

Growing (b)Old: A Spirited Approach to Aging

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar Ilan University

Ellen Greenfield

011732021

Advisor: Professor Ilana Blumberg

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לפני שיבה תתקומם: להעיז להזדקן

הצעת מחקר לתזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

אלן גרינפילד

011732021

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Aims and General Description

I came to my curiosity about aging from my experience as a social worker in the 1990's, working with the elderly in a New Jersey hospital. I found many of my clients with a passion for life, wanting to contribute to their communities in a productive and creative fashion which belied their often-frail demeanors and limited physical abilities. Yet, this wasn't always the case. Many seniors succumbed to depression, feeling the weight of ageist attitudes and diminished self-esteem.

What intrigues me, then, is understanding the elderly who, despite physical limitations and age discrimination in the United States, "soldier on", looking to actualize their pre-existing aspirations and even creating new ones.

As I have just turned fifty-five, I will be looking at my own concerns and insecurities about aging: As a middle-aged graduate student learning alongside millennials, can I compete with younger, agile minds, and what contribution do I bring? And as I approach the age of the clients with whom I work and the elderly whom I will be interviewing, an even more compelling question for me is: *what legacy will I leave behind?*

My hope is that my aging voice on the page will join the new chapters being written by the elders I've interviewed and plan to interview, as well as narratives of retired persons, writers, and artists to create a political and artistic presence that can re-teach what it means to grow old. My thesis is creative nonfiction and the sub-genre is memoir. I see the interviews and the scholarly literature on aging as trigger moments for reflection as they inform my own feelings and aspirations as an aging student and writer. These personal observations about my own midlife experience will not be set off in chapters of their own, but will be interspersed throughout the thesis, as they are generated from the interviews I will be conducting and relevant literature on aging.

Conceptual Background

Objective and empirical demarcations of what constitutes age are constraining when defining the elder years. There is a subjective sensibility that applies, particularly when describing this life stage.

“How old would you be if you didn't know how old you were?” said Satchel Paige, the twentieth century's oldest baseball player. In his playing field, age is a liability. To be 47 years old and still be competitive in athletics is a statement of Paige's talent, his sterling record, but most of all his spirit and refusal to cave in to the negative expectations of a youth-oriented culture. As Zalman Schachter so eloquently describes this attitude in his book, *From Age-Ing To Sage-Ing*:

Gerontologists no longer regard the “inevitable declines of nature”—such as reduced physical strength and mental acuity—as necessities of nature. Rather, they view these conditions as the result of a sedentary lifestyle that is reinforced by negative aging stereotypes that condition us to expect physical and mental decline in our later years. (5)

He continues by noting the historical context of this decline, pointing to the Industrial Revolution.

Many immigrants came to America to escape from authoritarian Old World traditions, including the tyranny of kings and monarchies. But in their revolutionary zeal to overthrow authority, they dealt the aged a grievous blow. Identifying old people with the “old ways” that were overturned by the American and French revolutions, they vowed never again to submit to such tyranny. Power passed from the fathers to the democratic sons, who valued the new and technological, rather than the old and traditional ways of the past. This shift has created great technological progress but has left elders without meaningful roles. (64)

This trend still continues today, as elders figure out what their roles are in this post-industrial world that devalues their unique offerings. The population that I am focusing on in this thesis are Anglo Americans who live in the United States and Israel, and are mining these years of their lives for opportunities of personal growth, creativity, and social contributions.

The relatively new field of age studies addresses the quandary with which today's seniors are faced. As Lynn Segal writes in "The Coming of Age Studies,"

Understanding the paradoxes of old age means tackling how we always struggle throughout our lives to become, and remain, the person we feel "we are," striving to retain some sense of selfhood and agency, although such efforts encounter different challenges across a lifetime. In western societies especially, we find ourselves early on directed to become, and above all to remain, autonomous, independent, future-oriented individuals. Such teaching, with its disavowal of so much about our human vulnerabilities, passivity, interdependence, and mortality, can only shore up trouble for the future. It ensures that all too soon, our registering of aging is likely to prove a perplexing, even frightening, affair.

