**Storying aging futures: Critical reflections from an intergenerational storytelling project**

**May Chazan & Melissa Baldwin**

Greetings. My name is May Chazan. I am an Associate Professor at Trent University, in Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory, what is now Peterborough, Canada. I lead Aging Activisms, a research program, which connects hundreds of academics, students, activists, artists, and organizers, from their late teens through to their 90s.

Aging Activisms explores the diverse ways activists of different ages, abilities, genders, and backgrounds resist injustices and create change. We draw on a pluralized definition of **activisms**, which includes not only outward protest, but also quiet advocacy, arts, ceremony, cultural resurgence, parenting, survival, and more.

Between 2015 and 2019, we facilitated 7 intergenerational storytelling and arts-based workshops, as part of our project of storying resistance, resilience, and resurgence. These research-generation workshops aim to expand conversations taking place at the intersections of social movement scholarship and aging studies.

This work begins from the premise that **storytelling is a critical form of knowledge production.** We consider how participants tell and circulate their own stories, and how stories can challenge and extend dominant ways of thinking about both aging and futures. We also consider how intergenerational storytelling might push the epistemic boundaries of aging studies and challenge key concepts.

In this presentation, we offer just a few reflections from this project, about intergenerational storytelling **as a process of making**. We will close by sharing one media capsule from this work.

**Making media, archives, arts, and relationships**

Our research process fosters cultural production, through making media, archives, and various arts. To date, we have produced almost 100 media pieces and thousands of photographs, as well as zines, collages, installation art, poetry, music and performance. We make this material freely available online and have established a digital archival collection at the Trent University Library and Archives.

In most of our workshops, we invite multi-age and diverse groups of participants share their own stories by interviewing each other, taking photos, and listening supportively. We also facilitate full group conversations; and co-create arts, performance, and music.

Following many of our workshops, we have worked with storytellers to turn recorded interviews and photographs into short media capsules. These are not slick, professional pieces. The power of these pieces lies in how they capture a process built on relationships.

Indeed, this project is also, at its core, about making relationships.

**Making (and valuing) multiple knowledges**

Methodologically, we centre stories from people and groups whose knowledges have most often been omitted from academic scholarship broadly and from aging studies. From Anishinaabe elders to disability rights activists, trans storytellers, migrant rights advocates, and Raging Grannies, we begin each workshop with a deliberate selection of storytellers across ages and subject positions.

Epistemologically, we are also trying to expand conventional ideas about who and what holds knowledge. We go out onto the land, sometimes visiting Odenabe, the nearby river. We open our spaces to ceremony. We incorporate being creative together and collective embodied practices. We consider the fluid borders between making and knowing. We are learning that critical knowledges exist and can be produced outside of conventional ‘data sources.’

These methodological choices are not intended simply to ‘add diversity’ to aging studies. Rather, we aim to extend whose and what knowledges might contribute to producing the concepts and tools available to scholars of aging.

In other words, we understand that knowledges co-created by diverse people – in connection with land, ceremony, and creativity – offer epistemic interventions into aging studies.

In turn, participants in our work illuminate how systems of power inform dominant ways of knowing and thinking about aging. They continually push us to think about how knowledges about aging are held in our bodies, the land, water, cosmos, ancestors, and generations to come.

**Making counter-narratives of aging and aging futures**

Through these processes, storytellers have collectively offered a series of counter-narratives about aging and aging futures – complex stories of queer, trans, Indigenous, racialized, and/or disabled life, love, aging, intergenerationality, struggle, joy, and futurity.

As I have written elsewhere, storytellers push back most clearly against binary aging narratives – ‘aging as decline’ and ‘successful aging.’. For instance, in contrast to widespread notions of ‘success”’, as defined by financial security and independence in later life, many describe aging as a process of shedding internalized oppressions, becoming *more* whole and self-accepting, not less.

