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## Ageivism Roundtable

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### Ageivism Roundtable<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the increased attention to the intersection of people's various social, cultural, economic and political locations, the discriminations that come with old age are often neglected in gender studies. Some have even pointed to the inadvertent ageism in the field (e.g. Calasanti et al., 2006). While in social gerontology there is considerable attention to older women, this is not necessarily from a feminist or intersectional perspective, and the field has been accused (by e.g. Hogan, 2016) of the unintentional use of sexist concepts and stereotypes. It has also been critiqued for looking at age and gender in additive ways, with a tendency to foreground older women's misery (e.g. by Krekula, 2007; Calasanti and Slevin, 2006). Since the 1990s, critical age(ing) studies have emerged as a distinct field, which has led to the publication of several important books and articles that have addressed the topic of gerontophobia or ageism and the 'sexageism' women face in particular (e.g. Gullette, 2004; Woodward, 1991; Cruikshank, 2009/2003; Holstein, 2015; Segal, 2013; Bouson, 2016; Arber and Ginn, 1991).<sup>2</sup> This body of work has pointed to the need of theorizing 'the system of inequality, based on age, which privileges the not-old at the expense of the old' (Calasanti et al., 2006) and asked attention for how the stigma affixed to old age and the age relations that keep young and old groups in their respective places, serve capitalist and patriarchal power relations. So far, however, age-based oppression has still not been taken to the centre of feminist analysis. Discriminations that specifically affect older women are not high on the feminist activist agenda either. In this Spring 2022 General Issue, the Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies (DiGeSt) aims to call attention to ageism and the need for including it in feminist theory and activism. It also aims to raise awareness of older women's strategies of resistance and activism that may inspire new perceptions and experiences of ageing.

### 1

#### Katrien De Graeve - Feminism Needs 'Ageivism' (and vice versa)

Critics have pointed to the marginalisation of older women not only in research but also within the feminist movement. It has been pointed out that despite the movement's increased commitment to diversity, certain groups, identities and peoples are still underrepresented. Older women are one of them. It has been argued that the 'third wave' feminist drive towards advocating the voices of younger women, came at the cost of older voices (Evans, 2015). Issues that specifically affect older women, such as sexuality in older age, sexageist representations, older women's discrimination in dating, in the labour market, in medical care, etc. have been largely absent from the feminist agenda (Evans, 2015), and feminist discussions on menopause (Zita,

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<sup>2</sup> Using the term ageism to refer to discrimination against older people is not to deny the existence of discrimination against children or youngsters. However, the latter might need a different term, as children, who are associated with the promise of adulthood and embody the ideal of youthfulness, are not as prone to abjection as older people are.

1993; Campioni, 1997; Leng, 1996) seem to have almost ceased by the turn of the century, a couple of notable exceptions notwithstanding (e.g. Corinna, 2021). Moreover, the depiction of the history of feminism as a series of ideologically opposed, generational waves, has been criticized for being ageist itself (Chazan and Baldwin, 2016). The tendency towards an essentializing generational rhetoric (Sawchuk, 2009) that depicts each new wave as ‘comprised of young women with unprecedented ideas, politics, and theories, while women above a certain age are relegated to some past wave and assumed to have outdated politics and practices’ (Chazan and Baldwin, 2016: 72) has been denounced for not only making invisible continuities, commonalities and complexity (van der Tuin, 2010), and for ‘whitening’ the feminist history (Bilge, 2014), but also for adding to the exclusion and silencing of older women’s contribution to radical new ideas.

In 2018 Doron coined the term ‘ageivism’ to refer to the advocacy of the interests and rights of older persons. He argues that because older people experience both symbolic and cultural injustices, a politics of identity of older people is needed based on an ideology that ‘encourages older persons to self-identify as such, and to actively resist the attempts to ignore their unique subjective social experiences of being old in modern and post-modern societies’ (Doron, 2018: 35). Like many critical age/ing scholars, Doron denounces the cultural dictate to age actively, as it over-emphasises individualistic ideologies, such as autonomy, self-reliance, and individual responsibility, and ignores the varied subjective experiences of older persons.

While ageism as a term is not (yet) well established, older people’s activist groups and initiatives do exist. In various parts of the world, older people are involved in activism and/or have united to take action against various forms of injustice, including environmental injustice (e.g. Knitting Nannas in Australia) and political injustice (e.g. Omas gegen Rechts in Germany, Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina). While some of these initiatives do have a clear ageivist agenda and advocate for older people’s rights (e.g. Gang des Vieux en Colère in Belgium, The Age of No Retirement in the UK, The Grey Panthers in the US), many of these groups protest injustices that are not specifically age related. Public consciousness of ageism is relatively low, which is reflected in its relative absence from the political and activist agendas. Some advocacy groups have emerged at the intersection of old age and other axes of inequality such as race/ethnicity and sexuality (e.g. the Rainbow Ambassadors in Belgium, the Diverse Elders Coalition in Canada). What is also striking is that many of the older people’s activism have been performed by women, and often based on their identities as older people within familial structures, such as that of mothers or grannies. In an opinion piece on what she calls ‘granny power’, Gopalakrishnan (2020) explains why grandmothers’ resistance ‘has such righteous power’:

If mothers are allowed to be fierce when their children are threatened, grandmothers have even greater authority in their indignation for the brood, their bodily vulnerability only makes their voices ring stronger.

