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"Age is Just a Number, Init?"<sup>1</sup>  
Interrogating Perceptions of Age & Women within Social Gerontology.

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Abstract

The Second World Assembly on Ageing (Madrid, April 2002) recognised a need to challenge stereotyped images of ageing and later life, particularly those related to older women. This article will survey and critique a range of social-gerontological discourse from a social-constructionist feminist perspective. It will challenge the notion of *the* elderly as an objective social category, and illustrate the plurality of ways in which women respond to old age. Deficiencies in social-gerontological theory will be highlighted, especially in relation to women's late-in-life sexuality. Strategies for challenging ageism and misogyny will also be elucidated. To give this work an immediacy, I will refer to my own experience as an older woman. I have been willing to 'put myself in the picture', as the concept of reflexivity is important to many feminist researchers.<sup>2</sup>

“Ila Chattopadhyay is a very important girl....”

“She’s hardly a girl any more, dear,” said her husband. “She’s quite an elderly woman – must be at least fifty-five.”

Mrs Chatterji glanced with annoyance at her husband. Fifty-five was hardly elderly.

(*A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth p.446).

### Embodiment, Disembodiment & Denial

Coming afresh to the field of social gerontology, some of the ideas abounding within the discourse seem counter-intuitive or downright odd; the idea of the ageing body as a ‘masking device’ which ‘conceals and distorts the self which others interact with’, as Featherstone & Wernick put it, assumes a peculiar essentialism – some kind of constant self which is undiminished and unchanging through time, subject to disembodied social relations, which can then be ‘masked’ (11). Likewise, the notion of a ‘mask of ageing’ that is ‘hard to remove’, postulated by Featherstone & Hepworth, or a ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman), would appear to fall into the same trap. These ideas are very influential within British social gerontology and are often reiterated.

We all interact through our bodies all the time, don’t we? We have an embodied consciousness. As Leder put it: ‘The lived body is not just one thing in the world, but a way in which the world comes to be’ (1992, 25). It is both, simultaneously. The dichotomy between ‘self’ and ‘mask’ is surely problematic? Our bodies (their shape,

size, colour, sex) determine our social relations; we experience ourselves differently in varying contexts and we reiterate or 'perform' norms associated with our embodied selves as active agents, as philosopher Judith Butler put it, without necessarily thinking about it too much, with a nearly intuitive sense (*le Sens Pratique* as Pierre Bourdieu called it in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*); or more simply we *do* sex and age is surely just one aspect of this complexity of being? As the British Sociologist Ann Oakley asserts in her book, *Fracture*:

The problem with bodies is that they're both material objects and the site of human experience. They're how we know the world, but they also give rise to it... Our being in the world depends utterly on the body's physicality (15-16).

However, this idea of an underlying essential 'truth' which is masked is a popular analogy; the French feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir, links this sense of masking to feelings of youthful vitality:

So long as the inner feeling of youth remains alive, it is the objective truth of age which seems fallacious: one has the impression of having put on a borrowed mask (329).

Featherstone and Wernick point 'to the inability of the [ageing] body to adequately represent the inner self' (7); but can the body *ever* be said to do this? This is not just a problem of old age. For example, I tend to think of myself as large and powerful and as taking up lots of space, but in fact I am rather diminutive. When my yoga teacher once lined up our class according to height, I was the second shortest person in the room, much to my surprise, because I feel big! This is a trite example, but I think it makes my point. However, context has a bearing on this, and I can be reminded of my smallness in a densely packed crowd, for example. Ethnographers Crang and Cook give a more sophisticated example, in looking at the way that narrative flows change during walking interviews.<sup>3</sup> They discuss how memory and place are connected, and how different aspects of an individual are stimulated by different locales and interactions. Although they talk about 'different facets of people's identities' (10) there is a sense in which the identity of the individual *is coming into being* in the process. It is our sense of the permanence of a self-identity, cut off from context, which is fundamentally delusory.

Age has also been described as an 'involuntary change of dress' (Comfort, 20). When facing illness or disability, a disconnection from the body can occur – a distancing; however, many women report that they feel a difference between their perceived age and what they have become. One research participant admitted:

...I see my arm with the skin hanging loosely from my forearm and cannot believe that it is really my own. It seems disconnected from me; it is someone else's, it is the arm of an old woman (McDonald & Rich, 14).

Sociologist Anne Oakley at sixty-three says of herself, 'When I look in the mirror, I see a woman who is usually older than I feel....' And a woman of eighty-five years said, "I see an old lady... I just brush it off. It isn't me" (Furman, 2). Intriguingly, Oakley calls this kind of thinking 'an identity-survival trick' (2007, 110). Again, this phrase would seem to presuppose a disembodied identity – an 'identity' beyond embodied and enacted social relations, and it is premised on a denial of ageing – the 'identity' is a youthful or younger one indicating a 'lag' of some sort between personal perception and the physical reality.

Age can also be perceived as an adversary within. As the poet W. B. Yeats put it, 'Being old makes me old and tired and furious':

I am everything that I was and indeed more, but an enemy has bound and twisted me so that although I can make plans and think better than ever, I can no longer carry out what I plan and think'.

One's relationship with the world must change as one ages, and it is not just the appearance of the body at play. G. Stanley Hall very eloquently described his experience of becoming 'old': 'Each decade the circle of the Great Fatigue narrows around us, restricting the intensity and endurance of our activities'.

