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Review Symposium

Critical and reflective gerontology

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Ruth E. Ray and Thomas R. Cole (Guest editors), *Coming of Age: Critical Gerontologists Reflect on their Own Aging, Age Research and the Making of Critical Gerontology* [Special issue in memory of Mike Hepworth]. *Journal of Aging Studies*, **22**, 2(2008), 97–209.

Walking the talk: becoming one's own data as a critical scholar

Reflection on the intersection between the theoretical and the autobiographical, the personal and the social, and the generalised and the closely corporeal experiences of ageing is a rarity in the gerontology literature. Most academic texts exercise scholarly distance as writers shy away from explicitly positioning themselves in their theories or data. The collection of essays in this special issue is an important exception. Guest editors Ruth Ray and Thomas Cole have invited several foremost international scholars working in critical gerontology to reflect upon themselves and their work. Key authors and theorists, early activists like Andrew Achenbaum, Carroll Estes, Jon Hendricks and Ronald Manheimer soon facing retirement, and the next, now middle-aged cohort including Stephen Katz and Toni Calasanti were all asked to ponder several searching questions: What have I been doing all these years and why? What motivates – even compels – my research and theorising? How has my personal life shaped and been shaped by my work in gerontology? How has my sense of the field and myself in it changed over time? What do I see as the central issues for critical gerontologists in the future? This exercise in side-stepping strict scholar-speak resembles putting on bifocals, as Manheimer puts it, that enable the writers to move between the near and the far, or from the personal to the comprehensively general.

The result is a rich set of personal essays that in part resonates with themes put across in recent edited volumes on critical perspectives and on ageing, globalisation and inequality. The collection, together with the foreword by Ruth Ray and the afterword by Harry Moody, paints a colourful picture of critical gerontology as a professional knowledge community. Included are beautifully and engagingly drafted details of the socialisation of critical thinkers through the civil rights, women's and labour movements of the 1960s and 1970s, of identity politics, and of decisive turning-points, important mentors and personal intellectual discoveries.

My take on the collection was at first methodological. Reading through this lens, the critical agenda seemed to afford considerable variability and flexibility, and some writers were at pains when positioning themselves in the tradition. The salience of macro-structural perspectives in the essays (*e.g.* Estes and Phillipson) is

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accompanied by voices stressing the acute need for critical narrative, micro-level theorising and methodology (*e.g.* Biggs, Twigg and Manheimer) and genuine inter-disciplinarity (Gullette). This reflects the historical unfolding of critical gerontology over the past 30 years and the division between political economy perspectives and an emphasis on humanistic-individual micro-meanings of ageing. Perhaps as a result of the (sometimes reluctant) personal genre of the essays, however, the borders between such traditions become interestingly blurred. This means that refreshing ideas on the possibilities of critical methodology are also voiced. Dale Dannefer, Paul Stein, Rebecca Siders and Robin Shura Patterson, for instance, suggest that the methodology of action research can teach us how human agency is universally expressed in the everyday domain of practice and micro-interaction, and to initiate a constructive theory – practice dialectic. William Randall warns against *methodological myopia* in critical gerontology and claims that 'lines of thought that hang outside our usual interpretations get looked upon politely, but basically askance' (p. 171). Similar critical methodological overtones are found in Jon Hendricks's essay in which he states: 'social gerontologists need to take heed: human beings do not live life two variables at a time, but come as complex, oftentimes messy packages lodged in life worlds that have been years in the making. Try explaining that in a way that captures its richness' (p. 113). The collected papers build on the notion of using one's ageing self as a test of validity, and as a medium to evaluate contrary paradigms and theories of ageing. As Hendricks puts it, 'if we cannot see ourselves in our explanations, perhaps we should pause before proffering them to the profession' (p. 113).

Several recurrent themes in the collection bring the contributors together. These include persistent criticism against new master narratives of civic engagement, against notions of the baby-boom as a social resource, and the growing unease with the anti-ageing silver industry and with concepts of productive or successful ageing. New directions, agendas and challenges for critical gerontology are also identified. These include new regimes of ageism and the analysis of discourses of resistance. Identification of omissions and silences in earlier work and of new allies in the future provide a way ahead. According to Simon Biggs, 'a newly critical gerontology … should be a part of a wider project of social, economic and ecological sustainability' (p. 118). Several writers also emphasise the increasing impact of globalisation on older people. The changing role of the nation-state, the power of transnational organisations and agencies over social policy agenda, and the impact of neo-liberal policies and new forms of ageism, are all questions that older and younger cohorts need to tackle.

