

Article

The taking place of older age

cultural geographies
2021, Vol. 28(4) 661–674
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DOI: 10.1177/14744740211020510
journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj



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Abstract

Representations of older age are often reductive in western societies, portrayed as a distinct period of life characterised by social disengagement and physiological decline. Through rich ethnographic accounts developed with older people from Greater Manchester UK, this paper is concerned with how the category of older age is made through representations, and the different ways people encounter and relate to it. In doing so, it disrupts reductive representations by considering how older age is lived. I respond to calls for the incorporation of more-than-representational and affective approaches into the geographic study of older age to advance research on ageing and highlight affect as a useful concept for thinking through difference. The paper is concerned with how older people are represented, with how representations differentially affect and are affected by older individuals, and with how representations of older age are performed and folded into lived accounts. More-than-representational theories offer an understanding of older age that is not pre-given or free-standing, but as something which can emerge, gather and disperse in relation with materialities as well as diffuse atmospheres, affects and emotional resonances.

Keywords

affect, difference, non-representational theory, older age, representation

Introduction

‘I believe in living life to the full until you can’t live anymore. I’ve had a wonderful life, but I’m not old yet! I keep a zest for life and an interest’. These words were shared by 90-year-old Mel as we spoke in her living room. A lively reflection on the meanderings of her life spent between the Lake District and Manchester ensued. Pointing toward a stack of books in the corner of the room, Mel enthusiastically explained, ‘in there, we have books on every subject. You should never ever let your brain idle. I’m in groups for all sorts of things: Buddhism, poetry, gardening’. With a hesitancy to her voice, Mel explained how a fall a year ago had regrettably made enjoying her varied interests difficult, resulting in her ‘feeling old and stuck’. This hesitancy was quickly dissipated as Mel exclaimed, ‘I will start again, I’ve not finished. Old age is not yet. There’s so much still to do’.

This paper is interested in how the category of older age is made through representations and how this category surfaces in people’s everyday lives. The above vignette is an example of this.

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The corollary of Mel's account is that older age is a time when there is nothing left to do, when interests dwindle, and brains idle. Despite being at an age which many would associate with being old, in an attempt to push back this horizon, Mel confidently states that 'old age is not yet'. For Mel, older age is something that was encountered after a fall, but which is consciously resisted. In current geographic research with older people, there is a fixation with older age as an empirical category rather than critically considering how older age *takes place*. We might equally argue that age and ageing are under-studied topics in contemporary cultural geography, especially those which attune to events, affectivities and embodiment. More-than-representational theories are used in this paper to show how, in the flow of everyday life, representations of older age are recrafted, resisted, performed and embodied as they become folded into lives. As Mel's words reveal, reductive representations affect and are affected by the practices of those that work to sustain and disrupt them. Put another way, representational classifications, be it older age or otherwise, *create* worlds, affording different potential connections and movements. For Mel, older age was resisted in a way which sustained her 'zest for life', but for others, these representations are related to in harmful ways.

Older age is most often understood in relation to the number of years someone has lived. Indeed, society is, in various ways, organised around this chronological understanding of age. Take, for instance, the liberties afforded to those over 18 in the UK (such as buying tobacco or alcohol), or the existence of 'young' and 'senior persons' railcards. Age markers are central to the construction of social identities in bureaucratic contexts, in less formal social interactions and in understandings of the self. In the global North, one dominant way in which older age is framed is of increased reliance on family members, society and the state.¹ Whilst the past decade has seen more positive accounts of older age surrounding 'lifelong learning' and 'active ageing', it is nevertheless a social category which is often stigmatised and reduced.² With such stigmatisation comes the stereotypical imaginary of older age as the antithesis to 'youthfulness', where slowing minds, walking aids and silver hair come to define complex individuals.

The physiological and cultural effects of the biological clock certainly matter in terms of what makes some individuals be understood as older. There is a risk, however, that focusing overly on biological age can lead to essentialist representations of older age in wider society. Indeed, the problem arises when a set of characteristics and attributes are mapped onto particular age groups which are then used to say something about the people who find themselves within it. What could be thought through further are the assumptions and identities that become attached to particular ages and how this affects and is affected by different people.

