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Ageism: A Health Humanities Approach

In her keynote address at the joint European Network in Ageing Studies (ENAS) / North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS) conference on 30 April 2017, Margaret Gullette recalled a violent incident on United Airlines flight 3211 that went viral on social media and sparked a national outcry. On Sunday, 9 April 2017, a flight scheduled to leave from Chicago's O'Hare Airport was overbooked. The airline wanted to bump four passengers to accommodate its staff members who were heading to a connection point. Passengers were offered \$800 and a seat on a flight the next afternoon, but no one volunteered to leave. At that point, the airlines selected four people in economy class and told them to get off the plane. However, 69-year-old Vietnamese-American doctor David Dao objected. As he explained, he had to make the flight because he was seeing patients the next day. At that point, things got ugly. The airline summoned guards who forcibly removed Dr. Dao from the plane. The video of the incident – which was posted on the internet and garnered over 400,000 views – shows Dao resisting and crying out in pain as the guards slam his head into an armrest and wrench him from his seat. The video ends with Dr. Dao on his back – face bleeding, eyeglasses broken, belly exposed – as the guard drags his limp body down the aisle. Whereas the majority of people viewed the incident as a blatant instance of racism, Gullette maintained that it was, in fact, a covert example of ageism. “Dao,” she insists, “is not just old, not just ‘Asian,’ but ‘old Asian,’ read as ‘weak, passive handles without fuss’” (Gullette, “The Violence of Ageism”).

We begin our introduction to the special issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* on ageism by citing Gullette's view of Dr. Dao's assault because, prior to her lecture, no one in the audience viewed his mistreatment by United Airlines from the perspective of ageism. Frankly, after Gullette's talk, many people remained skeptical of her claim. Nevertheless, her assertion productively and provocatively raised key questions among age-studies scholars. First, is ageism a technical or political and polemical term? Second, when people use the term, are they referring to a way of thinking or a way of structuring society that leads to age discrimination? Third, what is ageism's relationship to other isms including racism, classism, sexism, and ableism? Are these relationships de facto intersectional, or might they also be oppositional? Fourth, if as Deborah Rupp et al. assert, ageism implies a threefold dimension – cognitive (stereotypes), affective (attitudes), and behavioural (discrimination) – do all three dimensions need to be operative simultaneously for an experience to qualify as “ageist”? Fifth, recalling J.L. Austin's speech act theory, is describing something as “ageist” referential, or is it a performative gesture? In other words, does my calling something ageist make it so, or do instances of ageism exist independent of an individual's pronouncement? Finally, on a related note, did “ageism” exist before the term was coined in the 1960s, or is it a new phenomenon? Since Gullette's keynote in 2017, the importance of coming to grips with both the concept of ageism and its workings has grown more urgent due to COVID-19 – a global pandemic that has proved especially lethal to frail older people. Now under lockdown for the second time, with several potential vaccines on the horizon, we are offering the current volume to readers in the hope of enhancing our understanding of this complex and contested term.

As the title of this issue indicates, we are adopting a health humanities approach, characterized by a willingness to rely on the humanities and the arts when addressing questions of well-being, health, and health care (Crawford 3). Before we turn to prevailing definitions of ageism, it might be helpful first

to explain briefly why a literary studies professor (Goldman) and a sociologist (Higgs) chose to collaborate on a project that analyzes ageing and old age from a health humanities perspective. Traditionally, these topics were the purview of gerontology, a discipline historically committed to the scientific study of old age, the process of ageing, and the particular problems of old people. As Thomas Cole observes, in the last fifteen years or more, scholars who have pioneered the new history of old age “have taken their basic orientation from the social and biomedical sciences, which generally view old age as an engineering problem to be solved or at least ameliorated” (xxi). In contrast to the social scientific and biomedical approaches, and in keeping with the world of contemporary social historians and age studies critics, we rely on the humanities to bring a much-needed alternative perspective to bear on the experiences of ageing and, by extension, the meanings and experiences of ageism. Elsewhere, Goldman argues that perhaps Cole puts it best when he says, “growing up and old is not only a process, rooted in our biological existence, structured by social and historical circumstances. It is also an *experience*, an incalculable series of events, moments and acts lived by an individual person” (xxxii). Whereas the process may remain the purview of the scientists, clinicians, and social scientists, the experience and its often elided and repressed features are the domain of writers. Literature and the humanities are essential to age studies because abstract biomedical and sociological narratives often ignore the texture of people’s lives.

