Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Introduction: The Time Elapsed

Helen Small

The Introduction highlights broad developments within age studies reflected in this issue of *19*. Detecting a shift in emphasis away from concern with representations of the old, it explores heuristic forms of attention to the processes of ageing, its meanings, and its biopolitics across the life course. Queer temporalities are a distinct area of critical interest: the non-normative experiences of time generated through narrative attention to non-aligned age perspectives; subjective immersion in the tempos of later life; and — for more radically experimental writers — deliberate departure from age-related 'realism' about time. Fruitful connections are opened up here with queer theory, disability studies, and 'crip time' theory, admitting allied investments in diversifying expectations for the temporal horizon and subjective experience of living across time. A second area of concentration activates older perspectives and portrays older subjects as representatives of history in ways that lend critical purchase on the present moment. Contributions to the issue show these deployments of old age as 'anachronism' serving a wide variety of political agendas. Considering the articles in their historical context of publication, the Covid-19 pandemic, and testing their political claims against the greater visibility it has given to the precariousness of late life, the Introduction predicts an intensification of interest in the activist credentials of age studies, with stronger emphasis to be expected on frameworks of care.

Acknowledgement of the personal and institutional pressures introduced by the current global pandemic has quickly become a feature of journal issues brought to completion or inaugurated after March 2020. The special pressures of that context on thinking about age and ageing are made explicit by Andrea Charise in her introduction to 'Bending the Clock', the series of podcast interviews accompanying the five articles in this issue of *19*. In 'the time elapsed between recording' the conversations in January 2020 and preparing the introduction, Charise observes, coronavirus 'has claimed the lives of almost two million people around the world, many of them older persons living in long-term care'. With other 'transformative events' of the recent past in her sightlines, including the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Charise suggests that taking the measure of before-and-after 'highlights not only what is missing, but also what endures'.

It is not difficult to see where our attention is being directed: the mortality rate from Covid-19 among older age groups has put the physical vulnerabilities that come with, or are accentuated by, age at the forefront of national and international conversations about state responsibilities for care, even as the disease has shone a light on social inequalities best understood intersectionally as combined effects of geography, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, educational opportunity, health, and age. Enhancing our understanding of the historical experience of the old, and of continuities and differences in those intersectional effects across the life course, is part of what age studies has, from its inception, done well, with nineteenth-century scholars, in particular, enhancing understanding of how the science of demographics and its social applications altered perceptions of ageing over the Victorian period, for good and ill.[1] Karen Chase reminds us that the emergence of a formal twentieth-century scientific and political discourse around 'senescence' was, indeed, 'the culmination of a process' through which the Victorian epoch had redesigned and 'shape[d] human experience' to admit old age as a special category for our contemplation.[2] Making the old visible as a distinct, (by end of century) rapidly expanding cohort encouraged state interventions to support those in late life and without private resources, but it also gave impetus to 'cohort-conscious narratives of intergenerational catastrophe' that are still, damagingly, with us.[3]

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[1] See especially, *Aging in the Past: Demography, Society and Old Age*, ed. by David I. Kertzer and Peter Laslett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and, for the modern repercussions, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 23, 42–60; Kathleen Woodward, *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 58–78.

[2] Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 1.

[3] Andrea Charise, *The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (New York: SUNY Press, 2020), p. 147.

It has never, in other words, been a stretch to articulate presentist salience for nineteenth-century age studies, but the extent to which age-related vulnerability and the failures of most national care systems now stand exposed and in need of political redress makes this the right moment and *19* an ideal venue in which to press harder on how historically focused cultural criticism may speak to 'real-world' problems in the present day. Reading and listening to the contributions produced for this issue, completed on the eve of Covid-19, I am struck by the level of agreement around knowledge-making priorities for nineteenth-century studies at that point; agreement also in the identification of what are now enhanced political concerns, notwithstanding a range of stances on how knowledge making relates to activism (see the interview with Devoney Looser). Two areas of concentration emerge across the contributions:

1) the uneven temporalities of human lives, as made visible by close critical attention to literary and other aesthetic forms, queering conventional notions of the normal life course.
2) connections between attending to ageing in art and literature and attending to history; recognizing, then, the repercussions of these connections, negative and positive, for thinking about conventional ascriptions of value (not least, Looser proposes, our disciplines' frequent undervaluation of 'old' critical preoccupations and methods).