Oakley, drawing on the work of Leder, points out that there is a paradox in our embodied being, that 'while the body is the most abiding presence in our lives, the main feature of this presence is actually *absence*'. She suggests that one definition of health is 'not to feel one's body', that one is simply not aware of one's body most of the time, and that it is ageing which makes us aware of our bodily integrity' (16).<sup>4</sup> In this view, age challenges a propensity to disembodiment; it forces conscious acknowledgement of our fleshy being.

The opposite of this potential for disembodiment is exhibited by those who wallow in their infirmities: 'It is a torment to preserve one's intellectual being intact, imprisoned in a worn-out shell' wrote François-René de Chateaubriand.<sup>5</sup> French psychiatry has a term for this – *Gribouillisme*. This is an interesting concept which de Beauvoir describes as 'plunging into old age because of the horror it inspires. The subject exaggerates... by playing the cripple, the subject becomes one' (338). Furthermore,

De Beauvoir also suggests that older people are more subject to 'morbid anxieties' about their health than the general population (336).<sup>6</sup>

Although I have been critical of Featherstone & Wernick's seeming essentialism, it is worth remembering that the concept of 'stigma', originating from ancient Greek culture, which Goffman interrogates, refers to bodily signs denoting or 'exposing' something unusual or bad about the moral status of the marked person; thus blemishes denote an underlying corruption (11). This idea has had extraordinary longevity, and it is not difficult to find 19<sup>th</sup> Century examples of this concept, or the belief that a momentary lapse of control of unruly desires, in an expectant mother, for example, could cause terrible birthmarks on her newborn infant. The belief of the imperfect outside indicating something about an imperfect soul is enduring and pervasive.<sup>7</sup>

A newer spin on this concept is what Turner identifies as 'New Puritanism' – a tendency to attribute moral significance – indeed, to ascribe goodness of character, to those who have a beautiful healthy body. Critics of this emphasis on healthy well-regulated bodies and a movement towards 'positive ageing' (epitomised by seeing older bodies engaged in traditionally youthful pursuits) view such ideology and rhetoric as potentially 'tyrannical', worrying that problems associated with biological ageing may increasingly be viewed as deviant or pathological. Blaikie asserts, 'unless you work on being 'liberated' from chronological destiny, you are less than normal' (209)!

### Discontinuities Associated with Ageing

A number of mainly North American theorists (Reichenberg-Ullman; Lock; Pearsall; Zita; Fishel; Hogan & Warren) have suggested menopause has been vastly overstated or described too negatively as part of a Western medical cultural heritage which positions women's bodies as inherently 'unstable' (Showalter). Dickson summarises the problem that,

The available research on midlife women, most often conceptualized from a biomedical perspective, studies menopause as a "hormone deficiency disease", a cluster of symptoms, led by hot flashes and vaginal atrophy, including, also, many diffuse psychological problems. Little research data are available that has not been strongly filtered through the biomedical perspective (36).

Only a limited amount of feminist research (Barbre 1998; Callahan 1993; Dillaway, 2005; Dolan & Tincknell 2012; Gannon 1999; Greer 1993; Gannon and Ekstrom 1993; Winterich & Umberson 1999; Winterich 2003;) acts as a counterweight to the predominant medical and popular representation of menopause as a negative period, associated with loss; this small body of research suggests that menopause is over-emphasised, and that many women find it of little consequence, or even a positive experience overall. Dillaway emphasises that women's attitudes towards menopause will be coloured by their previous reproductive experiences and context.

Menopause is sometimes posited as a discontinuity, but for many women it is a gradual process, leaving us physiologically closer to males.<sup>8</sup> Zita, a North American author, identifies three dominant rhetorical discourses, which surround the discussion of menopause; she identifies these as follows:

1. firstly, 'the loss of femininity', which she calls 'bio-gender essentialism' (97) - the 'estrogen-restored woman', she asserts, is seen as a 'sexually restored' woman (98).
2. Second, is the menopause portrayed as a 'dysfunctional or functionless state' (97), a deviation from wellness. (In popular culture this emphasis on 'deviation' includes acknowledgement of a greater tendency to weight gain, changed skin texture, the inconvenience of menstrual irregularity, hot flushes due to hormonal shifts, and such like).
3. The third dominant discourse identified by Zita describes menopause as a 'natural' life transition not distressing for many women. Gott, a British social gerontologist, notes that 'old age is accepted as a 'natural' stage in the life course and, as such, fixed and universal' (8).

Of course, the meanings ascribed to the 'naturally' ageing female body are far from universal. The latter approach of sensitivity towards social distinctions, Zita suggests, is more characteristic of feminist approaches to the subject, which include viewing the body 'as a surface upon which cultural texts are written, contested, and re-written' (106). Meanings ascribed to the ageing process, in this more feminist outlook, are seen as cultural and context bound. Ageing is posited as a set of cultural practices which become naturalised in particular contexts (Gullette).

In an interesting contrast to the notion of menopause as a dysfunctional or functionless state, with a physiological functionalist emphasis old age is celebrated as the human body's greatest achievement by the BBC series '*The Human Body*' (2001). Menopause is

declared as adaptive in preventing ongoing reproduction, and allowing women to serve as active grandparents; it is purposeful. The need for women to help their daughters is posited as having 'actually effected how long we have evolved to live' in '*The Origins of Us*' BBC (2011).