In sum, this collection of essays functions as excellent meet-the-author reading through which scholars, particularly those new to the field, get a sense of the critical gerontology community, its cultural and gendered history, early commitments and future challenges. In a critical tone, the collection perhaps suffers from a predominantly Anglo-American (UK-USA-Canada) emphasis voiced with (at times) an apologising middle-class Caucasian ring. Ethnic and racial inequalities seem to have been 'bleached out' (to use Julia Twigg's term) of the narratives. Having said that, the thoughtfulness, the sheer skill and obvious enjoyment of writing that comes through in the essays makes this special

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issue recommended reading in critical gerontology – an important human-faced companion to the numerous other texts by the same and other critical thinkers.

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What is *new* about critical gerontology?

Scholars that advance critical gerontology like to use the word 'new'. A recent collection, for example, three of whose editors appear in the journal issue under review, is sub-titled *The New Critical Gerontology* (Baars *et al.* 2006). When does a confluence of ideas become something 'new'? As several of the articles admit, a critical stance was evident in social gerontology before the 'new critical gerontology' was articulated. Dale Dannefer, Paul Stein, Rebecca Siders and Robin Shura Patterson list those 'who began in the 1980s to approach gerontology with the resources of critical theory' (p. 103), and they pay homage to Burgess, Rosow, Bengtson, Riley, Cain, Neugarten, Gubrium, Quadagno and even myself. Everyone on that list was publishing prior to 1980, some of them long before. What they imply was missing from these authors was 'a vision of human emancipation and possibility' (p. 104). However, my paper, 'Notes for a radical gerontology' that they cite, suggested that critical theory was a bit narrower than what we called for, and outlined several premises about the gerontologist's commitment to the constituency of older people, stressing the need for 'adjusting the societal context to the aging individual rather than adjusting the aging individual to the societal context' (Marshall and Tindale 1978: 166). In light of the 'new critical gerontology' advocated in this issue, the only thing I think we missed was the invocation to take advocacy beyond the academy and into the streets.

Chris Phillipson (1998: 167) recounts that what struck him in writing *Reconstructing Old Age* 'was the way in which critical perspectives had opened out to embrace a range of different approaches', and he named political economy, humanities and biographical or narrative perspectives. The new critical gerontology collects many different resources under one label. But the authors in this set are by no means unified in which resources they use. For example, Carroll Estes (p. 129) places herself, 'in strong opposition to some postmodernist thinking (perhaps better portrayed as rant against universals)', to argue that there are human needs that are both universal and transcultural. William Randall (p. 169) says, 'though "critical gerontology" is not a phrase I've previously embraced, if it means being skeptical of medical-empirical approaches to understand aging, then clearly I am critical'. If rejection of empirical research in health and ageing is a requirement for 'membership' in the critical theory group, then leave me out.

Ruth Ray (p. 98) asserts that one of two threads connecting the articles is 'the understanding that critical gerontologists make up a community of sorts, despite their differences in perspective and approach'. The second thread linking the articles is advocacy for change. Dannefer and colleagues (p. 104) argue that 'a fundamental principle of critical theory is the importance of linking theory to

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practice', but there are many ways to do so that do not require taking an explicit advocacy stance in one's publications: conducting and disseminating research on structural and political issues; serving on policy committees that rely on evidence-based practice; encompassing solid research relevant to emancipatory issues in testimony before legislative committees, and so forth. In his article in this set, Simon Biggs (p. 116) cites no less an authority than Robert Butler to the effect that gerontology has always been 'an amalgam of advocacy and science': that has certainly been my personal and communal experience in the broad community of gerontology for the past 40 years. It did not require critical theory to get the gerontology community there.

So, why is this critical theory enterprise happening? Toni Calasanti (pp. 156–7) says, 'I find my greatest comradeship among critical and (especially) feminist scholars of aging. A community of researchers with an interest in power relations has emerged over time, and I have found interaction with them to be intellectually inspiring, encouraging, and nourishing'. Estes (p. 127) notes that 'my objective is to work as part of a larger and virtual collective of organic intellectuals toward understanding and changing structures of dominance everywhere'.

