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EDITORIAL – NOISY WOMEN AND SUMMER SCHOOL 2017

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The 6th Annual Women Ageing and Media (WAM), International Summer School took place on the 27th, 28th and 29th June at the University of Gloucestershire, UK. As usual the theme for the event was drawn from activities and thinking that took place in the previous year's event; engendering a research and methodological progression in our work on ageing. The topic of 'noisy women' emerged as pivotal to everything WAM stands for in terms of approaches, methods and activism. It focussed on giving loud voice to older women to counter dominant cultural narratives which seek to silence older women. We decided to be especially noisy as the Summer School coincided with WAM's 10th anniversary.

Day one opened with a workshop titled 'Music, ageing and women: Women and the musical 'Noises' of our lives' which was co-facilitated by Prof. Ros Jennings (University of Gloucestershire, UK) and Prof. Line Grenier (University of Montreal, Canada) who joined the workshop via Skype. This workshop built on research into lifecourse soundtracks by the facilitators, and asked participants to reflect on music which was/is important to them and to share discussion with the group.

In the first of two keynote papers at this year's WAM Summer School, Prof. Kim Sawchuk of Concordia University, Canada delivered her paper 'Making noise together: expressions, intersections and relational ageing'. This paper explored 'relational ageing' and the logic of prepositions as a device with which to think about age.

The first presentation panel grouped together papers which focussed on the theme of music, and saw Alison Willmott (University of Gloucestershire, UK) present 'The ageing experience of women in the UK who identified with punk cultures.' This was then followed by Caroline Coyle (University of Gloucestershire, UK) whose presentation was titled 'Noisy Women, Awakening the Goddess: Bealtaine at Uisneach, 2017.'

The second presentation panel saw papers which took print media texts as their basis to explore the theme of noisy women, beginning with Linda Caissie (St. Thomas University,

Canada) who presented her paper titled 'Rebel Rousers or Old Ladies in Silly Hats? How the Raging Grannies Are Portrayed in the Canadian Press.' This was then followed by Anneliese Heinisch (University of Graz, Austria) who presented a paper titled "'She would've been a good woman': Noisy Southern Women in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor.'

Running throughout the three days of the Summer School, WAM was proud to host a photography exhibition by Alex Rotas titled 'Growing Old Competitively', an exhibition which focusses on masters athletes. Participants were delighted to spend time in the exhibition and to speak with Alex at length, as she participated in all three days of the Summer School.

The second day of the Summer School opened with the second workshop, a Senior Researchers Roundtable. WAM PhD student Alison Willmott took up the role of facilitator, fielding questions from Summer School participants to Prof. Ros Jennings, Prof. Kim Sawchuk and Dr. Estella Tincknell (University of the West of England, UK). WAM is an interdisciplinary and intergenerational research centre which prides itself on working collaboratively with colleagues at different stages of their research careers. This Roundtable sought to provide a space for Early Career Researchers to engage with more senior colleagues and to explore questions from the evolution of Ageing Studies to professional development in research careers.

Presentation panel three grouped papers that featured issues of performance, and opened with Vicky Hodgson (University of the Creative Arts, UK) who presented her paper 'Responding and Reacting to the Lives of Prominent Older Women: Life Stories, Photography and Performance.' Leah Thorn (Keele University, UK) then presented her work on "Older Women Rock!"

The fourth and final presentation panel brought together papers which explored noisy women in film and television. This opened with Linda Hess (University of Frankfurt, Germany) presented her paper titled "'We're sick and tired of being dismissed by people like you": Talking back to ageism in Grace and Frankie.' This was then followed by Lisa-Nike Bühring (University of Gloucestershire, UK) who presented her paper "'Retired, Extremely Dangerous and Female: Helen Mirren Kicking Ass in R.E.D.'" Oana Ursulesku (University of Graz, Austria/University of Novi Sad, Serbia) presented the final paper of

the Summer School titled “The Reclaiming of Personal Space in Woody Allen’s Blue Jasmine.”

Day three opened with a few sore heads and several achy bodies. Summer School participants had come together the previous evening to celebrate WAM’s 10th anniversary with a birthday party, replete with disco and dancing. WAM Summer School has become (in)famous for our dancing events, as part the ongoing WAM research project ‘Keep Dancing.’ We began offering a space for participants to come together, to be noisy, and to dance, in response to conversations at the 2013 Summer School where the concept of space, place and time in relation to women aged 50+ dancing emerged as a discursive thread (see PGWAM Issue 2, 2015). Dance tracks were chosen in advance by Summer School participants, which were then shuffled into a playlist, and colleagues danced the evening away.

With celebration of the research taking place in WAM firmly in mind, day three saw the inaugural Summer School Three Minute Thesis showcase. In a modified version of the famous University of Queensland competition¹, participants were asked to present a summary of their research projects in no longer than three minutes, with no props, one static slide only, and no handouts. Participants shared their work in progress, and whilst there were a range of styles of presentation in terms of depth and breadth, all participants suggested later that this was an enjoyable process which allowed quick access and forced them to think carefully about their research aims and presentation styles.

Day three saw our second keynote paper, delivered by Dr. Estella Tincknell (University of West of England, UK) titled ‘Noisy (older) women in politics.’ Estella is a founding member of the Centre for Women, Ageing and Media and is also a ward councillor and the Cabinet Member for Culture, Events and Equalities at Bristol City Council. Estella’s keynote explored questions around older women in politics and highlighted work to be done around gender and ageing in politics.

The second half of day three was titled ‘Noisy Community Partner Showcase’ and sought to offer space to community groups and partners connected to WAM. WAM was delighted to welcome colleagues from across the UK and beyond, and Summer School participants

¹For more information, see: <https://threeminutethesis.uq.edu.au/>

were given a chance to hear about the work being done on questions of age and ageing by a number of different groups. Charlotte Dryden and Paul Kane joined us from Northern Ireland, representing Belfast Women's Work, Over the Hill and Oh Yeah! Charlotte and Paul explored the work they are doing in these groups and the projects being run with older people through Over the Hill and Women's Work. Jim Rawlinson from Gloucestershire Old Persons Association [GOPA] spoke about the work GOPA is doing with marginalised groups of older people in Gloucestershire; and Bridie Breen joined us from Manchester Irish writers and Poetry in the Park Athlone to share with us a presentation on her community work with the Irish diaspora and read some of her poetry.

The Summer School closed with a plenary led by WAM co-directors Prof. Ros Jennings and Dr. Hannah Grist, which brought together the themes of Summer School. As ever, the entire WAM Summer School was marked by an open, honest and collaborative ethos only made possible by generous and thoughtful participants, who are noisy in their work on questions of women, ageing and media and committed to developing our understanding of what it means to age and be aged.

RETIRED, EXTREMELY DANGEROUS AND FEMALE: HELEN MIRREN KICKING ASS IN R.E.D.

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ABSTRACT

The box office success of female protagonists in action films seems to indicate a changing socio-cultural view of women and a final victory of emancipation. However, in the recently commercially highly successful 'geri-action' films all main and many supporting roles are filled by aged action heroes and the occasional young woman while older women are entirely excluded from the cast. The action comedy *R.E.D.* is an exception to this rule. Helen Mirren as Victoria Winslow and at the time of filming 65 years old is portrayed as active, forceful and competent older woman who is, in every respect, on a par with her male teammates. Her depiction appears to be atypical for the media portrayal of female ageing and older femininity which is often characterised by notions of decline, frailty and dependence. Victoria Winslow's portrayal seems to render female ageing as finally socially acceptable – a further victory of feminist efforts. But is it really? It is my argument that the portrayal of Helen Mirren as Victoria Winslow in *R.E.D.* is exemplary for a neo-liberal pattern of discourse souring in popularity which is characterised by questioning and partly ridiculing dominant cultural narratives to satisfy the expectations of a postideological and post-feminist audience while the main story line remains essentially informed by key neo-liberal values.

KEYWORDS

Ageing, action films, action heroines, R.E.D., neoliberalism, cultural narratives

Introduction

Narratives of Action Heroines

Shortly before the release of *R.E.D.* (Schwenkte, 2010) in cinemas across the U.S. and Europe, publication material and the trailer shocked audiences and critics alike by showing footage of Dame Helen Mirren in an evening dress while cold-bloodedly and clearly professionally firing a machine gun at the president's bodyguards with the intent to kill them (Biancolli, 2010; Orr, 2010; Weitzman, 2010). Although the action film *R.E.D.* received mixed reviews and its evaluation was not overly enthusiastic, one aspect most critics agreed on was the formidable performance of Helen Mirren in her role as Victoria, a professional killer (Biancolli, 2010; Smith, 2010; Turan, 2010). This positive reception by the public as well as by film critics is somehow surprising and noteworthy when considering both Helen Mirren's gender and her age.



Figure 1: The Killer, Source: (Schwenkte, 2010)

Until rather recently Hollywood action films predominantly told stories of dominant and active men fighting evil while women were presented as passive but outstandingly attractive bystanders who need male protection and rescue (Tasker, 1993). Women not only often served as the justification and motivation for the actions of the hero but they were also staged as objects whose main purpose was to satisfy “the gaze and enjoyment of men” (Mulvey, 1992 [1975], p. 8). The appearance of Sigourney Weaver as Ripley in *Alien* 1979 marked a significant turn in the depiction of women in action films. Ripley and her successors in *Terminator*, *Kill Bill*, *Lara Croft* or *Resident Evil*, to name but a few, are, contrary to generic conventions, staged as resourceful self-reliant and active heroines whose muscularity and behaviour match their male counterparts’. Indeed, the positive audience reaction to action heroines and their box office success has led to an ever-increasing number of action films featuring tough, independent and physically as well mentally strong female protagonists in recent years (Inness, 2004b).

Since their first appearance action heroines have been conversely discussed in academia. Particularly scholars within the context of feminism tend to view the muscular and aggressive action heroines as gender transvestites or figuratively male (Clover, 1992; Negra & Tasker, 2014; Negra, Tasker, & McRobbie, 2007). Postfeminism, on the other hand, reads the increasing number of action heroines as indication of a changing understanding of women and related narratives of femininity signifying successful female emancipation and empowerment - proof for the increasing expendability of feministic efforts (Negra et al., 2007). However, as pointed out by several scholars, action heroines are an embodiment of socio-cultural narratives of neo-liberalism (Coulthard, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2007). As such their portrayal is not only based sado-masochistic male phantasies of dominant women but it also adheres to current standards of hegemonic cultural narratives (Inness, 2004a). The depiction of women who are strong, independent and self-reliant but whose narrative construction mostly neither questions patriarchy nor the neo-liberal values of consumerism and individualism it is based on, enables the inclusion of female often postfeminist target groups. They therefore satisfy the expectations of a post ideological (often female but also male) audience without losing the predominantly male enthusiasts of conventional action films which majorly contributes to the commercial success of films (Negra & Tasker, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the audio-visual and narrative presentation of action heroines is ambiguous. It relies on stereotypes of strong women such as the dominatrix and firmly embeds the motivation for their unconventional behaviour and look in individual strokes of faith and/or pathological tendencies (Tasker, 2002). This does not surprise, given the fact that most scriptwriters, directors, producers etc. in Hollywood were and are still men (Donnar, 2016; Treme & Craig, 2013). At the same time, however, if gender is understood as a social construction then assigning attributes such as muscularity, aggression, mental and physical strength to men is simply a convention, yet another cultural narrative (Butler, 2011). Consequently, the appearance of heroines in action films and her construction as “primarily a subject and secondarily object” (Brown, 1996, p. 68) challenges the traditional view of femininity and thereby contributes to changing hegemonic narratives of femininity. Modern action heroines transgress the conventional binary of weak, passive and

objectified women and strong, dominant and active men (Brown, 2004), or so it seems. However, action heroines do not only appear less frequent but they are also predominantly much younger than action heroes (Lauzen, 2015).

Cultural Narratives of Female Ageing

That action heroines are often much younger than their male counterparts does not really surprise, given western cultures' in general and in particular, Hollywood's obsession with female youth and beauty. Neoliberalism has become the dominant political and economic symbolic order of western countries (Žižek, 2009). Its underlying assumptions that free markets liberated from political and social interferences are essential for a healthy and stable economy and the prerequisite for the freedom and well-being of people (Chomsky, 1999; Harvey, 2007), have led to the belief that all activity can and needs to be assessed by its market value. It therefore "seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (Harvey, 2007, p. 3).

As a result, current neoliberal society is characterised by its obsessive focus on consumption and the enjoyment which can be gained by this consumption. Self-fulfilment and the belief that consumption is the basis for self-actualisation aimed at gaining everlasting happiness has become a major principal guiding the actions and desires of the neoliberal individual (Wright & Zizek, 2007; Zizek, 2010; Žižek, 1989). As said elsewhere (Bühning, 2017) in a neoliberal society youth is, thus, worshipped beyond comparison as it is seen as the principal time of independence, production and consumption (Featherstone, 1995; van Dyk, 2014). The physical and mental transformations caused by ageing are viewed rather negatively (Cruikshank, 2013; Harvey, 2007; Žižek, 2009) since older age is believed to limit one's ability to produce and consume. Hence, older age is often linked to notions of decline, frailty and dependence (Cruikshank, 2013; Gullette, 2004). Remaining a valuable member of neoliberal society in older age is possible but only when accepting and executing the individual responsibility (Laceulle & Baars, 2014) of staying active and youthful as long as possible and by all purchasable means (Cruikshank, 2013). These views of successful and unsuccessful

ageing are reflected in the hegemonic cultural narratives of the west and, among others, communicated through mass media in general and particularly through U.S. American films (Coulthard, 2007; Tasker, 1993; Woodward, 2006).

As said above, females are cast less often in lead roles in action films. This is particularly true for the recently commercially highly successful 'geriaction' (Donnar, 2016; Lennard, 2014) films in which all main and many supporting roles are filled by aged action heroes while older women are entirely excluded from the cast. The action comedy *R.E.D.* is an exception to this rule. Helen Mirren as Victoria Winslow and at the time of filming 65 years is portrayed as active, forceful and competent older woman who is, in every respect, on a par with her male teammates without, however, displaying any of the aggressive and violent behaviour and masculine appearance typical for the current portrayal female action protagonists (Coulthard, 2007; Tasker, 2002). Her depiction as action heroine neither conforms to genre conventions (Tasker, 2002) nor does it appear to be typical for the media portrayal of femininity and of female ageing (Gullette, 2004; Jennings, 2015; Wearing, 2007). My analysis is, hence, aimed at understanding the strategies used to transform cultural narratives of older femininity and related decline in older age into stories of success which are accepted and indeed embraced by diverse male and female audiences around the globe.

The Three Dimensions of Victoria Winslow (Helen Mirren) in *R.E.D.*: The Caring, Motherly Woman

The narrative construction of Helen Mirren in her role as Victoria Winslow is based on presenting her as a feisty heroine who is on par with her male teammates (Tasker, 2002). As such she is portrayed as a woman who "has balls' as well as guts, she is spunky and so forth." (Tasker, 2002, p. 83). However, her depiction lacks any sign of masculinization (Tasker, 2002). Indeed, the narrative spends much time on establishing Victoria Winslow as a well-aged motherly British dame while simultaneously and tirelessly emphasising that she is a professional and highly dangerous killer. Contradicting the image of the caring, older British lady with her job as a mercenary is the basis for all comic

elements linked to Victoria. For instance, before her first appearance, she is introduced so as audiences expect a ruthless killing machine:

*Francis: Hmm, we go to Eagle's Nest. Marvin:
Then we all get shot.*

*Francis: I'm just going by myself. Marvin:
Want a vest?*

Francis: Hach, wouldn't do any good.
(Schwenkte, 2010:56:04-0:56:24)

Since she is neither mentioned by name nor is her gender mentioned, not only the tranquil surroundings of the Eagle's Nest but also the appearance of Victoria Winslow, an ageing woman British lady, is surprising and can be, given her late incorporation in the film's narrative, seen as one of the climaxes of the film.



Figure 2: Victoria's Entry Source: (Schwenkte, 2010)

Although Victoria is clearly alerted and ready to use the machine gun she is hiding underneath the roses she is arranging when she meets Frank for the first time in her home, she changes her behaviour to being considerate and empathic as soon as she finds out that Frank is injured. From her very first to her last appearance, the film's narrative dedicates a considerable amount of time to establishing that Victoria is, despite the fact she is a mercenary, a nice typically British lady and therefore non-threatening woman in the last third of her life (Inness, 2004b). Accordingly, she is contextualised as being a caring and motherly type. This depiction of Victoria resonates with Yvonne Tasker's suggestion that women in action films are usually portrayed as "macho/masculine, as mothers or as Other". (Tasker, 2002, p. 69) Despite the fact that Victoria is not a mother, at least as far as we know, her narrative construction is based on inscribing motherly attributes to her.

Victoria: Are you here to kill me?

Frank: No.

Victoria: (worried look) You have been shot!?

Frank: nods

Victoria: (relaxes, smiles and takes out the machine gun from underneath the roses she was arranging) Tell Marvin to stand down before he gets hurt.

(Schwenkte, 2010:57:04-0:57:29)



Figure 3: The Carer, Source: (Schwenkte, 2010)

The typically female attributes of being caring, interested and possessing nursing qualities and, all in all, being motherly are further staged in two more scenes. Immediately after Victoria removes the bullet from Frank's body, she asks him about his relationship to Sarah:

Victoria: So, tell me about your lady friend.

Frank: She makes me think I could actually have a life – a real life.

Victoria: Oh, Francis¹, you are such a romantic. Frank: What?

Victoria: A romantic – That's why I have always been so fond of you. You are hard on the outside but you are gooey on the inside, gooey.

(Schwenkte, 2010:59:03-0:59:37)

Some minutes later she talks to Sarah and again shows her deep consideration and motherly feelings for Frank:

Sarah: Frank said you wanted me with you.

Victoria: Yes, I thought it might be nice to have some girl time together. You know, get to know each other. I just wanted to tell you that in all the years I have known Francis, I have never seen him like this. (Sarah is obviously flattered and smiles) So if you break his heart, I will kill you and bury your body in the woods.

