Imitate Annie Ernaux! Teaching Students to Rethink Aging with a Stylistic Exercise

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This article proposes an exercise for teaching students to reconsider how they think, speak, and write about the life course. University students compose narratives using French Nobel Prize-winning writer Annie Ernaux's distinctive prose style as a model. Learning outcomes include: (1) cultivating new ways of understanding one's own aging; (2) identifying and critiquing how cultural forces shape life course narratives; and (3) developing a rich vocabulary for discussing aging and ageism. The multi-step exercise begins with an optional warm-up activity involving anti-ageist art. Students then practice describing a series of photographs of Ernaux at different ages. Closely reading excerpts from Ernaux's *The Years*, students analyze how the author employs an "impersonal" style to challenge conventional progress/decline narratives. Finally, they create their own short age autobiographies by selecting photographs of themselves at different ages and writing about them. This exercise can be adapted for literature, gender studies, sociology, history, and age studies courses.

In *Aged by Culture*, Margaret Gullette calls for a new, anti-ageist form of storytelling, "age autobiography," a genre that reveals how cultural forces shape our understanding of aging across the life course (10). Anyone can begin writing an age autobiography, Gullette argues, and she offers a short exercise to begin, which is based on the work of British photographer and activist Jo Spence. The prompt is simple: Gather photos of yourself at different ages and lay them out chronologically on a strip of paper, then write down details about each image—such as the emotions and cultural events connected to it. "Only you can decide which states of mind or age-selves have been significant to you," writes

Gullette. "Your latest self might have changed its opinion of an earlier self: You might have hated the way you looked at twelve but now see how touching you were" (10). This photo-writing activity reveals that our selves are fragmentary and palimpsestic—and it also teaches students to see that one does not "decline," but rather changes in surprising and often-rewarding ways. According to Gullette, the exercise has great pedagogic potential, for it invites students at any stage of the life course to rethink "what it [means] to be an embodied psyche, in culture, over time" (11).

Inspired by Spence and Gullette, I have developed a new version of this exercise, which I use in the intermediate and advanced French literature classes I teach at Princeton, as well as in gender and sexuality studies courses. I have found that my students particularly enjoy exercises that involve studying and imitating a model text, and, in the past few years, I have come to agree with poet and professor Jeff Dolven, who argues that "imitation is a powerful, and underused, mode of understanding" (279). I invite my students to use Annie Ernaux's photo-biographies as writing models, and I have discovered that they are particularly excited to emulate her distinctive voice as they compose their own photo narratives about aging. When students imitate Ernaux, they come to see themselves in new ways: rather than describing their personal feelings about getting older, they begin to write about how they have been aged by culture. By writing about photos of themselves in the third person (as does Ernaux), they are able to step outside their usual perspectives and think about notions like *aging well* in more critical ways. Moreover, it turns out that while most university students have extensive experience taking and editing selfies, they have rarely practiced writing about photography. They are generally delighted to participate in discussions about this art form.

With this exercise, I seek to help students (1) cultivate new ways of understanding their own aging; (2) identify and critique how an ageist culture influences the stories we tell about growing older; and (3) develop a vocabulary for speaking and writing about aging and ageism that they can carry into their professional and personal lives. The activities, which are informed by a multiliteracies pedagogical approach (Kumagai, Paesani and Menke), can take

place during one three-hour long seminar or could be spread out over two or three classes, with each activity lasting about thirty minutes. Below, I suggest starting with an optional warm-up, which is followed by three key steps. First, a previewing/interacting step: In small groups, students practice *reading* and describing photos of Ernaux. Second, a critical engagement step: Students consider questions like: "How do we tell stories about growing older?" Third, an imitate-the-genre step: Students select several photos of themselves or another person at different ages and write about them in Ernaux's style.

Warm-up

Before I introduce the main goals of the lesson, I like to scaffold this exercise by asking students to discuss a piece of anti-ageist art. For example, I might show students images from the French street artist JR's 2008 *Wrinkles of the City* project. JR photographed the oldest inhabitants of different cities and pasted his monumental portraits on the facades of various wrinkled buildings. His unusual mural project, as historian David Troyansky points out, teaches us that "ageing is something that ties people together" (226). After the students and I look at some of JR's portraits, we watch a video in which he recalls visiting the United States for his project. He found that it was easy to spot people with wrinkles in European and Asian cities, but he ran into a problem when he arrived in Los Angeles. "It was actually really hard to find walls with wrinkles because buildings tend to be really new," JR explains, before adding, "It was hard to find any wrinkles [because everyone has] so much Botox." Ultimately, he had to go to elaborate lengths to find older American people to photograph. This example of the youth-oriented nature of American culture inspires students to talk about TikTok fads and the pressure to get preventive Botox—and it helps me better contextualize Ernaux's anti-ageist work.

