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Alienation and alterity: Age in the existentialist discourse on others



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ABSTRACT

Aging Studies and Postcolonial Studies belong together in a rather fundamental way, given that they share profound theoretical roots and far-reaching critical perspectives. These derive not only from the more recent poststructuralist discourse on others but also, further back, from the existentialist discourse on others – particularly in issues relating to “The Look” as elaborated by Jean-Paul Sartre in his major philosophical treatise *Being and Nothingness* and in his reflections on racism, colonialism and humanism. These texts have had a decisive influence on both Aging Studies and Postcolonial Studies. First, no less a figure than one of the main progenitors of Postcolonial Studies, Frantz Fanon, drawing on Sartre, analyses the gaze of the colonial masters and black responses. Second, two of the most significant theoretical works on aging and age to have appeared since 1945 were directly inspired by Sartre: Jean Améry’s *On Aging* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age*. Additional sources of interest are the phenomenology of responsibility by Emmanuel Lévinas and works on *absurdity* and *rebellion* by Albert Camus. It is this early influence that is explored from two perspectives adopted by more recent postcolonialist discourse: debates around the concept of *alienation* involve analysing and critiquing the kind of epistemic violence which renders abject and invisible not only old people but also all those who are ‘othered’ by a dominant gaze (racism, ageism, othering); and the concept of *alterity* involves debating ways of acknowledging *otherness* responsibly on the one hand and being able to articulate and represent oneself on the other: *Can the subaltern speak?* We might similarly ask “Can the old speak?” Postcolonial discourse tells us that this is not quite as easy as some versions of so-called “Happy Gerontology” proclaim. The aim of the present article is to examine the foundational existentialist critique of *racism* and *ageism* and to render it useful for re-negotiating possibilities for aging differently – without *othering*.

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Introduction

Within the broad spectrum of academic disciplines, research topics and methodological approaches that characterize Aging Studies today (Katz, 2014), there are few approaches that adopt a postcolonial agenda. Those that do so are recognizable by their participation in a discourse that is key to Postcolonial Studies: the discourse on others. Doing Aging Studies with postcolonial intentions means, above all, studying

the old as ‘other’ (Hazan, 2009: 61). Within this, it is possible to identify two distinct perspectives:

- The first addresses socio-cultural processes and power relations in which age and aging are viewed as separate and distinct from other phases of life. Old age appears as the problematic, bewildering Other to that which is considered to be life’s norm (Hazan, 1994; Philippson, 1998; Turner, 1995). Such processes of othering and abjection are debated in Postcolonial Studies using the terms *alienation* and *othering* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2006: 576, 584). Critique is

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directed at an “epistemic violence” that regards other people essentially as subaltern and consequently excludes them (Spivak, 1988a: 280–281; Spivak, 1999: 265–266).

- The second perspective addresses ways of acknowledging and accepting other people in their difference. Given a situation in which attributes, constructions and representations are ascribed asymmetrically, is there a place where old people can speak for themselves and from their own experience (Cole, Achenbaum, Jakobi, & Kastenbaum, 1993; Gubrium, 1993; Hazan, 2009: 66; Spivak, 1988a)? Such possibilities are debated in Postcolonial Studies using the terms *otherness* and *alterity* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2006: 576, 584). The difficult challenge is that of facilitating counterhegemonic representations of the Other.

Up to now postcolonial discourse on others has not been systematically examined in terms of its implications for Aging Studies (Hazan, 2009; van Dyk & Küpper, 2014). Having said this, there are areas of research in Aging Studies and Critical Gerontology which coincide with postcolonial intentions. This is especially the case in studies that focus on *cultures and cultural representations of age and aging, cross-cultural aspects, migration and hybridization* of aging. Specifically, ideas about age discrimination which compare it to racist attitudes (*racism, ageism*) fit into the context of Postcolonial Studies as well (Biggs, 2004; Butler, 1969; Hatch, 2005; Palmore, 1990; Coupland & Coupland, 1993; Holstein & Minkler, 2003; Todd, 2002). Although the question ‘*Can the old speak?*’ has not yet been asked in the context of postcolonial theory, one of the main intentions of actor centred micro-studies in Aging Studies is to ensure that the voices of the elderly are heard clearly (Baars et al., 2006: 4–5; Cole et al., 1993; Gubrium, 1993). This also requires “the creation of alternative concepts and visions about the future of age” (Baars et al., 2006: 1). Incorporating analytical perspectives from postcolonial theory in Aging Studies can be regarded as a key opportunity to develop such concepts and visions.

