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Introduction : Care as Critique and Debating The Ageless Self

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“To think is not to possess the objects of thought:
it is to use them to mark out a realm to think
about which we therefore are not yet thinking about.”
(Merleau-Ponty 1960, 160)

Introducing the Debate: Generating Theory with Care

Scholars in the field of aging and the life course generally develop a critical sensitivity for the complex entanglements of multiple temporalities. Particularly their aged collaborators teach them, in distinct ways, that the thick of the present is a laboratory for reimagining futures from the fissures of tradition and for saturating pasts with what we, as aging subjects, kin, scholars, activists, practitioners, and companions, care for in the contemporary. As feminist STS scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 2017) argues, as in care practice (Mol 2008; Mol, Moser, and Pols 2010), caring in knowledge production is not a universal and generalizing moral disposition – ‘if only we care’ – but an ongoing practice that entails particularity: taken from where we stand, we care for some things more than others, and can become accountable to the fact that some things need not equal but more care. As such, care can be troubling, critical, and generative (Duclos and Criado 2019). Instead of appropriating, reproducing, or discarding, caring in the staging of things – like theoretical concepts and epistemological traditions – adds to their vitality in a particular way and nurtures some futures more than others (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011). Generative care thus also has a speculative dimension: “to mark out a realm to think about which we therefore are not yet thinking about” (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 160). It is in this spirit of generative critique through care that *Anthropology & Aging* launches the Debate as a new annual section in the journal.

The Debate is designed to animate multiple relations with seminal works in anthropology of aging and the life course and to promote the advancement of anthropological theory. This annual section will take a ‘classic’ text in anthropology and aging or popular-culture media (fiction, film, music, comics, etc.) as a point of departure for a diffractive reading of theoretical issues in interdisciplinary research on aging and the life course. The format is called a ‘debate,’ because, like in a formal debate format, the participants are invited to take a clear stance in favour of or against a central statement. However, the art of debating is here of secondary importance and there are no winners or losers in the end. Rather, urging participants to take a stance is a provocation to move beyond calcified consensus on the meanings and uses of seminal concepts, towards affective engagements with their pasts, presents, and futures.

At stake in the Debate is the critical labour of “looking forward, looking back” (Zeitlyn 2015). On the one hand, we invite scholars – the debaters – to be mindful of the genealogy of epistemologies, concepts, and critical traditions in the field, of how they are gathered, and of what was excluded (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, 2017; Zeitlyn 2015). On the other hand, we motivate them to assess the accuracy of these concepts cross-culturally and in a contemporary world with its slowly shifting processes of aging, relating, living, dying, moving, caring, and kinning, and consider what of the past traces in concepts are amenable for particular futures. Thus, we hope for this Debate to become a resource that introduces different publics to the relevant arguments in debatable statements, to be a place where issues of consensus and dissensus in anthropology of aging crystallize, and to contribute to articulating debates for the future in anthropology and aging that can further diverse aging futures.

To achieve these aims we adopt a multimodal approach: the Debate consists of a podcast of a (virtual) live debate held with the debaters, and written pieces by the participants published in *Anthropology & Aging*. In doing so, we hope this Debate section will be a dynamic space for engendering anthropological theory on aging and the life course that can respond to changing times.

First Debate: Reflections on The Ageless Self

For the first debate we invited Editorial Advisory Board members of *Anthropology & Aging* to revisit a quote from anthropologist Sharon Kaufman. Her work recently came to the forefront by her passing away in April 2022, although she has of course always been and remained a reference point in the field. Kaufman made an invaluable contribution to medical anthropology, gerontology, and the anthropology of aging. Among her award-winning work are *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (1986), *A Healer's Tale: Transforming Medicine and Culture* (1993), *And a Time to Die: How American Hospitals Shape the End of Life* (2005), and *Ordinary Medicine: Extraordinary Treatments, Longer Lives and Where to Draw the Line* (2015). Kaufman's radical empiricism and long-term ethnographic engagements allowed her to articulate and theorize contemporary experiences and practices of aging, caring, monitoring, curing, living, suffering, and dying in the era of biomedicalization.

The statement open for debate is a quote from the [reflections](#) on *The Ageless Self* that Kaufman wrote in 1993, a few years after the publication of the book, in *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*.

In this way, I heard many older people talk about themselves, their pasts, and their concerns for the future. I observed that when they talk about who they are and how their lives have been, they do not speak of being old as meaningful in itself. That is, they do not relate to aging or chronological age as a category of experience or meaning. To the contrary, when old people talk about themselves, they express a sense of self that is ageless – an identity that maintains continuity despite the physical and social changes that come with old age. . . . Old people do not perceive meaning in aging itself so much as they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age. Thus, my initial research question about the meaning of aging evolved into an inquiry into identity, or the ageless self, and how it operates as a source of meaning in old age. (Kaufman 1993, 14)

Four members of the Editorial Advisory Board of *Anthropology & Aging* took the time to critically consider this statement, in the light of their own work and research experience, and mindful of the more than three decades that have passed since the publication of the *Ageless Self*. After a first draft of their contributions, they participated in a (virtual) live debate, that was generously moderated by Phil Kao

(which can be listened to be [here](#)). The four wonderful short pieces that were finalized after this debate are included in this debate section.

