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Virtual roundtable discussion of 'Revisioning aging futures: Feminist, queer, crip and decolonial visions of a good old age'

Rebecca L. Jones, Barbara Marshall and Linn Sandberg.

What follows is a lightly-edited transcription of a video call between Rebecca Jones, as lead Editor of the Special Section, and Barbara Marshall and Linn Sandberg, as the authors of the original article to which the papers in the special section were responding. The call took place in March 2022 once all the papers had been published online first, and was organised around four questions that had been sent in advance of the call:

- What particularly interested you in these papers, as they responded to yours?
- Has your thinking about reimagining ageing futures changed since you published your paper?
- What do you see as the biggest challenges or barriers to reimagining ageing futures?
- What do you see as the key ways to take this work forward?

Rebecca Jones

Thank you so much for agreeing to have this conversation. I reread your original article this afternoon and it reminded me of why I found it so fruitful, by making that connection between critiques of successful ageing, and crip theory, feminist theory and queer theory - demonstrating that those offer us some ways of rethinking successful ageing. I found that really fruitful and generative. As you know, that led directly to my own project, but the other papers in this issue are also in dialogue with yours. So the first thing I wanted to ask you was; what did you think was interesting in all these papers that were responding to yours? You write something and you never

know how people are going to receive it, but here you are, you've got five papers responding to your paper! So what was interesting to you about those responses?

Barb Marshall

One of the things that immediately struck me upon reading these papers was the varying ways that the idea of queering was taken up. There were some commonalities – I think everybody probably cited Halberstam at some point (Halberstam, 2005, 2011) but queerness was taken up in a number of different ways. It was used to challenge some really big ideas, from cisheteropatriarchy to biomedicine, to biopedagogy. Another thing was the focus on temporality in different ways, from reproductive time to Indigenous elsewheres, to non-cyclical time.

Linn Sandberg

I think it's interesting you raising the idea that we 'offered' something in the paper. To be honest, I feel that what we did was more of a critique, the "paranoid reading" kind, to speak with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term (Sedgwick, 1997). But what I really found great with these papers was that they actually offered some kind of rethinking. I don't think that term 'reimagining' was so prominent in our paper but it's really central in these papers. For example, in the paper by Chazan and Whetung (2021), they talk about the notion of radical imagination in these kind of times. I've been thinking quite a lot about imagination in the last months as well, so that resonated with me. How can you reimagine? What are the boundaries of imagination, what are the possibilities of imagination? Queer, feminist and crip theory are great for reimagining, but at the same time it can still become a bit romanticizing. And I think that's what I'm always a bit wary about when I'm writing and I was also thinking quite a lot about that in some of these papers.

Barb Marshall

I thought that actually engaging in that reimagining is what is so important about the critiques of cisheteropatriarchy and biomedicine and biopedagogy and those kinds of things. It's not just enough to open those lines of critique, there has to be some kind of alternative envisioned, some kind of

thinking about how things could be different, or are already different and we're just not recognizing that kind of difference. Our paper was trying to open up, crack open the door, maybe. And here we have a number of papers that flung that door open instead. When we wrote our paper it was really a conversation that we had been having. And we thought, well, let's write it down. I don't think we ever saw it as a kind of polished finished argument.

Rebecca Jones

I recognize what you're saying, that in that paper you're not reimagining. You're saying 'here are some lines of critique of how what we're doing at the moment is inadequate'. But by laying out that critique you opened a space which enabled me to see the world differently and to explore, in the case of my paper (Jones, 2021), how feminism could allow you to reimagine ageing, or in Andrew King's paper (2021), how queering allows you to rethink dementia, and so on. That's the fundamental reason I'm an academic - I love those moments where you suddenly can see the world completely differently. It's like turning 180 degrees and the thing itself doesn't have to do all the work for you, it just has to orient you in a different direction. So that is what I found so fruitful in your paper.

Linn Sandberg

That's very nice! And I agree, what I've always really enjoyed in academic work is that creativity of 'what happens if I bring this theory or concept into a new terrain?' That's why I think these kind of dialogues between feminist and queer studies and ageing studies are so productive.

