



Framing Ageing

Workshop 1 Abstracts

1. Assmann, Aleida (University of Konstanz): Wisdom - a new concept for gerontology?

Theme: Memory and Feelings

The experience of ageing confronts humans with challenges, problems and incapacities. But this is not the whole story, as Paul Baltes and Ursula Staudinger argue. They also show a potential for new resources in the process of aging that is related to cognition and discussed under the label of 'wisdom'. Both psychologists developed an empirical method to test different stages of wisdom among older people, thus adding a new component with a vision of empowerment to our concept of old age. The paper will reassess this interesting approach and frame within in a wider transcultural context.

2. Byrne, Tara (Arts Programme Manager, Age & Opportunity): Die! Die! Old People Die!: subverting and celebrating older age through the arts.

Theme: Practise II

This presentation will discuss the concept of creative ageing festivals, drawing on the example of Bealtaine, Ireland's only and first such festival. The presentation will introduce the concept of using the festival model to subvert and complicate common understandings and representations of older age, and as well as to honour and celebrate it. Bealtaine is Ireland's national festival which celebrates the arts and creativity as we age, it was founded in 1995 by Age & Opportunity, Ireland's national organisation aiming to ensure the best possible quality of life for people aged 50 to 100+. The festival takes place every May for the entire month, with annual attendances of over 50,000 in communities all over Ireland. Bealtaine's key mission is to increase access to and representation in the arts for older people in Ireland. See: www.ageandopportunity.ie. I thank the UK Theatre Company Ridiculusmus for the title of this presentation!

3. Carney, Gemma (Queen's University Belfast): The Material Life Course



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Theme: Methodologies

One of the benefits of the cultural turn in gerontology has been to expand the methods and approaches available to us to study and, ultimately, understand old age. However, the paucity of indicators of ageing other than the physiological has left us finding it difficult to find anything other than the human body to hang our conceptions of ageing on and particularly old age as a cultural and social construct on. How do you know someone is old? What does it mean to be old? We find it difficult to answer these questions without mentioning chronological age and/or some aspect of physiological decline. In this paper, drawing on a successful pilot project *Material Objects on the Journey of Life*, I make the case for using material objects to better understand old age as a significant stage on the human life course.

The idea of looking at the significance of material objects, in particular, personal possessions as a means of understanding human history is not new (see Miller, 1998; 2005; 2017). Material possessions have potential to offer empirical artefacts to accompany life histories (see Hannan, Carney, Devine and Hodge, 2019). Objects from the past also offer a potential entry and exit point for younger generations to understand the personal and social history that the current generation of older cohorts have lived through. When objects are explored as personal possessions, when the significance of those possessions to their owners are researched in the context of the lived experience of their owners, objects can offer a three dimensional perspective on the human life course, combining history, material culture and lived experience. The material life course approach offers us a way of bringing together culture, history and lived experience through the objects and testimony of those who have already lived a long life.

Perhaps the material life course approach is a way for gerontologists to better understand what it means to live a long life. Our use of visual methods also has the potential to demonstrate that experience to younger generations, and to re-frame ageing as an important aspect of human life.

4. Cosgrove, Mary (Trinity College Dublin): Title forthcoming

Theme: Narrating Gender and Ageing

Title and abstract forthcoming

5. Featherstone, Katie (Cardiff University): Wandering the Wards: Everyday hospital care and its consequences for people living with dementia.

Theme: Practise I

Based on ethnographic research carried out over a four-year period (supported by the National Institute for Health Research NIHR HS&DR researcher led funding stream) within 8 hospitals across England and Wales, this paper provides a detailed examination of the world of the hospital ward and the everyday bedside care within it. We explore a key contemporary transformation in our hospitals, the experiences, impacts, and consequences, of an increasing significant population of people living with dementia who require unscheduled acute hospital care.