Bringing in research on aging experiences from very different cultural contexts (Japan, India, Ghana, and the United States) and diffracting notions of aging, agelessness, selves, and culture from various angles, the debaters provide a kaleidoscopic analysis of the ‘ageless self.’ They also carefully articulate some viable alternatives for interrogating aging experiences in the future based on the starting points in the ‘ageless self’ as an analytic concept.

Mark Luborsky, a contemporary of Sharon Kaufman, takes the time to honour her, not through empty glorifications but by taking the intentions and the genealogy of her work seriously. Taking recourse to art and poetry to substantiate his arguments, Luborsky comes out in favour of the statement and he proposes to engage with the ageless self as a reliquary – “a shrine, or a container for something of value, not the thing itself” (Luborsky, this issue). Kaufman and her colleagues were the first generation to provide alternatives for the then dominant representation of aging as a natural stage of diminishment, loss, frailty, and disconnection. Set in this gerontological tradition, her work has a janus face: it is progressive in turning the attention to aging experiences and personal meaning-making in an era where scholars presumed only the abatement of meaning, and it fell prey to the “siren call of the seductive familiarity of the subjective, internal and private sphere” (Luborsky, this issue) that is so characteristic of the Western cultural tradition of privatization and the monadic self. Luborsky further explores the openings that Kaufman’s ‘ageless self’ has made for future scholarship on the diversity of aging experiences. He reminds that it would be a mistake to cast Kaufman as naïve on issues that we would now call intersectional and that significantly constrain possibilities for meaning-making. For example, the focus on meaning-making in *The Ageless Self* at that time contrasted sharply with the prevalent denizenship of older adults and their homogenizing, negative portrayal. Kaufman’s focus on life span personal meanings however, Luborsky notes, also opens up to other diversities in later life. These include cross-cultural or cross-national comparative studies that challenge the binary between collectivist and individualist notions of self; historical, global, and political diversities in the life course different age cohorts which invoke complex negotiations of self and personhood; migratory realities that motivate assemblages of multiple selves and modes of aged belonging; and diversity in the way critical cultural events (such as the development of HIV medication) impact possible experiences of self across the life course. Luborsky contends that by conceiving of the ageless self as a reliquary, it retains its vitality as a provocation of the singular, monadic self that keeps requiring denaturalization in the field of gerontology and anthropology of aging.

While having nothing but praise for Kaufman’s prose, her analysis, and the thickness of her ethnographic work, Cati Coe argues against the ageless self as articulated by Kaufman. Indeed, Coe recognizes, the ageless self is hegemonic in the US, Kaufman’s homeland and field site: it fits well within ideologies of continuous personhood and independence that have regulated a sense of self since the mid-twentieth century. The ageless self however, Coe states, is an emic, not a universal concept to talk about experiences of aging. Bringing in alternative orthodoxies of aging from her decades of research experience in Ghana, she argues that “old age is a powerful cultural category, although one with considerable ambivalences” (Coe, this issue). Power in aging has mostly negative connotations in Ghana, as exemplified in accusations of witchcraft of older women who are alleged to use their power to disrupt social integrity. Yet, aging activists do not propose agelessness as heterodoxy but work to undo the power associated with aging, propagating “considerations of a long life as a blessing from God, not a sign of malevolent power” (Coe, this issue). Unlike the American cultural context, she finds that the Ghanaian cultural context does provide the resources for the articulation of aging selves: older Ghanaian adults actively perform aging through attending to and making explicit their aging bodies as

weak and in pain, and through actively anticipating death by preparing standardized narratives of their social accomplishments during life. Reaching beyond the statement that (aging) selves are culturally specific, Coe proposes the notion of *repertoire* to account for “a toolbox of practices, skills, and ideologies” (Coe, this issue) that people draw from to respond to different challenges in life. The repertoire is synchronic in nature – it changes throughout history and over the life course, unlike notions of ‘culture’ or ‘self’ have us believe. Importantly, one aspect of the repertoire is the cultural sensorium that calls attention to embodiment, bodily sensations, and references to embodiment in discourse – aspects of aging that receive little attention in Kaufman’s work. Coe makes a claim for focusing on these sensory experiences of and through aging bodies to analyze experiences of aging and gain insight into which bodily experiences are socially recognized and legitimate, and which are not. Being mindful of the cultural sensoria of aging can reveal which factors influence changing repertoires for self- and person-making, and opens up to the politics of aging.