As Virginia Woolf observes in *A Room of One’s Own*, “there is a spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head which one can never see for oneself” (86). She insists that “it is one of the good offices that sex can discharge for sex – to describe that spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head” (86). Although Woolf was referring to gender, disciplines also have their blind spots – a realization that increasingly prompts age studies scholars to create opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. In

the spirit of collaboration, this collection does not strive for a monologic, single definition of ageism. Instead, we offer eleven essays that explore various definitions of ageism that have circulated since the term was coined by Dr. Robert Butler in 1969. In the remainder of this introduction, we outline the prevailing definitions and clarify the various approaches adopted by the authors of the essays in this special issue.

Coming to Terms with “Ageism”

Elias Cohen points out that Max Lerner, in his “monumental volume” *America as a Civilization* (1957), proves one of the earliest descriptions of the “phenomenon now known as ‘ageism.’” As Lerner states, “It is natural for the culture to treat the old like the fag end of what was once good material. ... The most flattering thing you can say to an older American is that he ‘doesn't look his age’ and ‘doesn't act his age’—as if it were the most damning thing in the world to look old” (613). Over a decade later, Robert Butler formally introduced the term “ageism” in his celebrated essay “Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry,” published in the *Gerontologist* in 1969. As Butler explains,

Ageism describes the subjective experience implied in the popular notion of the generation gap. Prejudice of the middle-aged against the old in this instance, and against the young in others, is a serious national problem. Age-ism reflects a deep-seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged – a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, “uselessness,” and death. (243)

Butler intended “ageism” to sit alongside terms describing other forms of oppression on the basis of race, class, and gender, which were coming to the fore in the ferment of the cultural revolution of the 1960s. He speculated that ageism is especially prevalent in America, “a society that has traditionally valued pragmatism, action, power, and the vigour of youth over contemplation, reflection, experience, and the wisdom of age” (243). Focusing on Chevy Chase, Maryland, Butler implicitly adopted what is currently described as an “intersectional” approach. He argues, for example, that in Chevy Chase, as elsewhere, “class, color, and age” are core structural elements of American communities; and, despite Social Security, “the elderly poor” are numerous, and “they are frequently black” (243).

Although Butler maintains that “ageism” serves as a description of “subjective experience,” his essay touches on ageism’s structural facets. He insists, for instance, that the age-based discrimination faced by many older Americans is underpinned by policies of mandatory retirement from paid employment. As a doctor, he also railed against the lack of concern for the health needs of the older population. He believed that this neglect was symptomatic of the low status older people had within society, and he highlighted the “othering” of the older population by younger cohorts. In his biography of Butler, Andrew Achenbaum observes that Butler continued to campaign and challenge the persistence of ageism for the rest of his life, developing his ideas as the situation changed. In an editorial published in 2009, for example, Butler states “that age discrimination exists advertently and inadvertently in personal and institutional form, and that economic and psychological factors play a major part in ageism as well” (“Combating Ageism,” 211). In sum, Butler’s contribution paved the way for more robust structural accounts and cultural understandings of the interplay of issues surrounding ageism.

Although Butler will be remembered as the person who first defined ageism, as a physician he remained aware of the embodied and material dimension of ageism. In keeping with Butler's body-based approach, many contemporary accounts of ageism, including Bill Bytheway's book (aptly named *Ageism*), likewise grapple with the centrality of biology and the body. Bytheway's analysis begins by stressing the importance of the beliefs held by people of all ages regarding the negative impact of biological ageing on all humans. He relies on people's views of biology to construct his account of the fear of ageing that, in his view, develops over people's lifetimes. Other critics, most notably Michael S. North and Susan T. Fiske in an article in the *Psychological Bulletin*, point out that negative views of the physical signs of agedness, such as grey hair and wrinkles, are international phenomena. Age studies scholars unanimously concede that ageism is rooted in the idea and, at times, the perception of a body in apparent decline. Recalling the essentialist claims concerning racism and sexism, however, they observe that readings of the aged body as frail, closer to nature, degenerate, deprived, and weak are stereotypical projections. Although stereotypes are sometimes accurate, no one wants or should have to live under their oppressive shadow. Critics of ontological accounts of ageism thus argue that the reading of the body may be unwittingly reductionist – the outcome of unconsciously viewing the body through the lenses of both sexism and ageism – elements of what Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard helpfully refer to as “the social imaginary.” Nevertheless, since the fears and desires projected on the body and, we would add, the body itself cannot be discounted, accounts of ageism that grapple with the embodiment remind us that the body serves, in Glenda Laws's words, as a “surface of inscription,” and that by extension, ageism, like sexism and racism, “is an embodied form of oppression” (114).

