



Exploring the Boundaries of Literary Age Studies

Aagje Swinnen, Cynthia Port,
and Valerie Barnes Lipscomb

I. Age Studies at the Modern Language Association

“Exploring the Boundaries of Age Studies,” a roundtable at the MLA Convention in Philadelphia in January 2017, was proposed by members of the Modern Language Association’s Age Studies Forum as a response to this year’s Conference’s Presidential Theme: “Boundary Conditions.” Particularly, these excerpts from the general call for proposals resonated with the session organizers:

Boundary conditions are, for mathematicians, the parameters that define the space within which one seeks solutions. Our work lends itself to this idea too, for all scholarship takes place in conditions that constrain and enable its significance. These boundary conditions can be intellectual or institutional; they can be national or notional. This year’s theme should, first of all, be taken as an invitation to reflect together on these conditions: Are there questions we have put aside because they are outside our current parameters, conceptual or material?





Swinnen et al.

Can reflection on these parameters generate new questions or undermine the presuppositions of existing scholarship? When should we seek to redefine the parameters that constrain and enable our work? [...] Our expanded boundary conditions are sometimes spatial, sometimes identitarian, sometimes disciplinary and subdisciplinary. We have also noticed that boundaries themselves are sites of artistic production and of scholarship. [...] This theme will invite reflection on the profession itself, a profession that, in all its shaggy complexity, is the one thing we share.

The session organizers immediately saw this call in relation to the evolution of their specialty group within MLA. Age is, after all, a category that for many decades was left outside the parameters of literary studies; as other arenas of identity and difference grew increasingly prominent in literary and cultural studies, age was rarely included as a category of analysis. Indeed, when an age studies group was first proposed to the MLA committee in charge of divisions and discussion groups in 2004, the proposal was declined, as were several additional attempts in succeeding years. Responses from the MLA administration explained that committee members found the study of age in literature to be overly thematic or topical; they were not persuaded of its value as a category of analysis in literary study. (At the time, it should be noted, the MLA supported fifteen divisions under the rubric of interdisciplinary approaches that included Ethnic Studies, Gay Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Disability Studies, and Women's Studies—all of which had been recognized and validated as useful categories of analysis). It was not until the summer of 2008 that the persistent efforts—which had been spearheaded throughout by age scholar Leni Marshall—were rewarded with the institutional validation (and guaranteed conference panels) that come with official recognition. At the group's inception, then, the utility, value, and relevance of age studies perspectives to literary scholarship were under debate.

The stated mission of the Age Studies Forum has been to serve as a resource for researchers and educators in the field of age studies, which is fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature. The forum supports





researchers who explore the implications of age during the life course and the intersections of age with other categories of identity in literature, media, and culture. The mission statement explicitly “encourages scholars to explore the impact of their own and others’ age-based stereotypes, the benefits and frustration of aging, and the potential inherent in aging and old age beyond the boundaries of essentialist, reductive valuations.” Such exploration frequently crosses disciplinary lines.

The delayed response to repeated petitions notwithstanding, housing an age studies group made MLA a leader among humanities disciplines—a natural development, because literary critics led the charge in the 1990s to establish the field that has become known as age studies (which now includes scholars of history, visual age studies, philosophy, and other humanities fields). At the same time, inquiry into the meaning of aging over the life course had been expanding in the work of sociologists, gerontologists, psychologists, anthropologists, etc., offering more opportunities for cross-disciplinary exchange. Humanities-related age studies now boasts two international organizations, the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS) and the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS), which invite scholars from a wide spectrum of disciplines to address such subjects as myth, narrative, and cultural representation. Traditionally scientific professional groups, such as the Gerontological Society of America, have begun to value and publish humanities-related scholarship, further blurring disciplinary boundaries. By the same token, MLA has embraced cultural studies and broadened the definitions of literature to encompass film, television, and other media. As cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship proliferates, literary scholars have been welcomed in a variety of venues.

Given this context, the MLA Age Studies Forum Executive Committee members agreed that the time is ripe to ask these questions: What is the current role of literary age studies—and the MLA—within the interdisciplinary arena of age and aging studies? What does literary age studies bring to the community of literature and language scholars who make up the MLA membership? Does the age studies group at MLA continue to serve a unique purpose? Considering the range and reach of humanities-oriented inquiry, the recent roundtable addressed what the





