defend, reject, demand? A credo’s power to rally its crusaders depends upon the identification of an enemy whose ordained powers are waning and infirm, practically obsolete. Out of whose ashes will we be born anew?

This urge presents a problem. The logical framework of the manifesto—a textual form that leans heavily on the rhetoric of generational incompatibility—runs counter to the impulse of our very subject. Age studies (AS) is, relatively speaking, a new subfield of the humanities and qualitative social sciences concerned with the matter of age and aging.¹ More than this: AS has thus far focused its attention on older age in particular. The nascent study of age, aging, and older age—by no means equivalent terms, as the reflections in this section emphasize—therefore expresses the subfield’s own divergent age-selves (to use Anca Cristofovici’s phrase) and, consequently, its own conceptual infrastructure of age diversity. For the AS practitioner, neither old age nor youth, nor the temporal domains of past, present, or future they can be imagined to embody, can be uncritically operationalized as an antagonist, however generative the outcome might at first appear. In refusing to perpetuate longstanding ideological valuations of lifecourse, AS turns away from the straw man that has set ablaze other movements and modes of inquiry.

How then to proceed? Against such models of regime-slaying, the AS practitioner looks instead to the repressed cracks of the everyday, resolving

to build up where other instincts cry, “tear down.” In my case, I come to AS as a young or, more precisely, junior scholar. My interest in the literary study of older age is prompted by nearly a decade’s work as a medical researcher, primarily in geriatrics. As Stephen Katz encourages, I bring up this subjective dimension because it serves as a partial case study of the opportunities and challenges that face this subfield, especially for researchers at the outset of their academic careers. Several years ago, when I first began my dissertation, I observed a peculiar pattern. Well-meaning inquirers from both medicine and literature would ask what I was working on. When I replied that my dissertation examined representations of old age in nineteenth-century British writing, the response was predictable:

“What?” followed by a leaning in or compensatory gesture
(tilted head, cupped ear).

I would say again, simplifying still. “Old age.”

<A pause. Alternatively, the above exchange repeated>

“Oh.” <Wait for it...> “Why?”

Why the study of older age might feel unseemly is, I suppose, no big mystery. The stubbornly ageist collapsing of aging with senescence and death (as Jan Baars notes) effectively brands the investigator of aging an uncanny or even perverse character. Weirder still seems the apparently young scholar who takes up the mantle of progeria, like the eccentric aged child of a Dickens or Hardy novel (I can’t remember—did Little Father Time get tenure in the end?). This pervasive sense of antipathy is a major barrier for the AS researcher and for AS itself. In the twenty-first century, there is much about aging and older age especially that can feel off-putting or even repulsive. Both literature and health policy have been working hard to animate specters of the ill-derly, dementia, and the apocalyptic demography of aging populations and falling birth rates.² Reflecting on my own experience, the most profound indication of this aversion was expressed not so much in the baffled “Why?” but in the failure or reluctance to give ear to the words “old age” in the first place.

Drawing out the *what* of AS is the purpose of this journal and most especially of this inaugural issue. What distinguishes AS as an approach to inquiry? Stephen Katz (Sociology) begins this section by imagining a world where gender studies has been shuttered into practical oblivion, materializing only in niche panels at the occasional humanities conference. To remedy the displacement of age as an analytical category, Katz calls for a “fuel[led] criticality” in AS that includes the anchoring but reinventive potential of narrative and “close attention to the ordinary.” A lapse in just this kind of close attention provides the spur for Devoney Looser’s (English) contribution. Looser interprets Virginia Woolf’s assumption that Jane Austen outlived Fanny Burney, her literary predecessor, as an instance of a wider reluctance “to see authors, particularly female authors of past centuries, as active across the lifecourse.” Looser’s call for an improved recognition of the radical contingencies of age—that is, age’s resistance to the static effects of meaning-making—becomes, for Lynne Segal (Psychology and Gender Studies), a “critical plank” of AS. As Segal writes, AS is uniquely positioned to teach us how “‘dependency’ is part of the human condition, whatever our age.” Yet the complexities of affect springing from narcissism, desire, and “the happiness industry” underscore both the challenge and the need for a collaborative ethos that “promot[es] communication across generations.”