It is paradoxical that in attempting to build community, critical theorists spend much of their energy critiquing others. I do not consider myself a critical gerontologist, in part because I reject the stance taken by many who so self-designate that criticises so much good work. I commend work, and do some, that would be damned by many critical theorists for falling in the positivistic research mode, research I consider to have made a difference. Conventional explanatory and predictive research that employs quantitative methods has helped to better the lives of the aged and society at large. Cumulative research on the social determinants of health in later life, on health-care delivery, on formal and informal care provision for older people is rarely done from an explicit critical theory perspective but it has been put to good use to improve the lives of older people. Those who wish to advocate for structural change can and do effectively use empirical research that clearly falls outside the boundaries of the new critical gerontology. There is an ambiguity in the writings of many of the new critical theorists. In their passion to form a new paradigm (for reasons Jon Hendricks notes in his essay), they selectively appropriate the work of others, calling it 'foundational' or 'pioneering', or they dismiss the work of other scholars as lacking the humanistic tinge or the explicit stance of advocacy. Building their new theoretical community involves a social constitution of 'the other'. We are all invited to join this community, but the invitation connotes a moral judgment that we are not quite adequate unless we do.

Phillipson, Estes, Katz and others acknowledge that critical theory has embraced a number of different perspectives. A process of 'appropriation' characterises this small social movement of critical gerontology. Biggs (p. 117) notes that, at the birth of critical gerontology, 'truly critical thought was concerned with the exclusion of older people from the forces of production', and he cites Peter Townsend's concept of 'structured dependency' that first appeared in this journal (Townsend 1981). That paper was foundational not to critical theory but to the political economy of ageing perspective. Yet Townsend and many others, including myself, seem to have been retroactively co-opted into a new

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identity as critical gerontologists. While flattering, the reaction might well be, 'don't tell me who I am'. Margaret Gullette (p. 193), describing her development as a critical gerontologist says: 'I call this age criticism. Others call it sociology'. My answer to that is, 'precisely!' It is quite clear, though, that a fairly small group of scholars, most of whom are represented in this special issue, are energetically trying to build a new communal identity for a group that, by the very nature of its enterprise, is set on criticising others – a stance that is softened by their equal passion for self-criticism (much evident in the confessional quality of many of the papers, such as those of Achenbaum, Calasanti, Hendricks, Katz, Manheimer and Randall).

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Critical gerontology: intersections of the personal and the political

On reading this special issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies*, what is immediately apparent is not the 'coming of age' of critical gerontology, nor the coming to terms with ageing by many of the authors; rather, what continually reverberates is the unfulfilled promise of the project itself. Chris Phillipson writes: 'looking to the future, I am struck with the rather bleak thought that many of the broader aspirations of those driving the development of critical gerontology remain unfulfilled. Politically, the last two decades have been years of frustration and disappointment' (p. 168). In drawing together the intellectual and the political in this way, Phillipson reflects the common experience of many of those self-identified as critical gerontologists. For many of the writers in this predominantly US collection, their involvement in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s was often the motivation for an interest in a progressive politics of old age. While some were drawn in by the accident of arranging classes for seniors and developed programmes of humanistic education, others became engaged with second-wave feminism and its concerns for both personal and political change. Carroll Estes writes of taking this path and describes the challenges of combining domestic and professional roles as formative in developing a career as a sociologist and gerontologist. Others, such as Meredith Minkler and Martha Holstein, also found their engagement formed by the issues brought out by the women's movement.

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The optimism for change among this generational group combined with their finding that work in gerontology meant that old age became a new terrain of political struggle. It led to a belief that ageing and old age were not only forms of oppression but also forms of discrimination that could be successfully challenged and eradicated. In this, many critical gerontologists were inspired by the very consciously named 'Gray Panthers', who echoed in their identity politics and in their name the black nationalist radicals of the 'Black Panthers'. This admiration was given greater force by leaders such as Maggie Kuhn and Tish Sommers, who not only expressed a politics of older people as an excluded group but also provided a template for building alliances with other oppressed and exploited sections of society. For a time, critical gerontology could see itself as moving forward in union with a newly awakened politicisation of older people.