Sarah: Ok.

(Schwenkte, 2010:01:45-01:02:12)

¹ Why Victoria calls Frank 'Francis' is never explained

As mentioned above, the action comedy draws much of the humorous elements linked to Victoria from the contradiction of portraying Victoria as a motherly, kind and classy older British lady while not missing any opportunity to stress the fact that Victoria is a highly dangerous paid killer.

Joe: Sarah, this Victoria. Best wet work asset ever. A true artist with a PSG.

Sarah: What's that?

Victoria: I kill people, dear.

(Schwenkte, 2010:57:40-0:58:00)

However, it is striking that we never see Victoria Winslow kill anyone in the film. We do see her handling machine guns and firing them in a clearly professional manner but we never actually see her kill anyone (also in some scenes it is implied).

The Lady Killer

Victoria's portrayal as a killer differs from the depiction of younger action heroines and male action heroes (Brown, 1996; Brown, 2004; Coulthard, 2007; Perry, Riege, & Brown, 1999): she never displays aggressive or violent behaviour (except when telling Mary to treat Frank well), she always looks prim and proper and she never loses composure. She is not involved in physical action scenes and her weapons of choice are female accessories such as her purse, her necklace, supposed female strategies such as charm and nativity or big guns which make physical proximity and muscle power unnecessary. This is noteworthy since all the men in the film are seen to kill opponents and are involved in extremely violent physical confrontations. The insistence on depicting Victoria as dangerous without supporting this portrayal in the narrative construction is striking. In my view, staging Victoria as a killer who does not kill is evidence for the rather conventional portrayal of gender in *R.E.D.* In fact, Victoria Winslow narrative construction, in some respect, reminds of a more modern version of Miss Marple.

The action comedy pretends to follow an unconventional and postfeministic line of narration which shows women as empowered and emancipated (Negra et al., 2007). In

fact, however, a deeper analysis of the film shows that the portrayal of Victoria (and Sarah) is based on very traditional ideas of femininity. Victoria is not only contextualised as a motherly, empathic and caring person, attributes typically linked to femininity (Brown, 1996; Coulthard, 2007), but she is also portrayed as a heterosexual woman who is flattered by compliments, who clearly takes care of her herself and who is viewed by other men (of course her age or older) as sexy and desirable, something which is typically presented as symbolising femininity and increasingly also older femininity provided that older women have “aged well” (Wearing, 2007). Victoria is presented as the picture perfect (except that she is a killer, of course) British lady. She is always well-dressed (even in army clothes), she wears make-up and jewellery, her body is fully covered in often particularly feminine and expensive clothes such as dresses, skirts, high heels. Clothing plays a major role in the presentation of action heroines. According to Yvonne Tasker, muscle shirts, army clothes and boots worn by action heroines “reinforce the ambiguous gender identity of the female action hero”(Tasker, 2002, p. 69). It is therefore significant that Victoria is predominantly shown in feminine clothing. When she is shown in combat gear it does not in any way undermine her femininity although one must admit that she looks much more natural and also seems to feel more comfortable in a fur coat, an evening gown or a dress.



Figure 4: Cross Dressing, Source: (Schwenkte, 2010)

The side love story between her and Ivan, a Russian agent (who doesn't seem to be retired) additionally highlights Victoria's femininity and heterosexuality while following a rather conventional storyline of initial resistance to male courting based on rational motives to then, however, give in to emotions and follow them after being rescued by the male hero from danger (Tasker, 2012).

Figure 5: Lady in Trouble Source: (Schwenkte, 2010)



If the softened depiction of a killer is owed to Victoria's age, her gender or her intertextual persona (Murtaugh, 2017; Patterson, 2014; Platell, 2013) cannot be conclusively answered, probably it is a mixture. In any case, this politically correct version of an aged female killer is certainly easier to accept and empathise with than if she was contextualised as an older version of fighting machines such as Ripley or Sarah Connor.

The Ageing Woman

Victoria Winslow's depiction as an attractive, white, middle to upper-class, heterosexual woman ties in with her contextualisation as an incarnation of successful ageing. She is portrayed as ageing well which is supported effectively by the off-screen persona of Helen Mirren commented on in popular magazines (Murtaugh, 2017; Patterson, 2014; Platell,

2013). Victoria shows no signs of mental or age-related decline of professional skills. The few signs of ageing, such as reading glasses and wrinkles, are portrayed as insignificant particularly when set against her physical fitness, able-bodiedness and unchanged superior professional skills shown in several scenes. Indeed, the fact that Victoria is never involved in physical slugfests and that her body is always fully clothed and we therefore never see more than her face, arms and hands, makes it easy to ignore any unpleasant physical signifiers of age (Donnar, 2016). That apparently neither her body nor her mind are majorly affected by age enables her to continue working even if in her rather unusual job as a killer. In turn, this provides her with possibility to stay autonomous and independent (Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Heron, 2008). Indeed, when compared to the other retirees of the team, Victoria seems to have managed her retirement most effectively which links well with the cultural understanding that men are more dependent on employment and related status (Baur & Luedtke, 2008). However, what sets Victoria apart from her teammates is not that she finds retirement less difficult but rather that she is more self-reflective and able to adjust her life-style to the new circumstances which also means that she has not actually stopped working.

Frank: How do you do it.

Victoria: What?

Frank: How did you make the transition? You always seem so calm, at ease.

Victoria: I love it. I love it here. I love the baking, I love the flower arranging. I like the routine. Well, I do get a little restless at times. Frank: Mmhh.

Victoria: I take the odd contract on the side. I just can't stop. Frank: Tell me about it.

Victoria: You can't just flip a switch and become someone else.
(Schwenkte, 2010:58:03-0:59:00)

Victoria embodies the neo-liberal ideal of having courageously and successfully defeated ageing in an individual effort and by utilizing all purchasable means possible (except cosmetic surgery) (Wearing, 2007) to age in a way that is expected and accepted by society (Baars, 2013; Laceulle & Baars, 2014; van Dyk, 2014). In a neoliberal society being productive is essential in determining the individual's value (Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Gullette, 2004). Employment, related status and efficiency as well as the acquired financial means which enable consumption are main vehicles of identification and of rightfully demanding societal acceptance and respect (Addison, 2010; Wearing, 2007).

Helen Mirren as Victoria Winslow represents a cultural narrative of ageing which is based on the understanding that older people have the individual responsibility to stay active and youthful (van Dyk, 2014). To do so they are expected to be consumers of anything which maintains youthful looks and behaviour and to follow a healthy and dynamic lifestyle which enables active participation in society (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995). Thus, portraying Victoria as a contract killer performing her job to the highest standards possible despite her age enforces her usefulness and youthfulness. Narratives of decline are resultantly transformed into stories of success and progress.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Victoria Winslow's portrayal is majorly based on dominant cultural narratives. Her depiction as heterosexual, attractive and desirable white middle to upper class woman reflects typical cultural narratives linked to femininity and assures audiences that, despite her untypical and conventionally masculine job, Victoria, is, after all, just a normal and therefore unthreatening woman. This contextualisation is further emphasised by presenting her as a ladylike killer who is bare of any characteristics typical for the on-screen portrayal of contract killers and/or action heroes and heroines (Coulthard, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2007). At the same time, her presentation as successfully ageing woman is based on the cultural understanding that age is not something which has to be endured but that it can be managed and controlled provided that one is determined and affluent enough (Featherstone, 1995; Featherstone & Wernick, 1995). The cultural narrative of successful or productive ageing, thus, contributes to the marginalisation and discrimination of anyone who does not or cannot adhere to the standards of everlasting youth (Chivers, 2011; Gullette, 2004). Simultaneously, the narrative construction of *R.E.D.* adheres to a position representative for a majority of recent cultural products which are characterised by a cynical distance to the hegemonic narratives neoliberal society it is based on without ever allowing the vision of an alternative socio-economic system developing out of this criticism. Many of our cultural products seem to break conventional narrative patterns and to question hegemonic narratives linked to gender, race, social class, or ageing, to name but a few. In fact, however, the alterations in the narrative are

a rather superficial reflection of the audiences' attitude of resistance which calls for certain patterns of neoliberalism to be criticised and changed while not questioning the overall structure these patterns are based on (van Dyk, 2014; Žizek, 2010; Žižek, 1989).

The film's compliance with dominant cultural narratives related to femininity and ageing might tempt one to view the film as a purely commercial film which does not move beyond stereotypical depictions of ageing and femininity. However, it is precisely this strategy which allows the film to occasionally extend conventional narratives and support a more differentiated picture of women and female ageing which includes the possibility of desirability, sexuality and love in older female age and a portrayal of women who are competent, resourceful and mentally and physically strong and on a par with their male counterparts without being masculine or macho. Thus, *R.E.D.* can be seen as a typical product of a postfeminist, neo-liberal culture whose female protagonists "can be rooted in stereotyped female roles but can simultaneously challenge such images" (Inness, 2004b, p. 6).

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NOISY WOMEN: AWAKENING THE GODDESS, BEALTAINÉ AT UISNEACH, 2017

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ABSTRACT

On May 6th, 2017, thirteen older women including myself, participated in a celebration of Bealtainé, one of the Celtic festivals of the Seasons, at Uisneach, the mythological and sacred centre of Ireland. The aim of this autoethnographic study was to explore a co-constructive poetic Inquiry into older women's experiences of identity at the Bealtainé festival, in the Royal Palace at Uisneach. In the month prior to the gathering, I had interviewed the twelve women with the question, 'How do you feel about your identity as an older woman?' and provided each with a journal asking them to reflect upon their answers, through poetry, narratives and thoughts. Participating in this celebration at Uisneach, is hugely symbolic in the exploration of older women's identity. In Irish mythology, Éiru, the Sovereign Goddess of Ireland, is honoured by the lighting of the Bealtainé Fire. Also, Uisneach is known as the mythical 5th province of Míde, with a gate to the otherworld, accessed at 'Ail na Mireann' (The Stone of Divisions), the resting place of Éiru, whom Ireland, (Éire), is named after. Responses to the question of older women's lived experiences of identity resulted in a day into evening of wonderful noise; voices, poems, narratives, stories and music. Poems were recited, co constructed and through a workshop; collaboratively morphed into a communal poem. In response to my Éiru poem, an original composition for the violin was played; and art works, including life poem maps and poems encased in encaustic art; were created. The findings are represented in a multimedia presentation, short film, poetry, art and music.

Keywords

Identity, Poetry, Celtic Festivals, Uisneach, Art

Introduction

On May 6th, 2017, thirteen older women including myself participated in a celebration of Bealtainé, one of the Celtic festivals of the Seasons, at Uisneach, the mythological and sacred centre of Ireland. The aim of this autoethnographic study was to explore a co-constructive poetic Inquiry into older women's experiences of

identity at the Bealtaine festival, at the geographic site of the Royal Palace at Uisneach, the royal centre of Ireland.

Participating in this celebration of Bealtaine is hugely symbolic in the exploration of older women's identity. The festival marks the ancient tradition of the coming of summer by lighting large fires on sacred hills across Ireland. In Irish mythology, a large bonfire was lit on the hill of Uisneach to honour Éiru, the Sovereign Goddess of Ireland. This bonfire is said to be the location of the first fire from which all the other fires were then ignited (www.uisneach.ie).

All the participants volunteered for the study. I had developed a good relationship with the women over many years through my connections to Poetry in the Park, Artists in the Community and Athlone community radio where I am active. As a poet, down through the years, I had utilised my poetry and the poetic inquiry methodology to provide an avenue for the voicing and expression of identities in various spaces, (Coyle, 2014, 2015, 2017; Coyle and McKenna, 2017). In my work *Phenomenal Women* (2015), I established outreach poetry workshops for various groups, (such as Active Age Retirement Ireland, Widows Association and nursing homes) whereby 'an avenue for narrative was unveiled, allowing older women to vocalise their feelings' of being invisible in society,' (Coyle, 2015, p.2).

As autoethnographer, I was also part of the study, fulfilling Anderson's (2006) definition of my roles as; a full member in the research group, visible as a member in the researcher's published text and committed to an analytic research agenda focusing on improving theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena.

In the month prior to the Bealtaine festival, I interviewed the twelve women with the one question, 'How do you feel about your identity as an older woman?' I provided each with a journal, asking them to reflect upon their answers through poetry, narratives and thoughts for Bealtaine. I also set up a group email for organisational issues, information on meetings, a guide to Uisneach and a copy of my poem 'Éiru' (Coyle, 2017). A number of themes arose from these interviews:

The women did not see themselves as old

'I don't feel old.'

'In your heart and mind, you're twenty-five.'

'I've never considered myself old.'

'When I hear people talking about getting old, I don't think they're talking about me.'

'I don't act like a 60-year-old, well, what's a sixty-year-old supposed to act like?'

'I never thought about my age or that I may be seen as an older woman, I'm just me.'

There was an awareness of time passing

'Age is catching up, that's why I'm trying to do a lot of things.'

There was also an awareness of the fluidity of time

'Sometimes I panic that it's flying by, and sometimes I think it's endless. And I've all the time in the world, all the time in the world, and all the time in the world is mine, and I love that.'

There was a feeling of having spent their time caring for others in their life

'All my life, I was the daughter, the girl, the mother, the wife, I looked after everyone else.'

'Not being allowed' by societal constraints, church and state, to do what you would have wanted to do.

'It wasn't the "done" thing in our time.'

'My mother had to give up her job when she married.'

'Girls weren't prioritised for education.'

Not being visible

'You had to fight to be seen.'

'Told to stay quiet in school and by the church.'

'Going into banks and institutions, they were looking for the man.'

'The invisible person who went into the wall.'

The importance of friendships with other women was highly valued

'Always keep your women friends.'

'I absolutely love and would regard as role models, women I know in their seventies and eighties and in one case nineties, who are still out there running community groups, learning new skills, one lady I know, she learned how to use a computer in her eighties, now she's better at it than most people, of her grandchildren's generation.'

This time, now, is for them

'I feel a lot more comfortable than I have done at any other stage in my life, I suppose I've come to terms with myself. This time is for me.'

Geographically, Uisneach is a rural site of hills, tress and fields with archaeological evidence of enclosures, burial mounds, stone carns and burial sites (Schott, 2011). It is 596ft above sea level, and twenty counties of Ireland are visible from the summit of the hill; thus, one has access to a vast sky and horizon (www.uisneach.ie). At Bealtaine, we met at Uisneach, introduced each other and walked up to the Royal Palace site. Upon arrival we sat along the ridge of the Palace site, (which is a conjoined ring fort (figure of eight) testament to its royal legacy) amid the grasslands, rolling green hills and trees. Historian Ruth Illingworth introduced us to the historical and mythological background to Uisneach and the Royal Palace (www.uisneach.ie). She explained that:

[...] at the festival at Bealtaine, the Kings of Mide, High Kings of Ireland would come here with their retinues and set up camp. They would be joined here by other Kings to mark the beginnings of one of the most important times of the year, here on May eve, the sun would go down, just as it will tonight, and when all the fires that had provided light and heat were damped down and darkness had fallen all across Ireland, a darkness which as we don't experience now because of electric light, if it was a clear night, the sky would have been alive with stars and then they lit the fire on this hill to celebrate the coming of Summer to hope for fertility and for a good Summer.

Ruth highlighted the importance of Éiru in Irish culture, stating how 'cattle was drove between the fires for good luck ...emphasising that the festival of Bealtaine was in honour of Erin (Ireland), the Goddess Éiru, she was the embodiment of this land, the rivers would be the blood flowing through her veins ...the first fire would be lit as the centre, the round eye, the heart of the fire eye in Ireland fire eyes like flashing sunbeams'.



Figure 1: Photo Nicole McKenna (2017) *Awakening the Goddess Within: Bealtine at Uisneach*

The importance of the narrative is integral to Irish culture. Poetry and stories were revered as part of our everyday culture, our lived experience. Poets were held in the highest esteem, 'stories were first told in what was an oral culture, around 3000 years ago by the poets, the Aoidh, the learned class, in the navel of Ireland, this hill of Uisneach bounds all the hills together....this is an incredible place, there is nowhere like this, it is very much linked with Goddesses...there was a real fifth province and kingdom...linked with fifth province of the imagination and linked with the divine feminine...This is a place of poets, the very heart of Ireland's poetic past...'. (Illingworth, 2017). I then recited my poem, ÉIRU ILLUMINAT.

ÉIRU ILLUMINAT

Éiru, Éiru, Earth Goddess,
She is never far away,
She lies just beneath the surface.
In this blue cold bright of hanging Moon
At Aill na Mireann, she rests,
'Umbilicus Hiberniae',
Omphalos
Mother of Míde
Éiru, Éiru,
We call you from the Otherworld
Open your arms to the Women of Ireland
We are coming home,
Release your spirit to the Grandmothers, Mothers, Sisters and Daughters.
Beneath this tomb,
Flood your womb with ley lines of light,
Let us dance and sing and honour the Goddess Within
On this Bealtaine night
Éiru, Éiru,
She is never far away; she lies just beneath the surface.
She is Here

Áine, a participant who is also a musician, had informed me that she was inspired to write a composition for the violin in response to the musicality of my poem Éiru. She said, 'In my first efforts to create a poem, or the like, for the blank sheets of this notebook, I ended up putting music to Caroline's words...so that is my awakening...it was Caroline's words that choose the meter of the music and my experience to listening to music over the years that shaped the piece, I heard lows and highs and quietness and loudness, just like the cocktail of moods and moments that life brings,' (O Regan, 2017). Áine then played her 'Éiru' composition of 'hauntingly beautiful' (Coyle, 2017) violin music for the gathering.



Figure 2: Photo Nicole McKenna, (2017), Áine playing 'Éiru' Composition for Violin: Bealtine at Uisneach

I then invited the women to read aloud their own poems or reflections, deliberately not assigning a running order, leaving it to flow as naturally as possible; those who wished to read aloud could do so, and there was no obligation. As researcher, I was conscious that one of the participants had never read her poetry aloud in front of others, and had expressed her shyness. I had also observed by her body language at the time that she was reticent, therefore not having an entirely structured agenda on the day, enabled everyone to participate at their own level of comfort.