Kathleen Woodward, another North American author, puts forward the interesting idea that women become culturally 'aged' earlier than men; she suggests that many women, around the age of fifty, 'experience ageing'; by this she means 'the internalization of our culture's denial of and distaste for ageing, which is understood in terms of decline...' (xiii). She sees menopause as a trigger for this. In sharp contrast, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, 'Women do have the physical experience of the menopause; *but it takes place well before old age* (325, my italics). Clearly, there is no agreement about when old age starts, but as Woodward asserts, it is probable that the changes associated with menopause can force thinking about the ageing process.

Other discontinuities associated with age may be experienced forcefully (Hareven). Whilst compulsory retirement is the most obvious cleft (with some loss of one's self-identity, familiar roles, and peer groups, marginalisation, and dependency put forward as predominant), for many women old age is also associated with poverty, having made insufficient contributions towards a pension.<sup>9</sup> Poverty is also associated with chronic illness and disability (Cruikshank, 125). There may also be the move from independent living to becoming dependent, which can be marked by an accident. For instance, a fall resulting in hospitalisation, followed by a reassessment of living arrangements (this can have particular significance for gay women, who wish to live in a supported retirement setting or home in which they can be open about their sexual preference). Generally, marriage provides greater 'protection' from placement in aged-care institutions for men than it does for women.<sup>10</sup> Widowhood (and the death of other close peers) is destabilising, and increases women's risk of falling into poverty (Cruikshank 2003 p.116).<sup>11</sup> Hareven makes a reasonable argument that in modern British society there has been a 'segmentation of the life course into more formal stages' (132), meaning that there are distinct and recognised life phases. Gilleard and Higgs (2000), in contrast, see women as invested in 'age-irrelevant domestic roles' (49), their 'unending involvement and care in the reproduction of home and family life' (51), and therefore as less affected by discontinuities associated with ageing than men.<sup>12</sup> Given increasing longevity in the U.K. some women are caring for aged parents when quite old themselves. Certainly caregiving responsibilities are put forward by some social theorists as dominating women's lives in a way that distracts us from a preoccupation with the menopause, suggesting that its

significance is overstated (Twigg; Winterich and Umberson). Social policy provisions for frail and disabled older people in a number of countries are predicated on the expectation that women will provide the vast majority of care at no fiscal cost to the state and that much of the remainder will be subsidised by unpaid female labour. Gibson notes research which points to this being a pattern across diverse systems of health care, including Australia, Britain Canada, North America, and Scandinavia (73).

Moving on to think further about extreme old age, Hockey & James (1995) describe how the very old and frail are disenfranchised due to their comparison with children, and the discourses about old age as being like a second childhood; adult social identity, they argue, relies on the condition of the body. Of the frail elderly, Hockey wrote:

Those who become incontinent, unable to walk without support, or perceptibly 'confused in their minds' will find themselves moved to what the staff refer to as the 'frail' corridor.... Referred to as 'the little people' – who receive smaller meals – it is this group who will be addressed by Christian names only and will tend to be given nicknames' (100).

I would be very wary of conflating senile dementia with frailty, but it seems clear that extreme debility is dehumanising, at least within an institutional setting such as that described by Hockey & James. Drawing on my own experience, I do recall seeing my former mother-in-law shortly before her death, suffering from cancer, and seeing the skin of her face stretched taut over her skull - the death's head beneath the skin evident to me, when she was talking lucidly. There comes a point in extreme old age when the omnipresence of inevitable death does appear to overcome our apprehension of humanity – or at least to impinge upon it. Vincent (154), for example, argues that bodily integrity is essential to maintain a satisfactory sense of self, and that in 'deep old age' loss of control of movement, and incontinence, serve to 'dehumanise'; this is concordant with the work of Hockey & James above. Featherstone & Hepworth (1991) also lay great emphasis on continence, and note that, 'Degrees of loss [of control] impair the capacity to be counted as a competent adult' (376).

### Sexy Older Women – an Oxymoron?

Older men, according to Gilleard and Higgs, can possess sexual allure and be viewed as 'attractive partners'; masculinity, unlike femininity, is 'less compromised' by ageing, they assert. (2000:49).<sup>13</sup> The particular undesirability of older women is asserted by Cooper, a feminist writer and activist, who suggests that older women face 'primal loathing' for simply existing (19) – a suggestion surely worth challenging!

Twigg (2004:65) argues that deep old age is implicitly gendered:

Gender is relevant to the issue because deep old age is predominantly female. Most of the sex differential in old age relates to this stage, partly the product of women's greater longevity, and partly their tendency to suffer more from disability and thus to spend longer in the Fourth Age of infirmity. Issues concerning the body in the Fourth Age are thus gendered, but in an implicit way. Part at least of the negative meanings of deep old age relate to this. Misogynistic discourses have long focused on the bodies of women, and these feelings are extended and amplified in relation to old women. The body in old age thus comes to carry an additional freight of negative meaning.