She explains the framing of their activism in terms of family, with reference to patriarchal society’s dictate that women should be driven by compassion and care, not by their own rage. Their identification as ‘raging grannies’ therefore tends to be a double-sided sword. Their anger can provoke a public sense of empathy with their cause, yet it can equally be dismissed as merely funny or cute, and anachronistic or obsolete. This disdain for older people’s actions is also manifested in the tendency in research on older women’s involvement in activism (e.g. Charpentier et al., 2008; McHugh, 2012; Caissie, 2006; Narushima, 2004) to focus mainly on how activism can be mentally empowering for older women, more than on the power of their activism and how it strengthens feminist consciousness in general.

By the very fact of ageing, old women join what Halberstam (2012) has called ‘the vast armies of the marginalised, the abandoned and the unproductive’, a shift that has the potential to come with grief and shame, but also with a more deeply embodied understanding of patriarchal oppression. This understanding may inspire older women to make activist interventions that often have some witchy or ‘gaga’ aspects to it. In Côte d’Ivoire, for instance, older women have responded to abuses of power by using their nudity and genital power to curse those who had violated boundaries (Grillo, 2018). Raging Grannies in Canada, the US, Australia, and some other countries, have dressed like ‘innocent old ladies’ to sing songs in public in which they denounce and ridicule (environmental) abuses and injustice. The older women activists’ interventions in which they use their marginalisation and invisibility and draw upon caricatured tropes of grannies and crones to hold up as a mirror to capitalist and patriarchal society, are definitely ill understood. I agree with Gopalakrishnan when she claims:

Older women are complex political agents, like everybody else. Bilkis Bano or Mohinder Kaur are not shields or disarming cover stories for other ‘real’ activists.<sup>3</sup> They are massing on the streets with the same concrete goals as their comrades. If anything unites them, it is perhaps that they know what is to be on the other side of power. And having been on a long journey to get here, they care urgently about where we’re headed.

We need to pay attention to how even in feminist research and activism, mechanisms that pit one generation against another are reproduced. But we also need to include in feminist theorization older women’s knowledge obtained and consciousness raised by their experience of growing old within sexist and ageist structures. Feminism urgently needs to include ageism, but also the other way around: ageism needs feminism. Age activism should emerge in conjunction with other social movements and needs feminism’s increased intersectional consciousness. While there are injustices and exclusions that are specific for older people, the extent and way they are affected by them and/or able to cope with them depend on a variety of other factors, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, etc. Instead of going with the cultural drift to ignore or reject ageing, it is time to cut across it, and scrutinize the role of standards of youthfulness in the machinery of capitalist and patriarchal ideology.

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<sup>3</sup> Bilkis Bano and Mohinder Kaur are elderly women who received national and international attention due to their involvement in protests in India.

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## 2

### **Anja Meulenbelt - An army of grey-haired women**

I am old.

When I say 'I am old' in the company of people, friends, their reactions are invariably predictable. There is always that strong tendency to deny: 'But you still look wonderful!' 'But you're still so active!' 'I never think of you as "old!"' 'You have a young mind!' And then the soothing clichés come: 'You are only as old as you feel!', 'Age is just a number!'

'I am seventy-seven,' I reply. That is a fact. That makes me old, doesn't it?

The interesting contradiction in our societies is that we all want to grow older, but we do not wish to *be* old. Unless we manage to near our hundredth birthday, being old is not a reason to celebrate.

Why is it that we want to deny, to hide the fact that we are old, and that it makes a difference? What is it in our culture that makes us look down on old people, marginalize them, hide them away? How much does it have to do with the fact that we live in an economic system called capitalism, that decides that old people, like children, are usually not productive and only cost money? Yes, there are exceptions. Some old people are celebrated. There are a few famous actors, but even fewer actresses who are still famous. There is wonderful Judy Dench who is allowed to fill about half the roles of elderly women in the movies. It is possible, to become a politician of a certain age and still be respected, like Bernie Sanders who is over seventy and popular. Or to be a public intellectual, like Noam Chomsky, over ninety, still going strong. (It is interesting how often the word 'still' enters the language when we speak about old people, preferably called 'elderly' because it sounds nicer.)

Nancy Fraser offers us three paradigms for a better analysis of injustice and inequality: redistribution, representation, and recognition. On all three levels old people are at high risk of being discriminated against. There are more old people among the poor. We are underrepresented in politics and in the media, and we are often dismissed in serious discussions. But there is hardly any social movement to fight ageism, if we compare that with the big waves of protest like Black Lives Matter, the Women's Marches, Me Too, or the movements for climate justice. The reason is obvious. It is not possible to forget that you are female, Black, Muslim, or gay, but being old only starts when you are old. We live in times with a new awareness about discrimination of all sorts, and it is recommended for all organisations, the media, politics, to believe in the need for diversity. But usually, ageism is not included in these recommendations. That is particularly strange, because ageism is not about people who are 'different', the 'other', it is about our future selves.

We can deny being old matters until we are old, and we find out that it matters. Although we all know the day will come when denial is no longer possible, most people prefer to postpone any awareness of ageism, until it hits them in the face. Said differently: nobody is interested in old people but old people.