In exploring these foci in more depth, this Introduction will, I hope, further discussion about where age studies has been tending in, and beyond, nineteenth-century studies and where, post-pandemic, it may want to go next. Elaborating how and on what terms the attention to form and historical perspective can offer to make a real-world difference, the Introduction also recognizes areas of difficulty and dispute in which further work may be needed.

The 1890s short stories of Israel Zangwill provide the opening article, Alice Crossley's 'Odd Age, Old Age, and Doubled Lives', with a set of engaging case studies that extend the repertoire of recent work (by Cynthia Port, Leni Marshall, Charise, and others) on queer temporalities.[4] Zangwill's fictions bespeak imaginative resistance,

[4] See Cynthia Port, 'No Future? Aging, Temporality, History, and Reverse Chronologies', *Occasion*, 4 (2012), 1–19 <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/no-future-aging-temporality-history-and-reverse-chronologies> [accessed 17 March 2021]; Leni Marshall, *Age Becomes Us: Bodies and Gender in Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015); Linda M. Hess, *Queer Aging in North American Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2019); Charise, *Aesthetics of Senescence*, pp. 103–05; Sarah Falcus, 'Age and Anachronism in Contemporary Dystopian Fiction', and Emily Kate Timms, '"I Could Turn Viper Tomorrow": Challenging Reproductive Futurism in Merle Collins's *The Colour of Forgetting*', both in *Literature and Ageing*, ed. by Elizabeth Barry with Margery Vibe Skagen, Essays and Studies, 73 (Cambridge: Brewer/English Association, 2020), pp. 6, 65–86, 105–28.

Crossley observes, to 'the presumed banality and invisibility of ageing'. Exceptional in his enthusiasm for disrupting narrative and characterological conventions, Zangwill approached the topic of ageing with a lively sense of comic potential to be found in speculatively redrawing its normative parameters, both cultural and biological. Building on the insights of earlier critics, Crossley suggests a shared logic between the will to undermine conventional ideas of ageing and the play these stories make with traditions of Jewish humour — Zangwill, in both instances, making light of and yet simultaneously upholding the accrued heft of stereotypes over time. Of the several Zangwill stories creating imaginative disturbance around how time lived contributes to formation of identity, the most testingly counter-realist is 'An Odd Life', in which the protagonist experiences first the odd years of his developmental trajectory ('aged' one, three, five, and so forth), then the even. This queer fantasy, cut short 'prematurely' (as it may be) when the protagonist reaches thirty-nine years, puts pressure on life chronology as Victorian culture tended to imagine it: within relatively narrow parameters of expectation for biological growth, maturation, decline, life expectancy; for education and the gradual accrual of wisdom; and for sexual relations, reproduction, and the passing on of inheritances.

Jacob Jewusiak's article, 'Tennyson's Wrinkled Feet', shifts the focus from prose narrative to poetic form in three canonical Victorian representations of old age, 'Tithonus', 'Ulysses', and 'The Lotos-Eaters', drawing out the ethical implications of their technical evocation of over-living, belatedness, and the relaxation, at last, of the will to go on. He describes a 'poetics of decay' that invites us to 'recode' the temporalities of decay, senescence, even putrefaction, as 'ecologically and existentially' preferable to those of un-endstopped preservation, stasis, and dull repetition. As Jewusiak rereads them, these poems push, to a degree criticism may have underestimated, against Greek epic's presumed exclusion of the 'reality' of ageing — allowing 'almost nothing', Erich Auerbach thought, in the way of biographical or psychological development. (The case of Priam might suggest otherwise, but that is a telling oversight of *Mimesis* as it pursues an alignment of realism with the emergence of modern democratic freedoms.) Contemplating the imaginative seduction of eternal arrest, and late-heroic resistance to the proximity of ending, Tennyson keeps old literary models alive while committing to forward temporalities of biology and collective history.

