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## Race, embodiment and later life: Re-animating aging bodies of color

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### ABSTRACT

This theoretical essay examines the intersections between race, ethnicity and old age from an inter-disciplinary lens. Drawing on cultural gerontology (especially embodied aging studies) and post-colonial perspectives on aging, it explores how an emphasis on the *body and embodiment* can serve as a conceptual lens for understanding racialized aging bodies. A tentative framework for analysis is proposed. The concept of *exile* explores how bodies of color and older bodies are denigrated through the hegemonic (white, youth-centered, masculinist) gaze. Re-animation can take place by transcending double-consciousness: 'seeing beyond' the dominant gaze. *Othering and otherness* are explored in relation to both raced and aging bodies. The limits of ethnic aging are scrutinized at an epistemic level, simultaneously informing, and obscuring the understanding of lived experiences of racialized ethnic minorities in old age. *Visible and invisible difference* provide a way of unpacking the simultaneous hypervisibility of older (female) bodies of color, and their invisibility in institutional and policy discourses. *De-coloniality* is considered, by exploring ways to resist hegemonic power through embodied ways of knowing. This article concludes by exploring how recent methodological innovations – especially the visual and sensory turn – can offer new ways of understanding the lived experiences of aging bodies of color.

### Introduction

The intersections between race, ethnicity and old age have received increasing scholarly interest in recent years (Bajekal, Blane, Grewal, Karlens, & Nazroo, 2004; Burholt, 2004; de Jong Gierveld, Van der Pas, & Keating, 2015; Gardner, 2002; Karlens & Nazroo, 2002; Lievesley, 2010; Phillipson, 2015; Zubair & Norris, 2015). Despite this, it has been noted that *theorization* around race, ethnicity and later life has remained sparse, both in aging studies and in race and ethnicity studies (Gilleard & Higgs, 2014; McDonald, 2011; Phillipson, 2015; Torres, 2015). This has been in part due to the peripheral treatment of the life-course in race and ethnicity studies, and the treatment of 'ethnic' or 'minority aging' as a sub-category of mainstream aging – a process which can perpetuate othering and marginalization. However, two important theoretical developments in the late 20th century have offered fresh ground to explore these intersections: the emergence of cultural gerontology and embodied aging studies, and the application of post-colonial theory to later life (Van Dyk, 2016; Zimmermann, 2016). This paper is a theoretical essay which seeks to bring these two traditions together, by using an embodied approach towards understanding race, ethnicity and later life.

The 'cultural turn' in gerontology has reshaped aging studies beyond all recognition (Twigg & Martin, 2015a, 2015b). Drawing on influences from post-structuralism, feminism and queer theory, as well as inter-disciplinary approaches from the arts and humanities; the study of

aging has shifted firmly away from physical decline to an embodied study of aging in terms of subjectivities and biographical narratives. For the purpose of this paper, two aspects of cultural gerontology are particularly relevant for advancing theories of race ethnicity and later life. Firstly, in the last twenty years or so, there has been increasing research on embodied understanding of old age, aging and later life (Cole, Ray, & Kastenbaum, 2010; Gilleard & Higgs, 2014; Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011; Twigg, 2000). This tradition has been slow in gaining purchase within aging studies; an unease caused perhaps by the fear that focusing on the physical body could be a retrogressive turn which could undermine other social and political gains in understanding aging (Twigg & Martin, 2015a, 2015b). The 'absent present body' long invisible in social gerontology (and sociology more broadly) (Leder, 1990; Öberg, 1996), has been made visible by exploring what it *feels like* to grow older, within and through our bodies (Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011). Bodies can serve as a multi-dimensional field where the visceral and fleshy body intersects with representation in the social and material world (Shilling, 2012; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). This has especially been true with the contribution of humanities gerontology more generally (Cole et al., 2010), and bringing together perspectives from social sciences and the arts and humanities. Empirical investigations for instance, have produced rich and varied research that explore the intimate and bodily in aging such as bathing practices and caring for older bodies (Twigg, 2000), sexuality and sex among older people (Marshall & Katz, 2006); body image and ableism (Kaminski &

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Hayslip, 2006), as well as sensuality, spatiality and imagining bodies in relation to material culture (Buse, Nettelton, Martin, & Twigg, 2016; Milton, 2017). Within performative arts and drama, these articulations take on new meaning, transcending language and discourse. Spatz, Ercin, and Mendel's (2017) *Judaic* project, provide new embodied methodologies by which the diasporic Jewish 'voice' can be reanimated through songwork and conceptual fragments (Spatz et al., 2017). There is a rich tapestry to draw from here, and yet, cultural gerontology appears to have stopped short of a full and embracing engagement with race, ethnicity and the aging body.

Along with embodied aging, the cultural turn has also highlighted diversity in relation to old age. As Gullette (2004:111) states "age is a different difference". Growing older, especially into deep old age, involves much more than physical transformation, it is often defined in terms of abjection, as "the ultimate defeat of aliveness, the ultimate failure" (Van Dyk, 2016:110). Representations of old age in consumption culture, are often defined through 'othering'; and it is through an embodied analysis of materiality and aging bodies, that the fault lines of differently aging bodies become visible. Clothing for instance, can be understood as an inexact semiotic 'code' with contradictory and ambiguous messages around how aged, raced and classed bodies present themselves, and are interpreted by others (Twigg, 2009). "The centrality of appearance to age relations and to older women's subjugation and ... the embodied nature of ageism" (Hurd Clarke, 2010: 3) are implicitly and explicitly reproduced through consumption culture. Similar analysis has been drawn around the representation of ageism and racism as essentialist responses which objectify and render invisible people of color in later life (Zimmermann, 2016). While there has been considerable research on differential aging in relation to the intersections between age and gender (Calasanti, 2005; Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Hurd Clarke, 2010; Krekula, 2006) and lesbian and gay aging (Jones & Pugh, 2005; Slevin, 2006); *difference* in relation to race, ethnicity and the aging body remains under-explored.