Who is hit by ageism most? And does gender make a difference? It does. For people who are dependent on earning a wage, especially in lower educated jobs, the high risks of age starts at about fifty. The fear of losing a job and not finding a new one, or being replaced by younger people is real. For women there are more risks. They may be expelled even earlier, especially from jobs that ask for a representative kind of 'femininity', like flight attendants, or women having to use charm and sexiness to sell products, where obviously charm and sexiness are seen as 'young' by definition. However, they may also face the fear of losing love, especially when they are heterosexual.

We tend to deny that the choices people make in their private lives are 'political'. It is nevertheless no coincidence that in the average straight couple he is older, taller, and earns more. It is not merely a twist of fate that when the couple breaks up again, he will usually look for a (much) younger person while she will search for somebody her own age, a little older or a little younger. He will also have a bigger chance to find a new partner than she will have. This is the point: when women still have a romantic wish to grow old with their male partner, most of them will be disappointed. For people over sixty-five, more than twice as many women as men are single and stay single, and this cannot merely be explained by women's higher life expectancy. This does not mean older and single women are necessarily unhappy. Many state they enjoy their freedom, and seventy percent of single women over sixty-five have no wish for a new partner, says a report of the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek in 2015. The reason they often mention is that they are tired of taking care of another person, and many of the men who are now getting old, have never learned to take care of themselves, let alone to take care of a partner.

Being old does not make us unhappy per se, but it takes getting used to. Our bodies change and we might have to learn to love a body that aches more often and has lost the suppleness it once had. And where can we find solace and advice in this new phase in our lives? I tried Simone de Beauvoir and was disappointed. The fat book she wrote about aging is depressing. *Coming of Age* (which is the English translation of *La Vieillesse* and is a confusing title - because it is definitely not about young people growing up) spends a lot of words on the way old people are marginalized and stigmatised. However, de Beauvoir did not personally suffer so much from losing status - she was certainly no less famous in old age that she was when young. What she did suffer from was the fear of losing love. She hated her own older face in the mirror, 'I loathe my appearance now: the eyebrows slipping towards the eyes, the bags underneath, and that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring. And it was unfair, she said, 'an old man's body is after all less ghastly than an old woman's'. Her fear was substantiated because after an unexpected relationship in her forties with the younger Claude Lanzmann, she indeed seemed to have had no more affairs. Meanwhile the most important man in her live, definitely not a very attractive man, usually had more than one younger lover, and even at an old age started a new relation with a twenty-year-old woman. De Beauvoir was a passionate woman, and she mourned the loss of

sexual love. In *Force of Circumstance* she writes about the calamity of getting older: ‘Yes, the moment has come to say: “Never again! It is not I who am saying goodbye to all those things I once enjoyed, it is they who are leaving me. Never again a man.”’

Don’t we have more inspiring examples? Who? Is it Jane Fonda who is eighty-four, and must have spent an enormous amount of time and money to look as slim and youthful as she does, but then she says she is single and happy never to undress again in front of somebody? Or is it Simone Signoret who was married to the forever sexy Yves Montand, refused to try to look younger than her age, drank, smoked and ate as much as she liked, and accepted that her husband had affairs with younger women? Marilyn Monroe was among them.

Time for a small confession? I had my crisis when I turned fifty. I had just separated from a man, my choice, and was unhappily in love with another. I was angry and sad, and found it absolutely unfair that I would probably stay alone. And alone meant lonely. No more passion, no more friendly body to fall asleep against. But then, as a surprise, there was a new love that lasted twelve years. Now that relationship is over, I face a new surprise: I am not lonely, I am not unhappy. There are different kinds of love to make my life beautiful, and most of all I enjoy a new freedom. I have a pension, I don’t have to prove myself anymore, I did all that, and I still work, as a writer, as an activist, because I want to, not because I have to. My role model would be Angela Davis.

There is so much that needs doing: the climate, capitalism that is destroying us, fighting racism. I support the rights of Palestinians. I fight the discrimination of Muslims, migrants, refugees, poor people. I discovered that single mothers are still among the people with the greatest chance of living in poverty with their children, and as a former single mother I join them in protesting the undervaluation of the work of raising children. I joined a new, radically left-wing political party that is founded on an intersectional approach, including fighting ageism. Doing so, I was proud to support the first black woman, Sylvania Simons, to represent the party in the Dutch parliament. I have no time to waste, and I grow more radical every day. And I hope, with my activities, to be an example to other women.

Fighting ageism is important. The feeling of being written off, being dependent on charity, of being invisible and not touchable hurts women. Fighting ageism is not only about protesting prejudice, out there, but also protesting the internalized judgements that Simone de Beauvoir suffered from. It is also about turning around the self-fulfilling prophecy that comes with the accompanying negative feeling about being old: women who are more positive about being old live longer. And happier.

It is Gloria Steinem who said: ‘Women grow radical with age. One day an army of grey-haired women may quietly take over the Earth!’