boundaries of literary age studies are and what they should be. Toward that end, the session assembled an international group of five literary critics whose work is situated near various age studies boundaries, including considerations of academic discipline, theory, location, and engaged practice. Terry Lee (Christopher Newport University), for example, specializes in documentary film-making, which is often treated as a separate discipline from English. His work intersects with journalism, Jacob Jewusiak's (Valdosta State University) with philosophy. Jeffrey Williams (Carnegie Mellon University) publishes cultural studies outside academic circles and embraces the role of public intellectual. Aagje Swinnen (Maastricht University) offers a European perspective, while others are faculty members at U.S. universities of various sizes. Panelists' academic ranks range from Jewusiak as an assistant professor to Williams as a full professor. Of the participants, Swinnen and Cynthia Port (Coastal Carolina University) are most closely identified with a specialization in age studies. Port was among the founders of what is now the MLA Age Studies Forum. Moreover, Port and Swinnen were instrumental in founding NANAS and ENAS, respectively, and they routinely address the overarching questions that shape the academic age-studies field as co-editors of the print and digital peer-reviewed journal *Age, Culture, Humanities*. As described on its website (ageculturehumanities.org), the journal "promotes cross-disciplinary, critical investigations of the experiences of age, aging, and old age, as seen through the lens of the humanities and arts." Considering the boundaries of humanities-based age studies is thereby integral to Swinnen's and Port's collaborative work. The roundtable was organized and moderated by Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee), who specializes in age studies approaches to drama and performance. Participants were asked to consider the scope of literary age studies, how their own work is contextualized, and how literary scholars can best advance this relatively nascent field. Panelists took a few minutes each to situate their position in the conversation, then were prepared to discuss questions such as these:

- What are/should be the parameters of age studies in literature?





- How should literary age studies intersect and interact with other age-focused disciplines?
- How does your own current work at disciplinary boundaries enhance the individual disciplines and age studies as a whole?
- What unique contributions may literary age critics offer within the humanities?
- What challenges do you face in conducting and publishing boundary-stretching scholarship?
- How can we ensure that our contributions are valuable to the public beyond academic boundaries?
- How are disciplinary considerations useful or limiting to the development of age studies?

The ensuing discussion, which provided the foundation for the sections below, offered a snapshot of the contributions and current configurations of literary age studies as well as of challenges facing those who undertake this interdisciplinary work and of some promising directions for future inquiry.

II. The Evolution of Literary Age Studies

In the *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, Sarah Falcus gives an excellent overview of the scholars who have contributed to the development of age “as a critical perspective from which to view literature” (53) from the 1980s onwards. Falcus starts by paying tribute to founding mothers of literary age studies, such as Kathleen Woodward, Margaret Gullette, Barbara Frey Waxman, and Anne Wyatt-Brown. These are the humanities scholars who systematically started focusing on aging in literature from psychoanalytic, feminist, genre studies, and biographical perspectives, and who are most frequently cited up to this day.

As literary studies has evolved, however, new approaches to aging in literature have developed. From Falcus’ overview, we deduce the following important trends: a shift from the study of literary representations to more contextualized interpretations of aging in literature that, for example, question power dynamics in and surrounding literature as cultural practice





or experiment with reader responses; a change from a focus on age as a particular crucial difference to an intersectional approach; and a turn from somewhat essentialist discussions of late style to more literary-sociological approaches to careers in the arts. Falcus mentions the work of scholars such as Jeanette King (*Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism*, 2013) and Gordon McMullan (*Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, 2007) that have fostered these new developments. Other examples of this trend include monographs by Heike Hartung (*Ageing, Gender, and Illness in Anglophone Literature*, 2016) and Leni Marshall (*Age Becomes Us*, 2015), which came out after Falcus' piece yet equally well describe the trends that she identified. And, if we broaden our scope to other media, the work of Anne Basting (*The Stages of Age*, 1998) and Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (*Performing Age in Modern Drama*, 2016) on theatre, and of Sally Chivers (*The Silvering Screen*, 2011) and Pam Gravagne (*The Becoming of Age*, 2013) on film, for instance, show how literary age studies develops in tandem with cultural age studies, which is based on "text" in its broadest sense.

It is clear, then, that acknowledging age as a category of analysis has opened up new directions in literary study. The question that remains, though, is what literature specifically may bring to age studies and to gerontological research with its specific quest to understand and improve the lives of older people. What can the study of literature mean in terms of the development of theories of age and aging and how can it provide insights into cultural, personal, and embodied meanings of later life, which may then be translated into policy change?

The first argument that is frequently offered in favor of literary age studies has to do with how literary fiction "works" differently from non-fiction texts. Literary fiction is said to serve as an "imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of the experience of ageing in society" (Hepworth quoted in Falcus 55). As such, fiction, especially so-called polyphonic literature, offers insights into the meanings of aging in all their complexities and ambiguities. Living vicariously through characters and the affective responses this involves has the capacity to alter people's views of aging. Through these affective responses, literary fiction can function as "an epistemological tool" (Woodward quoted in





Falcaus 58) and eventually result not only in different thinking but also in different living practices.