Barb Marshall

The metaphor that I always use is that it's like a kaleidoscope; you turn it and the patterns change and you see something different. That was my sense of the conversation Linn and I had been having, but the response to our paper suggests a lot of people were having that conversation too, so I think there was a moment of more general rethinking.

Linn Sandberg

One of the things I find important in our paper, but perhaps not made explicit enough, is how successful ageing discourse, in one sense, provides ways of thinking later life as futurity. The pervasive discourses of ageing as negativity and decline always suggested ageing and growing old was a form of non-future. So successful ageing seems to be offering something future oriented, but at the same time it is really limiting your visions of future. Because in the end an ageing future was really only possible for a limited few.

Rebecca Jones

Given all that's happened since 2017 when you published your paper and then 2019 when we did the symposium together, how has your thinking about reimagining or queering ageing futures changed?

Barb Marshall

Certainly events of the last few years have raised so many interesting questions about the connection between individual futures and social futures, of what the future landscape might look like, and what kinds of connections can be built. But you know, I have to say I'm also very pessimistic in some senses because one of the things that is so richly demonstrated in these papers is the importance of reimagining and creativity, and the ways that creative arts-based methods can be used to try to nurture that reimagining. And I don't see that excitement being reflected in the policy world. The Arts are under threat in academic units, to a point where I worry that there's going to be less and less opportunity to do that kind of creative reimagining.

Linn Sandberg

It's a different world from when we first started discussing the ideas in our paper, around 2014. There have been so many crises and material effects on ageing since. The pandemic for one thing. If queering is not just about rethinking gender and sexuality, but as ways of thinking things critically and differently in a broader sense, this also includes questions about whose lives are worth

protecting, who is recognised as holding a future. The pandemic has really underlined that people in old age, in particular those living with disabilities and illnesses, are seen as basically disposable and are not part of imaginaries of the future. So the pandemic has in some ways consolidated my thinking and critiques, rather than changed it. Successful ageing gave a promise of non-ageing, that never took into account the material realities of our bodies and illnesses. Just like the HIV pandemic was the starting point for queer theory, the Covid-19 pandemic really makes visible the political aspects of ageing, disabilities and illnesses. There are clearly links to be made between these two pandemics and what they can generate intellectually in terms of whose lives are considered abject and viable or nonviable.

I think that the pandemic exposed quite clearly how the promise of successful ageing had made some people believe they could escape the materialities of their bodies and being interpellated as old. In Sweden we have these public 'successful agers' and I remember in the first months of the pandemic some of them were so frustrated that they could not go outside, could not go to restaurants or to the gym. But younger people still could, as things remained open here. So they were suddenly interpellated as old persons and it was so interesting to see how in the end successful ageing became an unfulfilled promise, and they were positioned in relation to their chronological age and treated differently. Which exposes how ageism was there all along and not done away through discourses of successful ageing.

So that's one crisis, and then the climate crisis as well, the whole vulnerability that comes with that. How the crisis impacts on and underscores the materialities of ageing bodies.

Barb Marshall

Well, I think we're seeing this now too as they are starting to lift mandates, it's now personal responsibility to protect yourself and so people with disabilities, people with autoimmune disorders, older people are just treated as, you know, disposable. I've been reading the way that Amanda

Grenier has taken up questions of precarity and vulnerability, and whose lives matter (Grenier, 2020). What lives are grievable, to use Butler's term (Butler, 2009).

One of the things I noticed throughout the pandemic was how often visual images of old women looking out of windows were used, maybe with wrinkly hands, at the window frame and that really became a trope for the theme of aging and isolation. That really needs unpacking by a cultural studies scholar. But that image was also used to say 'now we need to expand telemedicine and zooming and devices in the home, so that older people can be connected to children and grandchildren'. The rethinking of ageing futures has to a large extent been colonized by the age tech industries that were given a huge boost by Covid. And that's a kind of thinking, which is not terribly creative or reimagining in the way that we like to think of imagination because it really trades on very problematic notions of aging bodies, family and care. It reduces ageing to measurable bodily functions, assumed to be in decline, that can be surveilled by caregivers. They track when you're in the bathroom, when you're in bed, when you're eating. Those simple bodily functions. There's no sense of a measure of joy or wisdom or pleasure or anything like that. So I worry that we're going to see a closing down rather than an opening up of creative ways to rethink family and care and embodiment. On the other hand, I do think that we're starting to see more attention within age studies to diversity and a broadening out of analysis. I think there is the possibility for reimagining ageing futures in ways that we can't even think about now. But, has anyone else noticed the absence of class in a lot of this?

