

Transitional and Relational Aging: An Introduction

Elizabeth Barry and Margery Vibe Skagen

How do the psychological, biological, and socio-cultural thresholds of later life affect our relationship to ourselves and to others?

In comparison to the traditional paradigm of fixed life cycles, the social and cultural concept of ‘old age’ is today both fixed and floating, still being subject to inflexible views and judgements but its defining thresholds untethered from any normative phases of the lifecourse. The span of working lives can be very variable, people reproduce much later and greater numbers do not experience parenthood, menopause is no longer perceived automatically as a devaluation of female worth, and in later life one might remain or even become more intensely active—or be held for years in a state of managed illness unfamiliar to previous generations. It is high time, then, that the defining thresholds of ‘old age’ be reconsidered. Cross-disciplinary and cross-artistic approaches to aging reveal the diversity and contradictions of past and present categories of senescence—raising and sometimes suggesting answers to unresolved questions regarding the aging individual’s status, rights, and responsibilities.

Bringing together scholars and practitioners in literary studies, cultural and social history, philosophy, sociology, music therapy, geriatric psychology, gerontology, music, photography, and film, this special issue of *Age, Culture, Humanities* highlights transitions of later life and how we conceptualize them, as well as the variety of changes they might bring regarding the aging subject’s relationship to itself and to its environment. Encounters with transitional life events (such as loss of fertility, grandparenthood, retirement, impairment, loss

of loved ones, and institutionalization) involve letting go of former identities, relationships, and lifestyles and raise existential, ethical, and political questions documented in literary and discursive writing as well as in other artistic media used by this issue's authors.

The articles of this double issue, which are spread across [issues 7 and 8](#), include a variety of material documenting and responding to age-related loss (and gain) by way of critical reflection and creativity, typically telling individual stories with a collective reach. Several of the authors engage with biographical or autobiographical writing, forms that are by nature intermediate, placed somewhere between art and craft, fiction and non-fiction. At the crossroads of different disciplinary fields (history, literature, psychology, philosophy, sociology, ethnography, medicine), life writing is an open and increasingly popular genre, in traditional and digital media alike, giving voice and visibility to famous as well as obscure and previously silenced subjects. Walking into a bookstore, one may get the impression that “the primary function of literature is to give visibility to individual lives” (Gefen 17). In individualistic societies that encourage the continuous curation of the self, more reflective forms of life writing offer insight into the trials and challenges of age-related transitions and also models of existential renewal embedded in relationality.

The late life transitions dealt with here refer to profound moments of change that can be especially unsettling in a culture where older age may seem more frightening than death. Some of the material reflects what may seem to be a significant trend in contemporary media and literature, where personal testimonies of loss, malady, memory, and mourning seem to proliferate. From his perspective, literary theorist Alexandre Gefen points to contemporary French writers' growing interest in capturing the unique experiences, personal and collective, of seemingly unremarkable existences. He also suggests a generally increased interest in literature's impact on the reader, and how reading and writing can be used as an antidote to various forms of suffering. In contemporary authors' life writing projects, Gefen detects a stronger ethical and political recognition of being part of a community, demonstrating what he

sees as a widespread urge to use literature to find connection in an alienating world.

This urge to Repair the World (Gefen) can be seen as a reaction to the weakening of intersubjective ties and reciprocal responsibilities due to the fact that late capitalism favors economic productivity and sexual market value over personal worth (Illouz 2019), a preference to which older citizens are especially vulnerable. In our secular, individualist, and now also digital era, loneliness has become epidemic, not only among older people. The obligation to be autonomous and successful, to ‘realize oneself,’ often at the cost of intersubjective connectedness, has contributed to the rise of depression or “the weariness of being oneself” as a typical syndrome of liberal society (Ehrenberg). In this context of secular and post-ideological anomie, fictional and factual life narratives have been promoted as meaningful models to help overcome individual crises. The rise of self-help literature, responding to readers’ search for physical and mental well-being and health, reflects in the same way a relational deficiency exacerbated by the tendency in contemporary culture to either pathologize or judge experiences of frailty and loss, rather than accommodating them within established and collective sociocultural practices (Illouz 2007, Aubry 2011).

In response, Gefen identifies a significant shift in French literary focus since the late twentieth century from exclusive modes of writing defined either by formal experimentation or the ideological engagement of a consecrated intellectual, to a broader and more practically involved literature which seeks to intervene in the world, meeting the need to rebuild human intra- and intersubjective relationships. What ideology, religion (from Latin *religāre*: to connect) and institutionalized ritual used to provide as means of mental, social, and historical connectivity, is today often sought in literature and the arts. While the esthetic model of autonomy encouraged explorations of the exceptional and “intransitive” (Gefen 12) and was less concerned about recognizable content, about befriending the reader or having societal impact, Gefen suggests that the prevalent literary model of the twenty-first century is “therapeutic” (83).