For the AS practitioner, an array of possible paths exists. Chris Gilleard (Mental Health Sciences) reminds readers how aging is, in important ways, an anthropocentric oddity. If “[a]ging in the wild is rare,” then we should be alert not only to the artificiality of age “as a master identity or an unmediated biological process” but also to the “queering” effects of AS as an academic enterprise. Tamara A. Baker (Aging Studies) points to one area of AS in need of urgent critical attention: “Our understanding [of] the diversity of our aging population.” Improvements in healthcare have resulted in longer and, on average, healthier lives, but AS must attend closely to the range of experiences that distinguish age, aging, and older age in light of racial and ethnic identity. Another iteration of such diversity is evinced in Jan Baars’s (Gerontology and Philosophy) interest

in “the manifold experience of living in time.” AS practitioners need to be especially sensitive to the temporalized nature of their work; just as the Heisenberg principle demonstrates the impossibility of isolating both the location and momentum of a particle at any given moment, so must we be resigned to the “ambivalences of showing and hiding, of participation and withdrawal, of continuity and discontinuity” as they affect our scholarship, pedagogy, and activism.

What might the lifecourse of AS look like? By reflecting on the foundational work of key scholars past and present, Andy Achenbaum (History) engages Baars’s critical ambivalence in the form of a pointed, yet scopic, life review. “I have had my share of disappointments,” Achenbaum reflects; and yet, while “[t]he time has come for bolder action,” will the next wave of AS researchers and educators heed this call to exceed their reach, challenge dominant disciplinary models and, above all, partner creatively? Peter Whitehouse (Medicine) shares with Achenbaum the conviction that AS needs to breed a new species of academic entrepreneur, activists capable of thinking and acting beyond the stale mandates of inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinarity. “We need to find new intergenerative blends of science and narrative,” Whitehouse argues, referring to what he defines elsewhere as “the meaningful fusion of ideas and emotions that emerge from conversations and experiences shared between the generations” (George, Whitehouse, and Whitehouse 391). Like Katz, Whitehouse places highest priority on the need to re-engineer “the metaphors that fuel our new stories”—an urgent task, as his own idiom suggests, given the reality of an unprecedented global crisis that is recalibrating the relationship between ecological resources and human demographics.

If we are ultimately bound to the fact of finitude—be it our own or that of our alarmingly myopic species—then AS encourages us to exercise what remains of our agency through the language and stories we choose to live by. Here’s one attempt. As I was writing this article, it occurred to me that a line from one of my favorite songs, The Doors’ “Roadhouse Blues,” could serve as a sort of AS motto: “The future is certain / The end is always near.” Pleased with this little find, I mentioned it to my

mother during a phone conversation. I was immediately corrected: the line in fact records the opposite outlook (“The future’s *uncertain*”). So I had misheard the song I had been listening to for decades, as tone-deaf to Morrison’s lyrics as those who had been unable to discern my own enunciation of “old age.” Was this selective hearing? Sure, in part. But it is also, I sense, more than that: it is aversion turned on its head, forced and fashioned into a productive, affirmative act. The creative distortion of this intergenerative moment reminds me that AS, like every one of its practitioners, has a lifecourse whose issue is profoundly uncertain. But I choose to tarry with my misreading precisely because the *end*—as in the goal, the hope, the undertaking—is always near, helping AS and its practitioners to navigate the uncertainty of years to come.

Where to from here? Just as *Age, Culture, Humanities* promises to build up the prodigious resources of AS, so must we turn this impulse on ourselves, our departments, and our intellectual communities. I propose three modest action items:

- **Prepare a 30-second précis of what AS is and why it matters to your work.** Write it out. Make it strong. Employ it regularly. Let it evolve.
- **Seize opportunities to show your department what AS brings to canonical content.** How does our understanding of X (George Eliot, the novel, modernist poetics, queer theory, sculpture, bioethics, health policy) change when seen through an AS lens? How does AS identify and/or help solve the problems in your field?
- **Don’t factionalize.** “Age” or “aging” studies? Lifecourse or older age? Is AS within the purview of gerontology or something else entirely? State your preferences, know your reasons, but at the end of the day (Tom Cole said it best)—skip the border wars. Make a big tent.

NOTES

¹I adopt this shorthand (AS) as a conscious means of declining to take a position concerning the use of “age studies” over “aging studies” (and vice versa) in this venue.

²For more on this characterization of aging populations, see my article “‘Let the reader think of the burden’: Old Age and the Crisis of Capacity” in *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*. I borrow Rick Moody’s coining of the “ill-derly” *Aging: Concepts and Controversies* (172).

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