We examine the everyday cultures of care in our hospital wards and its consequences for patients and staff. In particular, we describe the struggle of hospital staff to fit and contain a population habitually regarded by the institution as the 'wrong' sort of patient within the delivery of tightly timetabled

routines and rituals of standardized task-based care work. We show the ways in which this creates a cycle of struggle and conflict between staff and patients that can in themselves become engrained within the everyday routines and patterns of ward life, with powerful and detrimental impacts on patients, their families, and ward staff. We discuss the ways in which this can inform the invisibility of the key groups within it: people living with dementia and ward staff.

6. Film screening of *Backwater* - Director Brendan McCallion in Conversation with Helen Doherty (IADT)

A screening of the award-winning graduate film *Backwater* by Brendan McCallion and Frank O'Malley will be followed by a conversation by Brendan with Helen Doherty (Film School, IADT) about the motivation behind the film and the difficulties of producing a short film about such a complex topic.

7. Fuchs, Anne (UCD Humanities Institute): The Inner Voice of Ageing Women: Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* and *Olive, Again*

Theme: Narrating Gender and Ageing

Analyzing Elizabeth Strout's compelling representation of the gendered ageing process, my paper focuses on the literary techniques that foreground and explore the gap between the social construction of old age in the community on the one hand and the protagonist's subjective experience of her world on the other. I will argue that interior monologue and stream of consciousness in particular offer unparalleled and 'real time' access to a complex and contradictory subjectivity, which complicates and unsettles normative expectations of gendered behaviour and propriety. If the literary techniques discussed provide a paradigmatic model for understanding the complexity of ageing, then this should impact the teaching of gerontologists and practitioners.

8. Guimarães, João Paulo (UCD Humanities Institute): Ron Silliman's *Universe*: Aging, Epic Poetry and Everyday Life

Theme: Gender, Subjectivity and Agency

What are we to make of the works of aging experimental authors who keep trying to resist conformity through the last stage of life, traditionally seen as a time of recapitulation, resignation and reconciliation? My current project, "The Old Garde", examines the recent work of poets who position themselves against a poetics of summation, sobriety and depth, highlighting instead the importance of openness, discontinuity, scepticism and contingency for literary prospection and late life well-being.

In this paper I will explore Ron Silliman's *Universe*, a serial poetic project which, according to the publisher's description, "were [the author] to live long enough, would take him three centuries to complete". I will specifically focus on the significance of the book's length for a general discussion of aging, poetry and temporality. One should bear in mind that *Universe* is, unlike most epics, not a retrospective work of synthesis but rather a present and future-oriented project. The point of departure for my analysis will be the following passage from *Northern Soul*, the second book in the series: "Page 43 / you will read / differently if / there are 94 to the book / than if there are just / 45, What about / 523 what then / little hen" (49). Notorious for his massive tomes of verse, Silliman establishes an analogy between the length of his life and the length of his work that, with a mere change in metrics (pages, for Silliman, represent moments, not years), blows up conventional



chronological accounts of life. In this poem, death, instead of looming on the horizon, is internalized as the point of transition from one page to the next, the death of an event being the birth of another. Everyday life thus reveals itself in all its subtle variety, its generative fugacity paradoxically enriching the life of the poet. Silliman's epic poetry is not, that is, a matter of mastery or life-extension (it makes no claims to totalization or immortality) but rather one of life-enhancement/enchantment, achieved through a greater bardic attunement to the granularities of community and everyday life.

9. Higgs, Paul (University College London): The ageing body and the social imaginary of the fourth age

Theme: Ageing Bodies and Identity

The connection between the ageing body and old age has been seen to have such an intrinsic relationship that it has rarely been commented upon. This has become more problematic as increasing healthy life expectancy has made leisure retirement and the cultures of the third age forms of 'ageless ageing' possible. 'Real' old age of decline, disability and dependency has become a 'feared' backdrop to the new circumstances of later life. This presentation will examine the role of the social imaginaries of the ageing body in their elaboration of the fourth age.

10. Jallo, Zainabu (University of Bern): Ageing in Diaspora

Theme: Memory and Feelings

The Ageing diaspora is at the centre of the Play *We Take Care of Our Own* (2019)¹. Three first-generation immigrants, ages 91, 89 and 87 are torn between romanticized imaginaries of ageing and the reality of living in a nursing home in Europe. They ruminate on the interruption of intergenerational practices by the choice to migrate from their homelands. As representatives of a highly accomplished group of transcontinental professionals, they look back on their achievements, but suffer from existential anxieties at the dusk of their lives.