In addition to theories that attend to the embodied aspects of ageism, accounts that trace cultural and psychological dimensions of ageism have also proliferated with considerable vigour.

Researchers such as Todd Nelson, for example, conceive of ageism as a fear of our future selves (“Ageism: Prejudice against Our Feared Future Self”). In *Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People*, Margaret Gullette argues further that all discourses surrounding ageing implicitly rely on a narrative of “decline” – a narrative so profoundly oppressive and totalizing that it is dangerous and, in some cases, lethal.

Gullette’s and other critics’ invocation of the harms – the physical and mental trauma – instigated by ageism prompts consideration of an under-theorized aspect of the discussion around ageism; namely, whether it is a technical term that can be studied relatively dispassionately, or if it primarily serves a polemical function. The work of Becca Levy and her colleagues, which seeks to quantify the cost of ageism on people’s health, constitutes an example of the former. More commonly, however, ageism is used in accordance with Butler’s initial essay: to denote forms of social injustice perpetrated by human and structural agents that do not value the lives of older people. Drawing on Butler’s approach, a number of contemporary age studies critics focus on people’s use of discriminatory words and phrases that denigrate frail older people, particularly people with dementia. These critics could be said to use the term “ageism” in a polemical fashion, adding ageism to a general set of oppressive features of contemporary society. The polemical approach has been successful to varying degrees at both national and international levels, if it is measured by the number of commitments to challenging ageism in its many different forms. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, myriad examples of ageism have been reported. These range from age-demarcated risk reduction policies to the abandonment of nursing home residents by care staff. Accounts of ageism during the pandemic make a powerful case against age discrimination, but they account for neither the causes of ageism nor its persistence over recorded history.

Equally problematic, many of the cognitive and attitudinal theories of ageism also rest on an implicit, overarching assumption that there is an underlying desire on the part of the elites in society to oppress older people – a point made eloquently by Teun van Dijk. Van Dijk’s theories and related others, however, raise a key question: why do such elites wish to promote such discourses? The challenge of what we refer to, in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as “paranoid” readings of ageism becomes apparent when one compares ageism to sexism and racism; in the case of ageism, it is profoundly difficult to identify its origins and causal mechanisms, the structures that maintain it, and who benefits from it.

These and other vexing questions about the term proliferate and, understandably, scholars have not reached a consensus. John Macnicol, for instance, views ageism as a multifaceted phenomenon that can certainly lead to negative discrimination but that also justifies the existence of various age-related benefits and mandatory retirement pensions. For this reason, he prefers to speak of “age discrimination” rather than “ageism” per se. A reductive and wholly negative “paranoid” view of age discrimination, for example, elides a consideration of the widespread perception of the privileges that have come to be associated with later life. The resources and opportunities that the post-war baby boomer cohorts have seemingly accrued to themselves are repeatedly cited as the source of intergenerational conflict. While the epithet “OK, Boomer” is no more accurate than that of the “Snowflake Generation,” it reminds us that ageism may not be exclusively limited to the oppression of older people; in some instances, age may have many benefits when set against youth.

Contributions to the Special Issue

Given the increasing importance of reflecting on the concept, we sought papers from representatives from a variety of disciplines. We begin with Andrew Achenbaum's essay on the life and work of Robert Butler. Achenbaum's reflections not only foreground Butler's commitment to challenging ageism but also trace the extent to which ageism impacted on Butler's own life and how he understood his own ageing within the context of his theories. Following Achenbaum's lead, Chris Gilleard's essay reflects on Simone de Beauvoir, the author of the most seminal books on old age, who had her own difficulties with the idea of old age. In accordance with Achenbaum's and Gilleard's considerations of society's view of decline and dependency, Susan Pickard explores Julia Kristeva's notion of "the abject." Granting that dependency and decline are features of what has been termed "the fourth age" – a social imaginary that contains society's greatest fears about old age and that among others is associated with "abjection" – Pickard nevertheless argues that these and other signs need not be perceived solely in negative terms. In essence, her essay challenges that there is only one way to read the inscriptions of time on the aged body.

The remaining essays ground the discussion of ageism in more concrete terms. Loredana Ivan and Stephen Cutler's article addresses the real-world dynamic between older people's uptake of technology, ageist views of technology use, and their negative impact on older people themselves. Surprisingly, research demonstrating that technology – designed mostly by young people with young consumers in mind – creates products that are difficult for older people to use has had little impact on commercial enterprises and policy-makers. In part, this reflects Robert Butler's original insights about ageism that draw attention to the under-funding of research on ageing as well as the segregation of older people from the mainstream of society.