Rebecca Jones

I have a little list here of things I thought we might talk about and one of them was absolutely social class. Then I wondered if that was just me being British because I think we care about social class more than other people sometimes. But yeah, it's very classed, isn't it? Successful ageing is very middle class.

Linn Sandberg

That leads me to thinking about what the barriers to reimagining ageing are. When I read these papers, the materialist in me emerged and I was thinking that in the end it comes down to very material structural conditions. What you can imagine is based on the material and structural conditions in a society. So there is certainly a need for further discussions on queering ageing futures as a capitalist critique also.

At the same time, I feel the war in Ukraine has made me very aware of how many discussions we've been having are so narrowly based in a particular kind of democratic context and our queer critiques have been focused on liberal and neoliberal societies. The rise of fascism in multiple forms, in Russia and elsewhere, gets us to some very basic questions, how to imagine queer ageing futures in societies where you cannot imagine any queer life!

Barb Marshall

Yes, watching the rollback of LGBTQ+ rights in the US right now is just frightening. Parents in Texas being charged with child abuse for raising a trans child, Florida is passing legislation that means you can't say 'gay' in schools. One of the questions you asked, Rebecca, was what we saw as the biggest challenges or barriers to imagining ageing futures, and capitalism was top of my list. You mentioned non-commodified care in your own vision of an ageing future (Jones, 2021), and that really resonated with me. There's this whole anti-ageing industry and cultural industries that depend on us buying stuff. The importance of arts and humanities in reimagining is really under threat because of the rationalization of higher education systems and the closure of programs that aren't seen as 'labour market' relevant.

Linn Sandberg

I think that was really nicely put in some of the papers as well – capitalism and thinking non-capitalist ageing. In Sweden we have a few LGBT-friendly care homes opening and I recently saw the advertisements for one of them which is privatized, and it was just ridiculous images of rainbow

balloons and a clown with drag makeup. Queering ageing futures should entail articulating those critical questions about privatized care and how they employ discourses of LGBT-friendliness. Queer theorists have been engaged in critiquing prison industrial complexes, see for example a recent issue of the journal *GLQ* (Bey & Goldberg, 2022), so I think there is inspiration to be found here, how queer approaches to ageing studies can help us to think about segregation and incarceration in care homes. We can bring those kind of thoughts from queer theory into a critical decolonial, non-capitalist conversation about ageing.

Rebecca Jones

Yes, I think I'm feeling less pessimistic than both of you. And I think that's probably for two reasons. One is I'm just a natural optimist, but the other is I'm not really a materialist. Although I do of course recognise the importance of the material, my instinct is usually that it's the discourse that matters! And so I think it matters that people have these alternative models in their head, even when the material surroundings are awful.

Barb Marshall

But I suppose because I'm an old Marxist I always look to the material! And because I've been working in the area of smart technologies for the last couple of years, I'm also concerned with the data. I'm concerned with how ageing futures are being shaped collectively through the collection of data and through algorithmic decision making that dehumanises decision making about your care and what kind of material circumstances you will live in.

Linn Sandberg

I want to stress that I am not as pessimistic as I may have sounded! I also think that one of the things these papers offer, when they do creative workshops with people, is that kind of collective consciousness building. That creation of imagination, collectively, is really, really important. But

when I was reading, for example, Chazan & Wetung (2021) and Changfoot and co-authors (2021), I was thinking 'how can we make this possible for more people?' Because having a group doing this is great on an individual, local level, but how can make these kind of narratives, these kind of ways of imagining, happen on a broader scale? So we challenge the discourses of successful ageing by actually providing these multiple narratives in the world. And I was thinking about that, for example, in Andrew King's paper about dementia charities (King, 2021). Would it even be possible for a charity to provide a narrative that was non hetero-happiness futurity oriented? So some of the workshop activities mentioned in the articles of this special issue offered some amazing opportunities for rethinking, but how but how do we make it matter on a bigger scale?