The present article seeks to theorize age by taking up an older, foundational critique of *racism* and *ageism*, namely, the existentialist *discourse on others*. In this context, Fanon highlighted a number of key issues that were to prove pivotal for current debates in Postcolonial Studies, while Améry and de Beauvoir anticipated various postcolonial perspectives in current Aging Studies. Central to this analytical discourse beginning in the 1950s is the critique of hegemonic views of other people, described later by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988a) in terms of *essentialism* and *epistemic violence*. On the one hand the issue is one of *othering* and *alienation*: in what ways are old people, groups and indeed entire cultures fixed, objectified and excluded by privileged gazes, perspectives and representations? On the other hand, there is also the question of *otherness* and *alterity*: how can other people speak for themselves and be recognized and accepted as other (different) – without *othering*?

The main epistemic problem lies in binary codes, that is, in a *hegemonic binarism* which reduces relations between cultures and, similarly, between generations to dualistic oppositions: us and them – black/white, old/not old. Since Edward Said’s pathbreaking work on orientalism (1978), critique in Postcolonial Studies has been focused on an epistemological imperialism summed up by Hall (1992a) in the pithy formula ‘*the West and the Rest*’. Colonialism appears accompanied by a discursive

power which insists upon and justifies the superiority of western cultures by designating other people and cultures as *subaltern*, by denying essential value to them (*racism*) and by misusing them as a negative foil for positive images of its own culture (*othering*) (for an overview, see Ashcroft et al., 2006).

This binary logic of vilification was analysed in gerontological perspective for the first time by Améry, ([1968] 1994) and de Beauvoir, ([1970] 1996), who based their work primarily on Sartre. Prior to this, Fanon ([1952] 2002, [1961] 2001) had analysed colonialism and racism, referring in the process to Sartre’s critique of *binarism* (which he called *Manichaeism*). Taking Sartre as a point of departure, both Fanon and de Beauvoir and Améry agree in terms of their proposals for solving the problem. Sartre had argued in favour of holding the gaze “in continual suspension” (Sartre, [1944] 1995: 12), indeed of establishing *suspension* as the antiracist mode of the gaze per se. In this way, he argued, socio-cultural boundaries fixed by binary codes can repeatedly be transcended, enabling one to take “responsibility” for the other. Following this idea, Fanon as well as Améry and de Beauvoir developed an account of *alterity* and *otherness* which is remarkably similar to that of *hybridity* and a *third space* elaborated in *Postcolonial Studies* by Homi Bhabha in particular ([1986] 2002, [1988] 2006, 1994; 2012), not least in reference to Fanon as well as to Lévinas. In the case of Améry this occurs by drawing heavily on the work of Camus ([1942] 2013, [1951] 1992).

The present account focuses on the theoretical nexus of “binarism” and “essentialism”. At the heart of this account is an important controversy that turns on the question: *Can the subaltern speak?* (Can the old speak?). Our exploration of postcolonial discourse focuses on those conceptual strands which extend backward from Hall, Spivak and Bhabha to Fanon and Sartre and which are also crucial to the theory of age and aging presented by Améry and de Beauvoir respectively. An additional original connection between Aging Studies, Postcolonial Studies and Gender Studies is apparent in de Beauvoir which can be mentioned only briefly here. To begin (*alienation*), we shall discuss *racism* and *ageism* in three stages: (1) *gaze and race* (Sartre); (2) *white gaze and othering* (Fanon, Hall, Spivak); (3) *alienation and ageism* (Améry, de Beauvoir). Next (*alterity*), we discuss in five stages various ways of overcoming *racism* and *ageism* while simultaneously justifying *otherness*; reference will be made here additionally to Lévinas and Camus: (4) *open gaze: reflection and responsibility* (Sartre, Lévinas, Spivak); (5) *black gaze: hybridity and instability* (Fanon, Bhabha); (6) *subalternity and old age: representation, resignation, rebellion* (de Beauvoir, Améry); (7) *old Sisyphus speaks: no! and yes!* (Camus, Améry); (8) *La vieillesse n’existe pas* (Camus, Améry, Lévinas, de Beauvoir). Finally I will draw (9) *conclusions with regards to current debates on age and aging*, particularly reflections on pathos formula such as *active, productive, successful aging* and on the cult of the *young-old*.

Gaze and race

The term *alienation* was introduced into research on old age by Améry ([1968] 1994: 93). However, its philosophical starting point is the work of Sartre ([1943] 1992: 252–298): the basic relationship of one person to another person is determined day in, day out by the *gaze*. This is not an exclusively *visual* phenomenon and is not solely about the ways individuals look

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