Two of the participants, Rosemarie Langtry (www.rosemarielangtry.com) and Tina Elliffe who are also full-time artists, submitted pieces of art made specifically in response to the question of their identity. Rosemarie, who is an encaustic and mixed media artist, submitted her work 'The Journey' a poem encased in an encaustic and mixed media of butterflies, framed in a wooden lockable box. In her poem 'The Journey', Rosemarie asks the question, 'Where I am going, where I'm

supposed to be'. Time is prominent as a theme, she writes: 'The hands on the clock, going tick tock, reminding me of time, how it is going by'. She self reflects asking herself 'Do I need to slow down? Rosemarie uses the symbolism of the car on the road to portray her journey in life, where she has come from and where she is going. At one point, she fears 'The fuel tank nearing empty', however she reasserts herself returning in the next line with 'I'm in control, where I came from, where I am, as I head on my journey.' She acknowledges her life ahead stating, 'The view ahead is the most important'.

Rosemarie lets us know that she has a fascination with roads, questioning, wondering and trying to sense why? These roads are choices she has made and will make in life, she reinforces this concept with the immediacy of time passing in the last line 'Not knowing, trying to make choices on the road, which road to take in my journey in life as time passes me by.'



Figure3: Rosemarie Langtry (2017) 'The Journey' Poem encased in encaustic and mixed media. (Photo Caroline Coyle)

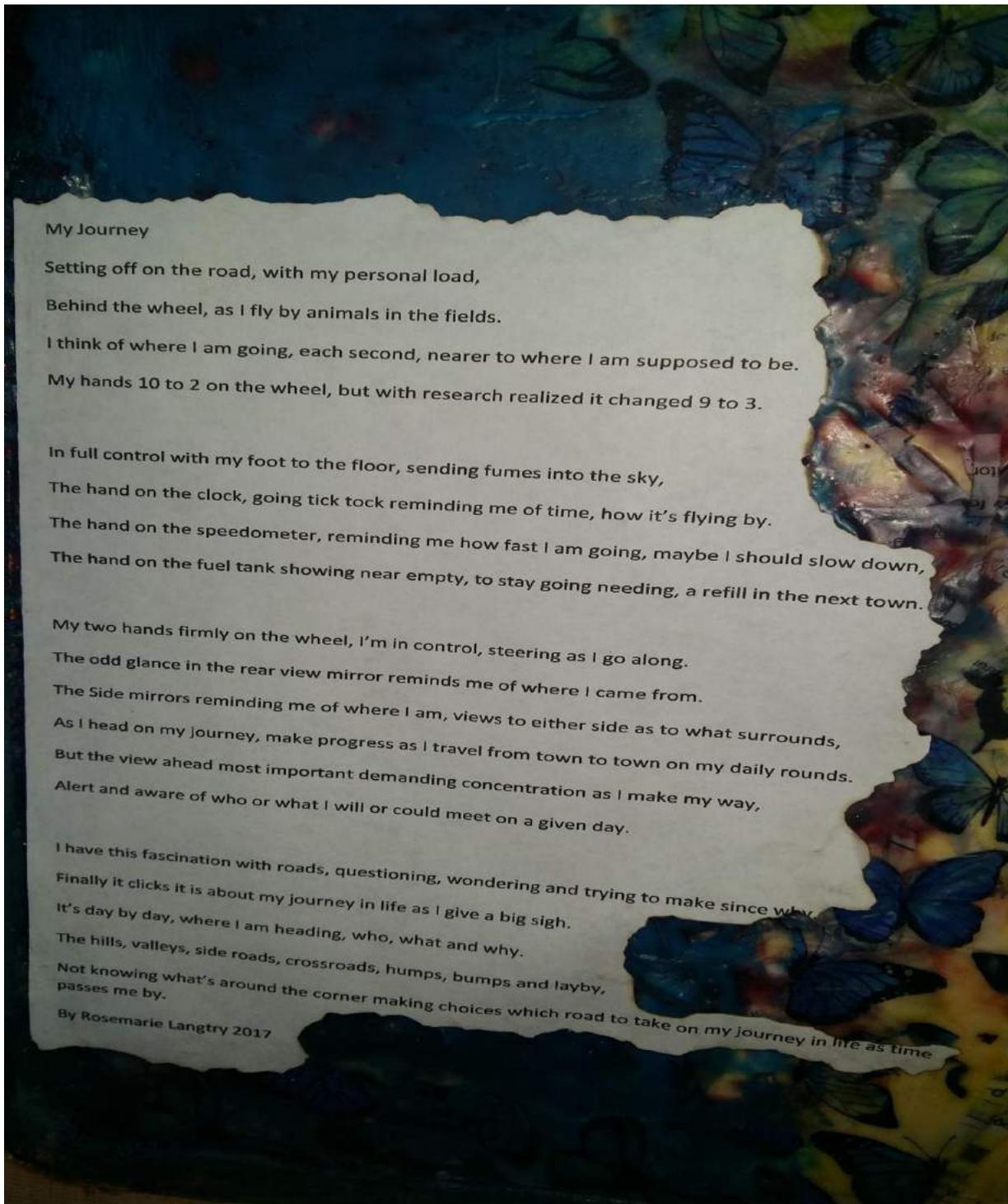


Figure 4: Rosemarie Langtry (2017) 'The Journey' Poem encased in encaustic and mixed media.

(Photo Caroline Coyle)

Tina who works in acrylic pour, encaustic and mixed media, also symbolised a journey. In her work 'Map of Life', she uses a train journey along the map of Ireland

to physically trace her journey, the stops are milestones, fertilisation to toddler, child to woman, who appears in the shape of Éiru' as Mother Earth, in the centre of the map, at the geographical point of Uisneach. Tina traces her journey through the map telling us at various points that 'Life is like a train journey', that we 'journey through life' and stop at 'the last stop'. Tina points out that maybe we don't get to go where we wanted to, 'Things, Life happen.... we stop', however she reassures us/herself, that this journey/space' will give us a chance to get off the train to 'rest, think plan' and 'get back on'. Tina also makes references to change and time noting that as we 'move forward', 'Things change, we get older'.

Map of Life

Life is like a train journey,
We get on at the first station
We move forward
Things, Life happen.....we stop
Sometimes we get off to rest, think, plan
We get back on, move forward
Things change, we get older.

- Tina Elliffe, 2017



Figure 5: Tina Elliffe (2017) 'Map of Life', Acrylic Pour and Mixed Media (Photo: Caroline Coyle)

Space

I want to draw a circle
And step into a different space
A space that's warm and welcoming
A space that I can leave behind
A space that resurrects me
Somewhere the time unwinds
To be dancing through the shadows
Catching blades of light
Facing down my demons
With laughter and delight
Shaking fists at angels
Running through the dawn
Barefoot on the hillside
My chance to be reborn

- Erica Follows Smith, 2017

Themes of space and place are evident in Erica's poem, she tells us she wants to 'step into a different space', she envisages 'A space that's warm and welcoming', but acknowledges that it is also a journey, her journey, it is 'A space that I can leave behind'. She hopes that it will be 'A space that resurrects me' where she can face 'down her demons'. Erica acknowledges the fluidity of time, an unravelling of the concept of time, in the line 'Somewhere the time unwinds' and sees this journey as a space that will give her 'a chance to be reborn'.

Emerging from a Torpor

OLD - Ancient, antiquated, antique, decayed, done, elderly, obsolete, old fashioned, original, out of date, primitive, pristine, senile, worn out....

Words to describe me? I don't feel them. I don't know them.

FEMALE – sex which bears offspring

No more...

I belong to this world. I am in it. Voice clear and strong. Deep desires are now expressed...at long last.

CATHOLIC – charitable, generous, liberal, tolerant, un-bigoted, universal, unsectarian, whole, worldwide

Mother I watched you toil and fight a catholic life against an army of prejudice and anger jack-booting their way through your dreams and aspirations. I went out into that same world to fight those dark furies.

The veil of vicious control pinned upon me is lifting, the chains of castigation are off, emerging from a torpor tall and true, to display my rounded decaying body and face to them all.

I am awesome, excited and calm, liberal and liberated, desirous and desired, unique, wonderful and winsome, powerful and true.

- Sadhbh Brereton, 2017

In her poem, Sadhbh explores her identity looking for 'words to describe me'. She recalls watching her mother 'toil and fight against a catholic life against an army of prejudice and anger, jack booting their ways through your dreams and aspirations'. She states that the 'veil of vicious control is lifting, the chains of castigation are off', she is emerging from the constraints of that world in which she fought 'those dark furies' to reveal who she is.

To bring the gathering on the site of the Royal Palace to a close, Ruth Illingworth read a poem written by Bridie Breen, one of our diaspora participants. Bridie was born in Athlone, Co Westmeath and has been living in Manchester for over thirty years. (www.celticthoughts.co.uk).

Uisneach Alive Inside

Seize the day

Answer the call

Uisneach is alive inside

Re-awakening begins. Unfurled earthed tendrils, entwined with soul, spirit and child. Open portals to heart released energy flow infuses life force. The wild within enlivens nature's mantle. All un-lived dreams in embers soar

Hill fire burns Stoked by presence in ashed night

Seize the day

Answer the call.

Softer furrowed ground lands the spade Echoes of harvests failure of famine upsurge from soil. Clear voices transcend time and space Mounds and cairns plea for remembrance. Fertile gifts abound Holy high priestesses emerge bare footed

Eriu's sovereign embrace.

Goddess of water,

Brid of fire.

Attuned by stars

Lit by moonlight

Adorned by Sun

Enthused by mystery

Powered by belief
We stand together
Seize the day
Answer the call.

- Bridie Breen, 2017

As a representative of the Irish diaspora, Bridie emphasises that even though she is not present with us at this moment, she will embark on her journey to find her own self-awareness, she tells us 'Uisneach is alive inside' and that even in providing a space that is virtual and liminal, it can instigate self-reflection. She tells us that 'Re-awakening begins'... 'entwined with soul, spirit and child', finds 'Open portals to heart, released energy flow, infuses life force'. She refers to nature, to historical events such as 'failure of famine' and to references from mythology. Her reference to 'Goddess of water, Brid of fire', is a direct connection to her own namesake. She affirms to us that that 'clear voices transcend time and space', and that she will 'Answer the call'.

After the poetry readings, we walked back down to the visitor's centre where we shared lunch (each person brought foods and fruits of the season). I then facilitated a workshop in co-constructive poetry in the amphitheatre. Thinking about the place, history, mythology, poetry, themes, words, time, ritual and the space that we were in, together we co constructed a communal poem, which we then read aloud, in order, each of the twelve participants reading the lines that they had written, to compose 'Awakening the Goddess Within'.



Figure 6: Photo Nicole McKenna (2017) Constructing the communal poem in the amphitheatre

Awakening the Goddess within

She is never far away
She lies just beneath the surface.
She is here
Bathed in gold with her soul wide open
She shares her wisdom with the universe
She is the breeze, a gentle presence
But also the warrior with shield and sword
Her eyes cleansed, a strong desire
To find new truth, new realities
We follow her guidance
We follow her path
As we look for our Goddess within
From the core,

She draws her breath
Taking control of the fight or flight
Gold dusted hair
Translucent skin
Calmness, so beautiful
But it the mystical eyes
All seeing, all knowing, that mesmerised the worshippers before her,
Now go find your rhythm
Play to your hearts tune
Sing with a smile of self-knowing
As I get older and get a little slower
May you bestow your magical power and strength
Woman within, I hear you
I see you, I sense you
Your glow is glorious and grand
Hair grey
Heart gold
Lips red
Soul old
Here we gather, as one united
Awakened Goddesses All

- Caroline, Janice, Erica, Sadbh, Carmel, Paula, Sharon, Anne, Áine, Amy, Ursula, Maria (Co Constructed Communal Poem; Bealtaine at Uisneach, 2017)

The workshop ended with a feedback session:

'Powerful, I love the idea of bringing Goddesses and poetry to the hill of Uisneach is very moving, gives it new symbolism in Bealtaine, and the whole idea of rebirth and being born again on the hill, Springtime and renewal, so really powerful, and I loved the way the group worked together, really that communal poem was really powerful, wasn't it? There was a different rhythm throughout it, but it gathered momentum and it kind of paused as well, beautiful, really strong'.

'It's magical what happened with the poem, I really enjoyed every minute, and I think what's going to happen is that there's going to be a whole new group of new friends forming, yeah, that's what I feel, its way beyond my expectations, but I said an affirmation this morning that it would be magical, and that's what's happening.'

'Yes. I like poems but I can't write many myself, I have written a few poems, I'm not very good at putting poems together, but I think its people expressing their feelings, lovely, very nice, spiritual, spiritual, fantastic.'

'Expressing their feelings and how they feel, very enlightening, I love it here, I find it very refreshing, and it's very interesting.'

'Everybody had something to say about this place, every one of us can create a poem.'

'So inspirational, A lot to do with female company, instantly comfortable.'

'Very ancient and earthy and creative.'

'Meeting of minds, creators and ideas.'

'A sense that I was here before.'

'A space that allows me to be me, in a time that has no time.'

'This journey couldn't have come along at the best time for me, I need this.'

Responses to the question of older women's lived experiences of identity resulted in a day into evening of wonderful noise; voiced in poems, narratives, interactions, stories and music. The celebrations continued as we joined several thousand others, singing, chanting, drumming, and walking up to the summit for the ceremonial lighting of the Bealtaine bonfire on the hill of Uisneach. This year was particularly emblematic as Uachtarán na Éireann, Irish president Michael D. Higgins (also a poet) walked up the torch lit hill to become the first Irish leader to light the ceremonial fire on the hill of Uisneach since the last High King of Ireland, (Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, Rory O Connor) nearly 1000 years ago (www.westmeathindependent.ie).

Findings from this study indicated that by providing a 'space'; in this case, through participation in the Celtic ritual of honouring Éiru at the Bealtaine festival; older women had an opportunity to explore their sense of identity. Themes which emerged during the earlier interviews, 'awareness of time passing', 'fluidity of time', 'not being allowed to do what they wanted', 'spending their time caring for others', 'feeling that this time is now for me' were reflected through poetry. The women responded by writing their own poetry, and co constructed collaboratively with the group to create a communal poem. Participating in the rituals enabled the women, including myself, to explore our experiences of time, space ritual and place (May and Thrift, 2001). In addition, the artists made art, creating artworks such as life poem maps and poems encased in encaustic art, and the musician made music, a composition for violin in response to poetry.

This study is the initial stage of a yearlong research journey to bring together the concepts of space, place, time and ritual to analyse contemporary older women's identities in Ireland. Upon reflection, it is evident that the interpretative nature of the poetic inquiry method lends itself to stimulating the individual's own art form that the very nature of writing poetry can also awaken a response from musicians to compose music, artists to make art, dancers to create dance, singers to make songs and creators to create.





Figures 7 – 13 - Photos by Nicole McKenna www.unframedterritory.ie

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Music

Áine O Regan, Violinist

Photographer and Documentary Maker

Nicole McKenna Documentary Maker and Photographer, www.unframedterritory.com

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“WE’RE SICK AND TIRED OF BEING DISMISSED BY PEOPLE LIKE YOU” TALKING BACK TO AGEISM IN *GRACE AND FRANKIE*

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ABSTRACT

The Netflix series *Grace and Frankie* showcases two aging “noisy” women as its protagonists. Working with research by age studies scholars such as Margaret Gullette, Steven Katz, Barbara Marshall and Linn Sandberg, as well as findings from queer studies and lesbian-feminism, I argue that the show’s portrayal of Grace and Frankie simultaneously works against the decline-narrative of aging and negotiates the difficult and ambiguous terrain of successful aging. Moreover, this article contends that the show frames Grace and Frankie as a “queer” couple and thus queers narratives of aging by disturbing heteronormative narratives of the linear life course, providing new ways of talking back to ageism.

KEYWORDS

Aging, Lesbian-Feminism, Television, Old Age, Queer Aging, Friendship

Aging on Stream-TV: *Grace and Frankie*

“A Taste of TV’s New Aging?” ran the title of *Senior Planet’s* review of *Grace and Frankie* when the show premiered on Netflix in May 2015, lauding it as “the first comedy-drama about older female characters that doesn’t make fun of them” (Manfred). One of Netflix’ own productions, the series stars Jane Fonda (as Grace Hanson) and Lily Tomlin (as Frankie Bergstein) – both in their late seventies – as protagonists. The series, which has since launched two further seasons with a fourth season announced for 2018, is certainly remarkable for its star-power (Sam Waterston and Martin Sheen are also on board), but even more so for presenting a narrative that puts the topic of aging front and center, and for talking back to ageism. Even though *Grace and Frankie* is a comedy, and one that focuses more than a few of its jokes on aging, I agree with Erica Manfred, that “we’re laughing with these women, not at them, and that’s a sea change.” Moreover, I argue that the show engages with a number of important contemporary issues in the context of

aging, such as the currently ubiquitous trope of “successful aging” and challenges its audience to consider new perspectives on age and aging.

The story revolves around the Hansons and the Bergsteins, two families who have been friends for years because Robert Hanson (Sheen) and Sol Bergstein (Waterston) run a law firm together as business partners and friends. The posh businesswoman Grace (Fonda) and the chaotic new-ager Frankie (Tomlin) could not be more different, but still see quite a bit of each other, not least of all because the families² even own a beach house together. In the very first episode Grace and Frankie are unexpectedly confronted with a three-fold confession from their husbands: Robert and Sol invite their wives to a get-together in a restaurant, hoping that the public venue will prevent a scene when they finally reveal a) that they are gay, b) that they have had a secret relationship with each other for years, c) and that they want to get divorced from their wives so they can marry each other. This new reality causes a deep rift in Grace and Frankie’s lives as they are confronted with their new identities as aging single women in an ageist world, and it results in a partnership of convenience that develops into a business partnership as well as a deepening friendship between the two women.