The second notable development has been the application of post-colonial theory to the study of aging. In a recent special issue in Journal of Aging Studies, Van Dyk and Küpper (2016) and colleagues make an important intervention by considering how post-colonial concepts can be applied to later life. Zimmermann (2016) notes that post-colonial studies and aging studies have similar theoretical origins within existentialism and politics of the 'other'. This is a promising vein of enquiry. In this special issue, key concepts such as alterity and alienation (Zimmermann, 2016); othering (Kunow, 2016; Van Dyk, 2016); exile and de-coloniality (Hartung, 2016) and colonial mimicry and its extensions to age mimicry (Küpper, 2016) are used to explore the representation of old age from a post-colonial lens. These papers provide important spaces to challenge essentialism and culturalism in the construction of old age. However, the special issue has a specific remit - the application of postcolonial concepts to aging, and old age and later life remain relatively static in this analysis. There is a rich analysis of post-colonial theory and its application, but its translation into the lived, the everyday, the visceral and fleshy embodied experiences of what it *feels like* to negotiate the world as an aging body of color remains just outside of its remit.

This paper starts where cultural gerontology has left off- the embodied studied of aging - and bridges the gap between where post-colonial analysis of aging begins -exploring othering within later life- and asks what new insights can an embodied analysis of race, ethnicity and later life bring to a post-colonial aging studies? A tentative framework for analysis is provided and is discussed in six distinct sections. First, the concept of *exile* explores how bodies of color and older bodies are denigrated through the hegemonic (white, youth-centered, masculinist) gaze. Re-animation can take place through an exploration of double-consciousness: of 'seeing beyond' the dominant gaze. Second, *othering and otherness* are explored in relation to both raced and aging bodies. The limits of ethnic aging is scrutinized at an epistemic level, simultaneously informing and obscuring the understanding of lived

experiences of racialized ethnic minorities in old age. Third, *visible and invisible difference* provide a way of unpacking the simultaneous hypervisibility of older (especially female) bodies of color, and their invisibility in institutional and policy discourses. The intersections between gender and aging are particularly relevant (see Calasanti & Slevin, 2006) and I will be focusing on older female bodies in this paper. Fourth, *de-coloniality* is considered, by exploring ways of producing contra-narratives to hegemonic discourse. I conclude with some thoughts about the emergence of creative methodologies and embodied ways of knowing which can extend current understanding of race ethnicity and later life. Zimmermann (2016) drawing on Spivak's (1999) "can the subaltern speak?" asks "can older people speak?" In this paper, I extend his analysis by asking "can bodies speak?" and if so, what would we learn about aging bodies of color?

### Essentialism and exile

The role of the body and bodily as governing principles of a biopolitical understanding of race, ethnicity and old age has had different genealogies. In terms of 'race' the body was weaponized by using certain corporeal features, skin pigment, hair texture and phenotype to create hierarchies of difference; and an arbitrary criteria to justify the colonial project (Aschcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2006). As Gates (1986, in Aschcroft et al., 2006:216) observes "race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherence to specific belief systems which more often than not also have fundamentally opposed economic interests". The irreducible and fundamental nature of racial classification, places the Caucasoid as racially superior, and through its definitive opposite, the Negroid, is cast into a state of permanent alienation and exile. Zimmermann (2016) describes alienation as a form of epistemic violence "which renders abject and invisible ... all those who are 'othered' by a dominant gaze (racism, ageism, othering). Essentialism and binarism are fundamental to the concept of exile, through a bifurcation of worth into human and non-human, white/black, male/female, young/old. "The Black man is overdetermined as "object", the White man is overdetermined as "subject" (Zimmermann, 2016:85). This creates a permanent state of non-being, of exile from humanity, of lacking futurity. The loss of the existential body is described eloquently by Frantz Fanon (1986:109-110).

"In the white world the black man encounters difficulty in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty...."

Blackness then becomes an imposed, alien subjectivity, its future uncertain, always on the edge of nothingness. Fanon's description of blackness suggests a 'triple consciousness'; the Negritude bestowed through the white man's gaze ("All that whiteness that burns me"), its annihilation of the black man's being, and the third consciousness of witnessing this self-negation. Fanon's description of being an 'object among other objects' also resonates with the concept of 'bare life'. Weheliye (2014:33) suggests that racialized bodies "by being barred from the category of human, are relegated to bare or naked life, being both literally and symbolically stripped of all accoutrements associated with the liberalist subject". In order to resist this form of exile, the white gaze needs to be reframed by a process of "reanimation" - of seeing *beyond* the dominant gaze, by en fleshing the 'bare life' with its lost stories, its cultural heritage, its history, as part of, and separate from, one of colonialism and slavery.

This process of reanimation requires the objectified black other to come to terms with double consciousness: "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (William Du Bois (1999:10-11). This exercise is fraught with tension, as the very existence of a racialized subject is determined by its binary opposition

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