What I understand to be an older person is shaped by my life experiences and dispositions, as well as the discourses and representations surrounding the category. The ways individuals interact with representations might surface in the types of places they feel a sense of belonging, or in how they understand or portray themselves as of a certain age, class, race or ethnicity at different moments. But exceeding and entangled with such representations are many individual and collective meanings, affects and emotions which are ever evolving, including my own. Although geographic research with older people is relatively small, the past decade has seen the field grow substantially, particularly in response to the cultural and relational turns.³ Geographers are beginning to understand older age less as a stable category, and more as a relational and embodied process.⁴ The past five years have seen calls for the incorporation of more-than-representational and affective approaches into the geographic study of older age to advance research on ageing and it is from these calls that this paper takes its cue. More-than-representational theories are necessary for work on older age because there is a tendency in everyday life, in policies geared toward older people, and in academic literature to speak of older people as though easy to identify. They allow us to consider how older age *takes place* and the various ways it is lived. Older age is understood

less as a stable container of meaning, and more as something which emerges and ruptures through the unfolding of events.

Although this approach is most commonly referred to in the singular non-representational theory or 'NRT', the name has undergone several iterations and is also labelled as non-representational theories, more-than-representational theories, and non-representational geographies.⁵ Indeed, the prefix 'non' has caused confusion amongst some geographers surrounding what is removed through the 'non'. In an email chain on CRIT-GEOG-FORUM in 2018, Paul Harrison reflected how it is 'the apparent blankness of the non' which he thinks causes concern and expresses an apprehension that people confidently claim to know what the name 'non-representational theory' refers to, presuming that the 'non' is a negation when it is still far from settled.⁶ For Harrison, the 'non' is neither a negation nor an affirmation, and it is precisely this ambiguity which is important because 'it points to something else that may be going-on, something that is not yet named, or which may be in-coming or unresolved' – an argument which is echoed by Dewsbury.⁷ I would add to this that there has been a tendency to read more-than and non-representational theories as different approaches, rather than the same but with a different name. I use 'more-than' over 'non-representational' as it better captures the significance of representations and the discursive. I use theories over theory to denote the plurality of influences on the evolution of the more-than-representational approach. I find 'more-than-representational theories' to be a less antagonistic and ambiguous naming that is more inclusive and therefore likely to encourage interest in the approach from a wider audience. I say 'inclusive' because 'non-representational theory' fixes the approach 'to a specific space-time, and to a few works of a few individuals' which risks limiting the development of what is an increasingly diverse body of work.⁸

Arising out of a frustration with the tendency of social constructivist approaches to render the world static and knowable, more-than-representational theories embrace movement and recognise that there is always an excess beyond what can be clearly comprehended and represented. They are concerned with how the world is made sense of as it emerges. This attention to processuality is often overlooked in geographic research with older people in favour of more definitive narratives in which older people are the empirical object.⁹ I argue that more-than-representational theories provide a means to disrupt reductive representations of older age. They do this by attending to how older age is lived whilst keeping sight of how representational structures mediate the capacities of different individuals to think, feel and do. Affect is perhaps one of the best-known facets of more-than-representational theories. The reading of affect advanced in this paper comes from debates within UK-based cultural geography which understands affect as the capacity to affect and be affected.¹⁰ In response to critiques which have suggested otherwise, I highlight affect as a useful concept for thinking through difference.¹¹ I demonstrate that predefined social categories of difference (such as older age) do not account for the multiplicities, potentials and practices that make up that category as it is lived.¹²

I am concerned with how representations of older age emerge, condense and dissipate as they are mediated through different relations and forces. These forces might be broader such as the political, economic, social and cultural context or smaller such as individual experiences, memories and so forth.¹³ Force is used in this paper to get at the multiple often overlooked processes which move individuals, but not necessarily by will.¹⁴ In this paper I draw attention to how the category of older age is made through representations and how lived experience escapes those relations, whilst also being mediated by them. Attention is paid to what is being said by participants as much as the processes and contexts which mediate both why and how those things are said.