Of course, Robert and Sol’s relationship is an important storyline of the series. Having an old gay couple among the protagonists of a TV show is remarkable, even in the 21st century. LGBTQ persons are rarely presented as anything but young in the media and older persons are still generally either portrayed as entirely asexual or firmly heterosexual. Apart from *Grace and Frankie*, only the Amazon-produced show *Transparent*, streaming since 2014, which focuses on the coming-out and transition of seventy-year old Mort/Maura Pfefferman, can boast an aging LGBTQ protagonist (as opposed to a minor character). However, I want to make the point that Grace and Frankie are, as the title indicates, the central couple of *Grace and Frankie*. While the women have repeatedly been labeled an “odd couple” (by the characters themselves as well as by reviewers) in allusion to Gene Saks’ 1968 movie based on Neil Simon’s play of the same name, I would like to spin this phrase and argue that Grace and Frankie actually make a “queer couple”.

² Both couples have grown children.

Both women are characterized as straight. Yet, as I will show, the series repeatedly stages their relationship as that of a couple, through the framing and juxtaposition of shots, as well as through the narrative itself. This framing becomes essential to the show because *Grace and Frankie*'s portrayal of the women's friendship as a development that renders them into "women-identified- women," i.e. women whose commitment is first to other women, is crucial to the show's portrayal of aging.

My argument has two parts. In the first part, I will focus on Grace and Frankie's business partnership. Their endeavour to produce a vibrator specifically geared towards older women provides many instances in the narrative in which they encounter ageism and call out ageist attitudes and remarks, be it from strangers or their own families. In this context, I will also discuss the show's ambivalent negotiation of successful aging.

In the second part, I want to focus on the series' framing of Grace and Frankie as a queer couple by demonstrating that the way in which their friendship is portrayed aligns with central lesbian-feminist ideas of the 1970s, ultimately presenting their relationship to the audience in ways that irritate hegemonic ideas of the linear life course, proposing an alternative to the heterosexual ideal of successful aging.

"We're creaky but tough": Confronting the Ageist Environment

Episode 3 of season 1, "The Dinner," is the first time when *Grace and Frankie* loudly talks back to ageism. Grace and Frankie try to buy cigarettes at a local grocery store, but are continuously ignored by the clerk who, instead, walks to another cash register to serve a young blond woman. After Grace and Frankie have repeatedly tried to catch the clerk's attention, Grace resorts to banging her a grocery basket on the counter and yelling "Helloooo" at the top of her lungs. When the clerk finally turns around, she shouts at him "What kind of animal treats people like this? Do you not see me? Do I not exist? You think it's all right to ignore us?" until Frankie drags her out of the store. Outside, in the car, Grace ruefully admits that her performance "lacked poise," but she adds, "I refuse to be irrelevant" ("The Dinner", 2015). The scene illustrates Margaret Gullette's definition of ageism perfectly. She states, "Powerlessness makes oppressed groups invisible.

Ageism...makes the old appear unworthy of attention when they obtrude” (Gullette, 2011, p. 67). Picking up on this familiar experience of older persons, and especially women, of feeling increasingly invisible, the series presents Grace’s noisy refusal to fade into the background.

In season 2, this issue of ageism is addressed more in-depth. Grace and Frankie fight invisibility as they decide to go into business together and develop a vibrator specifically designed for older women because they want to address precisely the demographic they find so often ignored. They think of a number of specific features, such as large print for the instructions, and a gel sleeve so that it will be easy to a handle for women who have arthritis. Yet, they are faced with reactions that reflect

Gullette’s observation that:

In our culture, the sexual life course is broken in two by age - for women, officially at menopause. Geriatric sex, or more politely, sex in later life, is invisible or treated as jocular. On film it’s considered distasteful unless Meryl Streep or Catherine Deneuve is imagined doing it. (2011, p.125)

Grace and Frankie’s first personal confrontation with this attitude occurs at a family gathering, with Sol and Robert and all four of the children present. When Grace announces their business idea, the family look embarrassed or disgusted in a familiar reaction so often seen on TV, particularly when children find themselves confronted with the fact that their parents (or grandparents) are sexual beings. But Grace boldly faces her family – and by extension also any audience members who might balk at her mention of “vibrators for women with arthritis.” Throwing her arms up in frustration, she admonishes: “Oh grow up. Older women masturbate, too” (“The Coup”, 2016).

The ensuing reaction from her younger daughter Mallory not only emphasizes the prevalence of precisely the stereotypes that age studies scholars from Simone de Beauvoir to Margaret Gullette have repeatedly documented, it also demonstrates how much dominant heterosexual, linear understandings of the life course rely on such tropes and insist on them.

Leaving awkward-looking children and ex-husbands, the camera closes in on Mallory a mother of two who is pregnant with twins, sitting in her chair, arms crossed over her sizeable belly, as she frowns and states, “Seriously, Mom. How do I explain to my children that their grandma makes sex-toys for other grandmas?” (ibid). Her reproach rests on two important terms: “children” and “grandmas,” and thus on an understanding of a relation between the generations in which children define the operational framework for all actions of parents and grandparents. Mallory’s obvious pregnancy and her indignation on behalf of her children draws attention to the heteronormative logic of the phenomenon Lee Edelman has termed “reproductive futurism,” which marks “the Child” and the best interest of children as the “perpetual horizon” (2004, p.3) of our thoughts and actions. Mallory’s repetition of the term “grandma” underlines the specific age role which she assigns Grace; one that is closely intertwined with the assumption that seniors are “asexual, celibate, or just disinterested in sex” (Kimmel, Rose, and David, 2006, p.5). Grace, however, dismantles her daughter’s attack by pointing out, “We are making things for people like us, because we are sick and tired of being dismissed by people like you” (“The Coup”, 2016). In this way, she counters her daughter’s reproach by highlighting Mallory’s ageist assumptions which reduce older women to specifically limited roles that fit neatly into the generational stratifications of reproductive futurism.

Grace and Frankie uses the women’s business venture to illuminate how they encounter ageism on all fronts: whether from strangers or family, during business meetings, or while shopping, the series increasingly puts a spotlight on these instances. What is more, Grace and Frankie do not suffer these instances silently. They are noisy about it. They loudly “talk back” to ageism. This is significant because it encourages indignation and solidarity rather than pity from the audience. In the first episode of season three, the women meet with Derrick Flout, a loan officer at their bank, to negotiate a loan for the production and marketing of their product: Vybrant. When Grace frames her well-prepared request and draws on her previous experience as the manager of her own beauty product line (Say Grace), to ask for a \$75,000 loan at an interest rate of 3.41 percent over ten years. Flout informs the women that a ten-year loan would not be “prudent at this time,” that, in fact, anything but a one-year time span is out of the question for the bank (“The Art Show,” 2017). While Frankie calls Flout out for being “afraid of female sexuality,” Grace interrupts

her and says, “He’s not gonna give us a loan because he thinks we’re too old” (ibid). Leaning forward in her chair and pointing her sunglasses at him, Grace says, “You know what this is? Ageist. Ageist bullshit!” (ibid.).

The scene highlights that these kinds of stratifications set up a much larger matrix of discrimination and effectively push older persons to the margins of society, making it impossible to be acknowledged as productive other than within the very narrow parameters already set up (for example babysitting the grandchildren or doing volunteer work).³ But Grace makes it very clear that she does not primarily define herself as a grandmother. She emphasizes, “I want people to look at me and say, ‘There’s the lady that created a business in her seventies’” (“The Alert”, 2017).⁴

The run-ins with ageism do not stop once Grace and Frankie gain access to a company interested in their product. Mimi Becker, a former business acquaintance of Grace’s offers a marketing campaign that has youthfulness as its focus. Despite the marketing strategists telling them that “we want to put you two front and center in the campaign,” the company has photoshopped pictures of Grace and Frankie in such an extreme way that Grace gasps: “We look twelve years old in those pictures” (ibid.). Wondering why the company would choose this approach to market products to older customers, Frankie protests, “We want to reach out to women like us,” Becker responds “Yeah, but that’s not how you sell it. [...] Nobody wants to see older women on a vibrator box. And nobody wants to see older women with anything sexy. Not even older women! [...] Sex is...young.” (ibid.). Mimi’s explanation precisely mirrors Gullette’s assessment of contemporary discourse on sexuality and aging:

In a consumerist hypersexualized environment where bare-midriffed fifteen-year-olds are the pedophilic standard of desirability, becoming older is coded as a set of deficiencies. Youthsex is supposedly “great,” the standard. It gets a gloss of rapturous attention, belying the true facts about starter sex. In our culture, the sexual life course is broken in two by age – for women, officially at menopause.

³ Grace and Frankie’s desire to go into business for themselves is also juxtaposed with Robert and Sol’s decision to retire.

⁴ Frankie is not as exclusively focused on the success of the business as Grace is, but she also puts on her first professional art show in Season 3 and thus takes her painting, which was more of a hobby before, to a new level.

Geriatric sex, or more politely, sex in later life, is invisible or treated as jocular. (2011, p.125)

The campaign strategy and marketing rationale for the vibrator speak to the notion of “successful aging” as an increasingly popular concept. Stephen Katz and Toni Calasanti define successful aging as an idea that encompasses not only the “forestalling of disease and disability,” but also maintenance of “physical and mental function” as well as continued “social engagement” (2015, p.27). One could therefore argue that successful aging is equated with remaining youthful. Moreover, in the context of successful aging, “sexual function and dysfunction have become all-encompassing bio-markers of heterosexual competence and health management” (Katz and Marshall, 2004, p.61). As Katz and Calasanti also point out “the successful aging paradigm seems to define *success* as an outcome...a game which can be won or lost” (2015, p.28), which is especially problematic because the responsibility for such success, Linn Sandberg has pointed out, lies with the individual.

Marketing the vibrators by insinuating that Grace and Frankie have stayed as youthful as their images on the box, or, that by buying the vibrator one can attain this kind of youthfulness, reflects on successful aging’s imperative against decline. While, at first, Grace is tempted to give in, blaming the market and its mechanisms, Frankie resists: “We cannot forget who we started this for,” and with a sigh, Grace agrees, “We can’t play a part in erasing the very women we made this for” (“The Alert”, 2017). At the end of the episode, Grace and Frankie risk financial success by refusing the youthful imagery.

Despite this emphatic message, the show itself has an ambivalent relation towards the paradigm of successful aging. Already when the first season of *Grace and Frankie* had just come out Barbara Marshall emphasized that particularly the remarkably youthful and fit look of 79-year old Jane Fonda as an actress fits the societal imperative of remaining youthful.⁵ In light of Barbara Marshall’s and Linn Sandberg’s observations that, “the notion of ‘successful aging’ has resonated with consumerist discourses that proffer an expanding horizon of anti-aging goods and services” and that “[t]his ‘successful aging assemblage’

⁵ She made this point during a discussion at the WAM summer school in 2014.

underpins contemporary imaginaries of old age and later life, populating these with active, creative, flexible, ‘sexy seniors’” (2017, p.3), we might also be inclined to evaluate “Vybrant” more critically. Grace and Frankie the characters refuse false youthfulness but *Grace and Frankie* the show at least plays with the notion of the “sexy senior.” The show’s portrayal of marketing the vibrator for older women as a big success, getting even prudish women⁶ to admit that they want to keep experiencing sexual pleasure, can be considered problematic. It *is* problematic if we read *Grace and Frankie*’s focus on sexuality as total acquiescence to the trope of successful aging.⁷

However, I want to argue that the series adds more depth to its narrative by taking up many issues of ageing, particularly the issue of feeling vulnerable; for example, to burglaries and accidents, but also in relation to one’s own body. Grace and Frankie both grapple with a heightened awareness of their mortality. The show is a comedy, yet for the most part, the show balances comic and serious moments particularly towards the end of season 2 and in season 3. *Grace and Frankie*’s tendencies to support the narrative of successful aging are not all that the show has to offer, and I would like to propose a perspective that perceives the portrayal of Grace and Frankie as one that actually *queers* the portrayal of aging.

In my use of the term queer, I follow David Halperin, who stated that “[q]ueer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant,” marking “a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative [and a] horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance” (1995, p.62). I argue that this friendship provides a useful lens that helps us understand the ways in which the bond between the two women challenges the generally unquestioned priority of attachment to one romantic partner forming the ideal of monogamous heterosexual bonds.

⁶ First of all, the show portrays Grace herself as very reluctant to talk about her sexual desires. In Season 3, Grace and Frankie try to talk to a group of local church women about their vibrator, who, feeling offended, flee the house, but later admit to being highly interested.

⁷ It is equally problematic that Grace and Frankie are wealthy white women and race and class do not play a role in the show.

“I probably don’t say this enough, but you’re a striking woman”: Queering Grace and Frankie’s Relationship

In the first season of *Grace and Frankie* the two women are dealing with being newly single in their seventies and their friendship often centres on supporting each other as they each try out new heterosexual relationships. In seasons two and three the storyline increasingly focuses in on Grace and Frankie’s struggle with their relationship to each other. The narrative never seriously suggests that Grace and Frankie will become a romantic couple in the way that their ex-husbands Sol and Robert have. However, the way in which their friendship is framed nevertheless leaves no doubt that their presence in each others’ lives has become essential and their bond to each other is not easily outdone by any heterosexual romantic attachment they might have.⁸

Grace and Frankie’s specific framing of intimacy between the two women struck me the first time as deliberate during the ending scene of the last episode in season 1, “The Vows.” We see Robert sitting at a table at home, practicing his marriage vows to Sol. As he reads out loud, “[f]rom this day forth, I freely and joyfully join my life with yours,” the camera cuts from Robert to Sol, who is walking up to the house, to Grace and Frankie walking home arm in arm from the beach. The voiceover of Robert’s vows continues, “Wherever you go, I will go. Whatever you face, I will face” (“The Vows”, 2015), yet the camera lingers on the backs of Grace and Frankie, walking together, as if the words described *their* relationship, rather than Sol and Robert’s. It is only a brief moment, immediately overshadowed by the following one, in which Sol opens the door to find that Robert has had a heart attack, which forms the cliff-hanger of the first season. However, the third season picks this framing up more strongly and consistently. This is significant because, in addition to talking back to ageism, which, as illustrated above, largely happens through the narrative strand of Grace and Frankie going into business together,

⁸ The potential of Grace and Frankie’s relationship has apparently not been lost on the show’s fans either. There are over one hundred works of slash fiction on Archive of Our Own, one of the biggest web-platforms for fan fiction. While minute compared to other fandoms’ numbers, this is remarkable given that the slash characters are over seventy and often explicitly depicted as desiring each other.

this new focus on the women's relationship to each other lets the narrative also talk back to a specific heterosexual, linear model of the lifecourse, that underlies contemporary concepts of successful aging.

Successful aging, the new and "desirable" trope that is increasingly replacing the view of aging as decline,⁹ is intricately linked to heterosexual sexuality, as "penile-vaginal intercourse is the assumed goal of arousal" (Katz and Marshall, 2004, p.66). As I have pointed out, the series' negotiation of successful aging is ambiguous. In part this results from the circumstance that there seems to be hardly any middle ground between two discriminatory tropes. Older women are generally portrayed either as asexual, which risks enforcing the idea of aging-as-decline, or as interested in sexual pleasure, which risks enforcing the trope of successful aging. I want to suggest however, that *Grace and Frankie* does find a way to confront this dilemma. The narrative's continued focus on the vibrators in season 3 irritates the default heteronormativity of successful aging that Katz and Marshall point out: vibrators are not primarily aimed at heterosexual intercourse, and relationships with men, but rather at autoerotic pleasure. After all, Grace and Frankie call their product the *ménage à moi*. And while Frankie suggests that they should also produce a series of easy-to-open condoms, after she begins to regularly have sex with Jacob, this idea is dropped in favour of focusing on one only product.

There are also other factors, present right from the beginning of the series, that facilitate *Grace and Frankie's* break with heteronormative models of the life-course providing the series with a queer perspective on aging that goes beyond the narrative's inclusion of Grace and Frankie's former husbands as a married gay couple. Actually, the series breaks with the heteronormative trajectory of specific life-stages to be attained within a heterosexual framework right from the beginning – in its opening sequence. The opening sequence shows a wedding cake with several tiers. As the credits play to the song "Stuck in the Middle," the camera ascends, tracking upward from one tier to the next, each tier portraying a specific life stage, illustrated by cake-topper figures in a stop-motion-like

⁹ In fact, the concept of successful aging actually reinforces the fear of decline, since, as Sandberg points out, the responsibility for actually succeeding is placed with the individual who hence has to fear, failing the requirements for successful aging.

animation. The first tier shows two sets of brides and grooms; the figures are first posed as dancing and then as kissing. On the next tier, each couple holds a new-born baby, then, the male figures leave, briefcases in hand, while the female figures continue to hold the babies. On the third tier, the men hold golf clubs while one woman is painting and the other pointing at a business chart. During the golf game, one of the men puts his arm around the other. The next tier up shows the men actually turning to each other and kissing while the wives stand by helplessly. Finally, on the top tier, the two women are shown stand by themselves, without the men for a moment, before the whole cake breaks into pieces and falls apart.

The first tiers correspond perfectly with the heteronormative life course as Dustin Goltz has described it. Marriage and children are idealized elements within the “cultural blueprint for planning lives [and] futures” (Goltz, 2010, p.82).¹⁰ The opening sequence also mirrors a gender-model that adheres to patriarchal values, as the men go off to work while their wives stay home with the babies, only following their own interests (painting and starting a business respectively) once the children are older. What significantly interrupts this sequence of elements that so seamlessly make up the straight timelines of their life trajectories is of course the kiss between the two men, leaving the two women standing alone at the top. The disruption is visually represented by the cake breaking apart as the smooth order of things crumbles.

The opening functions as a summary of the action that is to follow, reminiscent of Hamlet’s traveling actors performing a dumb show¹¹ of “The Murder of Gonzago” before proceeding with the actual play. But how are we to interpret this summary? Should we assume that the most important signal here is that the wives lives will fall apart without their men? But then why are they depicted on top of the cake, where the figures of bride and groom are usually placed? In light of this significant change, I propose that the crumbling cake acts as a symbol for the obliteration of the linear heteronormative timeline,

¹⁰ While of course not everyone gets married or has children, such ideals are still overwhelmingly powerful. Goltz argues, “marriage - followed by procreation - determines heteronormativity’s promise of satisfaction, fulfillment, and recognition” (2010, 85).