The fate of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s has been reflected in the political arc of this generation of critical gerontologists. Many of the key parts of the political economy approach to ageing which derived their élan from various forms of Marxism have not recovered from the political defeats of the 1980s, as acknowledged by Simon Biggs in his paper. It would also appear that some of the concepts used by those advocating the continuing relevance of the political economy approach are no longer up to the task. No number of calls for critical gerontologists to act as 'Gramscian organic intellectuals' (p. 127) can alter the fact that the social world of ageing has changed out of all recognition. The extension of consumer lifestyles into later life and the role of global finance in funding them are just two topics that require elaboration.

The impact of feminism and identity politics has had greater success but at a cost. As Minkler and Holstein note, the radical impulses of critical gerontology have become uncritically tied up with the promotion of 'productive ageing' and 'civic engagement' rather than advancing the political ideas of Maggie Kuhn and the Gray Panthers. The narrowing of the possibilities for reform has not meant however that the women's movement has lost all critical traction in relation to understanding ageing. Feminism has consistently had an emphasis on drawing together the interaction between the personal and the social. Given that for many of the writers in this issue, much of the motivation to end forms of oppression and inequality lies in personal experience, then the way in which ageing impacts on a woman inevitably becomes an important arena of contestation. Some contributors, such as Margaret Gullette, take their motivation from the humanities, constructing their views about 'declining to decline' from the resources provided by literature. Others, like Toni Calasanti, see the ageism manifest in their professional lives connecting to the politics of gendered and age appearance. In addressing this issue, Calasanti opens up what is probably one of the least discussed or theorised aspects in critical gerontology; namely how individuals age and how the body becomes a marker for that ageing. While this aspect of ageing may be less significant than pensions policy, nursing-home care or the evaluation of social-care interventions, it is probably more representative of how the issues of ageing and old age are experienced at the level of people's everyday lives. While those influenced by feminism and the politics of sexual identity might be in a better position to understand the importance of ordinary ageing, there is still an underlying uneasiness about giving the embodiment of ageing its due significance

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unless it is framed in terms of physical dependency. Margaret Cruikshank, in her essay on ageing and identity politics, is quite explicit about the ambivalence of the identity that she has as an older lesbian and the way in which such identities can trap 'the old'. This is an unresolved tension in this volume but at least it is being addressed. Gerontology has itself played a role in fostering this split between people growing older and those deemed old. This has sometimes got in the way of being truly critical of some of the vested interests in gerontology, interests that want the old to be forever the objects of social policy.

In a volume dedicated to the coming of age of critical gerontology, based on the recounting of individual narratives of growing older, there is much about the importance of individual trajectories of age. For some it is viewed as opportunity, while others have had reason to view age through the prism of serious illness. In this respect, critical gerontology does not seem to have fashioned an all-encompassing view of what is happening to later life or indeed a set of strategies to make practical the vision of its early years. Maybe the lesson is that such ambitions are beyond it. It is noteworthy in this volume that the role of religion and the importance of spirituality in bridging the gap between theory and practice are more evident than would be expected in northwest Europe. Indeed Dale Dannefer and colleagues from a different perspective argue that what is presently needed is a return to the domain of practice and away from gerontology's 'comfort zone' of critique. Such a conclusion has its pluses and minuses but does seem to reflect Phillipson's gloomy outlook mentioned above. It would be wrong, however, to see critical gerontology as simply an approach that is bound up with the experiences of a politicised generation having to work in different times and contexts. The transformation of global capitalism and the emergence of a consumer society have certainly made later life more complex, which needs new approaches and assumptions. Significantly, much of this new environment is conditioned by the generational experiences of those who were radicalised by the 1960s and 1970s and whose emancipatory impulses have made the possibilities of an agentic Third Age realisable for many. This outcome might not be the way that many of those writing in this special issue imagined the future of old age would be, but it is certainly one that is liberated from the shadow of the workhouse.