A second argument revolves around the figure of the professional reader. A literary scholar has the unique capability to clarify how texts operate in society and to question ageist discourse in texts as well as points of exit from this discourse, through practices of resistant reading, or reading against the grain, for instance. Professional readers are needed to prevent literary texts from being squeezed into theoretical gerontological models at the expense of their literariness and their often-dialogic nature as well as their capacity not only to mirror but also to constitute society. This is not to say, however, that these perspectives on the value of literary scholarship for understanding and improving the conditions of later life are always recognized by gerontologists and other social scientists.

III. Current Boundaries of Literary Age Studies

Several factors complicate the cross-disciplinary exchanges that could help scholars in non-humanistic fields recognize the kinds of insights enabled through literary studies. As Swinnen and Port explained in their introduction to a special issue on “Aging, Narrative, and Performance” in the *International Journal of Aging and Later Life* (2012), the boundaries of academic disciplines are policed by distinct scholarly conventions that can inhibit communication and collaboration: each entails “different types of research questions; different methodological choices in attempting to answer those questions; different interpretations of research results and their implications; and different sets of concepts and terminologies—or, even more disruptively, different interpretations of the same concepts and terminologies” (Swinnen and Port 10). The strictly structured formats required by social science publications differ from the more essayistic style generally preferred by literary and other humanities venues. Whereas strategies of close reading and detailed analysis often serve as essential evidence in literary scholarship, social science journals might expect interpretive readings to be condensed. As a result, participants in the MLA panel noted, scholars who work in literary approaches to aging and old age confront practical questions about where to publish their work, how





to make their arguments persuasive to scholars in other fields, and how to earn academic validation (i.e., credit toward tenure and promotion) when working across disciplinary lines.

Another fault line that hinders the case for the broader relevance of literary approaches to aging is the widespread disconnect between academic discourses and the general public. Even as some institutions begin to require humanities researchers to account for the social impact of their work and to reward those who demonstrate evidence of their contributions to the broader community, it remains difficult to tailor complex messages for a nonacademic audience—especially when those messages address the nuances of age and aging in a predominantly ageist society. Older people who have internalized ageism might not be willing to listen to—or even be ideologically capable of hearing about—approaches that recontextualize age or probe the implications of its social and cultural meanings. Moreover, the practical uses of literary age-studies scholarship for meaningfully affecting policies and lives can be difficult to communicate to the public at large.

The boundaries between texts, on the one hand, and actual people, on the other, constitute another tension that plays out in multiple ways across age studies scholarship. In “The Critical Use of Narrative and Literature in Gerontology” (2011), Hannah Zeilig contrasts the therapeutic “storying” of an individual’s life in narrative gerontology with the literary-critical analysis of age as imagined and constructed in fictional works; she identifies blind spots that manifest in each approach when the distinctions between them are overlooked. Projects that encourage self-fashioning through literature (reading and/or writing) in caregiving settings can also face practical challenges, requiring intermediaries to facilitate the collaboration between caregiving institutions and academics. More generally, new methodologies are needed to accommodate changing research questions and different aims.

Another set of potential limitations to the development of literary age studies identified at the MLA roundtable concerned pedagogical matters such as teaching methods, curriculum development and student expectations. Participants noted that students reluctant to look across an imagined boundary between themselves and older age might tend to avoid





classes centered on aging. In recent years, a growing number of institutions are encouraging faculty to devise experiential learning opportunities for students, but recruiting students to engage directly with older people can be difficult. Panelist Terry Lee has developed an innovative program at Christopher Newport University in which, after reading about older people in a classroom setting, students work with older individuals, documenting their stories in prose, audio, photography, and video. While he finds that this project effectively sharpens students' listening skills, he also notes that those students often end up trading one set of stereotypes of older people with others that, though less negative, might still be demeaning or patronizing (e.g., "cute" or "adorable"). The barriers to cross-generational understanding, communication, and respect remain high. Developing curricular initiatives that draw students is an important challenge facing the field of age studies. The ultimate goal should be for age-studies-informed approaches to infuse not only all literature classes, but also *all* areas of education, as gender studies, race studies, and other categories of analysis have done.