Rebecca Jones

Yes, scaling up is one of the big challenges I see - this is all very well, but it's only a small number of people. Sometimes a small number of people do manage to have a big cultural impact, especially with social media, but it's hard to plan for.

Barb Marshall

I'm encouraged that where I am in British Columbia, a high school student has to have taken one course on Indigenous knowledge and culture before they graduate high school. So students get that opportunity to understand that there are different ways you can see the world, there are different forms of knowledge, fundamentally different standpoints that you can take. I'm quite encouraged that it's starting to be recognized in some areas that Indigenous knowledge and culture is a really important part of Canadian history and culture. I found those papers that worked with Indigenous knowledge really encouraging in terms of thinking about temporality in ways that are not linear, reproductive time. And how they emphasize that connection to place and land – there's a kind of materiality there that I think is what we need, and I'm prompted to rethink materiality in those terms. I found all the papers quite encouraging in some way. I loved thinking about my uterus as not reproductive, but productive (McLeod, 2021). It made me want to get a little microphone! And even

in Andrew King's work on the dementia charity, I saw the same sort of thing in the heart and stroke advert that we talked about in our paper: this a well-meaning, good organization that wants to help people but has trouble breaking away from those categories, so I found the idea about categorical analysis useful. I am disappointed that we never got to see the visual representation of your feminist vision, Rebecca! I kept looking, I went back and looked for it!

Rebecca Jones

I felt like I was already giving quite a lot of attention to my vision, and I didn't want to give it even more attention by putting the picture in. I'm very happy to send it to you! But that was part of my struggle with that paper, around reflexivity and how personal to be. Because it's such a big tradition in feminist work but often I think it isn't handled very well. You read it and you think 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I know some things about you now. But what does this tell me about the analysis? What does this tell me about the data?' I was struggling with not making it all about me but also trying to be honest about knowledge production. That reminds me I did want to ask you about the place of feminist theory in your original article because as I was re-reading it, I was noticing that there's a lot less in it about feminist theory than there is about crip theory and queer theory. And when I was writing my paper I struggled a bit with feminist theory, even though I've identified as a feminist for more than 30 years. I could immediately see where crip theory and queer theory help to rethink ageing, whereas feminist theory I found quite difficult to use.

Barb Marshall

I've been a card-carrying feminist for pretty much 50 years now and when I was a student discovering feminist theory, you could literally have read everything. There was a set of texts that everybody read, there was this kind of common ground. There were certain key books that defined 'feminist theory'. Happily, you can't say that now – while there still may be canonical texts, there is a massive body of work with a lot of diversity. Whereas I think with crip theory and queer theory, there's still a bit of a canon there, right? For example, I think everybody referenced Halberstam

(2005) and McRuer (2006) so there's still key touchstone theorists. I'm not sure you could do that with feminist theory anymore. I think I also just assumed queer theory (at least the theory I was reading) is already feminist in orientation. And of course Kafer, another touchstone theorist cited, explicitly ties things together in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Kafer, 2013).

Linn Sandberg

Yeah, one of the things I was thinking about when I was reading your paper, Rebecca, is that feminists still have a really difficult time moving away from independence. And that poses some really interesting questions to ageing because, although we cannot talk about something like feminist theory in any sort of uniform way, one of the things that feminist theory has offered for me is ways of challenging the autonomous, strong, independent subject and offering ways of thinking about frailty and vulnerability. But when I was reading your paper I didn't see much about interdependence as an aspiration or a promise of an ageing futures and that was a bit depressing to me.

Barb Marshall

I have particularly enjoyed Judith Butler's work on vulnerability and precarity (Butler, 2006, 2009) and that's resonating with me in a way that I think makes me think about independence differently. The other piece that I keep going back to in terms of feminist theory is the Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon's classic critique of the disdain for dependency in the US welfare state (Fraser & Gordon, 1994).