**Anja Meulenbelt** is a feminist, politician, activist and writer.

### 3

**Ryan Backer – The privilege of aging and the duty to expose ageism**



A harmful assumption is that everyone has the right to grow old. However, life expectancy ranges vastly between various populations due to wealth inequality (Vaupel, Zhang & van Raalte 2011). Aging is a privilege, and women statistically have the privilege of living longest (Ortiz-Ospina & Beltekian 2018). Unfortunately, older women are all but ignored by western society as they age into needing care themselves in their last stage of life (Cepellos, 2021). The capitalist patriarchy has misguided the masses to a land of rugged individualism, void of any comfort or support, reliant only on self, the nuclear family, and no further than the myth of a unified nation. Living into old age is the great assumption and living *well* into old age is the great demand.

Even so, for trans women the idea of old age is too often abandoned. There is an often cited, yet untrue statistic that the life expectancy for trans women is thirty-five (Sharman, 2021). This false narrative allows for both the invisibility and hypervisibility of older trans women. Because of sexism, women are already highly visible and subsequently heavily scrutinized. In response to the formation of the Transgender Day of Visibility, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy (2019), an older black trans activist said: ‘I really don't understand why we need a day of visibility since for most of us black girls our visibility is getting us killed’. Indeed, trans people are four times more likely to be the victims of violence (Flores, Meyer, Langton, & Herman, 2021). Adding to this, trans people being murdered by the hundreds every year (with that number growing) could be a reason behind the false life expectancy statistic (TGEU, 2022). In the introduction to ‘To Survive on This Shore, Selected Photographs and Interviews with Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Older Adults’, Jess T. Dugan and Vanessa Fabbre (2021) write: ‘Representations of older transgender people are nearly absent from our culture and those that do exist are often one-dimensional.’ As a result, younger trans women do not see a path forward as they get older. In her essay ‘Chronicle of a Rape Foretold: Holding Queer Community to Account’ (2019) Kai Cheng Thom asks: ‘How do you become an elder when you barely had any yourself? In community, we romanticize our elders, but we have little idea of what generational responsibility actually entails, or how to form intergenerational relationships grounded in both intention and integrity’.

This disconnect from what it means to live life as an older person is not unique to trans women. Thus far the roles society has provided for older people are limited at best, and non-existent at worst. Age equity will not be achieved so long as older and younger people are pitted against each other, and it will certainly not be achieved if equity for all is not the overarching goal. Alternatively, interaction, exchange, and reciprocity amongst mixed age groups is a straightforward antidote to the ageism and the age denial existing amongst different age cohorts. There are a number of recent approaches that explicitly reflect this solution, including the ‘Transgenerational Theater Project’, of which I was a part of in New York City in 2016. It was an incredible experience to collaborate and create with trans people of all ages, especially a group of older trans women whom I have remained friends with since. Another project which encapsulates the power of exchange across age groups is ‘Aging Activisms’, an activist-research collective designed to enact equitable change across movements and life spans. Out of the heteronormative, cisnormative, age segregated, dominant culture, queers of all ages are able to empathize and understand the complexity of bigotry, thus creating a firm position from which to combat it. As time and age intersect with other parts of our identities, the self is not a single static picture, but an ever-changing kaleidoscopic depiction. The fact that these projects are story-based is not a coincidence. The exchange of shared experiences is a tool of queer survival (Gelfand,

2018). These projects are reflections of cooperation amongst trans people across all ages and against all odds. They are undertakings which reveal the efficacy in bringing all ages together to make meaning.

I believe an intersectional, mixed age, and unconventional ethos must be applied to the broader age activism movement. My contribution to this cause is ‘Old School’, which I co-created with Ashton Applewhite and Kyrié Carpenter in 2018. Old School started out as a clearinghouse of carefully curated, free resources designed to educate people about the harms of ageism. In the past four years we have not only quadrupled the amount of resources on the site (now 340 and counting), but we’ve also morphed into a hub for age activism with an ever-expanding international reach. While all the resources were originally in English and many US-focused, we now get new submissions from across the globe. The best evidence of the promising shift we’ve seen in the last four years is our Campaigns section, which we added to the site in 2019. Since then, we have seen it expand to thirty different campaigns at town, city, county, state, province, and nation-wide levels. There are also campaigns unbound from location, like ‘All In’, which promotes inclusivity and respect for older adults at every stage of the advertising and marketing process, co-created by Google and the National Council on Aging.

Old School’s 8,500+ subscriber base fosters the kinds of connections and coalitions that are essential to galvanizing the movement against ageism. One such coalition is ‘Age Equity Alliance’, which was incubated by Old School after we saw the great demand for action related to age discrimination in the workforce. In 2020 we started hosting a seasonal Movement Builders convening, this February we co-hosted the first French-speaking Movement Builders convening and a Spanish-speaking one is in the works. In 2021 we worked with Tracey Gendron and Alexa Van Aartrijk of Virginia Commonwealth University to perform a gap analysis of all the resources on Old School to determine what we were missing. Old School’s vision, to help catalyze a movement against ageism and leverage the universal nature of this form of prejudice to address the intersectional nature of all oppression, is a tall order- but an important one.