It is this paradox that Segal describes here that I will be addressing, particularly with elders that are facing these obstacles of ageist expectations that have been internalized from their immediate environments and from the pervading attitudes of the surrounding culture. Old Age brings more intense challenges in maintaining selfhood than any other life stage. Having to cope with the unique constraints of this time of life-disability, fear of death, loss of independence- creates what Segal aptly describes as a "perplexing, even frightening, affair." It is remarkable to note, then, that elders are able to access this time of life as an opportunity for growth and creativity and meaningful contribution.

Yet this time of life, despite its limitations, presents the elder with a unique window of time that brings with it decrease of familial obligations, and an opportunity for personal growth. Mary Catherine Bateson couches the task of aging in terms of Erikson's Stages of Development: "How do I grow older and remain myself—or rather, how in growing older do I become more truly myself, and how is that expressed in what I do or say or contribute?" (237). Bateson explores this question of aging identity throughout her book in interviews with people, as they reflect on their lives from the vantage point of Adulthood II. This is the stage of life that she understands as a time that precedes Old Age, which she refers to as "active wisdom." It is a time when a person takes stock of what they have accomplished thus far in life, but "don't feel it's too late to do something *more or different*" (italics mine) Adulthood II is characterized by the "wisdom culled from long lives and rich experience, but combines it with energy and commitment in the context of a new freedom from some kinds of day-to-day responsibility." (19)

In particular, Bateson's interviewing style, in which she allows interviewees to define their own trajectories, resonates deeply with me:

I let people frame their own narratives around the implicit plots or through lines that represent their theory of what the story is really about, what in fact their life has been about, a central passion or a recurrent challenge that acts as a landmark as they move from stage to stage. For some it is achievement, for others it may be victimization, while for others still it is continuing discovery and learning. (139)

This open style of interviewing that Bateson describes is more fruitful than a questionnaire style of interviewing. An older person who may already have anxieties about aging that was referred to earlier, will be able to reflect more freely on their personal life narratives when they are not limited by a rigid structure of exploration.

The elder person has to build this narrative against a backdrop of biological prejudice. Unlike racism, it is not the color of one's skin, but its worn and wrinkled appearance that allows for irrational assumptions of a person's cognitive functioning and abilities. Zalman Schachter writes that, "In the popular imagination, old age means wrinkled skin and chronic disease, rather than the wisdom, serenity, balanced judgement, and self-knowledge that represent the fruit of long life." Schachter sees these years as prime time for doing "life review," psychospiritually healing the past to open up potential for growth, in the present and future. He calls them the wisdom years and sees seniors as "stewards" of the planet. Schachter takes this paradigm shift one step further by employing the Jungian construct of archetype, juxtaposing the young person as "hero" and the "inner elder".

As an alternative to society's youthful ideals of strength and beauty, Chinen says the elder holds up an image of maturity, based on self-knowledge, transcendence of the personal ego, and the willingness to serve society as a mentor and teacher to the young. (140)

Schachter reframes the picture of aging by seeing these biological markers of growing old in a positive and productive light. Wrinkled skin and limited mobility are not merely signs of senescence. Rather, they are badges that connote wisdom and maturity, informing a purpose and mission to guide the next generation.

As a rabbi with a mystical bent, Schachter sees this time of intense spiritual growth and introspection. "In elderhood, we can derive our identity more from the level of being, rather than doing. As we become more contemplative, we rely less on finding self-worth through our performance in the work world" (127). Growing (b)old is being comfortable in old, wrinkled skin. It is a time of expansiveness, not in spite of, but in direct cause of limitation. Growing (b)old is using the time go inward, to harvest the wisdom of a lifetime:

Schachter sees the archetype of the elder saying, “I’ve learned something about my life, my friend. I love you and I’m available to share it with you.” (195) This contemplative aspect of growing old is especially relevant when looking at how the aging artist sees the development of his craft.

Where does the artist fit into the continuum? In particular, the writer. Does the creative muse wane like the physical prowess of the writer, or does age bring wisdom and maturity to the writer’s craft?