Many discuss aging as a social or collective process. Their acceptance of responsibilities to future (and sometimes past) generations – not their withdrawal from these – is integral to their experiences of aging.

Some storytellers also question the ways in which aging is often depicted as placeless and disconnected from the non-human world. They imagine their aging futures as interwoven with land, water, climate, and food sustainability. They speak not only about their individual aging futures, but also about the aging processes of generations to come, and about the aging of the Earth itself.

These counter-narratives are about aging collectively, resistantly, and responsibly, in the face of ongoing violence, oppression, and apocalyptic futurity scenarios. They illuminate the more-than-human entanglements of aging and aging futures– expanded visions of generativity as nurturing of all past and future life.

**Conclusion: Making Livable Worlds**

Finally, storytellers offer glimpses into possibilities of aging as complex beings, with joy, struggle, pain, purpose, care, and community. It is in their complexity, particularity, and diversity that these stories help expand binary aging narratives. It is also in their complexity, particularity, and diversity that they may become part of **worlding alternative futures**.

With each workshop, we are learning that these counter-stories not only document what is, they also make possible what can be: they make alternative futures and other worlds imaginable. They have the potential to help reshape cultural imaginaries, influencing what we believe, expect, assume, and desire.

We are always learning new ways to engage with these processes. For now, we are thrilled to share one of the short media capsules created as part of this research. Thanks for listening.

**Further reading:**

Chazan, May, and Melissa Baldwin. 2021. Queering generativity and futurity: LGBTQ2IA+ stories of resistance, resurgence, and resilience. *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* 15(1). https://doi.org/10.3384/ijal.1652-8670.1574

Chazan, May, and Madeline Whetung. 2021. “Carving a future out of the past and the present”: Rethinking aging futures. *Journal of Aging Studies.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2021.100937

Chazan, May. 2020. Ode to Odenabe: Intergenerational storytelling and the art of making. *Anthropology & Aging* 41(1): 95-106. DOI 10.5195/aa.2020.264.

**Thanks**

We extend deep gratitude to all participants, storytellers, research assistants, facilitators, and students who have contributed to this work.

We are grateful to do the work of Aging Activisms in Michi Saagiig Anishnaabe territory, in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough, Canada). Our work is nurtured and sustained by this Michi Saagiig territory, by the land and the waters in this place, and by the community of people making home here.

Our work has also been shaped by some key collaborators and colleagues. Special thanks to Ageing + Communication + Technologies (ACT), the Trent Centre for Aging and Society (TCAS), and Project Re•Vision.

**Anonymous storyteller
Video transcript, Aging Activisms**

[music by Shan Culkeen, with storyteller and others:] Ba ba ba ba ba, from the whisper to the word, ba ba ba ba ba, we’ve been singing in the dark, ba ba ba ba

[storyteller, speaking:] I am a lover of nature. I am a facilitator of dream explorations. I am blessed to be a mother and a grandmother. I call myself a Sapphic queer woman. I have been a seeker all my life. The big questions like: What is this all about? Being human on this planet? Being a creature of this earth?

[music interlude, singing:] ba ba ba ba ba

[text on screen:] How has the coming out process been for you?

[storyteller, speaking:] The time I was born was like, it wasn’t like there was just silence, but it was a fortified silence. So even though innumerable messages would come to me over time, messages of truth, I had no passageways in my neurons that could bring it up to the conscious mind where thought was possible.

When I was 13, I was invited to my first boy/girl party. And someone says to me, in such a happy voice, “You can dance with Billy!” And I remember that feeling of just this crash, I fell into a blackness in this crash straight down, and the memory of the despair, of ‘oh this is going to be my life! I’ll be dancing with the Billy-’ Nothing against the Billys of the world, not at all.

So the next morning, I wake up, my arms are covered in these massive hives. So my parents were like, “what happened at the party? What did you eat? What did you drink? You’re allergic to something!” But nobody suggested it might be mandatory heterosexuality that I was allergic to. [laughter in background] You see? But the body was manifesting its truth. The body is speaking a truth that the mind can’t possibly take in.