¹¹ The *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines dumb show as “a mimed dramatic performance whose purpose was to prepare the audience for the main action of the play to follow.”

rather than that of Grace and Frankie's only route to successful aging. The theme song, which ends here on the line "Yes, I'm stuck in the middle with you" underlines this upheaval in a humorous way, as both Grace and Frankie often enough feel indeed stuck with each other against their will, which emphasizes their "odd couple" comedy. But as the narrative develops, they are no longer stuck, but remain together by choice and out of a deepening friendship.

Grace and Frankie's friendship is of course central to the show, but it becomes a crucial narrative element specifically in season 3. At some points this means that the narrative simply uses sexual innuendo for comic relief. After the beach house is broken into, the police officer first called to the scene mistakes Grace and Frankie for a married couple, telling Grace, "You and your wife are adorable" ("The Burglary", 2017). There are also moments of accidental intimacy, for example, when Grace and Frankie both end up on the kitchen floor after Frankie twists her back and Grace twists hers while trying to help her up. When Grace crawls over Frankie in order to reach the phone, Frankie just comments, "You know me, I'll try anything once" and then continues, when Grace's face is just inches from her own, "Oh Grace, I probably don't say this often enough but you're a striking woman" ("The Floor", 2017). But while these moments serve to create comedy, they also convey how much Grace and Frankie root for each other. When Grace helps Frankie take her blood pressure after her stroke, she exclaims, "God you've got beautiful skin" ("The Sign", 2017). And despite being very aware that their constant bickering has taken on an odd-couple dynamic, they build each other up.

When Frankie feels too terrified to sleep alone after the burglary, Grace tells her, "The Frankie I know is an ass-kicker, you started a relationship with a new man and started a business in your seventies" and Frankie admits, "You know what all these things have in common? You. I couldn't have done any of that without you. You make me feel strong, Grace Hanson" ("The Burglary", 2017).

In the course of the season, tensions rise as the women's friendship is increasingly put into competition with Frankie's relationship with Jacob. When Jacob decides he wants to

retire from farming and move to Santa Fe, where he bought a house years ago, he asks Frankie to join him. This plunges first Frankie, then Grace, and then their friendship into a crisis that revolves around their relation to each other. In the process, both Grace and Frankie time and again, point to their fundamental importance for each other. Frankie's first reaction to Jacob's request of moving is, "I don't know. My life is here. I have kids and a business, and a Grace. She won't survive without me. I'm the glue that holds that vintage Barbie together" ("The Apology", 2017). When Jacob probes her further about her plans for the future, Frankie says, "I would enjoy grandchildren someday. I want to keep making art. And did I mention Grace?" which seems to pique Jacob to the point that he follows up: "I have to ask. Do you really see yourself living here, with Grace, for the rest of your life?" – a question which Frankie does not answer. Nevertheless, there is no doubt for the audience that Grace holds a position in Frankie's life that is at least as important as her family and as Jacob. Likewise, when Sol asks Grace about her relationship status, wondering whether there are any new "moustaches" in her life, she answers, "just Frankie's" ("The Labels", 2017). When Sol continues: "I just think you deserve to be happy," Grace replies that she is happy, adding, "I've got Vybrant. I've got Frankie." In this way, each woman emphasizes the central significance of the other in her life. When Grace and Frankie finally talk face to face about the possibility of Frankie's move to Santa Fe, Frankie admits that it is "an impossible choice" because she wants to lose neither Jacob nor Grace.

When I argue that this portrayal queers the relationship between Grace and Frankie, I don't want to make the point that Grace and Frankie will end up in a romantic relationship with each other. Instead, I want to point to narrative's congruence with the understanding of lesbian expression formulated in "The Woman-Identified Woman," a manifesto from 1970 written by a group who adopted the name Radicalesbians. In this manifesto, they define lesbianism as an expression of women whose "primal commitment" is to other women and not to men, and this can but does not need to imply a sexual relation (Radicalesbians, 1970). What becomes most crucial is "that women begin disengaging from male-defined response patterns" (ibid.), and instead become truly supportive of each other. As Charlotte Bunch explains further,

The woman-identified-woman commits herself to other women for political, emotional, physical, and economic support. Women are important to her. She is important to herself. Our society demands that commitment from women be reserved for men. (1972, p.8)

Grace and Frankie, while not in a same-sex relationship, are shown to develop this kind of support which also helps them focus on their own priorities, rather than acting within a male-female dyad.

The show underlines the women's bond visually and narratively by creating several scenes in which Grace and Frankie argue and both are shown to tear up or cry in an allusion to lover's rows familiar from numerous films and TV-series. The culmination of this conflict occurs in the last episode of season 3. After Frankie has had a stroke and Grace, in her worry about Frankie's health, deters her from her plans to move to Santa Fe with Jacob, she feels guilty for curbing Frankie's adventurous nature and standing in the way of her *hetero-happiness*.¹² In the last scene, Grace surprises Frankie with a ride in a hot-air balloon. Originally, the hot-air-balloon ride was a present to Grace from a male admirer who wanted to impress her. Yet, instead of pursuing this opportunity of heterosexual romance, Grace immediately thinks of Frankie, who loves hot air balloons. Grace then persuades her date to take a rain check so that she can take Frankie on the balloon ride instead. This shifts the emphasis once again from heterosexual romance to friendship. It is important to note that the narrative does not suggest that Frankie or Grace will never have sex again or abandon heterosexual relationships, but it makes the point that the person with whom they have sex will not necessarily be the sole priority and determining factor of their lives.

The hot-air balloon scene, which forms Season 3's finale scene and is scripted as a reconciliation scene, finally brings Grace and Frankie to admit that they are scared to imagine living without each other. When Frankie stands speechless and excited in front of the balloon, but still deeply worried about her health, Grace apologizes for putting her own fears on Frankie. Frankie asks, exasperated, "What are you so afraid of?" ("The

¹² I borrow this term from Barbara Marshall and Linn Sandberg (2017, p.2).

Sign”, 2017). It is at this point that Grace confesses in tears that she is afraid of “waking up and not seeing [Frankie’s] hats in the dishwasher. Not hearing [her] sing in [her] studio. Never again cringing at [her] borderline-offensive Jamaican accent, and...” But Frankie interrupts her: “Why do you think this decision is so hard for me? I would miss your love of color-coding spices, how you try so hard to be funny, and the way you can always find my purse.” This is the moment when Grace takes Frankie’s hand and says, “I know, I’m scared of losing you, too,” to which Frankie replies, “But you’re not losing me. I’m not going anywhere” (ibid.). The last scene then shows Grace and Frankie, standing arm in arm in the hot air balloon when Grace urges Frankie once again “You should go.” Frankie answers wistfully, “Yeah,” but then adds, “Let’s just see where the balloon takes *us*” (ibid., my emphasis). Season 3 thus ends with a renewed emphasis on Grace and Frankie as the most important “us,” instead of Frankie and Jacob (or Grace and her new admirer), and thus queers the relationship between Grace and Frankie in the sense that the audience is confronted with a vision of aging that does not revolve around hetero-happiness as the key to successful aging.

“Where the balloon takes us”: A Conclusion

Grace and Frankie talks back to ageism by consolidating middle ground between the equally perilous poles of decline and success that tend to dominate narratives of aging. Additionally, and just as significantly, the series also talks back to ageism by irritating heteronormative understandings of happiness and meaningful life trajectories. Upon its arrival, the series received mixed reviews, and some reviewers, such as Matthew Gilbert, who had high hopes for the collective star-power of the show, admitted their disappointment with the result. Others applauded the inclusion of aging gay protagonists, but found it “difficult to buy the relationship between Mr. Sheen [Robert] and Mr. Waterston [Sol]” (Owen, 2015). Certainly, some points of critique are justified. Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that the series, and season 3 in particular, makes a significant contribution to the representation of aging. This is largely due to the shift away from a focus on hetero-happiness, when rather than setting all their hopes on trying to get back into the dating game, and building up new monogamous relationships,

Grace and Frankie's "primal commitment" evolves into a commitment to other women – particularly to women of their own age – as is illustrated by their decision against a marketing campaign built on youthfulness. The portrayal of a queer patch-work family of Sol and Robert, Grace and Frankie, and their four adult children, as they dissolve old bonds (divorce) but establish new ones (of friendship), and of intergenerational bonds (Grace's older daughter Brianna refers to Frankie as being like a mother to her)¹³ add further elements that challenge the ideal of a "straight" heterosexual timeline. Most of all, however, the strength of the series lies in its commitment to neither deny the fragilities of growing older nor to obscure adventurousness, sexual desire, and new beginnings as part of aging, but instead, to grant its protagonists of a voice with which to make their own claims, negotiate their own futures, and loudly talk back to ageism.

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¹³ In the same scene Brianna also refers to Grace, her biological mother, as "being *like* a mother" to her (my emphasis) and when Grace looks upset, Brianna emphasizes that she does not see Frankie as a replacement mother but "like another mother. More love. More love is so good" ("The End"), undermining the general priority given to consanguine relations.

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'SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN A GOOD WOMAN': NOISY SOUTHERN WOMEN IN THE FICTION OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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ABSTRACT

Women's literature of the American South is hardly recognized for its strong, feisty women protagonists, perhaps with the exception of Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. However, there is a line of southern women writers who have brought forth far more complex and probing women protagonists that articulate their opinions and take matters into their own hands in a society that tries to deny them of their agency. Particularly US southern writer Flannery O'Connor's works of fiction frequently focus on outspoken single or widowed women who come to embody different gender roles in a highly gendered society (Smith 1994: 35). Some of her literary texts exhibit elderly female protagonists that voice their concern over societal developments, even in social settings where their behaviour is often perceived as rude. My contribution would like to discuss these 'noisy' women and suggest that, on one hand, they complicate demarcations between 'good' and 'bad', and on the other, their loud being bears testimony to a tradition of racial and social oppression that has already begun to dissipate. In my presentation, I would like to focus on how these women structure and make sense of their lives and how they make themselves heard.

KEYWORDS

Flannery O'Connor, gender roles, single women, the American South

"You have to make more noise than anybody else, you have to make yourself more obtrusive than anybody else, you have to fill all the papers more than anybody else, in fact you have to be there all the time and see that they do not snow you under, if you are really going to get your reform realised." Emmeline Pankhurst¹⁴

"She has to move around and make some kind of show of herself so we'll know she's there all the time."

Flannery O'Connor¹⁵

¹⁴ http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/suffragette/famous_feminist_quotes/ [13.08.2017]

¹⁵ Quoted in Ciuba 2012, p.6

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor's fiction has not typically been associated with issues of feminism, yet this positioning of Pankhurst's quote intends to set the tone for the 'noisy' characters my paper is chiefly concerned with, just as much as it points to Connor's endeavor to reach those who do not *want* to hear what she had to say. I find it striking that studying 'freakish' female protagonists in works of fiction by US women writers in and of 'the South' has inevitably brought me face to face with highly conspicuous and probing female characters, who not only stand out in terms of their excessive or 'deviant' physicality but also through their outspoken, loud beings by voicing their concern over societal developments, even when their behaviour is rude or inappropriate. Flannery O'Connor's literary texts offer particularly compelling material for investigating these noisy women protagonists. The kind of 'noise' we find in O'Connor's texts can be aptly understood as mapped out by Garry M. Ciuba in "To the Hard of Hearing You Shout." Aside from investigating the type of noise or noisiness that emerges in these narratives, the heart of this investigation is dedicated to taking note of how the protagonists stand regarding their age and/or aging at (to them) critical life stages, and discussing representations of the life course will serve as a useful backdrop in this respect. My motivation for taking a closer look at the behavior and the identity formations of these characters is in part inspired by the observation that several female protagonists in O'Connor's literary texts come to embody different gender roles because their everyday lives are embedded and constructed in a highly gendered society (Smith 1994, p.35). Furthermore, I aim to fill a void by examining the female experience, as narrative texts have historically rather focused on the male experience (Malcolm, 2011, p.97), a practice that literary studies has made itself guilty of as well (Maierhofer 2003, p.20). In the course of this paper, I intend to show how the protagonists' behaviour and O'Connor's work as a whole can be linked to a pronounced need to be heard, with reference to Garry M. Ciuba's "To the Hard of Hearing You Shout." In addition, I will map out how the protagonists articulate their opinions and take matters into their own hands in a society that intends to deny them of their agency. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1953), I examine how the grandmother's loud being, as expressed by her need for communication and the lack of interpersonal responses from her environment, bears testimony to a tradition of racial and social oppression that is gradually dissipating. In "A

Stroke of Good Fortune” (1949), I investigate how Ruby’s understanding and experiencing of age(ing) and her social surroundings has impacted and continues to impact her identities. Regarding both protagonists’ need for and/or refusal of communication, I am interested in investigating how they interact with their environments, structure and make sense of their lives, and make themselves heard. As analyses of and comparisons with further literary texts would have exceeded the framework of my paper, I would like to leave investigations in these directions for future research. More precisely, my research questions are as follows: Do the narratives under investigation yield useful insights into depictions of the life course in short fiction? How does ‘noise’ manifest itself in the reflections and interactions of the female protagonists in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” and “A Stroke of Good Fortune”? And how does their experiencing of age(ing) impact their identity negotiations?

The Life Course and/in Short Stories

I find it necessary to remind that representations matter, and that literature has the potential to yield powerful insights with regard to the life course. In *The Life Course: A Sociological Perspective*, Clausen stresses that

“[g]reat literature explores lives in process; we see the actor in the network of persons and social happenings that shape goals, that permit or interfere with the attainment of satisfactions, and that reaffirm or call into question the character’s identity or integrity (...) Therefore, we shall draw upon the riches of literature as well as on the research of social scientists.” (1986, p.2)

I have chosen to focus on O’Connor’s short stories “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” and the relatively unknown “A Stroke of Good Fortune” because the analyses of these texts have the potential to yield particularly intriguing findings in this context. It is in this sense that we will be taking a closer look at “lives in process” (1986, p.2) and women protagonists in interaction with their surroundings to provide a better understanding of their identity formations. Before analyzing O’Connor’s literary texts, the following lines will discuss what investigating representations of the life course in short fiction can yield.

In her introduction to *From the Cradle to the Grave: Life-Course Models in Literary Genres*, Sabine Coelsch-Foisner states that literary depictions of the human life cycle have changed over time, along with varying social circumstances and systems of value, whereby these representations can be interpreted as deviations from and projections of an “ideal life” (2011, X). In O’Connor’s case, we are clearly met with varying degrees of deviation from an ideal way of living, which surfaces on several occasions in the two texts under investigation. At this point, I find it necessary to clarify the potentials of examining representations of the life course in short stories. One answer may be found in David Malcolm’s observation that:

[n]arrative texts (...) model human life, its central features and its course, in mode, genre and supra-genological category. Thus, the epic mode, within which narrative texts lie, involves a storyteller, and a story material of some sort and configuration (...). Narratives involve acts of memory and commemoration (...) (2011, p.97)

However, we must tread carefully here. As Coelsch-Foisner observes, “a literary life course is always constructed, because it depends on the events and roles that are selected for presentation and on the narrative strategies by which these are placed into context” (2011, VII). Nevertheless, guiding the following identity analyses will be the notion that the theory of the life course as “[a] model (...) in which a certain snippet of time or experience expresses or determines a whole life” (Malcolm 2011, p.105) has the potential to secure a more comprehensive understanding of how the examined protagonists perceive themselves and interact with their environments. First introduced in the social sciences in the 1960s (Coelsch-Foisner 2011, XII), the life course approach “denotes an interrelationship between individuals and society that evolves as a time-dependent, dynamic linkage between social structure, institutions, and individual action from birth to death” (Walter R. Heinz qtd. in Coelsch-Foisner 2011, XI). It can be employed in five different ways, of which the one most commonly used will be considered in this analysis, namely the life course as “a progression through time” (Clausen qtd. in Alwin 2012, p.12). From a temporal viewpoint, we must be aware that these short stories “pinpoint a moment [or moments] in a character’s life without destroying the illusion of a fuller panorama beyond” (Coelsch-Foisner 2011, X) or, as David Malcolm puts it, “privilege certain aspects of human life” (2011, p.97). Though I wouldn’t gender novels

and short stories by going as far as to state that they present “a useful way of slicing through the all-embracing net of the dominant (male, white European) narrative of the novel” (Malcolm 2011, p.99), the idea that the fragmentary nature of short stories sheds light in particular on marginalized and isolated individuals (p.98) is especially salient for this analysis, which is why it is all the more intriguing for scholars interested in the field to pay increasing attention to understanding short stories as a form of life writing: “Given its brevity, fragmentary and elliptical quality, short fiction seems to constitute a prime site for recreating the discontinuities and fractures in terms of which postmodernity has viewed human life” (Coelsch-Foisner 2011, XIV).

A ‘Fiction of Noise’

Recent research on O’Connor’s fiction that investigates its relationship with noise offers intricate insights into her use of startling, grotesque imagery. In “‘To the Hard of Hearing You Shout,’” whose title refers to a quote taken directly from O’Connor’s “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” Garry M. Ciuba argues that the violent phenomena, distinctive bodies, and warped desires that drive the characters that permeate O’Connor’s fiction function as the “raised voice” with which she tried to reach her audience and make them “hear” (2012, p.1). Consequently, the author proposes that O’Connor’s fiction can be understood as a “fiction of noise” (p.1): She responds to what might obstruct her relationship with her readers by raising her voice against the lost words, by distorting explicitly what is not even heard as already distorted implicitly. “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do,” O’Connor posits, “you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it” (MM 34). But since O’Connor recognized that her readers did not necessarily share her convictions about art, faith, and the modern world, she eschewed the well-modulated voice. Instead, she shouted from the very rooftop of her house of fiction (p.1).