Since the 1980s' first AIDS narratives to the more recent wave of dementia stories, the common ground between medicine and the humanities has been increasingly explored in different language areas, not the least in North American and British contexts. Much of contemporary literature, and not only in France, is committed to approaching, investigating, and understanding the life issues of ordinary people, witnessing and conveying voices that are not so often heard. The aim in this literary trend is not to instigate a totalizing ideology or revolution, or to fall back into an unreflective or positivist humanism, but to suggest subtle transformations in our ways of recognizing and relating empathically to ourselves and others in our local communities. Although some may object to this as a utilitarian narrowing of literary function, the present issue of *Age, Culture, Humanities*, combining literature, history, philosophy, and arts with disciplines of care and healing, adheres to it as a valuable form of small scale utopian thinking.

Biographical thresholds invite adaption to new predefined roles, but in modern Western societies, identity tends to be, as Charles Taylor puts it, "inwardly generated" rather than "socially derived" (33). How are such later life changes of identity and roles experienced and reflected on, currently and in the past (see Baars; Cayrol-Bernardo; French, Lovatt and Wright; Marambio; Valeur in this issue)? How can such transitions be an opportunity for renewed self-perception or wisdom (Baars; Valeur)? Among the 'younger old' today, there is a tendency to resist conventional social roles attributed to 'seniors' and to invent new ones. But these new roles also need to be socially recognized. As Taylor has argued, the fundamentally dialogical character of human life becomes apparent in the close connection between identity and recognition. Our identities are largely defined by our relationships and by other people's sensitivity (or blindness) to what we see as our true selves. Taylor elaborates on this point:

We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us.

Even after we outgrow some of these others – our parents, for instance – and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live. (32–33)

Ritual is a way of expressing recognition. Ancient and modern societies present a range of religious and secular rituals to celebrate and justify the transitions between different life stages, but comparatively few for later life, for which the most noticeable social ceremony is that marking death, which in rich societies is now primarily associated with older age. Kathleen Woodward made a similar observation regarding what she described as psychoanalysis's denial of aging, thereby reinforcing our culture's devaluation of 'old age.' As she notes, Freud based his dramatization of intergenerational structures on paradigmatic childhood events and scenes: "In old age by contrast," it is as if "*nothing dramatic happens*" (Woodward 38). This issue documents individual and social rituals of older age as well as finding ritual at the level of lived experience even when age transitions appear to be ambiguous or to go unmarked.

In older age, decisive ruptures in the life course can occur with no less consequence for the individual than the transitions of childhood and adolescence. A significant mirror event has been theorized in later life (Woodward) as well as in infancy (Lacan). The end of the menstrual cycle is as decisive as its beginning, as Cayrol-Bernardo and Marambio demonstrate in the pieces included here. And what happens to the relationship between child and parent when the once primal caregiver becomes in need of primary care? This question is taken up in vital ways in Skagen's article on the French writer Annie Ernaux. From earlier to later life, transitions will trigger issues of separation and differentiation, relatedness, and assimilation, and generate emotional states ranging between denial and acknowledgment of our dependence on others (see Baars in part 2 of this issue).

D.W. Winnicott's notion of "transitional phenomena" (2–4) originating in the infant's earliest stages of object-relating and symbol formation, also has relevance for later life transitions. The "potential space" (69), located between the internal and external world, allows the baby to transition from the state of

being merged in with the mother's body to accepting it as not-me. It is, according to Winnicott, the basis for all creative and aesthetic activity and experience. In this intermediate space or state of semi-withdrawal, devoted to concentrated "play," reality and illusion can coexist without contradiction (86). In all life stages, it offers us the possibility of a constructive return to a sphere where our differentiation from and relatedness to the outside world can be reimagined. This possibility is explored in diverse ways in the collection, from the exploration of fiction as such a space in French, Lovatt, and Wright's article, to the playing with citation and identification in Halstead and Schmid's essay, to the creative ways of relating encountered in those with dementia in Barry's piece. Winnicott's model offers the promise of unused potential, also in later and terminal life stages; it describes a way of processing (if not erasing) the traumas of separation and loss.