Centering the issue of ageism and ageism alone (specifically bigotry against older people) actually perpetuates harmful forces like white supremacy, heteronormativity, capitalism and colonialism. Without an intersectional lens in dismantling ageism, the fight against it could easily become a lopsided cause for rich people who are the only ones able to afford to live long successfully. Demanding age justice, while denying or ignoring justice for all, leads to the appropriation of entire social justice movements. Becca Levy’s (2002) research proving that ageism shortens the life span by 7.5 years is a strong enough argument against ageism. It doesn’t need to be compared to other forms of bigotry, as it so often is. Yet it must not be exposed without exposing all other forms of bigotry simultaneously. Care and compassion, especially self-care and self-compassion are needed in this work. As we come to terms with the climate emergency we are living through at the moment, as well as a pandemic and late-stage capitalism, interdependence is vital. As Zena Sharman (2021) explains in her book *The Care We Dream Of, Liberatory & Transformative Approaches to LGBTQ+ Health*, interdependent and mixed age communities have existed forever. It is the ‘violences of capitalism, colonialism, ableism, and white supremacy’ which have impaired these communities and our ability to perceive aging in a positive, or at least realistic way (Sharman, 2021). A compassionate and interdependent movement to expose ageism is about justice for all those who are stereotyped, discriminated against, harassed, and abused because of their age or for any other reason. The universal nature of ageism actually makes this work to fight it uniquely positioned to help build empathy for

all other experiences of bias. There is great potential for this work within ourselves, our communities, and the world at large. The place to begin is in our own minds, hearts and bodies.

**Ryan Backer** is a white, non-binary, European-American ‘old person in training’ and age activist. They are a co-creator of [OldSchool.info](#), a clearinghouse of anti-ageism resources.

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### 4

#### Sara De Vuyst – Joyful archives of queer ageivism

‘Whatever is unnamed and undepicted in images [...] will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable’. With this quote from Adrienne Rich (1976/1979, p. 199), Barbara Hammer begins her exploration of the hidden and erased histories of queer people in the experimental documentary *Nitrate Kisses* (1992). Her lens focuses on experiences that are silenced, even within queer communities. The first chapter highlights the rebelliousness, close connections and joys of

older lesbians. It is a playful collage of shots of a lesbian couple in their seventies making love, mixed with snippets of lesbian pulp fiction, short flashes of icons such as Greta Garbo, Colette and Virginia Woolf, footage of older lesbians socialising, dancing and having a good time and oral testimonies about ageism in the lesbian community. The naming and depicting of older lesbians as desiring and desirable is a powerful political statement against their invisibility in society and in cinema.

About thirty years later, *Nitrate Kisses* is still a rare display of older lesbian women's eroticism and intimacies. Representations of older women's sexuality in media are rare, and in the few cases when portrayed, they mostly stay within heteronormative frames. Although there have been other films in which older lesbian and bisexual women play a key part, such as *Deux* (2019; dir. Menighetti), *80 egunean* (2010, dir. Jon Garaño & Jose Mari Goenaga), and *Tru Love* (2013; dir. Kate Johnston & Shauna MacDonald), storylines typically revolve around a later-in-life coming out conflict in which family members' disapproval is more central than the women's desire for each other. Also, ideas of successful ageing that are increasingly articulated in the media tend to represent later-in-life (sexual) happiness as a privilege of heterosexual monogamous couples and women who can live up to an idealised heterosexual form of youthful femininity. Older queer women who do not follow this path are often portrayed as unhappy, depressed and miserable (Krainitzki, 2015, 2016).

However, the conversations I had in the framework of my research with queer women and non-binary people in their fifties, sixties and seventies in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium provide a different perspective. The image of older queer women and non-binary people as individuals who are lonely, sad, isolated and alienated in film and television does not match their experience of having supportive networks and meaningful connections with others, often through being involved in feminist, queer or anti-ageist activism. Participants highlighted the joy of being an activist, being intimate, humour and playfulness, which are often neglected or represented in a stereotypical way. Several of them testified to an attitude of destabilising normative expectations and affect. For example, Charlie, a non-binary person in their fifties, recounted that 'menopause is hilarious'. Contrary to the dominant portrayals of menopause as a 'serious medical condition' and 'hot flashes as a symptom to be treated', Charlie stressed the humorous aspect of it, hoped everybody could enjoy them one day and compared having a first hot flash to the 'first sneeze' in the American sitcom 'Third Rock from the Sun', in which four extra-terrestrials on an expedition to Earth attempt to live as a normal human family. Sally Solomon takes the form of a woman on Earth and has to learn how to express femininity 'in the right way'. When Sally sneezes for the first time and her brother Dick asks what it was, she replies: 'I don't know, but I want another one!'. Charlie's humour hints at the absurdity of the taboo status of menopause and the lack of inclusion of queer experiences. When menopause is represented in popular culture, those experiencing it are usually not the ones laughing, but the ones laughed at. In these cases, humour goes hand in hand with negative feelings such as shame and disgust. Charlie reclaims the unlikely comedy of menopause so that they can also enjoy the humour of it. For Thea (65-70), a spirit of revolt against norms on ageing and gender is best exemplified by Patti Smith, who, at the age of seventy-five, challenges the expectations of society about how ageing women should act, which inspired her to care less about the path that society designed for older women.