As Donald Hill, poet laureate, describes it:

When I was young, my language wore coats and shirts and trousers, neckties, bespoke shoes. In my lifetime as a writer I have cast off layer after layer of clothing in pursuit of nudity. In a paragraph or two, my prose embodies a momentary victory over fatigue. As I write toward my nineties I shed my skin. Why should the nonagenarian hold anything back? (135)

Throughout his two books of collected essays on aging, *A Carnival of Losses: Notes Nearing Ninety*, and *Essays after Eighty*, Hall bemoans how he has lost the ability to write poetry, and yet he charts his aging craft with broad strokes of descriptive language, evoking poetry, rather than prose. Here is his description of how the elderly are perceived:

When we turn eighty, we understand that we are extraterrestrial. If we forget for a moment that we are old, we are reminded when we try to stand up, or when we encounter someone young, who appears to observe green skin, extra heads, and protuberances. People’s response to our separateness can be callous, can be goodhearted, and is always condescending. (8)

I will be interviewing other artists and writers to see if the muse is still with them, and how aging has impacted their artistic pursuits.

In terms of style, I place myself mid-range in the continuum from the objective observer (“the eye”) to the subjective narrator (“I”). Much of my inspiration is drawn from Joan Didion’s modus operandi as a writer of creative nonfiction, visible in her invisibility. She is present in her writing, but like someone who walks into a party uninvited and then becomes the most celebrated guest.

In the following excerpt, Didion uses an interview with a nonagenarian artist as a springboard to meditate on a crude stereotype unfairly applied to the elderly. And it is precisely these articulate reflections that make her reading so engaging.

“Hardness” has not been in our century a quality much admired in women nor in the past twenty years has it even been in official favor for men. When hardness surfaces in the very old we tend to transform it into “crustiness” or eccentricity, some tonic pepperiness to be indulged at a distance on the evidence of her work and what she has said about it, Georgia O’Keeffe is neither “crusty” nor eccentric. She is simply hard, a straight shooter, a woman clean of received wisdom and open to what she sees. ()

Didion employs a writing technique so masterfully that I take it as an inspiration. She notes the insights of her interviewee, quietly places them her away in her “notebook, and retrieves them later for a powerfully stunning rhetorical effect.

In Texas, she had her sister Claudia with her for a while, and in the late afternoons they would walk away from town and toward the horizon and what the evening star come out. “That evening star fascinated me,” she wrote. ...MY sister had a gun, and as we walked she would throw bottles into the air and shoot as many as she could before they hit the ground. I had nothing but to walk into nowhere and the wide sunset space with the star.” Ten watercolors were made from that star.” In a way, one’s interest is compelled as much by the sister Claudia with the gun as by the painter Georgia with the star, *but only the painter left us this shining record. Ten watercolors were made from that star.* (italics mine, 274)

In analyzing the mastery of Didion’s writing, I note that the image of “ten water colors were made from that star” leads Didion to the reflection of “only the painter left us this shining record,” with the reference back to star. Then the poetic repetition completes for the reader how astounded Didion was by the artist and her work. The reader has no choice but to be caught up in the stunning air current of literary prose.

As I write and reflect on the elders I am interviewing, my aim is to employ Didion’s style of understated observation, while being present on the page. This is an important writing strategy, as it allows for a more objective mode of observation, while maintaining the integrity of the subjective narrator. Furthermore, Didion’s ability to take ageist lexicon and translate into non-prejudicial, clear cut understandings and language about aging, is precisely what I hope to achieve in my research, interviews and reflections throughout my thesis.

While Joan Didion’s memoir writing preference is more towards the objective end of the continuum of Creative Nonfiction, Mary Gordon’s subjective voice is felt more explicitly on the page. The author of two memoirs, Gordon weaves quotidian references into her memoir, *Shadow Man*, for a powerful rhetorical effect.

Now I know that whether I am in silence or listening to music, in a dark room or walking through New York streets, swimming in the ocean, about to fall asleep in a strange bed in a foreign city, talking about Flaubert or Joyce to students, beating eggs or stirring soup, feeding my children or listening to their stories, making love beneath the body of a man he could not even have imagined, I am always my father's daughter. (xxiv)

It is these detailed descriptions that strike a universal chord that creates resonance with the reader that are so vitally important to the memoir writer.

Throughout her writing, Gordon masters the complex layering of the “Narrated I” and the “Narrating I.” (The former is the voice of the writing recording the past. The latter is the voice of reflection of that experience.)