Hannah Rosefield's analysis of novels by Charlotte Yonge and Dinah Craik undertakes a closer scrutiny of narrative plotting as a lens on ageing. In the figure of the young stepmother, married to a widower and thereby assuming the role of surrogate mother to his children, who are too old (in the Yonge example) to be biologically her own and (in both cases) resist her authority, these fictions shed light on the moral and psychological

labour involved in maintaining family where (not uncommonly, for the period) a death has disrupted generational timelines of marriage and parenting. Lending realistic grip, and recognition of difficulty, to their protagonists' attempts to put Victorian moral ideals of motherhood into action, Yonge and Craik rebut folk-tale stereotypes of the malign stepmother. Structurally, these novels offer welcome alternatives to realism's characteristic limitations in the handling of ageing, as diagnosed and explored in Jewusiak's *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel* and the audio recording here: the exclusion of deep perspectives on chronological ageing, committed as realism is to narrative process yet with limited capacity to register incremental change over a long lifetime.[5] In the situation of the young stepmother, Rosefield argues, we can find forms of narrative compression and simultaneity in life events — mothering an adolescent stepchild while caring for one's own newborn — that grant access to changes beyond the standard narrative scope.

These three articles give a sense of the psychological and moral insights that can be afforded by opening up alternative time-of-life perspectives on ageing; each also has implications for recognizing competing histories within a culture. Zangwill, for example, takes advantage of fantasy and the short-story form to experiment with extravagant character sketching of a kind often said to owe much to Dickens but rooted at least as strongly in traditions of Jewish storytelling. The author's Foreword to the collection containing 'An Odd Story', *The King of Schnorrers: Grotesques and Fantasies*, states an intention to 'incarnat[e] the floating tradition' of the Schnorrer (beggar-scoundrel, teller of tall tales), putting readers back imaginatively in the late eighteenth century, 'the most picturesque period of Anglo-Jewish history [...] never before [...] exploited'.[6] Reactivating a dated narrative figure and deploying unregarded historical material are twinned gambits in cultural identity politics here, of a piece with Zangwill's lifelong effort to challenge British nineteenth-century claims to progressiveness by reminding readers of the as yet unrealized historic hopes of his people.[7]

Alternative ways of leveraging human ageing to yield fresh historical or political perspectives can be seen in the remaining two articles making up the central component of this issue: Christiana Payne's 'Ancient Trees and Aged Peasants' and Sara Zadrozny's 'Of Cosmetic Value Only: Make-Up and Terrible Old Ladies in Victorian Literature'.

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[5] Jacob Jewusiak, *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel: Growing Old from Dickens to Woolf*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 120 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[6] I. Zangwill, *The King of Schnorrers: Grotesques and Fantasies* (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. v.

[7] See, for example, the recurrent dramatic confrontations with the perceived atemporality of many Zionist projects, in Zangwill's *Ghetto Tragedies* (1899) and *Ghetto Comedies* (1907), and — in the 1920s — his calls to inter the 'old' political Zionism and promote cultural Zionism as the more viable way forward. See also Hani A. Faris's old and still helpful essay, 'Israel Zangwill's Challenge to Zionism', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 4.3 (1975), 74–90.

Exploring rural portraiture in painting and photography, with material drawn from periodicals including *Farmer's Magazine* and *Country Life* (f. 1897) (individually likely to be new to Victorianists, though generically instantly recognizable), Payne draws out a recurring analogy between old men and trees, 'stout of heart, and strong of limb'. Predominantly conservative in its application, the analogy often expressed nostalgia, as she shows, for a more hierarchical rural society, but could also admit admiration for gradualist social and political reform (durability or adaptability, in lieu of radical uprooting). These are, predominantly, 'trivial histories' in the sense Ruth McAdams gives to the term in her contribution to the audio recording — figures of old people who appear to their viewers like 'walking, talking [...] time capsule[s]'; unpacked, they are keys to how history gets mobilized in the present, not least in what they show us about how subsequent generations reassure themselves of their own 'progress'. Late century images in that vein show a keener sense of the pathos in old age and the biological inevitability of the end, Payne suggests, at a time when Britain and Europe were looking to develop state-level policies responsive to the care needs of old people newly quantified in public consciousness.[8]