The accounts shared are from a broader research project which explored the place-making practices of older individuals in Prestwich, Greater Manchester. Material was generated over 12 months with 32 participants and a combination of methods were flexibly drawn upon. These included photo

walks, go-alongs, participant packs and group discussions.¹⁵ All participants were met on at least three separate occasions, and some six times. The longer encounters, which lasted up to 6 hours, often included a walk which was split up through the sharing of food and drink over the course of one day. The shorter encounters included sharing lunch and accompanying participants on a regular trip to the shop or to walk their dog.¹⁶ Each conversation was transcribed from audio recorded material and written notes, and recurrent themes and points of interest were highlighted. Whilst listening to the recordings, attention was paid to intonation, silences, pauses and the composure of participants accounts as well as the contexts in which conversations unfolded. Whilst recruiting I was conscious to not delimit who could and could not take part in this research on the grounds of their biological age. Instead, I gave participants the freedom to think about whether they understood themselves as older. I did this by specifying on the participant information sheet that I was interested in working with older individuals, but I did not state what biological age this might corresponded with. This allowed me to attune to the performative and changeable nature of social categories and how they emerge and disperse as they are mediated through particular places and times.

The paper begins by considering how the category of older age is often represented in a reductive and homogenising way. Secondly, I review geographic work concerned with older age, highlighting the need for more-than-representational and affective approaches to strengthen research on ageing. In the empirical section, I enliven rigid understandings of older age by foregrounding the diverse ways it is lived, challenged and appropriated by those who are 'in' this very category. I explain how the prospect of older age was related to in differentiated ways, often understood as a time of simultaneous opportunity and resentment. The ways in which participants understood themselves and others as older (if at all) was mediated by the particular encounters shared. Beyond providing insight into the messy life-worlds of individuals, more-than-representational theories have the capacity to advance understandings of the affective lives of representations themselves. As such, more-than-representational epistemologies provide an opportunity to more generously represent the world.

The social category of older age

Though the social category of older age is never fixed, and indeed its invocation is always an event within itself, it has long been essentialised in a negative way. Even in the fourth century BC, Aristotle remarked that 'elderly Men [sic . . .] who are past their prime' are 'cynical', 'under-do everything', 'are small-minded' and 'neither love warmly nor hate bitterly'.¹⁷ In Ancient Rome and Ancient Greece, poets and play writers poked merciless fun at the old.¹⁸ Across the Classical period older age was understood as a time of 'decline and decrepitude'.¹⁹ The definition of 'old', however, was not measured in years but in terms of an individual's ability to perform tasks.²⁰ In the Modern period, the social standing of older people declined further, seen 'no longer as bearers of wisdom but as embodiments of shame'.²¹ This stance has become more pronounced with the so-called 'youthquake' of the 1960s wherein youth became understood as 'cool, coveted [and] aspirational which put a big fat target on the forehead of anyone looking a little long in the tooth'.²²

This essentialising is often little different today. It is not difficult to find newspaper stories or television programmes that sustain and reinvent negative tropes associated with the category. In the 28th December 2018 issue of the *Derbyshire Live* newspaper, for instance, a resident of Burton remarks 'I've done so much complaining about these potholes I feel like Victor Meldrew'.²³ Victor Meldrew is the main character in British television comedy *One Foot in the Grave* which ran throughout the 1990s and focused on the trials and tribulations of Victor's life as an older person.²⁴ Reductive narratives of older age are intricately woven throughout the series. In series 3, episode 3 *The Broken Reflection*, a visitor remarks 'so how are you coping now then Victor, bit of a big one

isn't it, retirement? Suddenly being thrown onto the scrap heap of life, a prisoner in your own home with no prospects, nothing left to live for. . . It's not getting you down I hope?' As Mills notes, Victor Meldrew 'remains in the public consciousness and is used as shorthand for references to older and/or angry and exasperated people'.²⁵ But of course, this maintenance requires it to *be referenced*, be this in *Derbyshire Live* or in a fleeting, overheard remark by someone on a high street.

There are multiple representations of older age and the representational field is not unidimensional. However, there are dominant tendencies which produce reductive narratives of older age. For instance, older people can be written off as senile or celebrated for their wisdom. Take Donald Trump, the former President of the United States who is in his 70s. In September 2017, and after heightening tensions between North Korea and the United States, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, said of Trump, 'I will surely and definitely tame the mentally deranged US dotard with fire'.²⁶ The 14th-Century term dotard refers to an old person exhibiting a decline in mental faculties. However, recent years have also seen a flourishing of phrases previously understood as antinomies: active ageing, life-long learners, age pioneers. This has been discussed in both policy and the academy, often surrounding the age-friendly cities initiative.²⁷

But a more-than-representational understanding must not settle for any of these representations as definitive, for this would forge 'a sort of rigidity - a hardening of the arteries' in how we understand older age.²⁸ To take these representations at face value would be to inscribe the fiction that the social category older age can 'contain a person's potential'.²⁹ Although representations and categories are not wholly separate, they are not entirely the same. Categories are concerned with the naming and classification of things usually based on a set of characteristics through which things can be demarcated and identified. Representation is a broader term describing any kind of image, figure or scene through which something is portrayed, and so representations become the means through which categorisation happens. An act of categorisation would be to say, 'look, that person is old'. The category is given a name, 'old', it is identified as distinct from middle age and youth and is based on an idea that someone has of 'old'. This idea can be based on a range of culturally variable references.