So, at the time, until 1969, homosexual activity was considered a crime, and not until the 1980s was there any protection, in law, in the workplace. So we’re talking about, years and years of living in lesbian communities in which we were off the grid completely. We were in exile, and that is hard on the human system.

[music interlude, singing:] ba ba ba ba ba

[storyteller, speaking:] I’ll just read a little excerpt from this piece, called “The Galaxy: Singing Ourselves Home,” subtitle is “Why We Must Have Up to Date Sex Ed.”

*In the beginning, there was no word, and this she does not know. A child is born in a time of no words, no letters, no runes, no whirls, no runway path, no cresting wake, to lift, embrace, and hold in a sea breeze of light.*

*She is seeking what she does not know. Yet senses the tiniest whisper, lightyears from home, a silent echo beyond the stars.*

*And so she dredges for a word that is gold.*

*Her heart is lowing a dirge she cannot hear. It’s a vast credenza of starvation beyond the range of her ears. And all this is stored away in her galactic cells, down in the core of flames, numinous, sending waves and waves of unrelenting light. And this she does not know, no clue.*

*The reign is ungrounded. The loam scent is buried. The ocean is closed off. Lovers lost to jealous husbands. Children held in ransom. “Oh but it’s a phase only anyway… One day you will become a grownup woman, and you’ll marry a man.” Which she does: he a good friend who gives her a son she adores. Walking up the aisle, her toes crumbling in ashes, her lover at her wedding. She can still see her: sitting by the wall, in the fourth row.*

*The body of the gal-axy, lifting off separate from the massive hot core, blind and lost to its own power.*

*The heart is moving into advent, into coming out, but the mind remains unable to really know. And so she keep dredging for gold.*

*So then a few marriages to women take place. Then come the sidelong scowls, the snarls, her child repeating the words of an adult he cared a lot about, said “Gay people should be lined up and shot.” Said to my beloved boy, and… and the heart… the blood just stops, the harassment, the desecration, the escalating, the police deployed.*

*And so, she works to attach a lost limb, a floating hand, a forgotten organ, a small skein of skin. Drawing on distant stars, beckoning to far quasars, bright as a thousand suns. Inviting the thrall that climbs the caterpillar, the thrall that leaps the squirrel, the thrall that explodes in dark matter, the thrall that electrifies the sky and lights the lamps at the end of the world. Where radiance unfolds us all in gold.*

*In the beginning was the word, and the word was a Sapphic ode.*

That’s my journey in outing myself.

[music interlude, singing:] All that is and ever was, ba ba ba ba, We'll be singing just because, ba ba ba ba ba

[text on screen:] What is it like to be you in this place?

[storyteller, speaking:] It’s really hard in some ways and very positive in other ways. There is a terrible level of poverty here: for the young, for people with families, for seniors, for so many people. As an older adult, I’ve become increasingly aware of the appalling lack of services and resources. There are certainly services available for seniors who have means, but not for those without means, and this must be addressed.

But on the positive wonderful side: the community I’ve found here in the arts and the queer community, which are intricately linked together.

And then there is the land. This land, I deeply love. And I know that I’m a visitor here, but this land sings to me. The wisdom and the power of this land that is sacred to the Indigenous people is something that we all need to honour.

And if we can honour that life force in the land maybe we can honour the life force in each of us, however it manifests. Gay, lesbian, trans, gender flu[id]- whatever, however it manifests may we embrace it and embody it, so that that gift can be offered to future generations.

[humming and autoharp by Shan Culkeen]

**CREDITS**

**Storyteller:** anonymous

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**Music:** “Go and tell it," by Shan Culkeen, recorded during the workshop

Thank you to all who participated in these conversations and to those who remain engaged in ongoing dialogue with us.

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