According to the United Nation's Department of Economic and Social Affairs, as of September 2019, the number of international migrants has now reached 272 million, outpacing the growth rate of the world's population. Consequently, there are nearly 220 million first-generation migrants around the world: this translates to around 4% of the world's population. My presentation will explore the processes of bringing aspects of diasporic gerontology to the theatre stage, working with age-appropriate actors, and the overall reception on the play thus far.

11. King, Andrew (University of Surrey): Coming far, getting somewhere? The current concerns and future challenges facing older LGBT+ people

Theme: Gender, Subjectivity and Agency

In this paper I discuss key themes affecting the lives of adults over fifty years of age who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or those whose gender identity or sexual orientation is minoritized (older LGBT+ people). These themes cover those that are of current concern, but also those that will become challenges for older LGBT+ in the future. To do this, I draw on data from a number of studies I have conducted, as well as drawing on the growing multidisciplinary and international body literature to have emerged over the past decade.

12. Knoeff, Rina (University of Groningen): Revisiting the centenarian cult: On the cultural significance of tales of exceptional old age

Theme: Ageing Bodies and Identity

In 1669 William Harvey (1578-1657), famous for his discovery of the blood circulation, reported on his postmortem examination of the renowned patriarch Thomas Parr, allegedly 152 years and nine months old and commonly known as 'the Old, Old very Old Man'. Harvey's findings, and especially the fact that he 'shows no trace of a properly skeptical attitude', were the beginning of what, among bewildered demographic historians, became known as the 'centenarian cult', 'which haunted many generations of English intellectuals' (Laslett, 1999).

In my paper I revisit this so called 'centenarian cult'. Yet, rather than exposing the many tales of exceptional longevity, I take them seriously as cultural markers, associated with key societal values autonomy, economic participation and wellbeing. I focus on the 18th century, which saw a rapid increase in claims to a very long life. These appeared in medical as well as popular texts, newspaper articles, drawings and paintings and they were often framed as the reward of an active and healthy lifestyle. I argue that the popularity of the longevity tales reflected (1) changing medical views which challenged the idea that the weakening of old age (i.e. *marasmus senilis*) is an illness (e.g. Schäfer, 2011); and (2) a renewed appreciation of the Ancients (Hippocrates and the Stoics) and their weighing of the realities and values of old age.

In the final part of the paper I will compare and contrast the 18th-century 'centenarian cult' with today's (popular and clinical) interest in centenarians and the all-important question of how to live to 100 and be happy.

Laslett, P. (1999). 'The Bewildering History of the History of Longevity', in B. Jeune and J.W. Vaupel, *Validation of Exceptional Longevity* (Odense: Odense University Press).

<https://www.demogr.mpg.de/books/odense/6/02.htm>.

Saner, Emine (2017). 'How to Live to 100 and be happy', in *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/aug/27/centenarians-record-number-live-to-100-happy>-Schäfer, Daniel (2011). *Old Age and Disease in Early Modern Medicine* (Oxford and New York: Routledge).

13. Kribernegg, Ulla (University of Graz): Literary gerontology: Understanding ageing bodies and identities through cultural representation

Theme: Methodologies

With the narrative turn, film and fiction have been functionalized by gerontologists to achieve a better understanding of growing old. Literary texts have been included in textbooks for students of sociology, nursing, or medicine in order to bring, as Cole, Carlin, and Carson (2014) put it, 'humanities to students in order to evoke the humanity of students.' Yet gerontologists have been hesitant to acknowledge the relevance of the study of film and fiction as a method in interdisciplinary gerontological collaboration. Using Margaret Atwood's short story "Torching the Dusties" (2014) as a case study, I will focus on how a critical analysis of fictional representations of ageing and old age from the perspective of literary gerontology can contribute to a better understanding of the ageing process. The short story can be read as a 'burden narrative' of old age that reveals how a rhetoric of crisis disaffiliates (in discursive and spatial terms) the oldest old from the young, establishing a binary opposition that affects the identity construction of nursing home inmates. It focuses on the



intersections of space, time, and experience, and thus also on the social, cultural, and biological dimensions of ageing. Because literary gerontology does not focus on why we grow older, but on what growing older means culturally, socially, and politically, it can contribute to fostering productive interdisciplinary dialogue on how ageing is understood and experienced.