By gendered contrast, Zadrozny's article taps into that savage vein of Victorian satire familiar to readers of Dickens, and far from completely expunged from literature or film even now: savage mockery of the ageing woman who attempts to disguise the effects of time through use of cosmetics. 'Of Cosmetic Value Only' detects a specifically nineteenth-century development of moral and medical discourses of ageing, one that rests on vigorous rebuttal of 'eighteenth-century' mores. It is terrain legible in Dickens's Mrs Skewton (*Dombey and Son* (1848)), Catherine Gore's Lady Ormington (*Cecil; or, The Adventures of a Coxcomb* (1841)), Thackeray's Miss Crawley (to add *Vanity Fair* (1848) to the list), and many other such sub-Swiftian castigations of older women's 'falseness'. The article charts the rise of 'anti-cosmetic discourse' in the periodical and advice-book press, fuelled by the efforts of British dermatologists to stop the use of toxic and corrosive paints and promote the honesty of 'soap-and-water beauty'. Viewed contemporaneously, anti-cosmetic discourse is more evidence, if needed, of early Victorian expansion in the cultural regulation of women's bodies (though David McAllister's podcast conversation reminds us that Dickens himself was susceptible to the cosmetic industry's promises, starting to dye his hair not long before he began work on *Dombey and Son*).

The wider political parameters of the discourse emerge most clearly in Zadrozny's closing reading of a short story by Percy Fitzgerald: 'A Terrible Old Lady'. From the vantage point of 1862, Fitzgerald describes the career of Charlotte Elisabeth of Bavaria,

[8] See Charise, *Aesthetics of Senescence*, pp. xix–xliv, 141–50.

Duchesse d'Orléans, a German observer of the French court during the reigns of Louis XIII and XIV. Known to have detested make-up, Charlotte Elisabeth is nevertheless depicted as another Skewton, a false and hideous baroque 'relic'. Aristocratic decadence, French sexual immorality, and British Regency excess are the joined targets of Fitzgerald's cheerfully sweeping satire here. No one loved this rhetorical terrain more than Thackeray, whose *Four Georges* (1860–61) may be read as one long set of variations on the theme of dispensing with the old regimes' abuses while relishing their operatic excesses of costume, gesture, anecdote, and surface. On that fertile imaginative ground, the sincerity of the literary moralist's protests against 'past' abuses is never quite clear of avowed hypocrisy: look at ourselves, 'gaily trampling down the old world', as Thackeray puts it to his readers, 'to the tune of *Ça ira*'.[9]

In locating and teasing out queer temporalities and pointedly critical anachronisms, these articles increase critical alertness to the ways in which Victorian and post-Victorian literary accounts of ageing have been capable of pressing against the 'banality' of age stereotyping and cliché, and simple disregard for the old. It is worth asking what further gains may result — with what present-day political purchase — from the concentration on alternative or contrapuntal temporalities as effects of literary form. Travis Chi Wing Lau's contribution to the recorded conversations captures wide ethical stakes when he identifies common ethical ground between ageing studies, disability studies, and queer theory, all 'prompt[ing] us to think differently about what does it mean to age or to mature?'. Approaching age studies as one among many fronts on which more diverse options are being sought for individual occupation of time, Lau asks us to look to our professional institutions as the immediate frame of political reference. How can they better respond, he asks from personal experience, to 'chronic illness that eludes [...] th[e] curative moment' and makes it difficult or impossible to meet any assumption that we work to the same tempo, with (roughly) shared expectations of productivity and of how long our tenure in the profession will be? Living with pain that has no end in sight creates a desire (personal, but also social), he suggests, to locate more psychologically sustainable options in the literature we read and teach than 'tragedy' — 'branching life paths', alternative metres or measures. One of the values we indeed ascribed to literature, David McAllister reminds us, is that it provides forms of imaginative 'projection' beyond our own temporal and generational moment, of a kind that may seem near-impossible without its assistance. Lau himself draws on