Rites of passage, as defined by Arnold Van Gennep, include three phases that can also be recognized in individual life crisis that create a qualitative change in a person's socio-cultural or bio-medical status. Between separation from the former group and reintegration into the new or redefined group, there is a liminal phase of non-belonging. In later life, one can imagine that the state of solitary indetermination, at the interstice between two different but socially well-defined groups, becomes extended or remains unresolved. The border between the kingdom of 'productive' professionals and the realm of pensioners, for instance, can be experienced as an isolating no-man's land where one's personal history and all relationships will need to be reconsidered.

Today's society does not privilege older people (who often do their best to appear younger than their age), and although round birthdays are celebrated, the paradigmatic changes related to aging—notably those that are medically defined—are privatized or deliberately hidden away. Literary and artistic representations of 'old age' can create crossroads for private and collective trajectories and, in so doing, bring these transitions to light. Increased public awareness of the transitions in later life can provide resources for self-reflection and (re)construction of self not only in relation to one's past but

also one's present and future, something especially important for a meaningful older age.

In his essay *Une ethnologie de soi: le temps sans âge*, the ethnologist Marc Augé claims: "No doubt writing plays this part [in renewing our relationship to time] with regard to the life that passes and passes away, that is, with regard to age. Writing plays the role of ritual when ritual is effective and manages to give those participating or attending the feeling that it reopens time" (74–75, our translation).¹ As an effective ritual, writing in Marambio, Skagen or Valeur's discussions, reading in French, Lovatt and Wright's piece, or music in those of Nordhus and Madsø and Halstead and Schmid here, allow us to live through endings and new beginnings, transcend our individual age and replace it with time—a *Time without Age*, as Augé has it—giving room for other relationships than those that were lost.

Exploring how these thresholds have been represented and/or problematized in literature and other cultural expressions, this double issue considers the intersubjective nature of later life transitions and the new relational identities that they mark or create. Time is experienced communally and intersubjectively in sharing musical expression, creating art, or experiencing the shared space of reading or writing. Such activities can bring to light a new sense of personhood, which is not reliant on a forward-moving, linear narrative—a 'career self' on a singular (conventional) trajectory. Those living with dementia, for instance, not only share in the mutually constructed sequences—the melodies—of music and conversation but show their own enduring initiative and agency: the capacity to initiate, structure, and organize communication or artistic creation involving others, even when their own language has been lost (see Barry and Nordhus and Madsø in this issue). New roles emerge and old capabilities, skills, and expertise can resurface through the relationships of mutual co-creation.

Inspired by Woodward's example, the articles in this issue seek to "dramatize" (39) transitional scenes of later life in relation to a variety of

¹ "Sans doute l'écriture joue-t-elle vis-à-vis de la vie qui passe et s'en va, c'est-à-dire vis-à-vis de l'âge, le rôle du rituel quand il est efficace et parvient à donner à ceux qui y participent ou y assistent le sentiment qu'il rouvre le temps."

conceptual and critical frameworks. They look at the moments of transition at which social identities become more uncertain and consider the way in which individual agency and creativity might come into play in both representing and living these transitions. These articles argue for the relational nature of the identities of age, identifying by means of literary or visual representations the negotiations and sometimes painful compromises made with family, society, and self in accommodating age-related change. Finally, they also draw out the creative and resourceful ways in which relationship, interaction, and self-expression are preserved by those living with a cognitive disability. The issue looks to literature, other discourses and creative practice to convey both the lived texture and the cultural underpinning of transitional experiences of age.

Classical *Lives* (usually of great men) were written with an ethical intention, to serve as models of character and deeds. Age studies, too, has an ethical dimension, seeking to have a positive impact on the future quality of later lives, and the authors of these articles deal with ethical topics in more diverse and less normative ways, for instance those related to dementia (see Barry; Halstead and Schmid; Nordhus and Madsø in this issue), intergenerational relationships (French, Lovatt, and Wright; Skagen), and later life sexuality and the aging female body (Cayrol-Bernardo; Marambio; Skagen), that are still tabooed or under-communicated. Without neglecting the internal, genre-specific particularities of the chosen material, this collection demonstrates how written and visual representations of later life transitions also can provide generalizable ethical models for meaningful aging.

As has been seen, the double issue encompasses a broad range of scholarly disciplines, as well as artistic methods and materials, but the articles constellation around a core set of themes and concerns. These investigations describe the aesthetic forms discovered within lived experience—rhythms of conversation, remembered gestures, superimposed bodily recollections—as well as those created out of such experience, both offering ways to express the unspeakable

and contribute to repairing forms of isolation. Its emphasis is on esthetic form and arts-based methods, whether therapeutic or critical, and the multi-modal offerings that reflect this emphasis: namely Soledad Marambio's film, linked to in this issue, the poetic fragments, music, and photography in Halstead and Schmid's article (and their online exhibition, accessible [here](#)) and photographer Inger Festerwoll Melien's capturings of music therapy sessions in Nordhus and Madsø's article. They offer a distinctive consideration—and demonstration—of the narratives, symbols, and rituals that adhere to age transitions, and which mediate and foster relationality.