Susan Sontag (1978) spoke of 'a double standard for ageing', and this is still a very popular idea, one which I will explore further, that attractiveness is a more important concept for women and therefore we find the process of ageing more challenging. This 'double standard' is experienced 'most brutally' with respect to sexual attraction (20), where the disparity is 'permanently to women's disadvantage'. Sontag's influential essay outlined the norm of women marrying men older than themselves. If the couple divorce after raising a family when she is in her forties or fifties, 'the husband has an excellent chance of re-marrying probably to a younger woman', whereas his ex-wife is less likely to re-marry, or may have to settle for a man considerably older than herself in his sixties or seventies – 'Thus for most women, ageing means *a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification*. Since women are considered maximally eligible in early youth, after which their sexual value drops steadily, even young women feel themselves in a *desperate* race against the calendar' (20, my italics).<sup>14</sup> But our anxiety does not lessen. According to Sontag, once we enter reasonably permanent relationships,

Marriage soothes the sharpest pain she feels about the passing years. But her anxiety never subsides completely, for she knows that should she re-enter the sexual market at a later date – because of divorce, or the death of her husband, or the need for erotic adventure – she must do so under a handicap far greater than any man of her age (*whatever* her age may be) and regardless of how good-looking she is. Her achievements, if she has a career, are no asset. The calendar is the final arbiter (20).

Moreover, whilst power is sexually alluring in a man, in a woman it is counterproductive – 'A woman who has won power in a competitive profession or business career is considered less, rather than more, desirable' (20). This tendency has been corroborated by more recent research (Hewlett).<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding, it is a rather bleak view and does not leave room for, for example, any positive benefits from being regarded less of a sexual object - the palpable sense of relief that I felt on moving into my late thirties, and no longer

being sexually harassed continuously as I moved around in public spaces.<sup>16</sup> And anyway perhaps some women are more interested in men listening to what they have to say, rather than surveying them as potential sexual quests!

It is undoubtedly still the case that women do feel under more pressure than men to present themselves as 'physically attractive objects'. As Sontag points out, women who are not 'narcissistic' are considered 'unfeminine': 'And a woman who spends literally most of her time caring for, and making purchases to flatter, her physical appearance is not regarded in this society as what she is: a kind of moral idiot. She is thought to be quite normal and envied by other women whose time is mostly used up at jobs or caring for large families' (22).<sup>17</sup> Sontag's other remarks about unmarried women being 'pitied' and the word 'bachelor' having no humiliating connotations (as compared to 'spinster') are perhaps now rather out-dated in a Western context in which many women are not marrying, but are raising families. We certainly do not assume, as she suggests, that the unmarried women are necessarily missing out on having a sex life, and her analysis does not touch on lesbian, bisexual and questioning trends.

Echoing Sontag's view, Oakley asserts (68): 'The big trick that culture has played on us is to let men live in a state of unconsciousness about their bodies (Howson 2005), whereas a woman's body calls for hypervigilance because it's her ticket to success in life (Chapkis 1986)'. Ruth Holliday's work with gay males contradicts this assumption of masculine indifference to their bodies, as does Halliwell, Dittmar & Orsborn's research on heterosexual men, and I have already presented examples of female disembodiment, or unselfconsciousness. Clearly, not all women are 'hypervigilant' and not all men are unselfconscious. There is evidently a plurality of ways of responding to and dealing with ageing. Calasanti makes the useful point that gender relations are *dynamic*, by which she means that they change over one's life, creating different pressures and constraints along the way (721).

The idea that women are required to match up to an 'adolescent ideal' throughout their lives, as Featherstone & Wernick assert, is perhaps even more contentious, and requires further examination. More recent research on 'body image' would suggest that not all women have self-esteem tied to a trim, lithe body image (Dittmar, Halliwell & Stirling; Dittman & Halliwell), though there is also evidence that this is extremely important for some ageing women (Gilleard and Higgs, 49).

Very reasonably, Cruikshank (2003) points out that older women internalise cultural messages about age, and end up feeling ashamed of their age: 'This is the most insidious form ageism takes' (153). She argues that internalised ageism prevents older women from accurately assessing their own abilities or challenging unfair assessments from others. Furthermore, there are proven health consequences of negative self-assessment (154). Ageing is difficult for some women to acknowledge.<sup>18</sup>

She also argues that 'age passing' (i.e., 'pretending' to be younger than you are) is a form of internalised ageism, which is a curiously essentialist notion in some respects. "Have I been 'age passing'?" I wonder to myself, or do I just happen to look younger than my biological years? As she points out herself, my positive self-assessment may have had concrete physiological performance benefits, thus I'll be perhaps functioning 'younger' as well as 'passing' for younger. She surveys an interesting range of research, which includes research participants being exposed to positive or negative stereotypes of ageing and then measuring their walking speed. Another study demonstrated changes in cardiovascular function after being shown different images of ageing.

Oakley (2007) later rather contradicts her statement about hypervigilance, asserting that the eccentric older women can be carefree: 'We don't have to watch people watching us because we no longer care what they think' (108). Given her remarks about her experience in her ballet class (which I discuss later), this statement is unconvincing – she is *excruciatingly aware* of the repercussions of her age, as shall be demonstrated.