14. Langbein, Julia (Trinity College Dublin): Theorizing a Visual Culture of Old Age: The Case of Neoimpressionism

Theme: Methodologies

What little attention has been paid to the subject of old age in Art History has focused on representation of the old, or on work produced in old age. This paper proposes broadening what researchers consider significant visual data about old age and its histories.

I turn to the specific case of the French Neoimpressionists (active from the 1880s through the turn of the 20th century), showing how we might consider the Neoimpressionist “dot” as key visual data in the construction of the category of Old Age in nineteenth-century France. Even in pictures that represent youth, leisure and mobility, I argue that we can understand Neoimpressionist painting—in particular its doctrinaire “pointillist” or dot style—as part of an emerging scientific and cultural vocabulary about cognitive decline in advanced age.

Briefly sketching some unlikely connections between the most famous nineteenth-century pathologists of old age and artists like Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, I hope to turn the question back over to social-scientific and clinical researchers of ageing: What unlikely connections might be made between the nature of image-based scientific/analytic tools (scans, models, diagrams) and broader artistic/visual-cultural characterizations of old age? Is there a feedback loop whereby the visual arts affect how scientists conceive their visual data? I hope that the methodological questions raised by this paper might in fact broaden what we (across fields) consider “images” of old age. Not restricted to thinking of images *by* the old or *of* the old, how do the homologies between the visual vocabularies of art and science reveal historical categories of old age in the making?

15. Moss, Hilary (University of Limerick): The role of the arts in the lives of older people before, during and after hospital stay: aesthetic neglect or enrichment?

Theme: Practise I

My research focuses on the importance of aesthetic engagement for older people in hospital. Hospital and healthcare facilities are at best aesthetically neglected and at worst deprived environments in which it is difficult to maintain creativity and arts interests. My research points to useful knowledge regarding the role of cultural institutions in supporting later life creativity, the role of creativity and aesthetics in healthcare institutions and the role of the arts in quality of life for those living with chronic illness in older age. Examples of practice and research in each of the areas above will be presented in this paper.

16. O'Neill, Des (Trinity College Dublin and Tallaght University Hospital): Cultural gerontology and medical humanities: opportunities for mutual learning

Theme: Practise II



The emerging fields of cultural gerontology and medical humanities have much in common yet have developed surprisingly little by way of interaction. Both seek a richer and fuller understanding of the human condition through interrogation and insights from a broad field of arts and humanities disciplines, liberating ageing and wellness from the often limiting perspectives of professional and theoretical constraints, whether the medical gaze or the sociologist gaze. Existing handbooks of cultural gerontology/humanities and ageing have had either no or scanty engagement with the many branches of health gerontology, and this represents an opportunity for discussion of possible, yet relatively unexplored, synergies.

Among the tensions inherent in both fields is the challenge of developing inter- and trans-disciplinary scholarship with gerontologists and healthcare professionals respectively, as well as developing a mainstreamed presence of cultural gerontology among other streams of gerontology, similar to that sought in the medical humanities. This presentation will compare and contrast the modes of development of the two strands, and seek to illuminate facilitators and barriers to further development of cultural gerontology as a key element in the epistemology of ageing.

17: Pickard, Susan (University of Liverpool): Gender and sexuality in later life

Theme: Gender, Subjectivity and Agency

In this presentation I will look at the depiction of older female bodies as lacking in sexuality, a 'lack' which is treatable through pharmacological supplements, specifically, but not exclusively, HRT. Through a discursive analysis of two newspaper articles, together with accompanying online readers remarks, I will look at how sexuality is 'framed' through the hormonal discourse and how this impacts on approaches to gender, subjectivity and relationships in later life. Finally, I speculate about how this discourse might be resisted and/or replaced by others, which suggest not just alternative ways of viewing gender and sexuality in later life but of rethinking its meaning for the life course more generally.

