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What are you reading?

Segal, L. (2014). *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*. London: Verso Books.

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Segal, L. *Out of time: the pleasures and the perils of ageing*. London: Verso Books, 2014.

What first drew me to read Lynne Segal's book *Out of Time* (2014) was its subtitle, '*The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*.' I have embarked on a research project on ageing, women, and sexuality, and in reviewing the existing literature on the subject, I realized that much more attention is paid to the 'perils' than the 'pleasures' of ageing. Lynne Segal deals with both in her book, by combining analyses of narratives about ageing in literary fiction and the media with her own experience as a woman growing older. She examines the words and lives of poets, writers, and artists—mostly from the Anglophone world—to find out what it means to grow older in an ageist society.

Out of Time is a collection of stories about cross-generational bonds, enduring love relations, solidarity and age-affirmative resistance, looking at the psychological, social and political dimensions of old age. It explores how context and culture age some people more than others and how the 'old' are isolated from the rest of society—foregrounding love, care and collectivity as spaces of growth, flourishing and resistance. Flowing from the words of one author to those of another, the book meanders around different perspectives and experiences of later life, looking for the possibilities for and impediments to 'staying alive to life itself, whatever our age' (Segal, 2014, p. 4). In this affirmation of life, Segal finds a starting point for thinking differently about later life.

Lynne Segal is an Australian-English feminist activist and a professor of psychology and gender studies, who has written extensively on how to reimagine and live a feminist life. As she approached her sixties, she became aware of the contrast between her dreams as a young feminist in the 1960s and the realities of old age a few decades later. What she — and many others — envisioned as a future where women of all ages and shapes would be loved, respected and valued clashes with a present in which older women often find themselves neglected and lonely. On top of that, feminism often forgets about the struggles of older women, and 'age' is the big forgotten when it comes to considering axes of discrimination. Nobody is 'really listening to what the old have to say,' laments Segal (p. 225), and by writing her book, she aims to do the exact opposite.

In her fifth chapter, entitled 'Flags of Resistance,' Segal explores the deep-seated fears of ageing behind the search for eternal youth. She looks critically at the relentless pursuit of youthfulness in the form of cosmetic procedures, disciplinary body practices and a 'busy ethic' that sees inactivity as a sign of decay and failure. This fear of stillness seeps into how elder care is approached — nursing homes in the US try to keep residents as 'busy' as possible — and additionally produces mediatic promises of newfound 'elixirs of life' and stimulates cults of agelessness among the wealthy. Segal links the search for immortality with an obsession with work, consumption and 'happiness' — that appears as a profound denial of life's messiness and reveals a self-centered rejection of interdependence and collectivity. Pursuing an endless youth is for Segal also lacking imagination—and fueled by an absence of referents of how to age in different, rich, and fulfilling ways. She counterbalances this scarcity by weaving together the words of the many older writers included in her book—which sing to the joys and sorrows of later life. Here grieving becomes entwined with 'aliveness'. Filtering out any trace of sorrow from life reveals a form of 'imaginative impoverishment' (p. 179) which leads to a watered-down version of life. Segal illustrates this through the poetry of mourning and loss, which unveils the beauty that can live in the challenging life experiences that cults of agelessness seek to suppress.

From there, Segal takes us to consider the relationship between the experience of time and our relationship to what lives beyond ourselves. She suggests that denying ageing and challenging emotions has consequences that go beyond the impoverishment of individual lives—influencing how we engage with collectivity and the world we inhabit. ‘Being in time’ is what she calls the experience of being immersed in something outside of ourselves, which in contrast to the self-centeredness of ‘ageless’ obsessions, brings us closer to the world around us:

The time when we feel most at one with the world is often when we are in a sense least our ordinary selves. Paradoxically, being in time with time in these ways means stepping outside of normal temporal patterns, stepping outside ourselves. (p. 181)

While this is not a perception reserved to later life, Segal depicts the experience of being old as one where time acquires a different texture—one that can be more fluid and layered than in younger ages. In old age, life becomes stranger (p. 75)—it can feel like a dizzying time-travel across past ages and current ones. This consideration interests me as a young(er) woman researching older women’s subjectivities. Throughout the project, I have often wondered how my temporal position affects my ability to understand the experiences of someone a few decades older than me. Many women I met during the research spoke about their experience of growing older as many-layered, far from the static idea of being one age and no other. Some saw ageing as an expansion of one’s existence, where— new temporal experiences add up to old ones—rather than a linear movement from one age to another. Segal describes this experience as one of temporal vertigo:

As we age, changing year on year, we also retain, in one manifestation or another, traces of all the selves we have been, creating a type of temporal vertigo and rendering us psychically, in one sense, all ages and no age. (p. 4)

Perhaps it is my visually oriented mind, but when I read this, I can-not help but imagine a swirling tunnel of mesh-like structures, such as those drawn to represent the fabric of space-time. By creating new concepts to describe how it feels like to be ‘old’, Lynne Segal stimulates the imagination that we need to envision more affirmative futures for older people. She encourages us to picture old age as a stage of life that can be enriching, challenging, interesting and joyful in its own way.

Carla Besora Barti

Carla Besora Barti is a PhD candidate at Ghent University and the University of Amsterdam in the fields of Gender Studies and Anthropology. She works within the ERC-funded research project ‘Later-in-life intimacy’ (LiLI), which investigates women’s ‘unruly’ sexuality in later life. As part of the LiLI project, she focuses on pleasure and intimacy work, and in particular on practices that question what intimacy, sexuality and care work should look like in later life. Besides her work at LiLI, Carla is actively involved in the Centre for Research on Culture and Gender (CRCG) at Ghent University, where she has co-organized symposia, seminars and other events.