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Our own lives under the lens: critical gerontologists' narratives of ageing

When I agreed to write a review of this special issue of the journal, I did not know just how special it would be. As the editors explain, 'critical gerontologists … who are able to see the world from both the social and individual perspectives, and in whose work culture and biography intersect, are indeed a rarity. We have gathered many of these unique scholars here' (p. 97). Rarely do I take such pleasure in reading journal articles as I have on this occasion, for even those which might stimulate the mind do not always at the same time so touch the heart. But this

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collection adds to our understanding not only of a discipline and how it has evolved since its inception 30 years ago, but also of the power of narrative as a tool for integrating micro- and macro-critical analysis. After having read the entire volume, it occurred to me that such a collection would be almost as compelling for me personally were it written by a group of chemists, biologists or mathematicians, or even journalists, dentists or teachers. For in these pages are accounts of what it means to reflect back on a profession to which one has dedicated one's life. What has it all added up to? What changes has one seen? How has one's own knowledge evolved through intellectual engagement, combined with life's experiences? This is bound to captivate the reader, regardless of the nature of the field.

But I write 'almost as compelling' because these scholars who have long contributed to the study of ageing are reflecting on their own ageing process. As Jon Hendricks comments, 'those of us who study aging have the unique opportunity to live their subject matter' (p. 109). In these pages we learn not only how a particular individual came to be interested in ageing – these accounts are themselves a treasure trove of rich stories – but also what it has meant to stay the distance once having 'discovered' this passion. The guest editors, Ruth Ray and Thomas Cole, set their contributors a difficult task: to make sense of their own lives in terms of their scholarship in the field of ageing. As Hendricks writes, 'if our quest is to uncover new ground, it must be applicable first and foremost to us. If we cannot see ourselves in our explanations, perhaps we should pause before proffering those explanations to the profession' (p. 113). In this collection, we see a very conscious attempt to integrate micro- and macro-levels of analysis. None of the contributions are 'only' personal narratives; being critical gerontologists, all are committed to investigating the structures within which individual storylines are played out. But each article sings out in its own voice, and the reader has a sense of being invited into a community in which individual members feel at ease to talk candidly about themselves, and about the changing world in which we live.

However, like all communities, this one is limited. If one must make a critique of the collection it would be this: most of the contributors are American. Ray, in her Foreword, quotes Harry Moody: 'When we finally come to look into the "human face" of gerontology, we will understand at last that the face we see is simply our own' (p. 98). Only in the most generic sense is this actually true; a few more colours in the rainbow would have enhanced the 'human face' that emerges from this collection. But it does feel somewhat churlish to complain about what is not here, when the offerings we are given are so very rich.

So much for the collection as a whole, what about the individual contributions? Here I will limit myself, by necessity, to commenting upon only a few although every article in the collection is worthy of its place. Hendricks describes his maturing from 'Joe, boy gerontologist' to one who has 'ripened on the vine for a fair number of years', and asks 'how have my attempts at scholarship transformed my life?' (p. 112). There is a renewed appreciation of the role of the body, as Hendricks reflects on how his own recent diagnosis of cancer impacts on the way in which he views his own life, his profession, and the relationship between the two. 'Bodily presence', he confirms, 'influences many aspects of identity and subjectivity' (p. 113). The theme of the importance of generation runs across

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many of the contributions. Simon Biggs focuses his discussion on 'intergenerational intelligence' and he recounts the effect of his growing children, and the death of his father and grandparents, as being critical to his own emerging awareness of being part of a distinctive generation. He laments the tendency to try to solve the problems of old age 'by pretending that there is nothing special to the human condition that older age can offer' (pp. 117–8). The roots of critical gerontology, he argues, are intergenerational, and the agenda for the future must be built on enhancing 'intergenerational understanding and solidarities under conditions of increasing scarcity and competition between groups' (p. 119)

Carroll Estes also picks up this theme. In a very moving description of Maggie Kuhn's mentorship, she writes: 'It was crystal clear to Maggie that the problems of the old and the solutions to them are indivisible from those of the young' (p. 123). Not only does this reflect Estes's own scholarly framework, but it is central to the way in which she views key people and events in her own life. Estes describes an experience common to many women: the birth of her daughter strengthening her ties to her own mother. When she contemplates the remainder of the work she wishes to do, focusing on reframing the debate away from individualism and toward interdependence, she again stresses the importance of intergenerational ties: 'I can think of nothing more significant for my daughter … and for my two grand-daughters … and the generations to come' (p. 127).