Gilleard and Higgs' (2000) analysis is rather negative in their suggestion that older women are fundamentally sexless; they position women as inhabiting 'domestic' roles, including that of 'wife'. Or if uncomfortable with 'the desexualised, albeit democratic, status' of 'third-ager', women may opt for a 'transgressive denial of ageing, through elaborate and effortful routines of self-care' (49). Note the use of the word 'transgressive' - a double-standard of ageing being perpetuated by social gerontologists, signifying that late in life sexuality for women is aberrant.

Oakley (2007) describes some of these 'elaborate and effortful routines':

Getting old *is* a profoundly gendered experience; women have to ward off the signs of ageing far more than men. Many dye their hair; choose clothes to conceal sagging bodies; buy expensive cosmetic alterations; constantly watch their weight; and generally pretend to be sweet and sprightly...(110-111)

It is interesting that Gilleard and Higgs' characterisation of wives is fundamentally desexualised and that the alternative to being sexless is described as 'transgressive'. Ongoing sexuality is premised on a 'denial' of ageing processes – and their phrase 'effortful routines of self-care' could encompass physical exercise, as well as the use of cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery. Zita complains that 'the ideology of ageism' frequently positions older women 'as asexual if not antisexual' (108). That an older woman may simply feel happy in her ageing but sexual body does not feature as an option, and this pessimistic assumption warrants further interrogation.

The exception to this seems to be lesbian women. Cruikshank points out that, 'Paradoxically, older women in general are seen stereotypically as asexual, while old lesbians, when they are noticed at all, are perceived only through their sexuality' (121).

On a local level, 'Ageing Well in Sheffield: A Guide to Later Life', a document produced by my local council for older people, does assert very straightforwardly, 'Sexual desire doesn't disappear because you're older. Older people can enjoy active sex lives' (11). Gott makes the important point that the exclusion of older people from supposedly 'national' and 'comprehensive' research on sexual behaviour reinforces the images of a 'desexualised' old age (Metters; Wellings et. al.).<sup>19</sup> Gott's survey of key research studies of sexuality concludes that,

Most authors appear to assume that people *should* be having sex because sex is healthy and fun. Moreover, that not having sex could be considered to be a choice rather than just the result of uncontrollable events is rarely considered. In particular, older women are set up as objects of pity (56).

Dillaway is keen to stress the positive experience of enhanced sexual desire associated with the menopause. Her research with women under sixty found that many respondents also expressed relief and not having to worry about using contraception. Calasanti too acknowledges the liberating potential of the menopause. Even when her interviewees expressed concern about vaginal dryness, as an unfortunate consequence of the menopause, Dillaway reports that they also talked about desiring sex, feeling more confident sexually, and having more sexual energy (407-408).

Despite the oft antithetical positioning of youthful sexuality, on the one hand, and physical decrepitude, sickness, and decline of asexual old age on the other, Gott's research

indicates that sex remains important to the majority of older people, especially in the context of 'close emotional relationships' (74), though her survey also revealed a minority whom she describes as 'sexually retired' due to illness or widowhood.<sup>20</sup>

### Zones of Interest. Another Way to Think About Ageing.

Men more than ten years younger than me tend not to regard me lustfully, (though there are occasional exceptions), and I have noticed that in dating websites some people specify a small age range. They want to meet someone between thirty-five and forty, or forty and fifty. A friend of mine of fifty-two advertises for a man under sixty (e.g. no more than a maximum of seven years older). Sixty would be a step too far. Rather than a 'mask' of ageing, perhaps it's helpful to think about zones of interest. I think I'd start a new relationship with a man between thirty-five and fifty-five. Below thirty would feel too young, and I would not wish to date anyone significantly older than I am. If a seventy-five year old man answered my advert (assuming I placed one), I'd simply ignore his response, as he is out of my 'range' or 'zone'. This is Oakley's (2007) experience:

Two years ago, at the age of 61, I joined a classical ballet class. Now, twice a week, I stand at the barre with a group of lithe 20-year-olds who watch me with mixed amusement and horror. Some of them studiously avoid looking at me, and, when we have to choose partners to cavort across the studio floor, they look desperately around for younger companions. I feel like saying to them, old age isn't a disease, you know, and it certainly isn't contagious. You'll be old, too, one day (107).

I suspect that in a more mixed-age class, Oakley would have willing partners over the age of forty or fifty to cavort with, and that the much younger people would tend to pair-off together. Rather than thinking about 'masks', or age as an entity, thinking about zones of interest and opportunity for engagements might be of use to sociological researchers. I'd also like to see much more nuanced cross-cultural comparative work on this subject, as the leeway for these engagements will be culturally defined and embedded.

### Misogyny, Silence and Invisibility

Misogyny tied to the ageing female body needs acknowledgement (Martin 1997; 2012). Even enlightened sociologists slip too easily into stereotyping; thus, in their introduction to 'Images of Ageing', Featherstone & Wernick move seamlessly from a statistic telling us that the 'over-50 age segment' holds 50% of 'discretionary income' in the U.S.A. to the headline 'Dipping into Granny's Wallet', highlighting a new market (9). Their unwitting sexism is further evidenced in the text thus:

a number of critiques have developed about misrepresentations inherent in the images which portray minority groups. Critiques have been increasingly made of what are seen as demeaning images of women, gays, the elderly, ethnic groups and religious minorities (4).

Hold on a minute, since when have women been a 'minority' group? Also, aren't women in world the *majority* when we start to look at senior sex ratios? They continue:

Here the assumption is that some groups suffer from the imposition of negative stereotypes: images which do not accurately represent their everyday realities and aspirations (4).