While Ciuba’s essay is chiefly concerned with acknowledging representations of those who are actually “hard-of-hearing” (p.5) in O’Connor’s fiction, this passage indicates that he recognizes the attempt of addressing those who are *figuratively* hard-of-hearing as a significant aspect that underlies O’Connor’s work. In fact, the characters in O’Connor’s

fiction frequently shout at each other as if “they were struggling to be heard and understood” (p.2), traces of which we will discover in both literary texts and even extend to O’Connor’s typography, “for it may punctuate the outcry with exclamation or up the volume of a voice with upper case letters” (p.2). Ciuba may have a point by arguing that O’Connor was aware that her fiction would hit a nerve with the majority of her audiences and that her writing functioned as “a loudspeaker for a partially deafened audience” (p.2). We can take away from this that O’Connor clearly refused to shy away from turning up the volume on the subjects of her fiction. Branching off from the notion that O’Connor “was consciously committed to communication” (Park 1982, p.249), I will also consider the figurative noise that emanates from her fiction, and at the same time suggest a broad understanding of the emergence of ‘noise’ in O’Connor’s literary texts that primarily includes *verbal* noise, based on the characters’ need for speech and communication. As I explore in the subsequent analysis, the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” talks despite the lack of responses from her environment, whereas Ruby in “A Stroke of Good Fortune” mostly speaks to herself, trying to respond to the harrowing noise inside her: her fear of being pregnant.

A Good Grandmother Is Hard to Find

As mentioned earlier, examining the portrayal of the main protagonist of O’Connor’s most well-known short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” who is known throughout the entire story solely as the “grandmother” (O’Connor 1971, p.117) can be useful in demonstrating how the author depicts noisy elderly women in her fiction. In this case, we are met with yet another one of O’Connor’s characters who is “isolated yet passionate to communicate” (Ciuba 2012, p.6). The story begins with a scene of protest involving the grandmother, who is displeased by her family’s intention to travel to Florida.irate, she turns to her son with “one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head” and admonishes him that a killer is on the loose, hoping that this information will alter their travel plans (O’Connor 1971, p.117). From the outset, it is noteworthy that no one pays attention to her: her son fails to “look up from his reading” and his wife doesn’t “seem to hear her” either (p.117). This suggests that the grandmother is not taken seriously and barely acknowledged, though she constantly tries to provoke reactions from

her environment. On several occasions in the story, she is consciously dedicated to appear ladylike, though this stands in stark contrast to her “loud” behaviour. For instance, the story renders a relatively elaborate description of her “navy blue straw tailor hat with a bunch of white violets,” her “navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print,” and the “purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet” pinned at her collar, so that, “[i]n case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (p.118). However, she exhibits inconsistent and at times hypocritical behaviour, for instance when she preaches that “in my time (...) children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then” just before laying eyes on a small African-American child and exclaiming: “Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!” (p.119). O’Connor herself mentions the grandmother’s hypocrisy in *Mystery and Manners* (1961, p.111). The grandmother’s subsequent wish to “paint” the picture of the young black child (“Wouldn’t that make a picture, now?” O’Connor 1971, p.119) can be read as her attempt to frame and construct the young boy or girl according to how she sees and perceives the child, which is possibly connected to the way her surroundings had encouraged her to do throughout her life. Here, once again, no one acknowledges the thoughts the grandmother voices.

These observations suggest to me that the figure of the grandmother bears testimony to dissolving feminine ideals of ladyhood, which is further mirrored by her coming undone by the end of the story. The elderly woman takes pride in landmarks close to the road such as burying grounds and former plantations that she deems historic. Once again, none of her family members engage in a conversation with her, though she is constantly commenting on her surroundings and telling stories: “[S]he rolled her eyes and waved her head and was very dramatic” (1971, p.120). When the family stops at “The Tower” for something to eat, Bailey’s wife selects “The Tennessee Waltz” on the jukebox and the grandmother enjoys the music in isolation:

[T]he grandmother said that tune always made her want to dance. She asked Bailey if he would like to dance but he only glared at her. He didn’t have a naturally sunny disposition like she did and trips made him nervous. The grandmother’s

brown eyes were very bright. She swayed her head from side to side and pretended she was dancing in her chair. (p.121)

The family eventually continues their trip that is crucially interrupted when the grandmother wishes to stop at a plantation she had visited “when she was a young lady” (p.123). For the first time in the story, her grandchildren show interest in what she is saying and convince their father to turn down a dirt road that would supposedly lead them to the place in question. However, when the grandmother comes to realize that she was mistaken and the plantation she had been thinking of was in fact in Tennessee, she damages the valise her cat Pitty Sing is in and causes an accident that lands them slightly injured in a ditch. They attract the attention of a car, whose passengers happen to be The Misfit and his helpers, Hiram and Bobby Lee, whom the grandmother mentioned before they embarked on their trip. The family may have gotten away unharmed if it hadn't been for the grandmother, who shrieks when she recognizes the murderer:

“You're the Misfit! (...) I recognized you at once!”

“Yes'm,” the man said (...) “but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me.”

Bailey turned his head sharply and said something to his mother that shocked even the children. (p.127)

Two by two, the family is taken away into the woods and shot by The Misfit's henchmen while the grandmother engages in a desperate conversation with The Misfit in which she resorts to appealing to her status as a lady:

“You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?” the grandmother said and removed her cuff and began to slap at her eyes with it. (...) The grandmother reached up to adjust her hat brim as if she were going to the woods with him but it came off in her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall on the ground.” (pp.127-28)

The fact that her efforts are futile and she is going to die at the hands of a killer exposes the uselessness of her appeal to her ladylike qualities along with the status of being a

(southern) lady – a construct based on the categorization and subjectification of the female body in order to “control” it that has been used to justify its protection (Goodwyn Jones qtd. in Gleeson-White 2003, p.7). The grandmother keeps repeating that she knows that he’s “a good man” (O’Connor 1971, pp.127-128), though this does not save her from being executed:

Alone with The Misfit, the grandmother found that she had lost her voice (...) She opened and closed her mouth several times before anything came out. Finally, she found herself saying, “Jesus, Jesus,” meaning, Jesus will help you [The Misfit], but the way she was saying it, it sounded as if she might be cursing. (...) Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.” (pp.131-32)

The story closes with a comment on the dead “lady.” When Bobby Lee remarks that the grandmother was “a talker,” The Misfit answers that “[s]he would have been a good woman (...) if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (p.133). To briefly sum up, what forms does ‘noise’ take on in this story? In addition to the aspects raised in the analysis, we can observe that the grandmother is not only the culprit for the family’s demise but the noise that structures this text. On one hand, it manifests itself verbally by way of her constant efforts to engage in conversation though she is rarely answered in turn by her environment. On the other, we can exploit the startling imagery, for instance in the scene immediately after her death, to explain that it in itself constitutes the noise, the “raised voice” with which O’Connor tried to reach her readers who refused to hear (Ciuba 2012, p.1). Paired with the observations in the analysis, it can be stated that the aural centre of the story vanishes with the grandmother’s death. It is noteworthy that, similar to the protagonist in the following short story, the grandmother is on a journey.

‘You’re Too Young to Bust Your Gears’: Perceptions of Identity and (Age)ing in “A Stroke of Good Fortune”

Though a considerable number of O'Connor's texts feature women protagonists who "ha[ve] been left to raise truculent, unruly sons and daughters" and as a result "prove tough and resourceful in their dealings with the outside world" (Westling 1978, p.511), there are others that prove to be equally tough, finding themselves "at two important stages in life – on the brink of puberty and well into young adulthood" (p.518). Quite often, "their frustration has turned into bitterness and perverse eccentricity" (p.518), which is tellingly demonstrated in O'Connor's ironically titled short story "A Stroke of Good Fortune" (1949) that yields ambivalent attitudes towards age(ing) and pregnancy in a traditional domestic setting.

It proved somewhat difficult to find sources on this short story that has accused of not being able to match the vigour of O'Connor's other stories (Freely qtd. in Gossett 1972, p.518) and O'Connor herself appears to have been dissatisfied with it as well (Napier 1982, p.20). I believe that scholars and critics simply did not know what to make of the story in relation to O'Connor's earlier ones. In any case, claiming that "A Stroke of Good Fortune" "contain[s] some good things but do[es] not come to much, on the whole" (Hart 1958, p.220) does not do justice to the text. I propose that research on this short story can benefit from analyzing the character's battles with her attitudes towards perceptions of her age and a female role she does not feel entirely comfortable in.

The story opens with the main protagonist Ruby who examines herself in a mirror in the kitchen after she has returned from shopping for groceries, "too tired (...) to straighten up (...) she hung there collapsed from the hips, her head balanced like a big florid vegetable at the top of the sack:

She gazed with stony unrecognition at the face that confronted her in the dark yellow-spotted mirror over the table. Against her right cheek was a gritty collard leaf (...) [s]he gave it a vicious swipe with her arm and straightened up, muttering, "Collards, collards," in a voice of sultry subdued wrath (...) spitting the word from her mouth (...) as if it were a poisonous seed. (O'Connor 1971, p.95)

Immediately afterwards, the text reveals that Ruby only bought the vegetable because her “baby brother” Rufus had requested it, though “[s]he and her husband hadn’t eaten collard greens for five years and she wasn’t going to start cooking them now” (p.95). However, this moment contains far more than her disgust for collard greens: Ruby’s small but fierce verbal protests emerge in a similar fashion throughout the entire story and are typically targeted against the duties attached to the domestic role of the housewife and mother she has great difficulties situating herself in. I argue that these protests are only intensified by the silence they are surrounded by.¹⁶

Ruby decides to write a note for her husband, Bill Hill, in which she orders him to carry the sack with groceries upstairs. She then “braced herself at the bottom of the steps for the climb to the fourth floor” (p.96), a setting and situation in which she is forced to confront herself with the possibility of a critical life event that appears to weigh down on her: her pregnancy. Ruby equates pregnancy with sickness several times throughout the story. At the harrowing sight of the steps that appear to “grow from the floor” and resemble “steeple” that “reared up and got steeper,” Ruby’s “mouth widened and turned down in a look of complete disgust. She was in no condition to go up anything. She was sick” (p.96). It is then revealed that Ruby consulted a palmist, who had predicted with a grin “[a] long illness” that will result in “a stroke of good fortune” (p.96). Yet Ruby refuses to hear this hint and instead interprets the prediction as a sign that she and her husband are about to move to a new home. It is worth mentioning at this point that the story has been recognized for its “purely comic effect” (Mayer 1979, p.70), though I propose that it can be beneficial to examine the text in a more serious light, as I will elaborate.

While ascending the stairs, Ruby suddenly finds that she is exhausted and reveals her attitude toward her own age:

As young as she was – thirty-four – you wouldn’t think five steps would stew her.
You better take it easy, baby, she told herself, you’re too young to bust your gears.
Thirty-four wasn’t old, wasn’t any age at all (...) She compared herself at thirty-four

¹⁶ In his analysis of O’Connor’s novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, Garry Ciuba posits that a reading of the rape of Tarwater as O’Connor’s way of shouting at an audience who does not want to hear gains in momentum by the silence the scene is enveloped in (2012, p.13).

with her mother at that age (...) All those children were what did her mother in (...) her mother had got deader with every one of them.” (O’Connor 1971, p.97)

This scene clearly shows that Ruby is terrified by the idea of bearing children (Mayer 1979, p.71) because she feels they bring her closer to death. Louise Westling observes that Ruby “tries to escape the demands of the traditional female role (...) [s]he sees her feminine heritage as horrifying, her biological destiny as death-in-life. At thirty-four, Ruby is smugly pleased to have avoided ruining her life with motherhood” (1978, p.515). Ruby reflects on her sisters, who each have four children, and cannot understand “how they stood it” (O’Connor 1971, p.97). Just like her brother Rufus had been “waiting to make his mother, only thirty-four, into an old woman” (p.97), she is terrified that her future child is waiting to do the same to her. Ruby oscillates between moments in which she comes close to accepting that she may be pregnant, though she hesitates to admit it to herself and instead reflects on her health:

The steps were going up like a seesaw with her in the middle of it. She did not want to get nauseated. Not that again. Now no. No. She was not (...) No, I’m not going to no doctor, she said. No. No. She was not.” (p.98).

There was nothing permanent wrong with her (...) She thought of herself again in comparison with her mother at thirty-four and she pinched her arm and smiled. Seeing that her mother or father neither had been much to look at, she had done very well. They had been the dried-up type (...) And she had come out of that! A somebody as alive as her! She got up, gripping the banister rail but smiling to herself. (...) She felt the wholeness of herself, a whole thing climbing up the stairs.” (p.99)

Even in light of the physical signs of her own pregnancy, Ruby is oblivious to her state: “There was a pain in her stomach (...) like a piece of something pushing something else. She had felt it before (...) [i]t was the one that frightened her most” (p.101). When she reaches the third floor to visit her “especial friend” Laverne Watts and tells her that she is “damn sick,” Laverne ridicules her, “swaying with her stomach stuck out” (p.102):

Laverne began to do a kind of comic dance up and down the room. She took two or three slow steps in one direction with her knees bent and then she came back and kicked her leg slowly and painfully in the other. She began to sing in a loud guttural voice, rolling her eyes, "Put them all together, and they spell MOTHER! MOTHER!" and stretching out her arms as if she were on the stage.

Ruby's mouth opened wordlessly and her fierce expression vanished. For a half second she was motionless; then she sprang from the chair. "Not me!" (...) "Oh no not me!" (...) "You shut up this minute. I ain't going to have any baby!"

"Ha ha," Laverne said. (pp.104-5)

O'Connor's credo can be defined in terms of the use of the loud voice (Ciuba 2012, p.14). Here, we have two characters shouting at each other: Ruby is yelling at Laverne because she is struggling to be understood by her friend (p.2), whereas Laverne becomes a "large and startling figure" (p.1) to get Ruby to be truthful to herself about her pregnancy. Mayer argues that Laverne functions here as the "very spirit of comedy" who "joyfully dramatizes the absurdity of Ruby's situation and ends by exploding her foolish dreams" (1979, p.72), but I believe that the serious undertone of Ruby's situation has not been fully acknowledged. She is ridiculed by virtually everyone in her environment – her palmist, her best friend, even her own husband (who doesn't appear in the story) – because of her fear, her hesitance, and her ambivalent feelings toward the idea of being pregnant (p.71) that I argue are grounded in her traumatic memories of her mother's labor: "She remembered when her mother had had Rufus. She was the only one of the children who couldn't stand it and she walked all the way in to Melsy, in the hot sun ten miles, to the picture show just to get clear of the screaming" (O'Connor 1971, p.97).

The final lines of the story are worth citing for the ambiguity (Mayer 1979, p.73) and ambivalence (Westling 1978, p.515) of O'Connor's depiction of Ruby's fate:

"Good Fortune," she said in a hollow voice that echoed along all the levels of the cavern, "Baby."

"Good Fortune, Baby," the three echoes leered.

Then she recognized the feeling again, a little roll. It was as if it were not in her

stomach. It was as if it were out nowhere in nothing, out nowhere, resting and waiting, with plenty of time. (O'Connor in Westling, p.515)

Westling observes that "A Stroke of Good Fortune" ends "with the leering mockery of the echoes in the stairwell. By now the title (...) has come to symbolize Flannery O'Connor's heavily ironic and perhaps even ambivalent attitude toward Ruby's situation" (p.515). In any case, however, " (...) [w]hether or not she intended to do so, Flannery O'Connor has made a vivid protest against sentimental stereotypes of motherhood, by presenting Ruby's horrified sense of the physical cost of reproduction and her awful realization that she has been tricked into paying it" (p.516).

'Noise' emerges in a twofold manner in this story. On one hand, we have Ruby's brief, verbal outbursts over fears of having been "tricked," as Westling put it, into the role of a mother, a role she does not want to take on. Furthermore, her arguing with Laverne offers the largest amount of noise of the story: Laverne yells because Ruby does not want to hear the truth, and Ruby yells because she knows it. It is the restrictive role attributed to motherhood that shakes Ruby's world, which many readers and critics may not be able to identify with. Yet "slicing" (Malcolm 2011, p.99) into the protagonist's life in this manner opens up several trajectories which we may use to trace her motivating factors. Ruby is at odds because her husband is in charge of birth control and may even have manipulated it on purpose (Mayer 1979, p.72) and is plagued by traumatic memories of her mother giving birth. These circumstances may explain why she thinks in profoundly negative categories, that "by escaping pregnancy she can escape the risks of aging and death" (p.72).

Despite this negative outlook, I suggest that Ruby's 'journey' up the stairs can be read as a "metapho[r] of life" (Coelsch-Foisner 2011, XI) that lets us reflect on representations of the life course. In "Life Course as a Ship's Course," Joanna Rostek finds that "the sea voyage and the process of recapitulating one's past are inextricably linked" (2011, p.59), and Roberta Maierhofer tellingly illustrates in *Salty Old Women* how narratives that depict journeys by sea can allow for different layers of the protagonists' memories to surface and bring to mind strong, passionate, and negative feelings attached to past experiences (2001, p.316). Similarly, Ruby's ascension of the stairs can be read along these lines, as

a setting in which she is confronted with identity negotiations, an imminent critical life stage, and negative memories. We must not forget that the story's main setting is the looming staircase, and it should also be kept in mind that its title was originally "Woman on the Stairs" (Mayer 1979, p.72), which testifies to the significance of this setting. The stairs even share characteristics with a ship, as is evident in some of the protagonist's descriptions of the staircase as "steeple" that "reared up and got steeper" (O'Connor 1971, p.96) like a ship's mast, or their evoking the image of a seesaw that almost leaves Ruby nauseous (p.98).