None of the participants expressed feelings of unhappiness about their queerness per se, but rather about dominant societal scripts that associate the happy later in life with heterosexual intimacy and living up to youthful feminine beauty standards. The registers of feeling connected

to queer ageing are more rich and manifold than currently represented in mainstream media. Creating an archive of unruly representations of older women that are obscured within dominant history can provide us with alternative modes of knowing, sensing, and feeling that challenge oppressive gender and sexual ideologies (Gopinath 2018). Making connections between disturbances and subversive moments in representations of older women and non-binary people and feelings of pleasure, joy, disappointment, and excitement can result in revolt, unruliness and resistance of dominant narratives on ageing. In this way, insights and experiences of queer people are an important source of knowledge in the resistance against patriarchal oppression. They play a key role in the intersectional ageivist struggle to overthrow sexageist power structures. In her latest poetic and dreamy memoir ‘The Year of the Monkey’, Patti Smith writes ‘Our quiet rage gives us wings, the possibility to negotiate the gears winding backwards,’ while sitting on the edge of her bed, reflecting on political and personal transitions in her life, just before her seventieth birthday.

*If you are a 50+ woman or non-binary person, you are welcome to share your experiences with media and help us create queer imaginaries of ageing that challenge cultural norms on later-in-life sexuality (sara.devuyst@ugent.be): <https://lili.ugent.be>*

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### 5

#### **Katrien Jacobs - The ageing feminist who died (and came back)**

An appropriate, ‘just right’, way of enjoying and praising the wit and spirit (in Flemish; *geestigheid* or *geestdrift*) of older women and (widely defined) feminists came to me when I saw

an artwork at the Dutch Gogbot Festival in September 2021.<sup>4</sup> The topics of the festival were ethical and aesthetic challenges of Deepfake Technology, a specific type of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Deep Learning Technology, through which recorded videos of a person, specifically their faces and facial expressions, are synthetically merged to create a virtual composite of that person. Deepfake videos have been used, for instance, in political campaigns in order to discredit one's opponent, they have also led to a specific kind of misogynist hate-speech by means of simulated porn videos (Maddocks, 2020). In Deepfake pornography, the faces of (mostly female) celebrities, movie stars, journalists, activists and feminists are synthesized into porn scenes. The Gogbot festival interrogated various uses of the technology, including the artwork *Deepfake Therapy* by Roshan Nejal in which he used the technology to summon up people who have died and to experience a warm or loving, 'spirited' and healing contact with them.

In this art work and concurrent documentary, Nejal explains that he adopted Deepfake technology after he lost his grandmother, experienced deep grief and wanted to speak to her by way of prayers according to his Hindu religion. He began experimenting with Deepfake videos so he could have a simulated moment of contact with her. The documentary shows only a small clip of this encounter, but as viewers we can immediately witness the glowing personality of the grandmother and the special bond she had with Nejal. Nejal was satisfied with his sessions and also decided to share benefits with other people by hosting therapy sessions in collaboration with a group of therapists in the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> As shown in the documentary, the Deepfake Technology was used to set up 'therapy sessions' for people who had recently experienced the death of a beloved. More specifically, it was utilized to synthesize the facial expressions and mouth movements of the dead, while actresses and actors were hired to improvise the speech of the deceased and hence, 'embody' them. The documentary details the psychological journey of the participants, who experience a return of their beloved, while interviews with them show that it is indeed a highly emotive and immersive AI experiment. We witness an elderly man and woman who are able to chat extensively with their deceased partners, as well as a couple who lost a daughter through suicide. All of them consented to engage in this therapeutic experiment and are more deeply affected by the images than they imagined. The participants also commit to analysing the impact of the session and the actors or intermediaries themselves are interviewed about their experiences with embodying the dead.

The various participants act out their experimental roles in an open and ethical manner; the effect is uncanny and deeply emotional. In this essay, I suggest that we further adopt the technology to evoke dead feminists and have fulfilling immersive experiences with them. This experiment would be set up to counter the negative representations of ageing feminists, their ailing bodies, or their embattled and marginalized presences and personalities; to experience and enjoy them one-on-one, to 'hang out with them', bringing them back to life. As noted elsewhere in this roundtable, issues that specifically affect older women have been largely absent from the feminist agenda. To add to this much-needed agenda, I propose to recall feminists who lived,

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<sup>4</sup> The Gogbot Festival Symposium was curated by Josephine Bosma. It was entitled 'Infocalypse Now' and devoted to various applications of DeepLearning as well as fake news and conspiracy theories <https://2021.gogbot.nl/creative-technology-festival/> and <https://2021.gogbot.nl/symposium>.

<sup>5</sup> The video of *Deepfake Therapy* can be found at <https://www.2doc.nl/documentaires/series/2doc/kort/2020/deepfake-therapy.html> ; An interview with Rosjan Nehal is available at Lucile Bourliaud, 'Deepfake therapy: From therapeutic experiment to documentary,' May 23 2021, The Flatpack festival, <https://flatpackfestival.org.uk/news/deepfake-therapy>

suffered and died—both those who witnessed glory, as well as those who died in dire circumstances or dwindled away without renown. Deepfake feminism would set up heartening experiences and spirited conversations with fragile and the dead, or forgotten or side-lined feminists, which is different from conversing with canonical feminists and celebrities. These proposed Deepfake sessions would be available to multiple ages and publics responding to an emotional or cultural need for experiencing a feminist presence or embodied spirit.