Ironically, thoughtful sociologists and social gerontologists perpetuate negative stereotypes and inadvertently position women as a 'minority' group, and older women necessarily as a minority within a minority. Clearly, we do not take up much conceptual space!

Gott argues that ageing women must look naturally younger to avoid denigration and becoming an object of ridicule – old 'slappers' or 'mutton dressed as lamb'<sup>21</sup>, but, in an increasingly playful post-modernist culture where identity is surely more fluid, Gott's analysis appears overly pessimistic and sexist in tone (33).

I have illustrated above how within the social gerontology literature there are examples of women being depicted as a 'minority'. Germaine Greer has been forthright in pointing out a paucity of positive images of older women in modern culture; however, Greer is more interested in the potential for women to liberate themselves from their sexual identity. She draws attention to the 'utter invisibility of middle-aged women in English literary culture' - hyperbole perhaps, but we understand what she means.<sup>22</sup> In a light-hearted experiment, a group of researchers recently cut out all of the male and female images, over the course of a year, from the Sun Newspaper and pasted them up on a wall. There were only three depictions of older women: Mrs Brown, a women on mobility scooter and our Queen! Older women certainly are a 'minority' when it comes to meaningful representations of us.

Arber & Ginn speculate that 'persistent denigration' of older women may be because we are more willing and able to challenge patriarchal norms (48), but they provide no supporting evidence for this. It is a cheering idea. Diane Gibson, an Australian writer, (1998) suggests that there is a particular silence around the positive aspects of older women's lives, particularly their greater social participation and stronger sense of self-identity. Furthermore, she highlights a tendency within social gerontology to investigate the older woman 'as the typical fourth-ager – very old, living alone and seriously disabled'

(144). This rather dreary view of older women led Simone de Beauvoir, (107), to describe older women as 'dismally invisible' and as inexorably tied to housework.

A study, which asked children from thirty-three countries to depict grandmothers pictorially, resulted in a diverse range of imagery.<sup>23</sup> Grandmothers in India were shown as the most physically active, and the least active were in Western Europe, perhaps reflecting cultural norms about age at marriage as well as social ideas which presuppose activity.<sup>24</sup> Drawing on the work of Bortz (30), Cruikshank endorses the assertion that older women are 'languishing on the orthopaedic floors of hospitals with fractured hips, spines and pelvises, neither as the result of age nor of calcium or oestrogen lack, but because of cultural disuse'.

There have been some challenges to 'invisibility', notably the work of photographer Rosy Martin (2003), whose 'Outrageous' series draws playfully on Rabelais's idea of 'grotesque realism' and Bakhtin's ideas of creative images which are 'intentionally carnivalesque and transgressive' (209). Certainly, they disturb, but the grotesque older woman is not iconoclastic; it is their sense of 'play' and transgression that perhaps marks out these images as defiant.<sup>25</sup>

Also part of this series are a number of quieter works, which are aesthetically quite beautiful, despite being composed of extraordinarily misogynistic quotations from psychiatrists and medical doctors, which Martin then projects onto her and other women's bodies. Here is one extract (Reuben, 292):

The vagina begins to shrivel, the breasts atrophy, sexual desire disappears.... Increased facial hair, deepening voice, obesity... coarsened features, enlargement of the clitoris, and gradual baldness complete the tragic picture. Not really a man but no longer a functioning woman, these individuals live in a world of intersex.

Reuben went as far as to say, 'Having outlived their ovaries, they may have outlived their usefulness as human beings' (289). Seeing the misogynistic texts projected (literally) onto the naked body serves to draw attention to the way ideological processes are ascribed to or 'projected' onto the female body, and then internalised, performed and reproduced (Butler, 1990). Martin wishes to increase awareness, so that women can *resist* these processes; at the same time she points out the instability of meanings ascribed to gender (2003, 195).

Fig 2. After Women Have Lost Their Genital Function. Outrageous Agers Series, Rosy Martin & Kay Goodridge. 2000.

More ambivalent work on the ageing body by the photographer and film maker Donigan Cumming, which 'probe[s] the ambiguous space between compassion and exploitation', and his photographs of naked octogenarian Nettie Harris perturb us with her seeming vulnerability (Amour 1). Recent representations of extreme old age have come from Jocelyn Cammack in her film *The Time of Their Lives*, which follows three spirited, politically active women, who share their frustrations about their bodily decline.



Fig. 3. Nettie Harris, by Donigan Cumming April 1991.

More direct challenges to the assertions of sexlessness in older women have come from North America, with assertive, positive books by Blank, Fishel and Braun. Fishel's book and documentary film based on it, contain frank statements – the film has some women over sixty talking directly to camera about how sexual they still feel and sexually active they are. The effect is mildly challenging and the tone distinctly upbeat. Sex isn't just defined as penetrative, and the book contains sections on auto-eroticism, and Fishel's film features one loving couple touching each other intimately in a nursing home: "we do the

best we can”, says a blind octogenarian... It is a moving moment. The work could fit into what has been dubbed the ‘positive ageing movement’.