Linn Sandberg

I also enjoyed the focus on place in some of these papers, in your paper, Rebecca, about swimming and also in Chazan & Whetung's paper. In terms of future directions for ageing studies, there's been a lot going on for some time now in gender studies in terms of posthumanism. I think there is a lot to be offered to ageing studies in terms of thinking subjectivity beyond the human, and thinking about non-human relations, and place and where we are in the world. And also the war in Ukraine

has really heightened my attention to coloniality and decoloniality from an Eastern European perspective. I feel that the decolonial approach was something that was great in these papers that we didn't really say anything about in our article. People are not able to age in the place they would like, they are displaced, they have to flee wars, conflicts and the consequences of ecological collapse, and that also makes me feel that we still have a lot of work to do in terms of discussing issues of race and racism, and migration and displacement in ageing futures.

Barb Marshall

I had the same things written down – capitalism, colonialism, racism, the climate emergency. But to turn to that last question you posed us, how do we go forward? What are the key things that we can take to work forward? The queer, crip, feminist critique needs to be expanded by attention to decolonial and anti-racist approaches, and the enduring problem of class. And I think that's been a problem for feminist theory and queer theory: a lack of attention to class. Or it's kind of receded. So how do we nurture the kinds of intellectual and political coalitions that are going to make those things happen? That, for me, is a big question that we need to think about - how to nurture those connections. And also, to turn to my nerdy intellectual side, I think we need to really think about how we use and develop concepts. There are some concepts that seem to have resonance across those different analytics that that we looked at in these papers: temporality, embodiment is a huge one, that idea of connection, independence and interdependence, and care. Just thinking about the whole concept of care; care for each other, care for the earth.

Linn Sandberg

A lot of the critical theories that we're engaging with are still very centred on the rational subject. Since I've been moving into dementia studies over the years since we wrote that paper, I think that continuously adjusting to dementia as a place from which to think about ageing and ageing futures is really crucial. There's this great critique in queer theory and feminist theory but it still departs from a particular kind of subject - thinking beyond the rational subject has a lot to offer. And that brings

me back also to the thing about imagination because I've been trying to write a chapter on feminist theory and dementia studies where I have been inspired by an article by Mark Stoetzler and Nira Yuval Davis who introduce the concept of 'situated imagination' (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). I think that it's a really interesting concept to think with in ageing studies and dementia studies because it's not only about situated knowledge and knowledge production but also about imagination. How knowledge ultimately is bound up with possibilities of imagination. Stoetzler and Yuval Davis argue convincingly how imagination is both "the source of freedom and emancipation, as much as a source of the borders and boundaries that emancipation wants to challenge". So I think that going back to that imagination thing is really, really important for this future that we're talking about.

Rebecca Jones

With the queering dementia angle, I was wondering if there might be connections to be made both with people hearing voices, and framing that as positive as some people do, and with neurodiverse people. And also with learning disability because there's a lot of work in the UK, and I think in Sweden as well, with people with learning disabilities reframing what it means to produce knowledge.

Linn Sandberg

The book that Richard Ward and I are editing at the moment for Routledge, *Critical Dementia Studies: Affinities, Resistances and Alliances*, which in the introduction to a series on critical dementia studies, is doing a lot of that stuff, having those kind of conversations. The chapter I'm writing is on feminism and dementia; I'm going into standpoint theory and making links to Mad movements and how mental health activism has informed critical research. Linda Örvulv is writing a great chapter on neurodiversity and dementia. So I think there are many, conversations to be made across movements and critical theories. But there is an obvious risk of when thinking ageing studies through the lens of dementia that it risks becoming the thing that defines old age – what old age is.

And at the same time, as Sally Chivers and others have been discussing, this whole thing of trying to separate disability and ageing is not unproblematic (Aubrecht, Kelly, & Rice, 2020). One of the things that I was thinking about, reading these papers, is that one of the critical things about reimagining is going beyond the binary of loss and success. How can we think about dementia and other kinds of disability and illness coming with old age, not only as decline and loss, and also without romanticising them? And that's a really key thing in queer scholarship too. I sometimes feel a lot of queer writings tends to fall into this kind of position of the subversive subject, which is also quite romanticising. What I liked in some of these papers was when how they point to the complexity, how old age involves joy as well as grief and death, for example, which is non-existent in successful ageing discourse.

Rebecca Jones

Yes. I would absolutely love to carry on talking, but I'm aware we've gone beyond our time.

Thank you so much for your time and your thoughts.

Linn Sandberg

I really hope that we can continue this conversation in the future.

Rebecca Jones and Barb Marshall (unanimously)

Yes!

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