It is these representations surrounding older age and older people which, in part, frame the world for an individual and which mediate the immediate, unthought, affective experience of the world.³⁰ These representations give rise to affects that condense around 'aged' individuals, ordering and characterising them against an 'other' in hierarchies of worth and value.³¹ Older individuals, however, are far from passive receivers of these, and other, representations. Rather, the representations affect and are affected by older individuals themselves, mediated by other social categories such as class, gender and race, for instance. This paper is concerned with how pervasive representations of older people take on a life of their own. Representations are not only a reflection but are creating and recreating worlds. Indeed, the empirical section of this paper is concerned with how these representations exist in-relation with and co-constitute the lived. It is necessary to first consider how older age has been researched within geography and what more-than-representational and affective approaches might add.

More-than older age

Human Geography has a small but growing literature on ageing which has seen pronounced interest over the past decade.³² The incorporation of social and cultural theories has helped to move research away from normative accounts of the relation between older people and place, to consider the diversity of ways older age is experienced.³³ Such literature has considered how older individuals negotiate changing urban landscapes, and the unfolding relations through which generations,

identities and life-courses are made sense of.³⁴ The study of older age, however, remains dominated by the biomedical sciences and is preoccupied with the older body.³⁵ I argue that focusing on physiological experience alone risks overlooking how the capacities of individuals can alter on a momentary basis, affecting the degree to which someone understands themselves as older. Further, there is a fixation with older age as an empirical category in geographic research rather than critically considering how older age as a category *takes place*.³⁶ Considering older age as it *takes place* welcomes a focus on the different ways it is (and is not) related to, and the factors that mediate this relation as life unfolds – something which is largely missing in work which approaches ageing from a social constructionist perspective.³⁷ The epistemological vantage points of practice and movement that more-than-representational theories encourage enables a consideration of the diverse ways older age is *lived*, and how what the category means ebbs and flows in relation with different places, and the events that constitute the making of those places. In this section, I will argue that more-than-representational and affective approaches can advance geographic research with older people by considering how the category of older age surfaces in people's lives and how it is related to differently.

More-than-representational theories emerged out of a frustration with the tendency of social constructivist approaches to understand the world as made of signifying systems against which social meanings are constructed and from which static truths can be represented. Crucially, more-than-representational theories do not propose that representations do not matter. Rather, they contend 'that the 'new' cultural geography had overextended a form of representational analysis of representations'.³⁸ Indeed, the ethos of the approach is to escape the 'deadening effect' of constructivist analysis of identity and meaning as is evident in more traditional ways of conceiving age in geographies of ageing literature.³⁹ Anderson introduced the term 'representations-in-relation' based on the observation that social and cultural research had moved away from understanding representations as systems of meaning to instead understanding representations *as they happen*.⁴⁰ Through this understanding, representations are not the object of analysis because they are understood through the relational assemblages within which they are entangled and emerge. Thinking of representations-in-relation echoes the call of Horton and Kraftl to focus on the liveliness of the relations through which social categories emerge, rather than drawing rigid lines between people, places and generations.⁴¹

The implications of this way of thinking for the category of older age are that it becomes something which is performed, resisted and embodied at different moments. Where older age begins and ends, and the traits and capacities of an older person are recreated and reimagined as life is lived. The approach invites a focus on how representations of older age are ever evolving, both affecting and affected by other processes and practices. Indeed, affect is perhaps the best-known element of more-than-representational theories. Across the social sciences and the humanities affect is understood in numerous ways from different and sometimes overlapping lineages.⁴² Despite proliferating in popularity in Geography, the use of affect whilst researching with older people remains small. Notable exceptions include Maclaren when writing about affective lives of rural ageing and Barron whilst bringing together research on the life-course and more-than-representational theories.⁴³ Indeed, although calls for the need to use affective approaches when researching with older people are multiple, very little work has done this empirically.