Gott has noted a mounting body of literature which posits a strong association between good sex and healthy ageing (26), a ‘use it or lose it’ mentality (see Duffy, for example).<sup>26</sup> This generation of older women will not grow older quietly, the film asserts. Another cinematic depiction of sex in old age is Andreas Dresden’s *Cloud 9*, which has long, harshly lit, rather brutally captured, geriatric sex scenes. The film reminds us that we can experience profound passion and torment even late in life (the protagonists are sixty-seven and seventy-six).

Probably the campaign which has reached the largest number of women is a commercial one, *Beauty Has No Age Limit*, by Dove, Unilever, which promotes a range of beauty products for older skin, launched in 2008.<sup>27</sup> It had produced advertisements of naked or glamorously dressed women over forty-five in many popular magazines, as well as videos featuring naked older women, a commissioned play, and other activities, such as facilitating parties, at which older women write a letter to their body about what they like about it and then share this with the assembled group in what amounts to informal psychotherapy. However, they acknowledge that even these ‘real’ images of older women have been airbrushed; they are beautiful older bodies, but sadly these supposedly naturalistic images have to be made a bit more palatable for commercial reasons.

To give this discussion an immediacy of voice (and following the auto-ethnographic work of Muncey), I have referred to my own experience as an older woman, and though not the focus, I have drawn on my experience. Twigg justifies this approach:

‘The great gain of the feminist literature is that it asserts subjectivity and reflexivity, and in doing so destabilizes the dominant account in such a way that recovers the territory of the body. Until now, a focus on the body in relation to older people has been seen as implicitly oppressive one, concentrating on all the things that encourage the objectification and othering of older people. Feminist and cultural critics in challenging this have regained important territory for social gerontology, and in ways that have deepened our understanding of the experience of old age’ (71).

This article has surveyed and critiqued a range of social gerontological discourse, especially in respect to a reductive essentialism permeating some British theory. It has fundamentally challenged the notion of *the* elderly as an objective social category, and has illustrated a plurality of ways in which women respond to old age. Deficiencies in

social-gerontological theory have been highlighted, especially in relation to women's late-in-life sexuality. It has been noted whilst feminist responses to the subject have varied, many feminist cultural theorists and sociologists have emphasised age as polysemous; the 'othering' of older women in social gerontology has been challenged by reflexive feminist research conducted by older women, though Twigg's overview is critical of the fact that this research has focussed on 'middle-aged' and menopausal women, rather than those in deep older age; from these women we still hear little. Further strategies for challenging ageism and misogyny have been elucidated. An original theory about 'zones of interest', as a possibly useful analytic aid, has been postulated. Finally, I have been willing to 'put myself in the picture' as, has been noted, the concept of reflexivity is important to many feminist researchers. Perhaps as the generation of baby boomers reaches maturity we will challenge the devaluation of older women and older women's relative invisibility.<sup>28</sup> I suspect we will not go quietly.

### **Bibliographic Note**

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> My Pilates teacher waxing lyrical! However, it's an oft-repeated cliché in British vernacular.

<sup>2</sup> Gillies & Aldred (p.41) use the phrase, probably referring to Jo Spence's book *Putting Myself in the Picture. A Political, Personal, and Photographic Autobiography*.

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<sup>3</sup> Walking interviews are when an interviewee talks to a researcher whilst walking. They are useful for elucidating the subject's relationship with the environment.

<sup>4</sup> This is a complex subject. When I told a fellow academic that I was about to start work on this topic, he happened to be about to ring his elderly mother and asked her how she felt about her body, to which she replied, "I don't think about my body at all anymore". He revealed that she has just received treatment for cancer, and was still undergoing treatment. Oakley suggests that, along with ageing, that accidents, illness, childbearing, or other 'disruptions' can make us more aware of our embodiment. It seems extraordinary that even whilst being treated for life-threatening illness the woman in question was able to say, "I don't think about my body at all anymore", though she may have been evading a distressing conversation, but if taken at face value it is extraordinary. A friend living with cancer recently said something very similar.

<sup>5</sup> Cited de Beauvoir 1972:337. De Beauvoir gives no source for this reference, but it is probably from his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (published posthumously 1848–1850).

<sup>6</sup> The British Crime Survey, for example, consistently shows older people to be the group most afraid of violent attack when out alone at night, and the least likely of the age groups listed actually to be prey to such violence.

<sup>7</sup> I was delighted to learn that 'the revival of Cartesian dualism lying beneath certain accounts of the body in age, notably that of Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) in their mask of ageing work' is regarded as highly problematic by Twigg p.63.

<sup>8</sup> Women undergoing HRT to postpone menopause or ameliorate its effects have significantly increased risks of heart disease, breast cancer, pulmonary embolism, stroke, and incontinence (Mayor 2002: 673).

<sup>9</sup> Women's occupational pensions in the UK are likely to yield less than those of men (Gilleard & Higgs 2000:46); also Land 1976; Rosenman 1986. Gibson 1998 produces further analysis, pointing out that women work in sectors characterised by lower pay and fewer well-developed 'fringe-benefits'. Women have lower pensions and less accumulated capital and investments. Women are 'consistently poorer than men in old age, and these adverse financial circumstances are further exacerbated by their greater longevity' (Gibson 1998:83).