[9] William Makepeace Thackeray, 'The Four Georges', in *Henry Esmond, The English Humourists, The Four Georges*, ed. by George Saintsbury (London: Frowde; Oxford University Press, [1910(?)]), pp. 695–811 (p. 803). On the sophistication of the mid-Victorian cosmetics industry, and the speed with which individual operators worked to negate medical attacks on their products, see Helen Rappaport's illuminating and entertaining life of 'Madame Rachel': *Beautiful for Ever: Madame Rachel of Bond Street — Cosmetician, Con-Artist and Blackmailer* (London: Vintage, 2012), esp. pp. 70–72.

the concept of 'crip time', developed within disability studies, to strengthen that offer from literature: bending the clock to the capability of the body, allowing for necessary extensions, delays, 'detour[s]', as Alison Kafer puts it, 'from the timeline of normative progress'.[10]

To shape our temporal measures around a wider range of physical and mental capacities is one way of encouraging a more equitable society, loosening social norms that have, under inspection, limited viability in many individual cases. There will be dissenting views here. Not everyone suffering from or caring for someone with debilitating illness, chronic pain, or shortened life expectancy finds 'queering time' more than a theoretical (it is tempting to say 'cosmetic') gloss on the reality of unequal human circumstances, including unequal luck. 'I haven't much time for queering time', a friend has had painful cause to quip recently. Some will think that the best human resources departments are pursuing the same agenda under other, 'older' names. In adopting the idiom of queer studies rather than, say, personnel economics or labour organization, are we, to drive Looser's provocation home to our own practices, potentially 'overvalu[ing] [...] the thing of the moment', undervaluing extant ways of achieving the same end? 'Human resources', it seems worth noting, is itself a Victorian coinage, finding its first institutional applications at the turn of the twentieth century.[11]

To these notes of demurral — more reflective of temperamental or methodological divergences than of political dissent within our disciplines — the humanities collectively may have to add the sharper expressions of non-comprehension that can arise when readers versed in modern scientific understanding of time encounter literary-critical accounts of time and find them so far removed from 'reality' as to be negligible. I have in view Gregory Currie's somewhat captious essay 'Can There Be a Literary Philosophy of Time?', which engages with Proust alongside Bakhtin, Ricoeur, and other twentieth-century theorists, and reaches the conclusion that 'literary philosophers of time [still] owe us a plausible account of imagination', one that would give grounds for ascribing those 'epistemic powers' that literary writers seem typically to want to ascribe to imagination.[12] Fictional narratives, as Currie observes, often 'stretch and compress, elide, repeat and reorder the temporal durations of their events, and in doing so they [claim to] distort, or at least restructure time'. Such tropes are 'common', but 'we should not [...] think of [...] them as in themselves *making the times of fictions distinct from real-world times*' (p. 58, emphasis added). Any authority fictional time-bending possesses is

[10] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 25.

[11] Attributed to John R. Commons, *The Distribution of Wealth* (New York: Macmillan, 1893).

[12] Gregory Currie, 'Can There Be a Literary Philosophy of Time?', in *The Arguments of Time*, ed. by Jeremy Butterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, for the British Academy, 1999), pp. 43–63 (p. 60).

strictly confined, by this objection, to the sphere of imagination and (though there may be disputation here, too) psychology — certainly, to subjective emotional experience. For Currie, we mistake the remit of literary representations of time if we allow them significance beyond that sphere: a credible 'literary philosophy of time [...] will have to cohere with the best physical philosophy of time; it cannot be a free agent' (p. 61).