Conclusion

This paper illustrated how O'Connor's short stories "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "A Stroke of Good Fortune" feature varying and ambivalent portrayals of 'noisy' women protagonists in critical life situations, including a varying extent of agency. The 'noise' that emerges in these stories can be linked to the notion that both women are overwhelmed by their social framework. Whereas the grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" constantly tries to interact with her environment despite the limited responses she receives, Ruby Hill in "A Stroke of Good Fortune" is isolated through her reflections of the threat of pregnancy and refuses to respond to her environment, as she is victimized and ridiculed by virtually everyone she encounters (Mayer 1979, p.71). By discussing the short story and its value for depicting the life course in this context, I tried to demonstrate that it provides a version of the human life course that pays special attention to individual moments instead of a longer period of time or sequence of events, moments that extend beyond themselves and hint at other actions that remain unnarrated (Malcolm 2011, p.101). Furthermore, investigating these narratives accentuates the "multidimensionality of the life course" (Walter R. Heinz qtd. in Coelsch-Foisner 2011, XI) and invites for future research in this area. As I have demonstrated, noise manifests itself verbally and figuratively, whereby these investigations greatly benefited from Carry Ciuba's insights. My project aimed to engage in a discussion of the "aesthetics of life writing and make us rethink life, identity and individuality" (Coelsch-Foisner 2011, XVII). But more importantly, underlying this project is the assumption that the manner in which artists (in this case writers) depict certain phenomena sheds light on how given societies engage with

phenomena such as the human life cycle, for instance (XVII), which I believe future research in this direction can only benefit from.

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STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AND AGEING: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This article illustrates how stereotypical representations of women and ageing are influenced by culture, embodiment and psychoanalysis. It draws on significant literature and photographic practice that have been developed in relation to clichés of women and ageing exploring the politics of woman and ageing that lead to invisibility and the cultural construction of age together with the performance of age and gender. Furthermore, the work of photographers who have made work in relation to stereotypical representations of women and ageing is explored.

KEYWORDS

Photography, Gender, Ageing, Performance, Embodiment

Introduction

The scope of this paper is to provide a brief review of critically engaged authorship and photographic practice developed in response to stereotypical representations of women and ageing. The focus is cultural and social issues that lead to stereotypical clichés of women as they age, together with the politics of ageing that render the older woman invisible. This review begins by considering pertinent literature from the mid20th century onwards. Fundamental to an understanding of stereotypical representations of women and ageing are writers, Sontag, Beauvoir, Friedan, Gullette and Woodward and key concepts and theories encompass: psychoanalysis, embodiment, the cultural construction of age and gender and the performance of age and gender. Moreover, important photographers are: Manchot, Noggle, Cumming and Martin.

In 1972 Susan Sontag's seminal article *The Double Standard of Ageing* was published illustrating how and why women are discriminated against as they age. This article built upon, expanded and clarified Beauvoir's (1949) ideas concerning women, maturity and old age. Sontag argued that Western society favours youth over old age, with men and

women experiencing growing old differently. This is in line with the way in which society defines 'femininity' and 'masculinity' with femininity meaning being weak and gentle and masculinity seen as strong and powerful (Sontag 1972, p.31; Beauvoir, 1949). Friedan (1993) contributed to this research by demonstrating that femininities are disrupted more than masculinities and result in 'discontinuities' of a woman's culturally expected behaviour. These discontinuities of a woman's life revolve around the expectation of her to focus on motherhood instead of a career leaving her, after child rearing age, feeling empty and discontent. In addition, after the menopause she is also considered to be less sexually attractive than a man (Sontag, 1972; Beauvoir, 1977; Greer, 1999; Gullette, 2004). Thus, the menopause heralds a turning point in a woman's life after which she is treated with disgust. This attitude leads to society's marginalisation of older women provoking their invisibility in contemporary Western culture.

Disgust of the older female body has led to a culture of inequality based on ageist and sexist attitudes to older women (Calasanti, 2006; Slevin; 2006; Marshall, 2015; Hurd Clarke 2012 in Leontowitsch, 2012; Macdonald, 1984) that not only renders the older female invisible but also makes her the subject of detrimental cultural and social values that have changed very little since Sontag's time. Sontag acknowledges that when women age they are expected to be deceitful about how they look by hiding behind the protection of culturally induced masks to subvert their ageing appearance. Such deceit arises out of what Gullette (2011) has termed 'age anxiety' and results from the existence of 'age gazers'. 'Age gazers' according to (Gullette 2011, p.119) are people who 'observe physical stigmas in women younger than in men, hurting women in the sexual marketplace'. 'Age gazers' look out for, and are intolerant of, representations and performance of age in the female body from mid-life onwards (Sontag 1972; Beauvoir 1977; Greer 1999; Gullette, 2011). The result of 'age anxiety', is that many women are unhappy with their body image and turn to using the masquerade of surgery, clothes, hair dyes, makeup and other means to disguise their ageing, as a quick Google search and a survey of beauty advertising will testify.

Woodward's book *Aging and its Discontents* (1991) seeks to clarify why women are marginalised as they age by considering links between women and ageing to certain

aspects of psychoanalysis. Woodward claims that the older woman does not exist in Freudian psychoanalysis because Freud's writing 'cannot contain the concept of gender as distinct from sexuality' (Woodward 1991, p.87) identifying that sexuality and gender co-exist in Freudian psychoanalysis until a woman is past the menopause. After the menopause she is seen to lose her sexuality but retain her gender and therefore 'cannot even be presented within the discourse of classical psychoanalysis' (Woodward 1991, p.87). In addition, Woodward refers to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and hypothesises that its meaning can be reversed and instead of referencing infancy can refer to ageing instead. She comments 'in the mirror stage of old age the subject enters the social realm reserved for senior citizens of the Western world' (Woodward 1991, p.67) and the old are alienated from their mirror image instead of being curious about it. If the old, and older women especially, do not like what they see in the mirror, how does this affect the construction of their identity?

Woodward (2006), in her article *Performing Age, Performing Gender*, calls for art practice and cultural criticism to put the presentation of the older female body and the performance of age into the spotlight. Many photographers including; Donnigan Cumming, Anne Noggle and Melanie Manchot have made work around the topic of age, gender, performance and identity. Donigan Cumming in the series *Pretty Ribbons* (1996) photographed former journalist and inspiring actress Nettie Harris in her 70s, once a week for 10 years, within the environment of her own home. His photographs of Nettie Cumming present 'aesthetically sophisticated pictorial compositions' that 'unite form and content appearance and being,' (Herzog 1996, p.13).

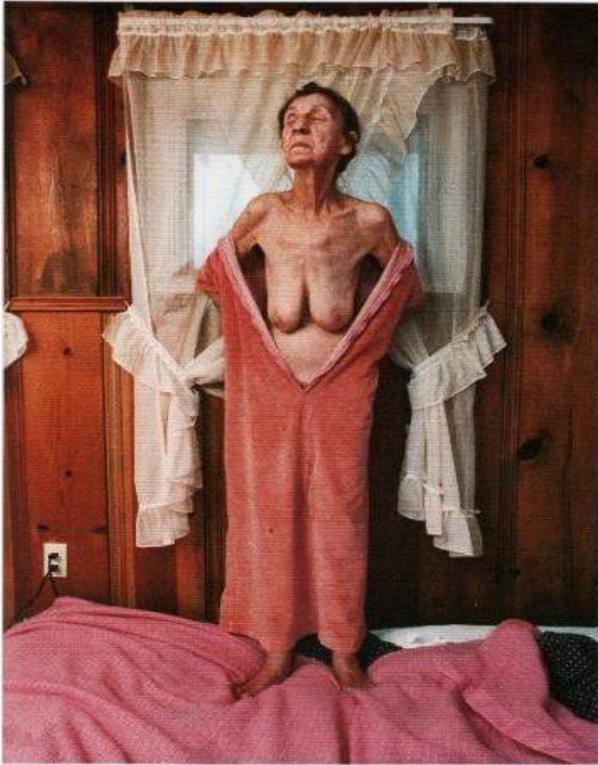


Fig 1: Donigan Cumming, Nettie from the series, *Pretty Ribbons*, April 10th, 1992

Additionally, these images reveal the older female body with all its wrinkles, sagging flesh and wasted muscle in intimate detail and show what old age, and the older woman, really can be like. By using Nettie's own home for the photography Cumming accessed various artefacts and detritus that he found there and included many of them in his images. The juxtaposing of these items with Nettie's body allow certain simplistic objects to acquire symbolic power as shown in fig 1.

Liminal Portraits (1999-2000) by Melanie Manchot, show her mother's naked and semi-naked ageing body both in private interior and public exterior spaces. Here Manchot is playing with notions of the acceptance and denial of the non-conformist beauty ideal body-should it be seen or not be seen?



Figure 2: Melanie Manchot, *The garden, turning to see*, 1999



Figure 3: Melanie Manchot, *The striped bathroom*, 1999

Manchot also plays with light and context, as seen in figs 2 and 3. By placing her mother in a beautiful landscape with the light falling on her body she attempts to increase the beauty and sensuality of the older female body. In contrast, when Anne Noggle used her own body in her photographic self -portrait *Stonehenge Decoded* (1977), fig 4, she presented her body elevated and prominent in the foreground over a flat landscape with storm clouds brewing. Here, only her torso and upper legs are shown, and she is naked from the waist downwards revealing her pubic hair, wrinkled and sagging untuned stomach and wrinkled thighs. No attempt is made to show her older ageing body as beautiful, in fact, she seeks the opposite narrative, a sense of something foreboding and threatening old age.



Figure 4: Anne Noggle, *Stonehenge Decoded*, 1977

Clothes play an important part in social identity, social difference and sexual difference and it is a way in which older women broadcast messages about themselves and their identity (Twigg, 2013). Recent photographic work by Cindy Sherman demonstrates how clothes, within the context of make-up, hair and appropriately sourced background, can influence identity. In her 2008 *Untitled* series, she uses her own body together with props, including cosmetics, clothing, wigs, pose, accessories and suitable backgrounds, to address the subject of women and ageing. In this series, she addresses women, ageing

and class by using herself to perform the older wives of prominent men. This series is often referred to as *Society Portraits*. In these images, the women are 'well-coiffed and poised, and yet the increasing levels of work required to attain the appearance of successful ageing and the possibilities of failure seem to haunt these women' (Meagher 2014, p.134) as shown in fig 5. Meager when writing about this series comments, that 'these ageing women, who look directly at the camera and know they are being looked at, allow the viewer to read their desperation as they seek to retain their youthful looks'.

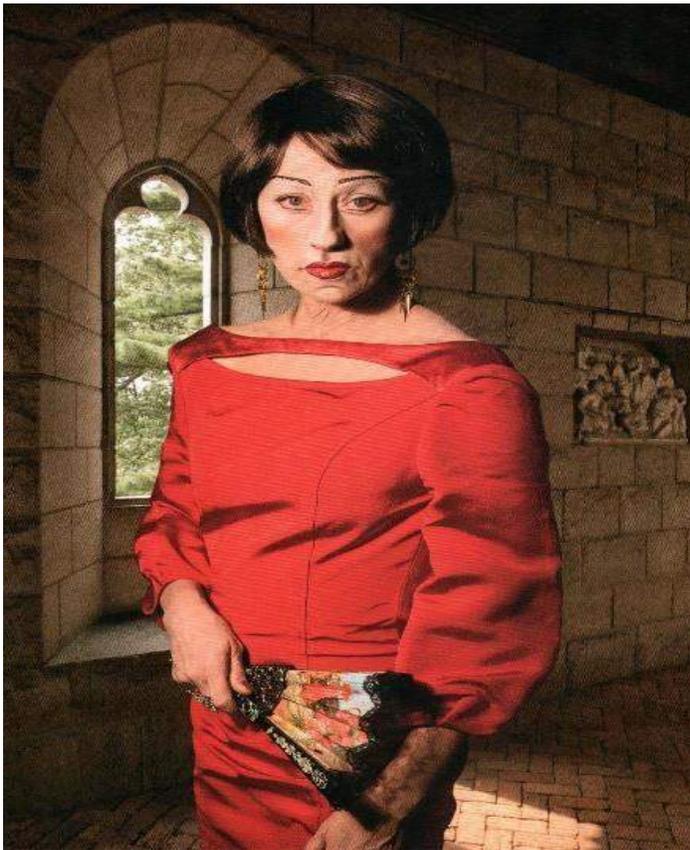


Figure 5: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #470* 2008 (Society Portraits)

Additionally, Sherman has taken on ageing Hollywood 1920s film beauties in her 2016 *Untitled* series. In this work Fallon (2016) says:

[...] she poses as 1920s-era film stars-older, or distinguished, but still wrapped in the sumptuous styles and finished with flawless coiffures of the time when they were young, hot, and on top of Hollywood (p.2).

Sherman in a *New York Times* interview (Gopnick, 2016) said she made these images because she is struggling with ageing and being a woman. An image showing Sherman posing as an older woman Hollywood star is shown in fig 6.



Figure 6: Sherman, *Untitled* 2016 (Ageing Hollywood Beauties)

What evidence exists that gender, age and performativity are connected? Firstly, Mary MacMaster (2012 in Dolan and Tincknell 2012), by referencing Butler's theory of the construction of gender, states:

Judith Butler sets out a strong argument for a complex construction of gender which can also be applied to aging; and, as with norms of gender, norms of ageing are reinforced by both language and image to create lived realities which are then performed (p.45).

Secondly, Butler (2003) acknowledges that strong ties exist between performative acts, gender construction and phenomenology. She identifies how 'the phenomenological theory of acts' as established by Merleau-Ponty, and others, explains the process by which 'social agents constitute reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic signs', Butler (2003, p.392). These components contribute to the stylization of the body and are fundamental, not only to gender construction, but also to degrading attitudes towards women as they age, as recognised by photographers Cumming, Noggle, Manchot, and Martin.

The work of Rosy Martin and Kay Goodridge in *Outrageous Agers: Performativity and Transgression* (2001) was made with a direct reference to 'Judith Butler's (1993) formulation of the discursively inscribed body' (Martin 2012, p.111, in Dolan and Tincknell 2012). By also referring to photo therapy, the work of Freud, together with medical discourse they sought to transgress, transform and subvert stereotypes of older women. By using their own bodies, they sought 'ways to use photography to intervene in cultural understandings of ageing femininity' (Martin, 2012, p.101, in Dolan and Tincknell 2012), examples of this work are shown in fig 7.

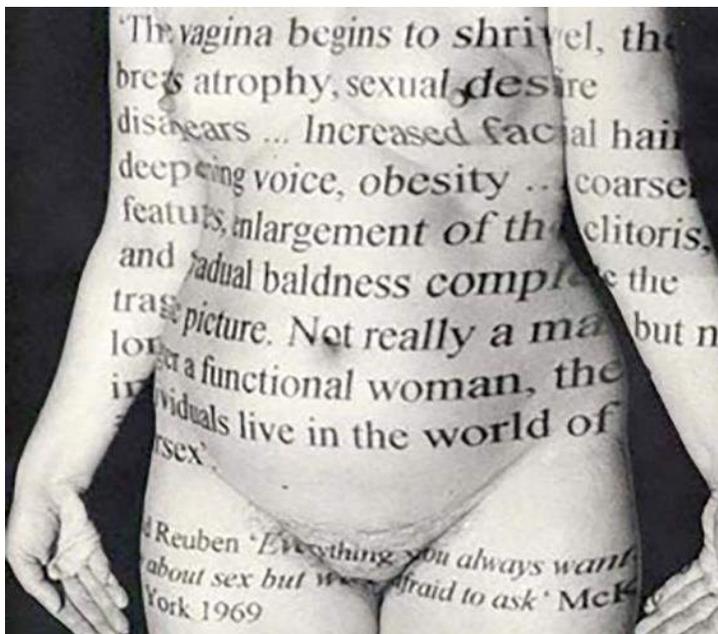


Figure 7: Martin and Goodridge, from the series, *Agers: Performativity and Transgression*

In conclusion, it can be said that not only has this review summarised previous authorship and photographic work in relation to the politics of women and ageing, the cultural construction of older women and the performance of age and gender, but it has highlighted that this work must continue. The discursive dialogue of issues pertaining to women and ageing began as early as the mid- 20th century with Beauvoir's publication of *The Second Sex* (1949) and continues to grow and be heard today. Furthermore, photography made around issues of women and ageing has been spasmodic from 1977 onwards. This review is therefore a call to arms to continue this work and to identify issues of gender and age concerning women today.

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'OLDER WOMEN ROCK!'

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Walking in ancestral women's footsteps,
I am an archive on legs,
a time traveller, alive to life,
I embody time, provide testimony,
me, I'm a radical, lyrical, womanist legacy.
Women's blood memory speaks in me

Women in our late 50s to early 70s are part of a generation that brought about significant change in society, yet we may now struggle to stay significant, lead meaningful lives and be economically secure. 'Older Women Rock!', a ground-breaking project of poetry-embellished retro clothes and performance, creates pop-up political art spaces in which to celebrate older women, challenge our invisibility, unite us across our differences and subvert dominant assumptions and prejudices about us. The project came about as a result of a Leverhulme Trust artist residency that I undertook on the theme of ageing at the University of Kent and at Canterbury Christ Church University. The poetry I wrote addressed issues of gendered ageing, such as:

- The invisibility or misrepresentation of older women in the media
- The beauty industry and the imperative to 'age agelessly'
- Poverty
- Being a carer

- Older women and incarceration

During the ten months of the residency, I also ran poetry workshops and had conversations with a wide range of women in their late 50s, 60s and early 70s, including women in a Zumba Gold class; women in prison; women with physical or learning disabilities; women at a MIND Day Centre and daughters of Holocaust survivors.

After the residency I collaborated with older women artists, sculptor Nicholette Goff, knitting artist Deborah Nash, fashion designer and fashion lecturer Claire Angel, textile artist Trish Bishop and members of the brilliantly-named Profanity Embroidery Group. These artists embroidered, burned, printed, engraved and spray-painted my poetry and the women's testimony onto retro clothes that I had found in local charity shops. The poetry/clothing we created has been exhibited in two pop-up shops - one in Folkestone, Kent and the other in Newcastle-under-Lyme (see Figs 1 & 2).



Figures 1 and 2

The work is publicised in creative ways to reach women who might not usually be drawn to creative events or to a feminist exhibition or talk. 'Older Women Rock!' sticks of rock and sweets are given out (see figure 3), poetry/clothing is displayed in high street shop windows and a knitting artist knitted in Wilko's shop window.