IV. Bridging the Boundaries

Its earlier resistance notwithstanding, the MLA has not only enabled the consolidation of literary age studies but has also afforded opportunities for valuable collaboration and cross-fertilization with other literary subfields. Every year, each MLA forum is encouraged to collaborate with another specialization area on a proposal for a joint session at the annual convention. These collaborative panels succeed not only in generating new interdisciplinary research but also in expanding the community of peers through academic outreach. To date, the MLA Age Studies Forum has developed collaborative sessions with other groups, including those devoted to Medical Humanities, Teaching as a Profession, Disability Studies, the Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages, and Comics and Graphic Narratives. Other panels sponsored by the Age Studies Forum have paired age studies with queer theory, the post-human, cognitive theory, performance, new media, affect studies, popular culture, and temporality, among other perspectives. Two participants in





the recent roundtable shared research perspectives informed by theories of temporality: Jacob Jewusiak's work on duration and Jeffrey Williams's focus on generations. This year's collaborative session, co-sponsored by the forums on medical humanities and age studies, invited panelists to reach beyond narrative models for aging and illness to other literary and cinematic forms, such as the lyric. A panel on nontraditional forms of adolescent literature demonstrated how sociological approaches to literary studies, including considerations of the publishing and marketing industries, could yield valuable insights. By interweaving age studies with other theoretical innovations, scholars are expanding the range and relevance of age studies approaches to literature and culture.

Forms of research that complicate preconceived disciplinary boundaries between traditional literary age studies and active engagement with older people seem a particularly innovative research direction, especially in light of today's call for a more socially relevant type of humanities scholarship as described above. An emerging, politically motivated version of reader-response research, for example, is producing studies that seek to enhance well-being or change stereotypical preconceptions about aging; scholars performing this research, such as Nick Hubble and Philip Tew (*Ageing, Narrative and Identity*, 2013) are moving away from analyzing texts to studying older people as they relate to texts. Other relevant approaches explore what writers experience as they write and age; investigate practices of reading over time and in different contexts; theorize late style as a kind of reception study; and research art interventions, which entails navigating between organizing or conducting such interventions (i.e., action research, a methodology borrowed from the social sciences) on the one hand, and studying their effects (i.e., participatory observation, borrowed from ethnography), on the other.

The institutional growth of age studies as a discipline is also supporting the expansion and refinement of literary age studies. Conferences hosted by ENAS and NANAS enable humanities and social science scholars to share their research and provide opportunities for networking toward future collaboration. NANAS also hosts a growing syllabus bank, and *Age, Culture, Humanities* publishes essays in age studies pedagogy. The expansion of venues that publish humanities-based age studies





scholarship, such as *Journal of Aging Studies*; *International Journal of Aging and Later Life*; *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*; the Humanities and Arts section of *The Gerontologist*; and the Aging Studies book series affiliated with ENAS, along with themed special issues in other publications, facilitate the dissemination of research across traditional disciplinary lines.

It was heartening to note, at the MLA roundtable, that while some participants had, in the past, confronted graduate advisors who warned them against specializing in literary age studies (on the grounds that, for example, it was not a recognized field, it might not lead to a job, it was not “sexy”), the most recent graduate on the panel reported no resistance. Nine years after the MLA finally acknowledged the usefulness of age as a category of analysis and granted it institutional validation, the proliferation and enrichment of literary age studies is well under way. As we look to the future, however, we recognize that there are still many boundaries to be crossed and gaps to be filled. In particular, we share Toni Calasanti’s and Neal King’s (2015) recent call for more intersectional work that encompasses all kinds of differences, including the intersections of age, class, and ethnicity, given the urgent and timely debates about migration and transnational families. After all, while considering the boundaries of literary age studies, it is worth noting that age itself is a boundary that is always shifting. Studying age, then, always entails attention to perceived distinctions and delineations, whether in an individual’s (or character’s) life or in cultural conceptions more broadly. At the same time, however, it is a category that affects everyone and that structures our understanding of life itself. We contend that the pursuit of literary age studies, in its multiple and multiplying forms, can (and should) be mobilized to resist and transcend the limitations of intellectual, cultural, and social boundaries.





Swinnen et al.

Works cited

- Calasanti, Toni, and Neal King. "Intersectionality and Age." *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 193-200.
- Falcus, Sarah. "Literature and Ageing." *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 53-60.
- Swinnen, Aagje, and Cynthia Port. "Ageing, Narrative and Performance: Essays from the Humanities." *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2012, pp. 9-15.
- Zeilig, Hannah. "The Critical Use of Narrative and Literature in Gerontology." *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2011, pp. 7-37.

Biography

Valerie Barnes Lipscomb is Associate Professor of English at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee. Her work on age and drama has appeared in a variety of journals, as well as a 2016

Palgrave Macmillan monograph, *Performing Age in Modern Drama*. She currently chairs the MLA's Age Studies Forum Executive Committee.

Cynthia Port is Associate Professor of English at Coastal Carolina University and coeditor of *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Her research on age and temporality

in modern and contemporary fiction has been published in numerous venues. Currently, she serves on the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS) governing council.

Aagje Swinnen is Endowed Socrates Chair in International Humanism and the Art of Living at the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht and Assistant Professor at Maastricht University. She has published on the workings

of age ideologies in literature, photography, and film. Swinnen is co-founder and current deputy chair of the European Network in Aging Studies as well as coeditor of the journal *Age, Culture, Humanities*.