The reading of affect advanced in this paper comes from more-than-representational theories and debates within UK-based cultural geography which understands affect as the capacity to affect and be affected.⁴⁴ From this understanding, affect is understood as the outcome of an encounter and takes the form of an increase or decrease in the capacity of an individual to act, think, feel and do. An understanding of encounter then is important to theorisations of affect. This is because encounters alter an individuals' capacities to affect and be affected and present the potential for being

otherwise. Wilson has shown how encounter has historically meant a meeting of opposites and so has difference at its heart.⁴⁵ It is this centrality of difference which Wilson suggests makes encounters important spaces for thinking through embodied differences and the contingency of identity and belonging. The momentary nature of encounter allows one to witness how embodied similarities and differences (age, gender, race and so on) are not stable but are negotiated and constructed iteratively.

In this paper, I refer to difference in two ways. First in terms of structural difference and how older age is understood as a category. Second, following Deleuze and more-than-representational lineages, difference also emerges imminently: it is about possibility and openness.⁴⁶ I argue that the pre-defined categories of difference fail to account for the multiplicities, potentials and practices of difference as imminence.⁴⁷ I understand these two perspectives together because to confine individuals to the category of older age is to overlook the 'multiplication of difference beyond organised representational boundaries'.⁴⁸ Cockayne et al. advocate Deleuze's thinking on difference to 'better understand how social formations [. . .] reproduce inequality, domination, and violence and how particular differences may escape or confound dominant coordinates'.⁴⁹ It is the lived dimension of older age that escapes the relations between representations and categories, but which is also mediated by and sustains them.

I make this point in response to some feminist critiques which have suggested that affect struggles to engage with difference and that more-than-representational theories do not take representations seriously.⁵⁰ It was the lack of attention to how structural differences (such as age, race and ethnicity) shape the lives of individuals in powerful and differentiated ways which these geographers rightly took issue with. Though these critiques were warranted at the time, the 15 or so years that have passed since have seen a growing body of work use affect to think through questions of difference in relation to a range of critical contexts.⁵¹ Much of this work could not be done without the influence of more-than-representational theories but is often done by scholars who may not identify their work as such. Repeating these critiques whilst ignoring this emerging body of work serves to systematically erase it whilst also inhibiting the development of the field. Affect related work is no longer a small area of critique and counter critique, and it can no longer be reduced to a subset of the discipline.

In the next section, I look at how representations of older age are lived, the different dynamics of power they bring into play, and how they structure the lives and capacities of individuals in different ways. I am concerned with the movement between structural difference and difference as it is lived. I show that representations do matter and that a more-than-representational approach directs attention to the ways in which representations become folded into lives.

Performing and resisting older age

Resigning to, and deferring older age

'A few years ago, I used to have my grandchildren every weekend. That was a big break when they stopped coming. It was terrible at the beginning, I didn't know what to do with myself, I felt really old and redundant. I don't feel like that now, I'm not dependent anymore, that's a long way off for me'. These words were shared by 74-year-old Iris whilst on her allotment. They illustrate the awkwardness of older age as a category. It is, in the main, something which is deferred to a future, or someone elsewhere. The account shows how changes in other people's lives has knock on effects on how Iris conceived of herself. Much like Mel's account at the start of this paper, older age was momentarily encountered, gathering around a moment in Iris's life, but dispersed as relations were reconfigured. 'Old' is equated with 'dependency' and 'redundancy'; it is something which Iris has worked against and which is now 'a long way off'.

The mention of older age with participants occasionally resulted in an exchange of awkward glances. In the UK, it is generally considered rude to ask somebody's age. Doing so could be interpreted as a judgement on appearance or opinions, or an assessment of an individual's accomplishments against their age. Some participants fervently worked to distance themselves from being 'old', or at least faced it with reluctance and defeatist resignation. The imagined older person - the caricature of the older person - as 64-year-old Janette described - with 'grey hair', 'a pale blue fleece' and a 'specific bent over posture', was actively worked against. This imagined person became the reference point of what some participants could not be and must not become. We can see here how representations of older age are performed and work to sustain ideas about who is categorised as old. Older age was often deferred and resigned to simultaneously. For Janette, there was a want to delay or postpone the onset of older age as something which is associated with a set of undesirable characteristics. Janette portrayed a sense of giving up on older age before it has started, communicating a defeatist acceptance of something undesirable but inevitable. The way Janette related to older age could have been shaped by the context in which this conversation happened - while sitting with her husband Paul and I in the private space of their home. Paul and Janette were returning home after dropping their daughter off at the train station to return to University when I arrived, and the conversation began with Janette explaining how having a child 'late', at the age of 44, meant she had always felt younger than her age because she had always mixed with other parents 'who are ten years younger'.⁵² Indeed, the older person whom participants referred to was far from a desirable category and was mocked by those in the chronological age bracket of 60 plus that the WHO and the UN define as 'older age'. However, this narrative persisted, shaping and being shaped by the everyday conduct of those who were in, or close to, this age category.