Humanists might well want to respond that few literary writers have entertained such ambitions as Currie implies to challenge the philosophy of physics on its own ground. Nonetheless, it can be salutary to hear an objection to our authority from another discipline. In this case the reminder that literary languages and critical theories of time have a definable field of cultural operation — distinct (if not, as Currie implies, adrift) from what other departments of the university would count as realism — suggests a more charged way of reiterating the hard question: what real-world difference are we making when we claim to dislodge or reaccent normal temporalities by means of the ideas we find in literary texts or aesthetic images? Culture is the medium in which we all conduct our lives (much more so, it is fair to say, than physics). To contest the ways in which it shapes and limits our perceptions of our experience is no small thing. Moreover, it matters (to risk an unwanted pun) that the clock being bent is not 'just' imaginative, though it is in the first instance metaphorical. Alongside the invitation to read literature and visual images differently there is an actual demand being made by Lau and other contributors here on the institution of the university, and social institutions more generally. Though other contributors are less explicitly activist than Lau, across the board their reflections speak to an ambition for ageing studies to make a difference beyond private acts of cultural consumption, starting with the impact critical practice has in the classroom.

Addressing the UK context, for example, McAllister observes that government responses to the challenges facing public funding for higher education reflect a weakening political commitment to earlier generations' perception that education is a good warranting investment across lifetimes: the current government, he worries with good reason, 'clearly doesn't value [...] adult learners or late-life learners and, in fact, sees the prospect of somebody coming back in middle age or in later life to do particularly a humanities degree as [...] an indulgence — a frippery'. We need, he urges, to challenge

> the kinds of arithmetic calculations that are involved in saying, 'so-and-so is such an age, they therefore realistically only have two or three decades, statistically, left to go. How much should we invest in their education?'. Or, 'how much on an individual level should I invest in my education at a later stage in life?'.

Birkbeck (McAllister's employer, and the host institution for this journal) has had a historical mission, since 1823, to provide for education across the life course — the implications for older age access emerging gradually out of an initial address to the working classes, then to aspiring female students. All institutions of learning have reason to take that mission to heart as it alerts us to barriers, elsewhere, on what, who, and when-in-a-life education is for.

Some of the most formative classroom encounters any and every teacher will have are those that happen when we teach someone significantly older than ourselves and whose longer accumulation of life experience provides a basis from which to challenge an authority less likely to be challenged by younger students. Victorian pronouncements on this subject tended to sentimentalism: 'the idea of instructing' those in extreme old age 'may at first excite the redicule [*sic*] of some individuals', wrote J. W. Hudson, one of the earliest historians of adult education, in 1851, 'but if they reflect on the cruelty of refusing to instruct these aged applicants' they will surely relent: 'What exhibition is more beautiful than that of the aged poor condescending to sit down and be instructed [...]?'.[13] By way of a better articulation of the principle of 'common and general participation' (less inclined to cancel condescension by greater condescension) we can look to Raymond Williams's much cited 'Open Letter to WEA Tutors' (1961). Often interpreted selectively as a call for equal socio-economic or class access to education, the letter reflected Williams's fifteen years of experience teaching 'more than a thousand adult students' on the Workers' Educational Association programme.[14] His biographer, Fred Inglis, ventriloquizes the ideal lesson for Williams: an 'exchange by equal persons of their understanding of their experience as focused in the "third realm" of their common ground: [...] the play, poem or novel'.[15] It is a galvanizing picture of what literary education at its best should be, and it rests, in part, on the role age may play in enabling 'equal exchange' between teacher and student where equality, in other respects, is not on offer.

Accordingly, all the interviewees in the podcast in this issue of *19* reflect critically on personal experiences of intergenerational interaction that spurred or substantially coloured their initial engagement with age studies. Care by and, latterly, *for* a grandparent or grandparents is a recurrent theme. The speakers are articulate about intergenerational debts incurred and repaid across scholarly careers, acknowledging the many circumstances in which older-to-younger transfers of wisdom were

[13] J. W. Hudson, *The History of Adult Education* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1851), p. 10.

[14] Raymond Williams, 'An Open Letter to WEA Tutors', 1961 <https://weaeducation.typepad.co.uk/files/raymond-williams-an-open-letter-to-wea-tutors.pdf> [accessed 17 March 2021].