Presenting the earliest historical material in this issue, cultural historian Laura Cayrol-Bernardo examines constructions and representations of the bodily event of menopause in the history, literature, and culture of the Late Mediaeval West. Drawing on medical sources, literature, and popular advice on health, she considers the end of reproductive capacity as a life transition, linking it to conceptions of identity in the aging subject and ageist attitudes in others. The variance in the treatment of menopause and thresholds of aging more generally in these sources bears out the observation that the shape of the life cycle is more historically and culturally contingent than might be supposed. Cayrol-Bernardo also situates these constructions of menopause in a debate about bodily sex differentiation in later life, noting the cultural value placed on female fertility but ultimately decoupling the loss of that fertility from more generalized ideas about gender identity. Mediaeval texts also depart from any association of the 'abrupt termination,' in Simone de Beauvoir's words, represented by menopause with an equally abrupt entry into older age for women. Women can be seen as 'old' or 'older' while still fertile, ascriptions of advanced age generally being related to perceived bodily decline rather than the cessation of reproduction *per se*. Women's value is nonetheless associated in a positive direction with fertility, and negatively related to beliefs about toxic undischarged menstrual blood, dangerous to herself and others. Both positive and negative forms of stigma therefore apply to women after menopause, even if the event is not routinely conceptualized—or stigmatized—as such.

Literary scholar [Peter Svare Valeur](#)'s article on Jane Harrison explores the work of a philosopher neglected until recently in her time and our own, but who has recently gained in prominence both in terms of the significance of her ideas on classical thought and in being a pioneer as a woman forging an academic career in her era and discipline. The two aspects of her newfound reputation come together in her reflections on philosophical models of—and positions on—the lifecourse and the transitions of age, framed by her own life experience. Valeur looks to the esthetic features of Harrison's philosophical vision for new concepts, symbols, and rituals of age (a topic still stubbornly underserved by both ancient and modern philosophy). As Valeur demonstrates, Harrison's thinking synthesizes anthropological, linguistic, esthetic, and philosophical strands in a rich engagement with questions about how to view both the totality of life and its discontinuities.

Poet, literary scholar, and film-maker Soledad Marambio's reflective essay also responds to a dearth of symbols and rituals pertaining to life transitions—in this instance, the menopause—in Western culture. In Marambio's case, she forges her own, drawing on Joseph Campbell's work of comparative mythology, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, as well as Maria Tatar's feminist recasting of this work, as model for the mythology of menopause to which she has given creative life in her short film *About My Blood* (2022).

Reconceiving the metaphor of a journey, she explores the experience of menopause as both passage and return—a trial from which the subject returns transformed to her body and her everyday life. Marambio reads four literary works (three memoirs and one work of autofiction) by female writers (Colette, Darcey Steinke, Deborah Levy, and Dana Spiotta) and identifies within them the narrative structures and symbols—houses, sculptures, ghosts, nonhuman animals—for this midlife 'recomposition,' in Deborah Levy's term, of body, mind and life pattern.

Literary scholar [Elizabeth Barry](#)'s article also draws on lifewriting (John Bayley, Thomas DeBaggio, Elinor Fuchs) as a source of insight into another life transition, the adaptation to memory loss after the development of dementia. Without denying personhood to those living with dementia, Barry

considers the centrality of a shared lifeworld and the scaffolding provided by conversational partners to the project of selfhood and the navigation of life with dementia. Using the tools of phenomenological philosophy, this article explores the implications of losing in some forms of dementia not only the capacity to remember but also the ability to expect—to predict the immediate future. Attending to the temporal structures of anticipation and surprise might enhance the understanding of the experience of dementia where these states—somewhere between cognition and emotion—can profoundly change. What also comes to light, however, is what endures: the ability to communicate and to structure time through innovative conversational strategies, shared social rituals, and—underpinning both—intersubjective attunement.