The proposed experiment also pays homage to certain Chinese literary traditions and related or adapted movies which involve fragile female ghosts, such as Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* (1988), a movie which positively represents a long-gone woman who returns to a future world in order to contact extant humans, triggering in those living beings unusual bodily feelings, which even include feelings of sexual arousal.<sup>6</sup> Chinese ghosts are sometimes older women who were social outcasts, who died out of grief and loneliness, but who came back to offer a special kind of companionship towards the living. In contemporary popular culture, such as the Icelandic televised mystery-drama *Katla*, ghost-like figures similarly arrive in a small town as highly attractive and slightly devious beings who start seducing particular citizens. Some of the living are elderly men and women who lost a spouse to illness. A much younger 'spouse' spirit visits them to provide an alternate kind of love, a type of physical-sexual chemistry and intimate dialogue that is no longer present in their actual lives.<sup>7</sup>

Besides summoning 'spouse' ghosts who provide a type of chemistry that has dwindled, we can summon dead feminists for a moment of healing contact based on different emotional needs. This would be different from an intellectual and generational feminism, where the younger people or 'daughters' of feminism worship and study the 'mothers' based on their higher status and accomplishments. This type of spirit can be seen as a feminist tool against sexageism as related to Jack Halberstam's idea of 'shadow feminism'-a person who may remain invisible and is not commemorated in any traditional manner, but who can be evoked in order to manifest a gratifying and spirited interaction. As Halberstam argues in the *Queer Art of Failure*, we need to stop evoking the 'legacy' of feminism or evoking feminist struggle in terms of achievement, fulfilment, and heroic liberation. As with the people who contacted the dead by means of Deepfake therapy, these sessions might be very personal and unique, not necessarily 'positive', as they evoke and process memories of self-destruction, pain, suicide, illness, broken love, emotional disorganization, and incoherence. (Halberstam, 2011, 125)

That is why shadow feminism, or 'Deepfake feminism,' argues for intimate and strange encounters with dead 'feminists,' widely defined here as coveted celebrities, semi-celebrities or ordinary persons, the 'backgrounded' type, anti-heroines who have refused to trod the traditional paths of heroic liberation. We might evoke feminists who are in our immediate family, deceased lovers, former friends or close and intimate contacts, or otherwise, feminist thinkers and artists whom we desire a chat with as a pleasurable or challenging experiment. Shadow feminism also means that people can think beyond one's own cultural and educational background, or circumvent patriarchal or matriarchal family origins, while gaining definition and identity by way of contact with others. The experiment is consensually 'fake' yet deeply imagined and experienced as a significant 'lived' moment. It does not speak in the language of

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<sup>6</sup> Information about Stanley Kwan's *Rouge* can be found at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093258>

<sup>7</sup> *Katla* streams on Netflix and information about the series can be found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katla\\_\(TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katla_(TV_series))

accomplishments but instead articulates satisfaction by means of an ongoing and chaotic interactions with the dead, their intermediaries (or performers) who tease out our search for them.

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## 6

### **Aagje Swinnen – Youth is *not* the only thing worth having: Planting the seeds for ageivism in the classroom**

When we scrutinize the public discourses surrounding two of the most discussed crises of today, the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, we cannot but realize that both come with severe age-based polarization; older people are consistently pitted against younger people. Greta Thunberg and her followers, for instance, do not hold back to position older people as the perpetrators who are responsible for the destruction of our planet and, as such, deprive the young of a future. In a similar vein, younger people are now said to unfairly have to sacrifice the best time of their lives to save older people who, as post-productive citizens, are financial burdens on society – consider the #BoomerRemover on Twitter. The shamelessness with which this imagined generational warfare – I call it imagined because it is not based on facts and ignores the many constructive intergenerational initiatives that have emerged – is reiterated time and again shows that ageism may be one of the last acceptable prejudices in our society. Indeed, compared to biases against gender, sexuality, and race, age-based bias remains largely uninterrogated. The irony is that, if anything, the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have brought age injustice and inequity to the forefront of public health concerns. Older people are the prime victims of the virus not just because of age-related underlying health conditions but because of policy that failed to protect especially the most vulnerable among them living in institutional settings. Recent climate disasters also have shown that the most vulnerable people, including older people in the most marginalized spaces, have already been and will be the prime victims of climate change. This begs the question why there is no social movement against ageism or an identity politics of older age comparable to, for instance, the Black Lives Matter movement. Why is it that – despite some valuable initiatives across the world – 'ageivism' is not really taking off?

Feminist age critics have argued that, in contrast to other identity categories, age is a movable marker: we all start young before we grow older. From early age onwards, we learn that youth is synonymous with health, strength, autonomy, independency, productivity, attractiveness, and sexual activity while old age signifies the opposite of these values. Youth is 'the only thing



worth having’ to quote from Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1893). The research of Allison Flamion and colleagues has shown that pre-school children already hold ageist attitudes in that they associate older people with a lack of physical capacity and a high rate of dependency. Growing up, as such, implies internalizing and embodying what Hailee Gibbons (2016) has called ‘compulsory youthfulness.’ With this phrase, inspired by Adrienne Rich’s concept of ‘compulsory heterosexuality,’ Gibbons refers to the moral dictate to stay able-bodied/minded, active, and independent throughout the life course. She helps us understand how disability and age intersect in this typical consumerist and neoliberal discourse that holds the individual responsible for their own health, wellbeing, and social status, thereby ignoring that human beings are physically, socially, and existentially vulnerable across the life span and dependent on each other.