This sense of participants being caught amidst the acceptance and celebration of becoming old and a will to 'push back the years', as Janette described, appeared frequently. Ahead of a walk around Prestwich Clough with Janette's husband, Paul, we shared a pot of tea.⁵³ Sitting back into the sofa, Janette explained 'one of the hardest things for me to accept is that I am getting older. But I am certainly not fighting the years yet, and I don't feel obliged to step into the conversation of what tablets are you on'. In suggesting that getting older is a 'hard thing to accept', and that she is not 'fighting the years yet', Janette implies that older age is a defined and inevitable thing that she must resist. Janette's perhaps mocking use of the word 'obliged' suggests that once someone is older, conversation will inevitably become dominated by medication. Indeed, it is Janette's reference to 'having lived for this length of time' which attunes to the ambivalence she feels about 'getting older'. On the one hand, Janette's interpretation of her biological age affects her self-perception - she feels and looks 'older'. On the other hand, Janette recognises her fortune in having had a wealth of experiences. There was a mix of acceptance and a need to personally defy the negative biological processes of ageing.

Paul laughed in agreement and said, 'we're probably the next ones to be off to the nursing homes! Although, there was a survey in the paper about what age people think they get old and it was 83. I'm 67, so we have ages to go!'. Here Paul is confirming to us all that, despite the joke about nursing homes, he is still young. If someone generations ago would have remarked that 'older age begins at 83', it would likely seem absurd due to changes around retirement age and increasing life-expectancies. This says something about the fluidity and shifting parameters around what constitutes the social category and is testament to the constant reshuffling of relations amidst people and the popular discourses surrounding older age. There are a host of broader conditioning forces and processes which affect what categories individuals perceive themselves as falling into and the extent to which representations are embodied and performed.

As Paul drank his tea, a moment of silence ensued. Silence has an affective capacity. Dawney suggests a 'second of silence is an interruption: the pause in conversation and the charge resonating

through the body as it recognises itself in those words'.⁵⁴ During that pause in conversation, uncomfortable feelings are registered, feelings that push at the limits of experience as they disrupt its normal flow. The words we had shared seemed to condense upon Janette. As if to shake off and dissipate the atmosphere that had gathered around us, Janette broke the silence and exclaimed, 'there is nothing wrong with getting older though, the word has a lot of wrong connotations to it. We could offer lots of things precisely because we have lived for this length of time'. A unique aspect of age-based prejudice is that it is likely to ultimately become applied to the self.⁵⁵

The only time participants referred to themselves as older people was either when speaking about what they perceived to be the positive attributes of ageing, or when in a large group of people of a similar age, such as at 'coffee and craft'. Coffee and craft is a weekly community initiative in Prestwich, where people chat and craft. One week, I was introduced by 73-year-old Ben to two of his male friends as a 'young lady' who wanted to talk to 'us oldies'. Ben's language draws attention to the performative effect of inter- and intra-generational narratives.⁵⁶ Ben simultaneously separates himself and his friends out from myself and draws them closer together along gender and age lines. What constitutes older age emerges, to some extent, *in situ*. In this example, to be older was empowering, providing Ben, Reg and George with a reason to share their life stories and experiences. Often, when speaking in a large group of other 'older' friends with me - a young 'outsider' -, older age took on a more positive meaning, as a binding thread of belonging and togetherness. This says something about how the category of older age *takes place* in specific situations, and how the literal 'place' and context in which older age is made sense of mediates how the category is performed and embodied. In this sense, older age is deployed in myriad ways, shaped by uniquely individualised lives, morphing with the unfolding present.

Older age as a category is simultaneously deferred, ambiguously accepted with resignation and positively affirmed as a form of belonging. The category of older age inspires, moves, angers and upsets, affecting individuals in different ways, at different times. The mediation, interpretation, internalisation and reproduction of stereotypes of older age not only shapes but is shaped by individualised experiences of later life. Interpretations of older age were also mediated by the lives of friends and relatives.