[The article](#) by musicologist and composer Jill Halstead and music therapist Wolfgang Schmid, longstanding friends and colleagues, also considers time, loss, and enduring relationality in their reflection on their shared experience of losing parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their piece demonstrates the significance of the aural and kinetic forms of memory that have survived their bereavement. Drawing on affective models of mourning in the work of philosophers Judith Butler and Nina Lykke, and following Lykke's arts-based methodology, their article is structured around poetic fragments—an artistic response that could both reflect and give form to the embodied nature of their grief. Challenging previous sociocultural constructions of mourning, whether spiritual or secular, and emphasizing shared experience rather than singularity, this creative-critical response to parental loss provides a fresh perspective on both transition and relationality in midlife.

Psychologists [Inger Hilde Nordhus and Kristine Madsø](#) offer another illustration of the value of the arts in their piece that reflects on their work using music to therapeutic ends with those living with dementia and their partners and family members. They frame these insights as a new narrative on capacity and wellbeing in dementia, showing how this narrative was disseminated in the public sphere via an exhibition of Inger Festerwoll Melien's photographs of these musical encounters. Like Barry, Halstead and

Schmid, they demonstrate the value of musicality and aural culture in fostering what have been called ‘rhythms of sympathy’ to express and share feeling in situations where linguistic capacity is altered. Tone and melody, whether in music, poetry or the rhythms of conversation, in individuals who might begin to struggle to express feeling or relation, capture existential and emotional truths not registered by other means. Nordhus and Madsø’s piece also recuperates the sometimes contentious concept of resilience, both by reconnecting it with its meaning and function in the authors’ clinical discipline, and by connecting it with the expansive forms of personal agency and connection captured in the photographs. They also share with the other contributors an emphasis on relationality, here expanded to consider not only intimate relationships but also co-created research and the connections between researchers and artist-participants and their audiences and publics.

Literary scholar [Margery Vibe Skagen](#) considers a more ambivalent form of intergenerational relationality represented by Annie Ernaux’s ‘auto-socio-biography’ *The Years* interpreted in the light of the author’s previous writing about the complex affects at work in her ties to her mother as parent, contested model of femininity, and source of what Bourdieu would have identified as ‘taste’ (with its rich associations to class, ritual, and both family and social history). Framing these considerations is the sociopolitical legacy of 1968 with its changed conceptions of a fulfilled life for a woman. Like Halstead and Schmid, Skagen’s subject is coming to terms with the loss of her mother, but in Ernaux’s case she is also encountering her own aging and the complex set of identifications with, and estrangements from, her mother that this entails. Ernaux especially considers relations after the advent of a dementia diagnosis, giving greater place than in the other treatments here to the ambivalent affects that can be produced on both sides, but also reflecting on the way in which writing might mitigate separation and restore language to the enigmatic reality of this condition. As in the pieces by Halstead and Schmid, and Nordhus and Madsø, Ernaux also engages with the photograph which in *The Years* acts as a conduit for familial and social connections but also representing poignant discontinuities and losses.

[Literary scholar Jade French, sociologist Melanie Lovatt, and historian Valerie Wright's piece](#) follows several other contributors in considering work that presents and explores new models for the aging woman. In this case, however, it is the figure of the grandmother rather than the mother that pertains, and this figure is a fictionalized portrait. Here the work is also at one remove, considering how an artistic representation of female aging is received by older readers navigating their own life transitions (in qualitative research conducted through a book group with older people). Can fictions such as Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* offer a utopian vision wherein readers can recognize and reflect critically on the world around them but also imagine new possibilities—in this case new conceptions of aging? This article not only considers aging, time, and intergenerational relationships itself through the lens of Jansson's book, but also demonstrates the dynamic effects produced by artistic representations of aging on older audiences and their expectations of age. An artistic response to age here not only mediates loss but presents the possibility of new age futures and new kinds of intergenerational relation.

Finally, the concluding essay by gerontologist and philosopher [Jan Baars](#) offers an overview of the impact of the forms of separation between generations and fears over age transitions to which these articles respond and which they seek to repair. He considers the attitudes and practices that have defined the treatment of older people in the twentieth and twenty-first century, such as 'compassionate ageism,' which represented a paternalistic and homogenizing attitude to those in older age, and the shift to an 'entrepreneurial' attitude which extolled values such as productivity, autonomy, and individual success which can exclude forms of experience associated with later life. He thinks about the perception of age transitions and what happens when intergenerational relations fail or become negatively charged, as well as identifying age-positive activism and resistance. In his article complementing the pieces about the role of the arts and writing in age relations, Baars argues for the role of philosophy in understanding ageism and offering models of social inclusion and personal fulfilment in older age. Tolerance for vulnerability and existential finitude in oneself and others is key

to not only managing but celebrating age transitions as well as deepening and ameliorating intergenerational communication.

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