<sup>10</sup> Gibson 1998 p.75. Men are less able to maintain a dependent spouse in the home; thus, it is 'predominantly women's labour that maintains aged couples in their own homes, with consequent savings to the public sector' (Gibson: 1998:75). Gibson also challenges the concept of 'interdependence', providing evidence that even disabled and frail elderly women continue to provide a proportionally larger share of domestic responsibilities, especially cooking (p.84). New legislation in Britain (2009) funding carers is likely to be of particular benefit to women, to enable them to remain at home and to provide respite to their caring role.

<sup>11</sup> A caveat needs to be added here that, whilst some ethnic groups tend to be among the poorest sectors of the population, extended family arrangements characteristic of some communities can be beneficial to those needing care and support.

<sup>12</sup> Gibson (1998) also worries about what she describes as a 'potentially dangerous ideological component' which 'lurks within the community care rhetoric – the neo-conservative assumption that it is women's duty to assume such obligations' (p.78). I think it worth adding that, for some women, the caring role would have been a dominant one in their lives and one in which they may feel they have genuine expertise. Cruikshank (2003) also points out that for those older women still in the work force caring roles can have a negative effect on how their work is evaluated (p.123).

<sup>13</sup> Gilliard & Higgs 2000:49 Gilliard & Higgs (2000) assertions about the attractiveness of older men is not substantiated, and it is interesting that they feel it is a given – perhaps they do not share my utter sense of revulsion in seeing a photo in the newspapers of Bernie Ecclestone with his latest 17-year-old mistress!

<sup>14</sup> I asked my 12-year-old daughter at what age she considered women most sexually desirable to men and she answered "Twenty"!

<sup>15</sup> Hewlett's study suggests that 'high achieving women' (defined by income) want to be with successful men, but that successful men want, generally, to be with less ambitious women who work shorter hours and are consequently more available (this is based on America where executives work longer hours than in Europe). The men are looking for someone who will complement them rather than someone who is experiencing similar pressures and stresses and working very long hours. It is not as Sontag suggests merely about men's desire to treat women as sexual 'objects' (p.20); this is one of her more reductive assertions. The ideology of the available wife ready to comfort her husband on his return from work is at play here.

<sup>16</sup> I recall trips to Paris and Morocco undertaken in my twenties, in particular, and literally needing a chaperone to be able to move about freely without being hassled by boys and young men in Morocco! On the other hand, as an older woman, contemplating re-entering the relationships arena, I feel a sense of trepidation!

<sup>17</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Mary Wollstonecraft made relatively similar remarks about her own sex, 'the fondness for dress so extravagant in females, arises from... want of cultivation of mind,' she asserted. chap. xii section iii (para. 30).

<sup>18</sup> Bordo, 1993; Davis, 1995; Bartky, 2000; Jeffreys, 2000; Budgeon, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> The Wellings survey of 18,000 British people, for example, interviewed people up to the age of fifty-nine only. The follow-up survey of sexual attitudes and behaviour, focused on c. 12,000 randomly selected men and women aged between 16-44. It was conducted in 1999-2001 ('Natsal 2000') with 11,161 people aged

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16-44 years interviewed as a 'core' sample, and an additional 949 people of Black African, Black Caribbean, Indian, and Pakistani ethnicity interviewed as part of an 'ethnic minority boost sample' (UCL website).

<sup>20</sup> There has been surprisingly little research on this topic and Gott's survey was small-scale. She did not ask about auto-eroticism, so the sample may not have been completely 'retried'...

<sup>21</sup> When older women dress 'too young'!

<sup>22</sup> Cited Gilleard & Higgs 2000:50.

<sup>23</sup> Hummel, C. Rey, J.C. & Lative d'Epinay, C. J. 1995. Children's Drawings of Grandparents: A Quantitative Analysis of Images in Images of aging : cultural representations of later life edited by Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick.

<sup>24</sup> Gibson 1998 points out that cardio-vascular fitness for older women is important. Certain forms of exercise are therapeutic for arthritis, rheumatism, and osteoporosis. 'Age, sex and social stereotypes conspire to make municipal pools, aerobics classes, gymnasiums, tennis courts and bicycle tracks less than 'user friendly' to women in their fifties and sixties, let alone their seventies and eighties. Such difficulties are, of course, likely to be compounded by the effects of class and ethnicity among some subgroups of older women' (p.85). Notwithstanding, some Muslim girl and women's groups have been very active in negotiating the separate (segregated) use of municipal spaces for their group use.

<sup>25</sup> There is a long historical tradition in Britain of women exploiting the 'carnavalesque', particularly with respect to liminal events (see Hogan 2008 for a detailed analysis). Hogan, S. The Beestings: Rethinking Breast-Feeding Practices, Maternity Rituals, & Maternal Attachment in Britain & Ireland. *Journal of International Women's Studies (JIWS)* Vol. 10. No. 2. November (2008): 141-160.

<sup>26</sup> Duffy 1998, p.68. Duffy, L.M. Lovers, Loners, and Lifers: Sexuality in the Older Adult. *Geriatrics*. 53 (1). (1998): 66-9.

<sup>27</sup> Dove Play: Body and Soul. <http://www.doveplay.ca> Site consulted 18.10.09.

<sup>28</sup> Charter Against Ageism and Sexism (ChASM), developed in collaboration with Women Ageing and Media, National Union of Journalist and Women in Journalism, UK, is one of a number of current initiatives.