From this it follows that many people have internalized ageism for decades before they arrive at a point in their life when they are confronted with the fact that it becomes increasingly difficult to live up to this ideal of youthfulness and that other people position them as old. This is a positioning that few want to identify with; it is always the Other who is old as ‘I am feeling young inside.’ Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs (2011) have written about the social imaginary of the third age that refers to older people who are able to embody the ideal of youthfulness. It is opposed to the imaginary of the fourth age, consisting of older people who are unable to do so. The latter category represents loss of control and social intent and, as such, provokes profound abjection, as the stigmatization of people who live with dementia, for instance shows. We should take the impact of age-based discrimination seriously. As Becca R. Levy and colleagues (2020) have shown, negative age stereotypes and internalized ageism adversely affect the health, wellbeing, and capabilities of older individuals. Evidently, the quest for eternal youth cannot but fail even though the boys of Silicon Valley looking for a technological version of what historically has been known as ‘the fountain of youth’ want us to believe differently. Circling back to Dorian Gray, the part that succeeds the words ‘youth is the only thing worth having’ but almost never gets quoted goes as follows: ‘When I find that I am growing old, I shall kill myself.’ This may sound extreme until you immerse in the euthanasia discussion related to the so-called ‘completed life’ of older people in the Netherlands. What is often heralded as the epitome of autonomous choice in old age cannot be appropriately evaluated without acknowledging the meaninglessness, isolation, and diminished self-worth that ageism causes, as research by Els van Wijngaarden, Carlo Leget, and Anne Goossensen (2016) suggests.

As this roundtable shows, there are, of course, older people who have grouped themselves and very resiliently advocate for a less ageist world. In the remainder of this piece, though, I would like to recommend the integration of critical perspectives on ageism and ableism in academic curricula similar to how a (queer)feminist critique of (hetero)sexism and a critical race studies critique of racism has been included in them. If the mechanism holds true that years of belonging to the privileged category of youth prevents many older people from questioning this privilege and from developing scripts for later life that go beyond youthfulness, it makes sense to start at an early age with educating people in becoming more ‘agewise’ to use the term coined by Margaret Gullette (2011; 2017). I have the privilege of teaching cultural gerontology and critical age(ing) studies at undergraduate students in the BA program Arts and Culture of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University and the BA in Liberal Arts at University College Maastricht. It was not easy to get these courses (or modules within courses) integrated in our programs because program committees felt that aging and later life are not of interest to younger students – their resistance possibly being indicative of their own unease with

the topic. I have witnessed over the years, however, how students have grown increasingly sensitive to social justice issues related to gender, sexuality, and race, identify as feminists and queer and antiracism activists, and are very vocal about changes they would like to see, for instance in relation to the establishment of gender-neutral toilets and the decolonization of curricula. There is no reason why they would not be triggered by ageism and ableism once they understand what these “isms” entail, how they are part of their everyday lives, and how age and disability intersect with the identity markers they already are familiar with. I believe that my Maastricht environment is well-equipped to further educate students in social justice that could be inspirational to other academic contexts for two reasons that I describe below.

Firstly, the principles of problem-based learning (PBL) in small groups of ten to fifteen students (<https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/education/why-um/problem-based-learning>) enable extensive discussion, including brainstorm sessions. I have learned from these sessions that, when students brainstorm on age-related topics, this almost always results in the blatant reiteration of ageist prejudice. A task text on population aging, for instance, prompts students to uncritically claim that older people jeopardize the welfare state. It is only after having done the readings in preparation of the next tutorial that they start reflecting on how and why this alarmist discourse is flawed. In a similar vein, a brainstorm session on the history of aging often results in students romanticizing old age in the past. Through the course readings they then quickly realize that there have been multiple and complex meanings of aging throughout the centuries and in different locations and that, under influence of colonialization and the now global export of the quest for everlasting youthfulness, the higher status of older people in some non-western contexts is changing. As such, the PBL-approach has an eye-opening effect on students. Many have proclaimed to me that once you see ageism and its twin ableism, you never can unsee it.

Secondly, Maastricht University takes great pride in its international classroom and teaching aging and ageism greatly benefits from the different intergenerational experiences and slightly dissimilar perspectives on the value of older people in society that students from different countries and continents can have. Conversation offers opportunities to reconsider one’s presumptions and to provide the critical literature with evidence from lived experiences. Exchanging experiences of changing relations with grandparents who are living with dementia, for instance, helps students reflect on topics such as personhood in dementia and the embodied and relational quality of memory. To compensate for the absence of older people – the oldest student that I have worked with was twenty-five – students are assigned to interview an older person about the subjects we discuss in class. However, talking about older people without having them actively involved in the discussion goes against disability studies’ credo ‘not about us without us.’ Therefore, I hope that this soon will change as Maastricht University joined the Age-friendly<sup>8</sup> University Global Network in 2018. This would require a culture change as universities in the Netherlands are geared to younger students while lifelong learning for people over fifty is relegated to HOVO, Higher Education for Older People. Intergenerational classrooms are necessary, though, to plant the seeds of ageivism required to make intergenerational collaboration and solidarity successful.

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<sup>8</sup> In the framework of this short piece, there is no space to explain why the notion of ‘age-friendly’ is problematic in itself. Instead, I refer to the publication of Sally Chivers (2021).

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