Linking lives and the on-coming horizon of older age

The conversations shared often meant that participants reflected on their own age in relation to their understanding of how they felt their lives might be expected to unfold. As Barron, and the wider academic literature on the life-course and social time suggests, the life-course is not just a theoretical idea, individuals often hold preconceptions of how their lives 'ought to' unfold against chronological age markers and cultural norms.⁵⁷ Notably, participants reflections on their age and their futures were entwined with their experiences of family members and friends growing older. Of course, from a more-than-representational perspective lives are always to be understood relationally. A more-than-representational approach attunes to how relations amidst different lives emerge and are made sense of: an unfolding linking of lives.

Consider 54-year-old Maggie who frequently referred to her mother's life. Drinking a coffee in M&S café, Maggie shared how her mother was in the process of being moved into a care home and her frustrations about how she had fought to keep her mother connected, active and ultimately 'young'. As her thoughts tracked on to the perceived demise of her mother, which she considered to be a state of loneliness and isolation, Maggie became compelled to state her desires to not mirror this. As she remarked, 'I want to stay connected with people, I want to do different things. I say to my Mum, why don't you go out for breakfast or do something different, but she won't. She is living in a bubble where there is nobody left she knows. If I gave up on one part of my life, I still have

lots of other parts to fall back on'. Similarly, while talking about his childhood home together in the Church Inn Pub, 78-year-old James explained how old he felt by relating his current age, feelings and outlook to various family members. James reflected, 'in truth, my Father was old in his 40s. When I look at me in my 40's and then my Father, there's no comparison. My twin brother is bald, grey, and only half an hour older than me! He is so different to me. He doesn't go out, likes to be on his own, and is happy in his own company. I'm more sociable, that's why I feel younger than him I think'. In some ways James is reinforcing and essentialising older age as a particular set of behaviours and characteristics. Of course, James' brother may have displayed these characteristics throughout his life.

Watching loved ones age and grow older in a manner James and Maggie deem to be undesirable shaped their own conceptualisations and understandings of themselves and older age. Narrating and performing themselves as better than, or as having avoided what they understand to be the negative aspects of older age, works to bolster their sense of self. In many ways, James and Maggie are outlining a sense of what it means to be older. They are trying to reject older age, but this rejection emerges out of a fear of becoming older themselves. Maggie's mother and James's brother might be perfectly happy as they are. Maggie and James are making assumptions about what counts as a good or bad life in older age. Although this example is about ageing, it is also about a wider way in which people place themselves in relation to others and more general societal norms and patterns.

Health, along with physical and mental capacity, affected how individuals experienced and understood older age. Indeed, older age was often framed as coming closer through the crossing of thresholds and boundaries. George and Nora, for example, explained how changes in their health affected how old they felt and how they related to other older people. George, diagnosed with multiple sclerosis seven years ago and a wheelchair user, explained how his disability gives him 'much more empathy for older people' as he has 'experienced the worse elements of ageing at a much earlier stage'. Although the disease does not correlate with older age, George has some of the same debilitating practices and feelings associated with older age, such as taking naps in the afternoon, regular hospital visits, aching limbs and a slowing mind. George shared these absolutist statements regularly, of older age as a definitive 'thing' that he was experiencing elements of. Similarly, Nora has fibromyalgia, a condition which she explained makes her feel extremely tired. Entwining her reflections on the changes in her life with her health, Nora explained, 'over the last few years, my health hasn't been great, I feel really old. I know I'm not old in my head, but I am starting to feel older'. This conversation took place while sitting together in Nora's car on a drizzly November morning as we tried to decide what we were going to do given that the rainy weather had scuppered our plans to walk around Prestwich town centre. While we were deciding, Nora explained how work had been incredibly stressful of late, that she was in the process of applying for a new job, and she had been advised by her Doctor to take time off work to rest. On other meetings with Nora, such as when we walked around Manchester city centre visiting the nightclubs she used to frequent, or when sharing lunch at her house, Nora seemed more 'upbeat', describing herself as 'young at heart', reinforcing how older age *takes place*.