Figure 3

We have had an older women's Zumba Gold flashmob in Folkestone shopping centre and an exciting programme of 'Older Women Rock!' performances, talks, workshops and films. For example, an evening of films featuring and/or made by older women, curated by Nuala O'Sullivan, the Director of the 'Women Over Fifty Film Festival'; a panel discussion with Polly Russell, British Library curator of the 'Spare Rib' digital archive and Linda Bellos, ex-Spare Rib collective; a screening of a short film, 'watch', about the impact of dementia on a father/daughter relationship, which led to the creation of a group poem by an audience comprised almost entirely of older women carers; a subversive catwalk at the Claude Cahun exhibition in the Sidney Cooper Gallery, Canterbury, with nineteen older women modelling the poetic/clothing (see figures 4 and 5).



Figures 4 and 5

Recently as a Visiting Fellow at Keele University in the Centre for Ageing Research, I ran a three-month project, 'Poetry [E]motion: Older Women Rock the Potteries!', in North Staffordshire with older lesbians, older women who are refugees and asylum seekers and

women in their 80s and 90s who live in a retirement village. For this project, I added basic tools of peer counselling to the existing format of 'Older Women Rock!' and combining poetry and listening partnerships deepened women's experiences.

Feelings

Allowing them, describing them,
admitting them, accepting them,
flowing words into feelings,
feeling power from words,
confidence from hope,
a possibility I still have something in me
that's useful.

Pull it all together,
these feelings, emotions and words.
Make sense of it all

- Karen

A few of the women had lived resolutely for six decades restricting expression of emotion as a survival technique and the workshops opened them up to possibilities. They said:

'Explaining my feelings is not always easy for me. You don't want others to see that side of you. This has been good for me, given me more calmness. The past can play havoc with you. This is an opening into things I didn't want to talk about.'

'We don't cry aloud. We've learned how to hide it inside because other people don't like it. When my husband died I 'put a brave face on' but after a while I got sick and my body showed me that I had to face the feelings.'

Challenges included the fact that:

- continuity is needed to build safety and gain lasting benefit from the listening partnerships. There was a lack of continuity of participation in the workshops, for often seemingly age-related reasons – ill-health, hospital appointments, caring responsibilities for parents and grandchildren, as well as spontaneous holidays
- there are differences in cultural patterns between the North/South of England. The majority of women I worked with were born and raised in the Midlands and

they felt that feelings are more ‘under wraps’ than in the South. I was often called a ‘Soft Southerner’, a term that was always accompanied with peals of laughter. I accepted this as a mark of our connection, especially in those sessions when women had expressed deep feelings

- negative experience of the mental health system [or just living in a society where the showing of feelings is pathologised and medicalised meant that a few women were very wary of exposing what they saw as vulnerability. However, they all stayed with the project.

As a result of the Fellowship, nine poetry/clothes will be added to the ‘Older Women Rock!’ collection, including a ceramic dress.

For information about the screening of documentaries about ‘Older Women Rock!’ or future exhibitions of the poetic/clothing or to contact me, see

loveolderwomenrock.wordpress.com

About Leah

Leah Thorn is a spoken word poet, activist and lecturer, published through performance, film and anthologies in England and the United States. At the heart of her poetry is the autobiographical exploration of identity and issues of liberation.

In collaboration with filmmaker Clare Unsworth, Leah has produced two short poetryfilms, that have been screened internationally at feminist film festivals. ‘Count’ is about everyday sexism and ‘shhh!’ about the silencing of women through violence and sexual exploitation.

Leah leads workshops in prisons that use poetry as provocation and witness. In 2012 she undertook a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship, visiting women's correctional facilities across the United States with dance and theatre companies and in 2013 she received a Royal Society for Public Health Special Commendation Award for her contribution to Creative Arts and the Criminal Justice System.

Leah is an International Fellow of the England Centre for Practice Development, Canterbury Christ Church University and an Associate of the Sidney de Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health.

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THE AGEING EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN THE UK WHO IDENTIFIED WITH PUNK CULTURES

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ABSTRACT

Older people are subject to cultural expectations that influence the way they act, look and spend their time. Boundaries of age are notoriously difficult to define and the widely used 'middle age' is not exempt from this, nor from restrictive expectations of appearance, behaviour and leisure pursuits. This is particularly problematic for women, who are subject to gendered expectations throughout their lives, with appearance endlessly scrutinised. Cultural Gerontology enables age to be examined through the lens of culture, looking at how the depiction of older people, and the impact of ageism, contributes to their experience of age. The subculture of punk came into being in the UK in the late 1970s, notorious for its anti-authority attitude, DIY ethos (anyone can have a go at anything) and the unconventional appearance of those associated with it. Existing research on 'ageing punks' has so far failed to capture the experiences of women. Findings nonetheless suggest that punk identities, lifestyles and practices endure into 'middle age', providing an alternative to the narrow view of 'ageing' that public discourse holds. Punk may have had a lasting impact for the women influenced by it, potentially their ability to resist conforming to wider social expectations of ageing. This article introduces the planning stages of my research, which aims to capture the experience of ageing for women, exploring the impact of punk (if any) for women as they age.

KEYWORDS

Women, Ageing, Qualitative, Subculture, Feminist, Punk

This article introduces the planning stages of my PhD research, which explores the ageing experience for women in the UK who identified with punk cultures in the late 1970s. There are aspects of punk that appear to be in conflict with expectations of ageing. Women that liked punk in the original era will be aged fifty plus now, subject to the same expectations of ageing as everyone else. Haenfler (2014) states that as subculturists age, they carry some of their subcultural ideas and practices with them, noting that although subculture isn't limited to the young, initial forays into subculture are far more likely to happen in youth. I'm interested in these lifecourse experiences, and the implications they may have for all ageing women. My research objectives are (a) to explore the meaning of 'punk' for older women, (b) to explore the ageing experience for women in the UK who identified

with punk cultures, and (c) to explore the impact of punk, if any, on the ageing lifecourse for women.

Punk is a subculture that came to prominence in the UK in the mid to late 70's, defined by its music, look and attitude, as noted by Hebdige (1979), Reddington (2007) and Haenfler (2014). Subcultural theory relates subcultures to a 'parent culture' (which its members then oppose) and an understanding of the parent culture of punk is useful in understanding this. The 'parent culture' can be understood as the mainstream culture and societal norms of the time. As Hebdige (1991:19) states 'No subculture has sought with more grim determination than the punks to detach itself from the taken for granted landscape of normalised forms, nor to bring down upon itself such vehement disapproval'. The late 1970s in the UK were notorious as a time of political turbulence. Britain experienced power cuts, strikes and the introduction of the 3-day working week. Unemployment was high and young people at that time faced bleak prospects (Spencer, 2005). Despite the emergence of second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, gender expectations for women remained limited, and the fight for equality at a very early stage. The Sex Discrimination Act was introduced in 1975 and strikes for equal pay (aimed at specific employers) took place throughout the 1970s. The Women's Liberation Movement also began in the 1970's. Nonetheless, to be a 'women's libber' (feminist), or to query gender roles remained unconventional activities, and women who did this could expect to be derided.

There are widely differing experiences and accounts of original era punk. Reddington (2007) claims that the literature on punk fails to represent the spectrum of experiences of the women involved in it, frequently focusing on stereotypical images of punk women. Examples of this are pictures of women where their striking makeup and outfit may have taken hours to achieve, giving the impression that appearance takes precedence over activity. She observed that many women who perceived themselves as punk did not take on an obviously punk appearance. Reddington (2007) additionally argues that much writing about punk gives a false impression of the experience for many women, describing a 'world within a world' (p2) of female performers, whereby women's participation in punk music often took place within domestic spaces, or away from male dominated public

spaces. In the public sphere, female bands did not enjoy the same equality of opportunity as male dominated bands. McRobbie (2000) draws attention to the ways in which girls were excluded from earlier subcultures, observing that girls have less freedom than boys due to parental fears for their daughters' wellbeing, reputation and the consequences.

With these restrictions, girls must organise their 'cultural life' in different ways. Reddington (2007) expands on this, stating that for girls, punk encompassed more than just the immediately visible street presence and gigs, with punk practices, such as music making or zine production also taking place within the home. However, for all its participants, the punk ethos can be broadly broken down into (1) Anti-Authority Attitude, (2) DIY Ethos (anyone can have a go at anything), and (3) Unconventional Appearance.

These can be expanded on further.

1) Anti-Authority Attitude: Punk is associated with a demeanour that epitomised an anti-establishment culture. Photos of punks frequently showed a lack of facial expression and Hebdige (1991) related this to a rejection of capitulating to the demands of others. Many female punk vocalists used 'declamatory' vocal styles to get their point across, including chanting, shouting and screeching, which served to emphasise their anger and frustration (Reddington, 2007). Dissent and protest were part of punk, whether through the iconic Rock Against Racism concert in 1978, or through individual rejections of mainstream culture.

2) DIY Ethos: The punk antidote to 'corporate' music and stadium sized concerts was to bring music and creativity back to basics and to remove the boundaries between performer and audience. In practical terms this meant both that gigs took place in far smaller venues, and enthusiasm took precedence over expertise in music making, giving rise to punk's claims of egalitarianism. The DIY ethos applied equally to other facets of punk. The process of Bricolage (Hebdige, 1991) involved the combination and re-making of various cultural objects, eg taking a safety pin and making it into a lip or ear piercing or incorporating household items such as a bin liner into clothing.

3) Unconventional Appearance: The punk 'look' is easy to classify – eye-catching clothes, which might be ripped, held together with safety pins, written on and handmade from anything, short hair dyed in unconventional colours, and bold, creative makeup. However, not all punks placed emphasis on the look and punk women may have been

noticeable more for their avoidance of mainstream feminine appearance than an extreme appearance, Hebdige (1991) noted that it is the distinctive look attached to subculture that first gains people's attention. The look of punk transgressed feminine ideals in multiple ways. While subculture members do conform to the norms of their own group, within the wider social context, punk appearance was transgressive.

Bennett & Taylor undertook qualitative research with 'ageing punks' from 2002-2004, interviewing fifteen male punks in East Kent for their research. Bennett and Taylor (2012) stated that they did not aim for a male only sample but their difficulty with locating female punks to interview nevertheless resulted in a purely male sample with an age range of 42-55. Their research suggested that punk identities, lifestyles and practices endure into 'middle age', providing an alternative to the narrow view of 'ageing' that public discourse holds. The ages of Bennett & Taylor's participants demonstrated that even with an age range encompassing early middle age, there was useful material to be had regarding subculture and ageing.

The research gaps within Bennett & Taylor's study provide justification for my own research. In addition to the omission of women from the study, people who identified with, but *no longer* practice punk were disregarded. My methodology is qualitative, feminist research. Feminist research aims to change inequality and power relations (Cook & Fonow, 1986) and the method must enable participants to communicate and reflect on their experiences. I will use semi-structured interviews to achieve this, a method that is consistent with adhering to the feminist principle of 'giving voice' (Reinharz, 1992). The qualifying criteria will be (a) women aged fifty plus (b) who identified with original era/1970s punk in the UK. Ongoing or current participation are not requirements as my aim is for the sample to include the more hidden women that historically identified with punk, in addition to visibly punk women.

I believe that female punks may not have been where the researchers were looking. McRobbie (2000) states that the failure to include females in earlier subculture research reflects a lack of interest in more domestic spheres, the places that women often spend their time throughout the lifecourse. It is likely that women are overlooked when they are

at home, taking care of children and household tasks, or toning down their appearance and activities to fit in with the acceptable image for their role and age. There are extra pressures for older women who continue to take on a disproportionate share of domestic tasks, and it doesn't end at retirement. This explains both the places in which females may practice subculture, but also the places that females may be hidden from view throughout the lifecourse, and therefore inadvertently excluded from research.

Older people in Western societies are subject to cultural expectations that influence the way they act, look and spend their time. This is particularly problematic for older women and is nuanced by class, race and ethnicity. Cruikshank (2008) talks about the interplay between gender, class and ethnicity and notes that the introduction of age is another facet of identity to negotiate in older women's lives. Cultural (ageist) expectations have the effect of excluding older people from full participation in society. Bytheway (1995) notes that the medicalisation of older age has led to its correlation with loss, ill health and dependency. However, this is just one facet of ageism, the internalisation of which impacts on how older people construct their identity. Cruikshank (2003) notes a pattern in gerontological research whereby older people often expressed a negative view of the health of older people in general, but would see themselves as the exception, thus distancing themselves, and resisting categorisation as 'old'. While this is an understandable response to ageism, it does seem a lonely stance to take. Older people are frequently characterised as a homogenous group, no longer valued as individuals in the way that they could take for granted in their youth, no matter that 'older age' spans several decades, and encompasses the years commonly thought of as 'middle age'. My research relates to Middle Age (defined by the World Health Organisation as fifty plus), a subsection of older age alternatively described as Third Age. As a discipline, Cultural Gerontology explores old age as a series of cultural experiences including examinations of the ways in which depictions of older people contributes to their *experience* of age. Twigg & Martin (2015) state that the central tenet of Cultural Gerontology is 'the recognition of the way that culture is constitutive of social relations and identities' (p353) and has been of increasing importance in recent years.

The term 'third age' is often used to represent 'post – retirement' (Higgs & Gilleard, 2015), portraying this period as one of opportunity and development. However, this links retirement with affluence and freedom, which is not a universal experience. Retirement can take a very different shape for men than for women, as women continue to take on a disproportionate share of domestic tasks and caring responsibilities, including for older relatives. Third Age theories of ages suggest that consumer culture has changed the way people dress for age (Twigg, 2007) in the sense that modern clothing is now available and marketed towards older people. Previously, the notion that current fashions *could* be marketed to older people would not have been considered. An alternative view would consider that clothing has always been *available* to all ages and therefore, clothing purchases are subject to a more subtle influence. Twigg (2007) asserts that the issue of dress engages with three key debates – body, identity and agency. The punk sub-culture highlights the issue of agency, due to the unconventionality of the original clothing. An older person wearing punk style clothing has to move much further away from the norms of their peers than a younger person would have to. It could be described as 'doubly deviant' for an older person to wear punk clothing, triply deviant, if gender is considered. However, as Bennett (2013) points out, subculture incorporates a broader ideology than style alone.

Woodward's (2002) article 'Against Wisdom: The Social Politics of Anger and Aging' discusses the 'invisibility' of older women. She declaims the portrayal of old age as a time of wisdom, highlighting that wisdom in this form is portrayed as a quiet passivity that has the effect of prohibiting anger in older people, even though there may be many injustices to object to. It could be argued that the number of issues to rally against increase, rather than decrease as we age: people have ties that restrict autonomy and ageing can bring the threat of redundancy or compulsory retirement and of not feeling valued. The discrepancy between a silenced version of old age and punk values of protest and dissent is vast. The construction of 'age appropriate' quiet wisdom is in conflict with political engagement and energy or questioning how society and cultural norms position older people, all of which are seen as valid pursuits at earlier ages and stages. Older people who seek to be heard, or who express forceful opinions, are consequently portrayed negatively. In the media, older women who express their opinions vociferously, or even

Speak loudly are frequently dismissed as 'mad', even when the content of their speech is not controversial. 'Loud' can also be applied to colourful or unusual clothing and ageism shows in the way that this is construed as eccentricity if the wearer is older. Woodward encapsulates the injustice thus "Challenges to ageism that draw on a rhetoric of protesting anger should not be dismissed. Anger can be a sign of moral outrage at social injustice, at being denied the right to participate fully in society" (2002, p206).

It is clear to see that there are facets of the punk ethos that are at odds with expectations of older age and this raises questions about subculture identity throughout the lifecourse. The concept of identity construction retains its relevance throughout the lifecourse, with respect to *maintaining* identity. Indeed, it could be argued that identity becomes increasingly important, as a counterbalance to the expectations of homogeneity in older age, essentially the dilution of individual characteristics. Societal expectations of 'age appropriateness' is translated into individual actions and responses - of looking at clothes and thinking they are unsuitable because they are 'too young', or of not attending gigs, perceiving that they are exclusive to a younger audience. Jennings & Gardner (2012), using their own experiences of continuing gig and festival attendance, counter that the vast size of the current ageing population means that there is no longer a consensus of what ageing should be, and nor should there. The experience of having a subcultural identity means that women who identified with punk are likely to have the experience of standing out in a crowd. This is in opposition to expectations of conformity in older age.

My research aims to draw out the voices of women aged fifty who identified with punk. Until then, I return again to the Punk ethos and consider the potential conflicts between the three facets identified earlier, and expectations of ageing.

Anti-Authority Attitude/Dissent and Protest: These are highly visible activities. They often, though not always, take place away from the home in the spaces that older people, and especially older females are not expected to inhabit. Older women that are outspoken are often characterised as mad or eccentric – not a voice that deserves listening to. To

conform to cultural expectations of age, 'punk' women must repress anger, even if protest and dissent itself is part of their identity.

DIY Ethos: This could be less controversial, underpinning the kind of 'make do and mend' philosophy, that is valued in women as part of household management. If women originally wore clothing according with punk principles, the ability to make or alter clothes and to be inventive within limited resources bodes well for potentially limited resources later in life. Bennett & Taylor (2012) found that punk values informed their participant's work choices, leading them to seek less mainstream opportunities, to maintain control via self-employment or to choose jobs which reflected their principles. This has implications for both leisure and occupation choices in older age. In conflict, are characterisations of women as passive. These endure throughout the lifecourse and potentially affect older women's belief that they can do something new, or that they should make themselves visible by doing so.

Unconventional Appearance: Resisting the expectation that you blend into the background as you age takes courage. To look different to the accepted norms means accepting that people will make assumptions about you. A woman's appearance is *always* subject to scrutiny, but age brings an extra layer of judgement and restriction in the form of 'age appropriateness'. There is a dichotomy within older age, whereas to be seen as 'old' is undesirable, but to resist being seen as 'old' is equally bad, leading to connotations of madness and eccentricity.

Punk has features that are in conflict with expectations of female ageing - especially in relation to being visible and being vocal. Women who identified with punk may find that it had a lasting impact, potentially their ability to resist conforming to social expectations of ageing. Whether this is the case or not, their stories will have something to tell us about the experience of ageing.

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