Observing Aging

As we transition to the next part of the exercise, students break into pairs, and, with their partner, they look at a series of photos of Ernaux and describe what they see. Students do not need to have read any of the Nobel laureate's

works, but they should have some knowledge of her career. Using images from the book *Écrire la vie* (*Writing Life*), stills from the film *The Super 8 Years*, and photos from newspaper articles about Ernaux, I give ten photographs to each group: two different photos of Ernaux as a young girl (see link 1), two teenage photos (see link 2), then two from when she was in thirties or forties (see link 3), two in her fifties and sixties (see link 4), and, finally, two recent photos of the author (see link 5, link 6), who will soon turn eighty-six. Next, I ask students to arrange the images in chronological order, and to take turns saying, in three or four detailed, precise sentences, what each photo depicts. (In a language classroom, an instructor might ask students to write short texts instead of speaking out loud, depending on what linguistic skills are being targeted.)

After the students have worked with their partners on this activity, I invite them to write some of their short phrases on the board. Once they have finished writing, I underline words or sentences that have positive and negative connotations, and we begin discussing these connotations and the specific phrases they selected. Often, students become more uncomfortable when they must articulate what Ernaux looks like after sixty. They start to use vague sentences like, "You can tell she's famous" or "She looks like my grandmother." I urge them to be more specific. One of my students, after hesitating to speak about the lines on Ernaux's face, finally said, "I feel uncomfortable even saying that she has wrinkles—and now I'm wondering why that is." These are the kind of reflections I hope to elicit. My goal is twofold: I want students to notice how, in an ageist culture, we are often uncomfortable looking at older people—and for them to understand that words like *wrinkle* do not have to sound pejorative.

As the discussion unfolds, I encourage students to keep thinking about the connotations of different words. For instance, I ask them whether the word *old* sounds positive or negative. Nearly all students agree that the adjective *old* sounds negative when applied to people. This is a good opportunity, if there are native speakers of different languages in the room, to compare whether words like the French *vieux* and *ancient* carry the same negative connotations and to make a list of idiomatic expressions like "it put a wrinkle in our plans." What do these expressions reveal about ageism across cultures? Finally, I steer our

discussion toward questions about decline and progress narratives. Do these pictures capture Ernaux *declining*? As Leni Marshall points out, students tend to believe that growing old is only a negative experience marked by sickness and loneliness (57). Students who have had little exposure to age studies curricula may be surprised to discover that *aging* and *declining* are not in fact synonymous. I ask my students to describe what they see in the photographs in front of them: Are they observing something that everyone can see? Or are they projecting something onto the photo when they use a word like *deterioration*? I also ask: How can we separate the reality of aging and the stigma attached to it? I am not looking for a single answer; I hope simply that considering these tricky questions will lead my students to think about aging with more nuance.

Writing the Life Course

I now hand out five or six short excerpts from *The Years*, Ernaux's 2008 "impersonal autobiography," in which the author describes photos of herself at different ages (*The Years*, 229). We read these passages aloud together, and students make annotations on their copies. I ask them (1) to pay attention to how Ernaux subverts the conventions of the autobiography genre and (2) to study how, in Ernaux's own words, she "describe[s] reality as though through the eyes of a photographer" (*Exteriors*, 7). In one excerpt I give students, Ernaux writes, "She is in the second row, third from the left. *It is difficult to see in her the girl with the provocative pose from the previous photo, taken scarcely two years earlier*. She wears glasses again, and a ponytail from which a lock of hair escapes at the neck" (70). As the sentence I have placed in italics demonstrates, Ernaux does not make her life course narrative align with a simple story of progress or decline. Sometimes, the *she* Ernaux describes looks more glamorous as she ages and sometimes she does not; readers find themselves presented with a series of *shes* that are constantly shifting.

We spend a few minutes close-reading the passage about Ernaux's sexagenarian body that begins: "Once in a while she looks at herself naked in the bathroom mirror. A delicate torso, small breasts, very slender waist, slightly rounded belly. The thighs are heavy, with a bulge above the knees" (167). I ask

questions like *What tone and techniques do you observe here? Does this sound like an autobiography, or another genre of writing? How does Ernaux's style affect how you read the text? Why do you think Ernaux never provides readers with the photographs she describes?* After students have studied Ernaux's style, I guide their attention to the phrases we wrote on the board during the "Observing Aging" part of the exercise. I prompt them to compare their words to Ernaux's sentences; my aim is for students to notice how Ernaux's "flat" prose style allows her to fight against ageist ways of speaking about and viewing older bodies (Bliss). In exit slips, students often report that this part of the activity was the most meaningful to them. One wrote, "Ernaux only writes about what she sees. I realized that my partner and I kept saying that she looked good for her age, but Ernaux never writes like that. She just says what's there."