18. Pye, Gillian (Associate Professor, School of Languages, University College Dublin): Happiness as emotional experience and narrative process in literary accounts of old age.

Theme: Memory and Feelings

The debate about what happiness is, and how to achieve it, is one of the oldest in the history of human societies. Nowadays, interest in the topic is even more intense: the launch of the world happiness index in 2011 and the burgeoning number of scientific studies, corporate and government policy initiatives, popular self-help manuals and fictional narratives, are some indicators of this trend, suggesting that as a benchmark of social, political and personal efficacy, happiness is more important than ever.

But what exactly does happiness have to do with emotion? Its connection to positive affect seems obvious, but happiness also requires interpretation and reflection: to understand ourselves as happy we must integrate emotional experience into a socially and culturally constructed framework. This dichotomy is captured in the classical concepts of 'eudaimonic' and 'hedonic' happiness: on the one hand, the notion of what we understand as a 'good life' and on the other what makes us 'feel good'. For commentators such as Adam Potkay, or Vivasvan Soni happiness should in fact be distinguished

from emotion: it is the product of an evaluative, narrative process. By contrast, although contemporary empirical research relies heavily on the narrative processes of self-reporting, under the heading of 'subjective wellbeing' current methodologies aim to provide for a holistic understanding of happiness based in both the experience of positive emotion and in assessment of life value over a longer period of time.

Given the increase in elderly populations in many western societies, questions about what makes a good and happy life, and how this relates to ageing bodies – encapsulated by euphemisms such as 'positive ageing' – can reveal more nuanced relationships between our embodied feelings and how we 'feel about' our lives. On the one hand, in most societies, happiness has been shown to have a U-shape, dipping in mid-life and curving upwards as we age. On the other, the extreme challenges of 'oldest age' and infirmity, particularly dementia and institutionalised care, push the boundaries of our understanding of happiness; challenging conventional notions of happiness as self-realisation and questioning what we can know about another person's happiness, particularly if they have lost the ability to account for it in a coherent self-narrative.

This paper explores such issues in a reading of fictional 'care-home narratives'. It asks what they can reveal to us about the emotional, social, familial and cultural construction of happiness.

19. Shortt, Linda (Associate Professor of German Studies, University of Warwick): (Un)Fit Ageing: Hermann Kinder and the Ageing Male

Theme: Narrating Gender and Ageing

German writer Hermann Kinder has been writing about the experience of ageing and the wider problem of how to live a relationship to death at different life stages for over twenty years. This paper explores how Kinder writes male ageing (particularly out of middle age and into the next phases) in two of his works. Focussing on the fictional novel *Mein Melaten: Der Methusalem Roman* (My Melaten: The Methusaleh Novel, 2006) and the hybrid narrative *Der Weg allen Fleisches* (The Way of All Flesh, 2014), it analyses how Kinder's writing critically engages with neoliberal discourses of fit ageing where the individual is responsible for ageing "well", a kind of ageing without growing old, to explore what capability looks like when faced with increased illness and age-related incapacity. Dealing with the ageing body and identity, interpersonal relationships and romance, male caregiving and caretaking, life-course transitions, ideals of usefulness, and boredom, Kinder's writing explores the challenges posed by age-related decline in fitness and ability. By poking his finger in the wound of ageing masculinity in both his writing and the sketches included in *Der Weg allen Fleisches*, Kinder critically examines its place in a wider field of masculine and neoliberal ideals.

20. Tobin, Desmond J (Professor of Dermatological Science, University College Dublin): Our Aging Skin – can we ever feel comfortable in it/ with it?

Theme: Practise II

The status of our body's largest organ, the skin, as sensor of the periphery and our most 'see-able' social trait has prompted some to describe it as our 'brain on the outside'. The skin incorporates, remarkably, all the body's major support systems; blood, muscle and innervation as well as immunocompetence, psycho-emotion reactivity, ultraviolet radiation sensing, endocrine function etc. Importantly, these skin-based capabilities guide the homeo-dynamics of not just skin but also of our



entire being. Despite numerous adaptations driven by powerful evolutionary selective pressures (e.g., skin color for life on a sun-drenched planet), skin conditions are the fourth-leading cause of non-fatal disease burden.