Examining yet another important facet of the cultural dynamics involved in contextualising ageism, Caroline Bergeron and Martine Lagacé explore how members of visible minority groups experience the process of ageing and the extent to which they feel that they have been the target of ageism. Their essay underscores the importance of cultural difference in shaping how members of diverse cultural groups experience age discrimination and react to ageist stereotypes. Raza M. Mirza, Lynn McDonald, and Laura Tamblyn-Watts's essay on ageism in workplace culture helpfully broadens Ivan and Cutler's more focused analysis of the impact of ageism on the development and use of technology. Examining ageism in the context of older adults in Canada, they address the fact that many people need or want to continue working. Others wish to return to work after retirement. As they observe, however, the influence of ageism in the labour market undermines people's ability to do so. To ascertain how people of all ages view old age, the researchers created a fictitious "pro-ageing cream" campaign, in direct contrast to the campaigns and beauty aids promoted by the anti-ageing movement. The campaign was launched in Toronto to draw attention to ageism in the workplace. Based on the campaign and the response it generated, the researchers were able to identify an array of misguided and negative assumptions about older workers. They insist that all Canadians need strategies for addressing ageism, but to combat ageism effectively in the workplace entails forging intergenerational alliances and tactics.

Marvin Formosa's essay likewise engages in cultural analysis by taking the debate around ageism into the lives of older people themselves and providing an account of how ageism operates within one of the most visible social institutions of the third age: the University of the Third Age (U3A). The distinctions drawn by people he interviewed for his research further emphasize that old age is far

from a unitary category and, as a corollary, the “dividing practice” of separating an agentic later life from a dependent old age is part and parcel of many people’s conception of “successful” ageing.

Rachel Herron, Christine Kelly and Katie Aubrecht’s analysis of long-term care facilities provides another timely and painfully relevant example of ageism; they focus on care homes and the widespread negative fear of “ending up in a home.” Like Formosa’s engagement with educational institutions serving third agers, Herron et al.’s research underscores society’s reliance on physical and ideological dividing practices. Adopting insights from the Disability movement, their essay specifically targets the ageism that underpins the carceral approach of many institutions, prompting the authors to call for both deinstitutionalization and a transformation of care work. At bottom, their insights about the dehumanizing experience in long-term care facilities and their demand for deinstitutionalization reflect the growing alliance between scholars of disability and age studies.

Linda Hess’s essay, “Queering Ageism,” which highlights the benefits of drawing on queer theory to combat ageism, sheds light on an equally important alliance developing between queer theory and age studies scholars. Hess’s paper explicitly addresses the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to challenge normative ideas of the life course and reductive views about ageing and old age. In keeping with Herron et al.’s recommendations, Hess argues for the need to challenge both “compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness.”

Chris Phillipson and Amanda Grenier’s essay, which explores attitudes toward older people living in urban environments, likewise engages with attitudes toward able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. Tracing the impact of changes such as gentrification in cities, they show how these changes to major urban areas in the developed world can amplify both ageism and inequality. This ageist trend is

all the more important in view of the significance of global initiatives, such as the “age-friendly city” for ensuring spatial justice. Global justice for older people is the central concern of Stefan Hopf, Federica Previtali, and Nena Georgantzi’s contribution. Bringing our collection to a conclusion, their essay discusses efforts to instantiate a new United Nations convention on ageism. Their contribution helpfully provides a context for the human rights invoked in calls for global justice, and it summarizes the political debates around a convention on the rights of older persons. Their essay also makes the case for the relevance of age discrimination and ageism to the United Nations. In their analysis of age discrimination as human rights violations, they concentrate on new forms of ageism that, to date, have received little to no attention in the United Nation’s debate. Ultimately, they refute critics who worry that a United Nations treaty specific to old age could contribute to the reproduction of age-based differences, which in turn might exacerbate the marginalization of older persons. Instead, they argue that an international human rights law, if based on “tailored rights,” could provide the foundation for equality and justice for older people.

As editors, we found it relatively easy to group the essays in the special issue to illustrate their overlapping concerns, but, recalling Woolf’s image of the “blind spot,” the essays are perhaps even more valuable owing to their different approaches and conclusions. Although we have grown accustomed to working in an interdisciplinary fashion, we appreciate the challenges associated with presenting essays that rely on a variety of disciplinary approaches and methodologies. Yet, for all their potential to provoke confusion, conflict, and division, we know firsthand that when it comes to understanding ageism, grappling with divergent approaches is both necessary and productive. As we endure the second wave of the global pandemic, which has led to the deaths of over seven thousand

people in long-term care in Canada alone, we also recognize that our very lives depend on our willingness to engage with and learn from one another.

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