The concern for the emic character of the ageless self is echoed in Sarah Lamb’s debate piece. Speaking from an ethnographic engagement similar to Kaufman’s, 40 years later, Lamb agrees at least in part with her finding that older Americans embody an ageless self as a positive source of meaning making in later life, what she in her own work (2014) sometimes calls “permanent personhood.” What is problematic, Lamb argues, is that the ageless self is “a particular, even peculiar, cultural-historical construct” (Lamb, this issue), not a universal category to analyse all aging experiences. Doing anthropology at home without fully destabilizing the doxa – her own doxa – Kaufman does not pause on “*why* North Americans might be so particularly inclined to posit a self as ageless” (Lamb, this issue). Having herself focused on the exacerbation of the ageless self in the “successful aging” paradigm as a “cultural obsession” (Lamb 2017), like Cati Coe, Lamb reminds that the American context does not provide a space for aging selves. It rather promotes the eradication of experiences of aging and the continuity of productivity, health, and meaning as a project of the self to exorcise the deep fear of decline and death. In the US, the aged self is not a cultural possibility. In a privileged position to defamiliarize the familiar with years of ethnographic experience in India, Lamb contrasts the ageless self as a cultural ideal with the ambiguities of aging experiences of older Indian adults. Foregrounding transience and transformation rather than stability as central to human life, aging in India is a meaningful stage of life, as any other. Influences of positive aging or anti-aging discourses, practices, and products in India also do not result in a dismay of signs of aging. As one of her interlocutors phrases it: “I don’t mind being called old, because I am old” (Amarnath Banerjee in Lamb, this issue). However, Lamb reminds, the ageless self as a cultural ideal, is not uncontested in the US either. Echoing much of the ethos of Ursula Le Guin’s statement on aging that “denial serves nothing” (Le Guin 2017, 17), some of Lamb’s US interlocutors also acknowledge the violence of the cultural ideal of transcending aging, arguing instead for a realist attitude towards life and mortality, and for accepting transformation as central to personhood. Lamb closes her argument with a call for a continued interest in the particular embodiments (or the absence thereof) of this ideal and invites future anthropologists “to investigate whether and in what ways visions of agelessness over the life course resonate—or not—with the experiences of situated interlocutors” (Lamb, this issue).

Jason Danelly, coming out against Kaufman’s statement, pursues these questions in an aging Japan, a cultural context that, similar to the US, provides little cultural space for embodying aging as a meaningful life stage. Official and administrative terms, like ‘senior’ (*kōreisha*), as well as more mundane and traditional concepts, like ‘elder’ (*rōjin*), simultaneously signify looming dependency and frailty in aging, and the responsibility to actively prevent dependence in aging. But does the lack of a discursive space to talk about aging in positive or even neutral terms mean that older Japanese adults might identify as ageless? “Many, no doubt, would, though not without some hesitance,” Danelly argues; but this does not make the ageless self a valid analytical concept for aging experiences in Japan. All these

terms and their appropriations need historical and political grounding. The fear of dependence that motivates practices of healthy aging for his interlocutors is not inherent to the aging self, but the consequence of historical and sociopolitical contingencies. Born a couple of years prior to the postwar baby boom generation (1947-49), his interlocutors, members of a Senior Center, retired in an increasingly neoliberal climate that forcefully mobilized a discourse of responsibility, prevention, and independence and saw the further pathologisation of old age with the new Long-Term Care Insurance system in the 2000s. The grimness of an aging population as futureless is further confirmed and magnified in popular media. The desire of older adults for agelessness would not be too far-fetched in this climate. Yet, Danely argues, practices and discourses of healthy aging by older adults are not merely reactions to social demands, but are also future-oriented practices. By caring for their health, they are also caring for a care-less future for their own children, taking recourse to paid care and support, and for thickening intergenerational relations so central for Japanese subjectivities. Additionally, “selves overflow the power of cultural and biopolitical narratives” (Danely this issue). Conversations with older adults outside the Senior Center taught Danely that aging was practiced as a process of transformation, including experimentation with new rituals, play, and relationships, as well as re-integrations of a changing past, and aspirations for the future. Selves were changed through these practices that were often prompted by “existential possibilities” (Parish 2008 quoted in Danely, this issue). “Aging as the process of inhabiting change over time,” Danely (this issue) argues, denotes the continuous labor of integration, recomposition, and renewal in – not outside of or in despite of – the conditions of later life. This, Danely suggests, is not the kind of labor for which the ageless self is equipped because it finds no meaning in old age. For anthropologists to be able to account for this everyday labor of meaning-making in aging, Danely proposes to meet older age as an “existential situation” (Le Guin 2017, 17) through which aging bodies continuously explore capacities of possible selves.

Decades after the publication of *The Ageless Self*, Sharon Kaufman has again propelled the invention of anthropological theory of aging. This debate honors Kaufman’s timely efforts to excavate experiences of aging and meaning-making in later life from the cellars of gerontology, where these had remained hidden behind the pathologisation of aging as a natural episode of decline. All speaking from their own research backgrounds, the debaters highlight the cultural specificity of the ageless self, as a particularly Western, American possibility for identification and meaning-making. They historicize and denaturalize interiority, independence, continuity and – concomitantly – agelessness as standards for meaning-making in later life. For the future, some analytical shifts are proposed – to repertoires, cultural sensoria, and possible selves – to better account for the historically and culturally contingent ways in which people navigate the challenges of everyday life throughout the life course. In sum, this debate is again a reminder for anthropologists of aging and the life course to cultivate a greater sensitivity to the inventiveness of older adults to make, find, and give meaning to their lives through the embodied, experimental and situated appropriation of cultural discourses and identities, whether these be ageless or aged.

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