It is not surprising that this group of critical gerontologists – committed as they are to the central importance of the relationship between individual lives and social structure – offer their personal stories steeped in a rich sense of history and reveal an acute awareness of the structures which helped to frame their own lives. There are a number of social and political battles which form the backdrop for these pages. Estes's mother was 12 when American women got the vote, and Estes describes with great pathos the extent to which her mother's 'vitality and enormous talent were suffocated by the structural impediment' (p. 121). Estes speaks candidly of her fears for her daughter when she was very young, and of her determination to 'avoid the trap of giving her a mother without a core or a centre – one who might disappear into exhausting self-sacrifice and bitterness …' (p. 123). Estes's challenges, which she met with formidable strength and courage, echo those of Toni Calasanti, 20 years her junior, who describes her attempts to 'assert my equality with male colleagues while carrying the burden of domestic labour at home' (p. 153). Both Calasanti and Estes describe what feminism means to themselves personally and in their work. But the appreciation of the intersection between their feminism and their gerontology is one which has grown over time. 'For the vast majority of my work', Calasanti writes, 'I have used feminism to inform both my life and gerontology. It is only more recently that I have used my understanding of aging to try to inform feminism and my own engagement with it' (p. 157).

The collaboration between Meredith Minkler and Martha Holstein in this volume embodies the spirit of dialogue so central to critical analysis. Their provocative critique of the 'civic engagement' model of ageing mirrors their 'unease … about other "grand narratives" such as productive and successful aging … which also impose totalizing ideals about the meaning of a good old age'

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(p. 197), in which difference of all kind is erased. They remind the reader that 'the possibility for choice is not equally distributed' (p. 201) and use their own lives as examples of divergent visions of a desirable old age. Chris Phillipson describes with passion the effect of growing up during the 1960s, his early commitment to Marxism, and the journey he has travelled 'finding a clear line of thinking about where my own perspective about critical gerontology was going' (p. 167), which has led to his work on ageing as a global process, and the pressures associated with globalisation.

Stephen Katz provides readers with a clear sense of place and time. He opens with the sentence, 'I must have been born a structuralist', and then proceeds to describe his childhood home in Kensington Market as 'an old world village, a *schetl* in the middle of one of North America's growing 'new cities' [Toronto]' (p. 141), home to Jewish, Italian, Portuguese, West Indian, East Asian, and American immigrants. Katz's piece is thoughtful and heartfelt; he describes the passing of his old uncle and of his still-born child, saying 'I touched my baby's cheek as my old uncle Myer had once touched my cheek, only I was alive between these generations, and they were gone' (p. 144). He attributes his openness to deconstruction and post-modernism to the fact that he 'had already experienced in the deepest reflexive sense the simultaneous existence of contradictions and impossibilities, the collapsing of time, the instability of foundations and the contingent nature of all things' (p. 144).

Harry Moody's Afterword, 'The maturing of critical gerontology', provides thoughtful reflections. His very personal conclusion, which ends with a quotation from Yeats, 'and say my glory was, I had such friends', reminds us that this is a community of scholars. While the individual contributions are – all of them – most thoughtful, it is in their collectivity that they derive their greatest strength. Virtually all of the writers talk about those who have helped them along the way. Familiar names like Maggie Kuhn, Tish Sommers and Peter Laslett appear time and again, but so do those of others who are less well-known. Neither in our personal nor our professional lives do we stand alone. While it might be incumbent upon each of us, as Moody states, 'to find our own unique voice as we age' (p. 205), we do this with the help of others. Some people mentor us directly, others write books which throw open new possibilities, and sometimes it is simply those we encounter through our daily lives – colleagues, friends, family, strangers – who challenge us to rethink our ideas about society and the forces that influence the way we live.

Finally, the special issue is dedicated to Mike Hepworth. Anyone who knew Mike will know how appropriate this is, and how unfortunate it is that Mike is not here to read it. He would have rejoiced in the stories of ageing which fill these pages, peppered as they are with a strong analytic spice. And he would have liked sharing the pride of place with Simone de Beauvoir, whose plea to 'stop cheating' – denying our own ageing – is the source of inspiration for the special issue. It is a tribute to the contributors that they have so candidly and thoughtfully met this difficult challenge.

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