Stylistic Imitations

As a group, the students and I now practice imitating Ernaux's style. I write a sentence like this one from *The Years* on the board: "Apart from the ballerina flats, nothing in the appearance of this teenage girl reflects what was 'all the rage' that year or what was in the fashion magazines and the big-city stores, long plaid midi-skirts, black sweaters, and chunky lockets, ponytails and bangs like Audrey Hepburn's in *Roman Holiday*" (49). We discuss how Ernaux contextualizes this photo (i.e. she writes about clothing and a film that had recently come out), and I ask each student to select a photo on their phones and to write a sentence that resembles the model on the board. (The photo they select can be of themselves or of someone else; it is important that students feel comfortable, and there should be no pressure to choose a "personal" photo.) I participate in the activity and share my photo and sentence with the group. I then invite a few other students to share theirs.

Now that the students understand how stylistic imitation works, I give them a short assignment to complete before the next class:

> Select four or five photos of yourself at different ages and write a short "age biography," imitating Ernaux's style. Keeping in mind what we practiced in class, please write in the third person and describe each photo in 100 words or more. You may want to write

> about what was in fashion when the photo was taken or about what the photo hides. Remember that the reader will not see these photos; they will imagine them based on what you write. If you like, you might draw an image of yourself at a future age and write about this image, too.

Because Ernaux's prose is so concrete and accessible, even students who do not enjoy creative writing activities tend to excel at this exercise. As I explain to my class, the idea here is not to produce a text that sounds highly polished, but rather to practice writing in a different, unfamiliar way that requires you to focus on specific details and to think more globally about the culture in which you are growing older. Ideally, students will surprise themselves as they adopt a new voice and perspective.

REFLECTIONS

This exercise can be modified in a variety of ways. When I teach it to students of literature, I often ask them to compare Ernaux's style to that of another author. Roland Barthes's description of a photograph of his mother in *Camera Lucida* works well; I have also used excerpts from Hervé Guibert's photo novel *Suzanne and Louise*. Another option is to show students excerpts from Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style* and then to ask them to write in Ernaux's style as well as in the style of a few other writers on the syllabus.

A few years ago, I taught a French language course to college students at East Jersey State Prison. Because my students did not have any electronic devices or photos with them in the prison classroom, I made some changes to the exercise. I asked my class to describe photos from memory, and I was surprised by what happened next. Many students could recall exact details of their favorite photographs, and they were enormously excited to draw and write about these remembered images. More recently, my students at Princeton told me about a new face aging app, and I invited them to write about the differences between their imagined future faces and the photos the app generated. Regardless of which version of the exercise I teach, I've noticed changes in how students discuss aging each time I've been struck by how meaningful this exercise seems to be for them. In a final reflection piece about our class, a

sophomore wrote, "I went home for Thanksgiving break and my mom made a joke about getting old. Before we did the unit on Annie Ernaux, I would have laughed. But I asked her what she meant and we actually had a great conversation that I think I was too afraid to have with her before."

In a course focused on aging and the life course, instructors might spend more time teaching students about Ernaux's anti-ageist activism and how it is connected to her interest in avenging "my people" (Ernaux, "I Will Write"). I have enjoyed teaching excerpts from Ernaux's conversation with sociologist Rose-Marie Lagrave (recently translated in English), in which the two women talk about how *les transfuges de classe*, or class defectors, grow older. I have also found in-class discussions of Ernaux's short 2016 text "The Photograph" particularly rewarding. The text is Ernaux's response to a photograph of an older, lower-class woman, who is aboard a bus in a bourgeois Parisian neighborhood. Ernaux addresses the subject of the photo in the second person: "I'm inventing a life for you, the life of your gaze on the number 72 bus. A gaze that judges, gauges and separates—separates you instinctively from all those who don't show signs of belonging to your world. The unyielding gaze of eighty years of domination and passing down legacies and moral and financial certainties. You are the overwhelming portrait of rich endurance." With this text, my students and I consider who has the resources to grow old with dignity and whether the idea of aging *gracefully* is, in itself, problematic.

After my students and I discuss "The Photograph," I ask them whom they would like to write a text about if they had to choose an older person as their subject. Often, students have not taken the time to look at older people around them or to imagine what these people are thinking and feeling. I want to teach them to do precisely that—to cultivate a way of seeing and writing that honors the complexity of aging. What begins as a stylistic imitation can become something powerful: a practice of noticing the way we ourselves and those around us are changing over time. My hope is that students will discover new ways of looking at and thinking about photographs, writing styles, and aging itself—and that, inspired by Ernaux, they will work toward cultivating what novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch calls a "just and loving gaze" (327).

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