Our skin is uniquely subject to diverse aging drivers incl., *intrinsic* (chronologic) aging generally under genetic (e.g., geographic-ancestry effects) and hormonal influences; and *extrinsic* aging caused by environmental/lifestyle factors (e.g., UV radiation, smoking, diet, chemicals, trauma, sleep deficit/circadian dysrhythmias, climatic maladaptation etc. Giveaways of lost youth are seen in our skin; incl., wrinkling and hair graying/baldness. We are less keen to 'sport' these signs of our progression along an ever-extending life continuum, as it 'frustrates' our 'optimal functioning' into our 80s and beyond. Implications of this demographic change, without precedent in human history, are even more significant for women. Women can now spend half of their lives post-menopause; and if estrogen levels fall naturally there can be reduced skin integrity and function at older ages. Thus, aspiration for 'ideal skin' drives a rapidly-expanding skin and hair care market, which offers sophisticated cosmeceuticals, pharmaceuticals and surgeries to assuage vanity on the one hand and aid increasingly dry/itchy, infection-prone, immune-unstable, skin with increasing risk of malignancy on the other. Researchers, like me, pursue distinct (but increasingly interactive) elements of the 'skin'-smörgåsbord, by exploring cellular/molecular tools to support our personal skin functioning as we journey through life.

21. Troyansky, David G. (Professor of History, Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, The City University of New York): J.R.'s 'Wrinkles of the City' Project. Representing Global Old Age, 2008-2015.

Theme: Practise I

French photographer J.R., best known for larger-than-life-size photographic portraits pasted onto city walls and for collaboration with the late filmmaker Agnès Varda, undertook from 2008 to 2015 a series of works concerning old age in the cities of Cartagena, Shanghai, Berlin, Havana, Los Angeles, and Istanbul. The project involved the pasting of old residents' portraits on walls of rapidly changing urban neighborhoods, interviewing and filming the subjects, and publishing some of the results in book form. This paper will offer a historian's view of the project, placing it not only in the context of contemporary ageing and urban development but also in the much longer context of the ways old age has been represented historically. It explores themes of ageing, representation, documentation, history, memory, and meaning.

22. Twigg, Julia (University of Kent): Age, Dress and the Cultural Turn in Gerontology

Theme: Ageing Bodies and Identity

The field of age studies increasingly encompasses a range of disciplines across the humanities, social sciences and sciences. With terms such as cultural gerontology, medical humanities, critical gerontology, humanistic gerontology, a range of new movements of ideas have attempted to broaden and deepen the study of later life, freeing it from the narrow confines of public policy, and introducing new theoretical and methodological approaches. This presentation explores one example of these new approaches, showing how a seemingly marginal topic – that of clothing and dress – can help us address some of the central debates in age studies.

23. Walrath, Dana (University of Vermont): Between Alice and the Eagle: Dementia Journeys and the Final Breath

Theme: Ageing Bodies and Identity

Time passes. Our bodies age. Ultimately we die. These universal human experiences could draw us closer but instead fear surrounds these very natural processes. With a medical system rooted in preventing death through various expert repairs to ailing physical bodies, aging and the end of life create both a cognitive and functional dissonance that contributes to generating such fear. In the context of dementia, the fear amplifies as capacities associated with “adult” status diminish, leading to a social death for people living with this disease well before their final breath. Such stigma doubly interferes with the path toward a humane and peaceful death that we all wish to give our loved ones. Drawing on my Alzheimer’s graphic memoir series, I seek to rewrite the dominant narrative regarding personhood and dementia in older people. I will show the light, laughter, and magic that we found within my mother’s long dementia journey until her final breath. This personal history will be combined with theory from medical anthropology that show the social origins of dementia’s stigma and the healing that comes from its removal. Restoring personhood that is stripped away by fear and stigma and detoxifying death will reframe ageing to all our benefit.