This is not a happy position for a loving daughter to be in: to be forced to choose between seeing something her father wrote as mad and seeing it as evil. I chose the second. I chose as my father's daughter. He would have considered it a cowardly evasion to call something mad that was quite possibly evil. So I called his manuscript evil, then forgot about it. (xvii)

Gordon is able to maintain the delicate balance of expressing admiration for her father, even as she showcases his weaknesses. This nuanced reflection demonstrates the finely-honed craft of the memoirist, and is essential to the credibility of her narrative.

Finally, Mary Gordon’s aesthetic sensibilities shape the language concerning the most painful realizations about her father.

I saw not only the horror of his ideas, but the weakness of his style. I lost another father: the father of the brilliant sentence, the brilliantly shaped phrase. (xxi)

The brutal shock of Gordon’s realizations about her father our couched in the eloquence and rhythm of her sentences.

I am aiming to employ these techniques that Gordon models so effectively in creating resonance with her readers with use of vivid details, poignant personal reflections, and well-crafted language to shape my experience of aging on the page.

Shape of project

My thesis is divided into four parts:

1. Introduction

In this section I will explore the psychosocial map of the territory called “old age.” Included will be the tasks of aging, as defined in the professional literature from an anthropologist’s and development psychologist’s perspective. I will also lay out the specific parameters of old age I will be including in this thesis.

As a social worker who has helped seniors craft their memoirs for the past decade, I have been privileged to hear life narratives of the elderly as they reflect on the milestones of their lives: those events and relationships that are weighted most significantly in defining a person’s identity and the narrative arc of their lives. Their stories reflect a wide range of topics, but I will be focusing on those interviews that deal with the unique challenges and opportunities of aging in the context of their lives, *as they view them*. While the workshops were conducted here in Israel, the participants were from North America, England, and South Africa. It is this cultural understanding that will inform the interviews and research of this thesis, as I investigate what aging is and how reflection during these further years shapes a life retrospectively. It is this “Narrating I” that looks back and views experiences from the vista of old age, and comes up with a more complex understanding of his life struggles than when he lived through them. For instance, a financial mistake in one’s forties might seem disastrous at the time. Yet reflecting on it years, often decades later, an elder might understand that subsequent financial decisions were informed by this previous disaster, so much so he no longer views it as a disaster, rather, an instructive life lesson. Real names will be used with the permission of the interviewee, unless otherwise indicated. The subjects for these interviews are English-speaking, or from English-speaking countries.

These in-depth interviews with seniors as they reflect on their own aging process in the context of their lives, is what Stephen Katz refers to as “the inside of aging.”

As Stephen Katz notes:

An advantage of age studies is how it emphasizes the “inside of aging” and what it *means* to grow older. Here the humanities have been especially vital as they promote questions of identity, the body, experience, language and metaphor, life-course continuity and disruption, sensation, emotions, and biography. These are the subjective and everyday aspects of aging by which we live out our lives; thus research requires careful observation and participation, discourse analysis, qualitative interviews, deconstruction of images and texts, and close attention to the ordinary. Narrative is particularly important because it anchors the inside of aging, bringing together self and society and animating our biographies as we borrow, adapt, interpret, and reinvent the languages, symbols, and meanings around us to customize our personal stories.

It is through such structured narratives, then, that I hope to portray a more textured, complex picture of what it means to grow old, as this phenomenon plays out in the everyday aspects of older people as they experience it in all dimensions of being: body, emotion and spirit.

2. Ageism and the Role of the Elder

I will discuss how prejudices of the aged affect elders, how they see themselves, and how social attitudes have affected their aspirations in this stage of their lives. This section will include interviews with seniors.

3. The Aging Artist

This section will deal with the particular phenomenon that aging artists experience. I will be focusing on the experiences of writers, but not exclusively, as I note how aging inspires and informs the creative impulse and endeavor. I will include the depiction of aging artists in some of the interviews and literature I am researching.

4. Growing b(Old): a look towards the future

What can we learn from this thesis that might shape attitudes toward aging differently?

The only way to fire up a grass roots movement is to raise the voices of these elders. It is an honor and privilege to be on the receiving end of their life stories. Even as their voices falter as they fall, or memories dissipate as they mumble, they have a vital role to play in “harvesting” their life experiences and wisdom, and guiding the next generation.

Here I will include personal reflections as to my own aging experience, as well as those of the elders I've interviewed.

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