[15] Fred Inglis, *Raymond Williams* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 118.

supplemented and enriched by transfers 'back' the other way. A compact example is provided by Ruth McAdams when she recalls an early-career mentor who encouraged her not to make 'assumptions' about the life experience students bring to the literature classroom: it is 'entirely possible that [...] students in the [*King Lear*] class [have] cared for an ageing parent with dementia'. It is a pleasingly complex anecdote, at once confirming the value of longer experience (I assume, cautiously, that the mentor was older than McAdams) while encouraging attention to counter-instances. These are positive notes in a context where generational inequalities in academic employment conditions, already highly politicized prior to 2020, have become all the more so, and harder to address, with the mounting economic challenges Covid-19 is imposing on higher-education institutions: the temporary or permanent course closures, especially in humanities; the impact of moves to online teaching and research; the predicted — but on current calculations unaffordable — rises in pension costs if current employees are to be financially protected in retirement.

The readiness with which this issue of *19* on ageing studies draws insights from across the humanities and beyond to assist politicized readings of nineteenth-century literature and culture marks a methodological pluralism typical of the field. To say this should not conceal how very uneven the traffic as yet remains between age studies (whatever its period focus) and other forms of criticism with activist dimensions. A recent issue of *Social Text*, dedicated to the emergence of radical care agendas, provides a striking but not, I think, particularly surprising example of how marginal or (simply) missing questions of age often are, even in work explicitly marked as 'intersectional'. Defining 'radical care' as a set of collective and individual strategies for resisting the neoliberal marketization of care and its concomitant exploitation of unpaid (often female) labour, the editors and contributors offer practices of care as a means of advancing social justice in the face of 'immediate crises and precarious futures'.[16] Across seven articles — running to over 150 print pages on topics as diverse as 'white care', mothering in prisons, and self-care through trans coalition activism — there is not one substantive consideration of ageing. On the very few occasions when the word even appears, it looks little more than an 'automatic' addition to the list of intersectional categories (see Looser's contribution to the podcast). The sole context in which it appears as a factor in the political analysis is a recognition that HIV-vaccine hesitancy in Argentina is partly explained by the reluctance of parents to accept that their daughters may be sexually active before the age of eighteen. The point is not to rebuke the *Social Text* editors or contributors, who have provided a welcome range

[16] Hiʻilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, 'Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times', *Social Text*, 38.1 (2020), 1–16 (p. 2).

of additions to the critical literature on care and self-care. It is rather to pose, with renewed purpose, a problem central to age studies, and one that just does not go away, politically, but for which the most credible responses seem to say something rather chastening about our societies. How is it that old age keeps slipping off the political radar, despite the urgency of a care crisis that (long before Covid-19) provided pressing reason to have it at the centre of our political deliberations?

Post-pandemic, we might expect, certainly we may hope, that the politics will change. Early signs are not entirely encouraging. The latest UK government budget (3 March 2021) yet again failed to address social care, eleven years after accepting, in principle, the recommendations of the Commission on Funding of Care and Support which proposed a viable structure for shared private and state responsibility.[17] Urging a rethink, the author of the report, Andrew Dilnot, explained to a journalist that he saw a need for 'courage'. 'Why courage?'. 'Because, for reasons that I don't fully understand, elderly people needing care, but also working-age adults and children needing this kind of care, are not a subject we find comfortable to speak about.' In particular, 'we don't find it comfortable to think about our needs, if we need social care, in old age [...] but if we don't sort it out, we are letting ourselves down.'[18] Whether or not the double meaning was intended, it is felicitous: we let ourselves down as a society; but we also (appealing to our self-interest) let down our future selves. Understanding why 'we don't find it comfortable' is the work not of economists, or medics, or philosophers of physics, but of cultural critics and historians. Some of the answers are to be found in the Victorian period which, while it opened the door to intergenerational catastrophism, also initiated the concept of social care, and provided us with imaginative projections that still invite us to think (at once critically and pleasurably) beyond our own time.

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[17] Andrew Dilnot, *Fairer Care Funding: The Report of the Commission on Funding of Care and Support*, *Vol. 1*, July 2011 <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120713201059/http://www.dilnotcommission.dh.gov.uk/files/2011/07/Fairer-Care-Funding-Report.pdf> [accessed 17 March 2021].

[18] *The World at One*, BBC Radio 4, 4 March 2021, 1pm.