Both 52-years-old, Nora and George were the youngest participants, yet they described feeling something called 'old'. They move between the affective and emotive body on the one hand (I feel older) and the biological body on the other (aching limbs and a slowing mind). Understanding their simultaneously biological and affective references shows how bodies are enrolled in more than just one set of intensities. Moreover, such a relational understanding helps to move current geographic literature on older age away from a preoccupation with the older body to instead consider how individuals interpret the capacities of their bodies differently in emergent contexts. Age in the medical sense and age in the affective sense cannot be separated.⁵⁸ When older age is understood

in the context of individual lives and other 'identity factors' - such as health - the category of older age can be complicated. The examples discussed in this section also imply a sense of elasticity with feeling old and with ageing more generally. Indeed, it is common for people in their 20s and 30s to feel old, as though youthfulness has passed them by, and this might particularly be the case for those who do not embody the 'ableness' that is so often equated with youth, for instance.⁵⁹

Conclusions

Older age is often portrayed as a negative phase of life in western societies; as a time of social disengagement and physiological decline. Such representations are reproduced through a variety of means, including the media, popular culture and everyday conversation. The point of departure for this paper was to consider how representations of older age move in and out of peoples embodied understandings of themselves. I wanted to demonstrate how categories of older age surface in people's lives, and how they relate to it as well as attuning to the pervasive power the category holds. I have done this by responding to calls for the incorporation of more-than-representational and affective approaches into the geographic study of older age to advance research on ageing. From a more-than-representational perspective, older age is not a fixed category to which people do or do not belong. It is instead something which gathers, emerges and disperses as it is mediated through particular contexts: it *takes place*. As well as arguing that studies of ageing, older age and the life-course need to pay greater attention to events and affectivities, we might equally argue that age and ageing are under-studied topics in contemporary cultural geography, especially those of an embodied and affective flavour.

I have kept representations and processes of categorisation in view, whilst also considering how the category of older age is embodied, performed and resisted in the everyday lives of participants. I have shown how more-than-representational theories move the focus of analysis away from static representations of older age, toward how this representation functions and comes into being as just one element of a much larger relational configuration.⁶⁰ The category of older age is a force with a capacity to do things, it is simultaneously something that participants worked to other themselves from and an inclusive marker of belonging. I demonstrated how older age is something which one feels they are entering, avoiding or embracing at different moments. When forces align, aspects of social identities (including older age) can crystallise and gain a degree of fixity and permanence, such that they can re-emerge in the present.

More-than-representational theories facilitate an understanding into the distinctiveness of older age in relation to other categories of social difference. Other social categories do not function in quite the same way as older age, which was often understood as an ever-receding horizon. Older age is unique in this way because of the reductive representations surrounding it. This was seen in how rarely participants positively attached to the category or affirmed that they are old. There was a want to imagine older age as something that will happen, but not just yet. Older age was also experienced through a sense of resignation, such as when individuals placed themselves in the category, or when others are resigned to it to make an individual feel better about themselves. This paper has not been about the older subject, but about the category of older age and how it shapes the capacities and subjectivities of individuals in different ways. It is the ability of this category to permeate every life that makes it so unique, perhaps only challenged by childhood or adulthood. Even then, the association of older age with the end of life defines it further as something unique.

I have shown that representations do matter and that a more-than-representational approach directs attention to the ways in which representations become folded into lives. Even though representations are lived differently, they are always very much present. By focusing on representations of older age as they are lived amidst other processes, we can begin to see how older age is

something which ‘takes off with the potential trajectories in which it finds itself in the middle’.⁶¹ Furthermore, the examples shared show how affect is not only a momentary response, but rather histories and biographies become important to how an individual feels affective states and to their capacities to affect and be affected.

The more-than-representational and affective approach used in this paper has the capacity to be taken forward in work not only by geographers interested in ageing, but other sub-disciplinary fields to explore the affective lives of representations themselves. There is a danger that in falling back on representational logic, the liveliness of the world gets forgotten. Thinking instead about *how* representations circulate and present themselves differently could offer insight and reflection on the current climate.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my research participants for being a part of this enjoyable piece of research. I am also grateful to Helen Wilson, Kevin Ward, Chris Perkins, Ben Anderson, and Joe Blakey who each contributed towards developing ideas for this paper. Finally, thanks to the reviewers of this paper for your constructive feedback.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the ESRC North West Social Science Doctoral Training Partnership (NWSSDTP) under Grant ES/J500094/1.

Ethics statement

This research was approved by the University of Manchester’s Research Ethics Committee [2017-2149-3610].

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Notes

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