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## Creative ageing? Selfhood, temporality and the older adult learner

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## **Creative ageing? Selfhood, temporality and the older adult learner.**

### **Introduction.**

This paper explores both the process and value of creativity for a group of older adult learners.<sup>1</sup> It does so through an ethnographic study of one creative writing class based at a major urban art gallery in the United Kingdom. In what follows close attention is paid to what older learners *themselves* claim they value about this educational process. In particular, I am interested in the statements some of these participants made during my fieldwork, that attending the class and engaging in its activities made them 'feel younger'. These claims are placed within the context of anthropological theories of creativity on the one hand, and the anthropology of selfhood, on the other. I argue that, contrary to the assumptions present in both academic literature *and* educational planning for older adults – that the value of creativity (and education for older adults in general) lies in self-expression and reflection on the past – it is, in fact, the move *away from an individual sense of self* and a dwelling in the *present* that my subjects valued and which contributed to their senses of wellbeing and 'youth'. In doing so, I hope to make a contribution to literature on older adult learners, to theories of creativity within educational contexts, to understandings of selfhood and ageing and to the curricular planning processes of those involved in developing and promoting such activities.

### **Learning in Later Life – theories and assumptions.**

The connections between education in later life and wellbeing have been well documented in recent years. An involvement in educational processes, it has been argued, can lead to increased levels of confidence, a rebuilding of diminishing social networks and greater independence – significant areas of concern for older adults (Panayotoff, 1993; Narushima, 2008; Withnall, 2006). John Field, in a summary of this literature, has signaled the importance of the concept of wellbeing for successful learning indicating outcomes such as 'a positive outlook on the future and a sense of one's ability to take charge of one's life', along with 'better health, higher levels of social and civic engagement, and greater resilience in the face of external crises' (2009: 177). Indeed, traditional theoretical approaches to learning in later life in general, whether in a functionalist (Havighurst, 1963; Moody, 1990), intergenerational (Laslett, 1989) or critical paradigm (Glendenning and Battersby, 1990; Phillipson, 2000, Formosa, 2002; Findsen, 2005), place emphasis on the importance of individual agency and empowerment either

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<sup>1</sup> There has been much debate about how this is to be defined but there is general consensus that it cannot be by chronological age. Findsen and Formosa suggest the following working definition: '*people, whatever their chronological age, who are post-work and post-family, in the sense that they are less or no longer involved in an occupational career or with the major responsibilities for raising a family*' (2011: 11).

through adapting and contributing to modern society or asserting a critical space of one's own. Jarvis has highlighted the importance of learning to be 'free', 'autonomous' and 'authentic' after retirement and has also argued for the importance of biography in learning experiences (2001: 45). For Jarvis, as for others (most notably, Merriam, 1990; Houston, 2007; Findsen and Formosa, 2011) the experience and past lives of older adult learners are a vital underpinning to any sense of liberation or agency. The 'self', it is argued, can be galvanized through reflection on past experience and present circumstance, a theory that has contributed to the popularity of 'reminiscence' sessions. Reminiscence, Jarvis argues, 'is a very important form of learning for older people' (2001: 20). Houston advocates the importance of reminiscence in restoring 'self-identity', promoting 'creativity and self-expression' and passing on family history and cultural heritage (2007: 30-36). Merriam, citing Moody, promotes reminiscence as an educational intervention for older learners because:

For older people, thinking means a dialogue between past and present, between the memory of life experience and the structure of the subject matter (Moody, 1978: 40, as cited in Merriam, 1990: 53).

It is worth highlighting two things here: firstly, the idea that memories are a rich learning resource for older adults, being in abundant supply in healthy third age learners; secondly, the notion that retrieving past experience is a means to reconstitute a self that comes to terms with ageing and/or challenges the marginalized position of older adults. In Moody's comment, cited above, there is also an assumption that a tendency to look backwards is somehow a 'natural' aspect of growing older. In this paper I am particularly interested in these assumptions in the context of arguments about the benefits of 'creativity' for this age group.

### **Creative Ageing – looking backwards and forwards.**

A significant amount of attention from both academic and policy contexts has been paid to the potentials of 'creativity' for the 'wellbeing' of older adults. In the U.S. there have been both qualitative (Fisher and Specht, 1999; Bickerstaff et al., 2003) and quantitative (most notably Cohen, 2006; Cohen et al., 2007) approaches to the topic from a range of disciplines. Many have considered the use of the arts and creative activities within community education programmes (Narushima, 2008; Castora-Binkley and Noelker et al., 2010) as well as institutional and 'therapy' contexts (Flood and Philips, 2007). These have generally produced some very positive results, contributing to the evidence on which policy, funding and practice are based. Addams-Price (1998) has argued that creative activities for older adults promote an openness of mind and a sense of self-competency and efficacy through the creation of meaningful products. Others have argued that the value of creativity for such learners lies in its closeness to 'problem-solving', adaptability and hence the ability to cope with the demands of ageing on mind, body and social life (Flood and Phillips, 2007: 390-1). The work of Gene Cohen perhaps most convincingly argues for the positive impact of the arts on the health of older adults. Creative expression, he argues, brings about health benefits because of four underlying mechanisms. These are: a 'sense of control' in mastering a new activity; the 'influence of mind on body' and its effects on the immune system; 'social engagement' in groups; and 'brain plasticity' - the formation of new synapses

through cognitive challenges offered by creative activity (2006: 9-10). Cohen's 'mechanisms', however, are based on conventional (and un-theorised) ideas about 'creativity' – here the creative act is about individual 'mastery' and 'control'. The 'summing-up' phase which he argues takes place in a person's late 60s and into their 80s is a time 'shaped by a desire to find larger meaning in the story of one's life as one looks back, reexamines, and sums up what has happened' (2006: 9). Flood and Phillips similarly note the prevalence of activities devised in healthcare, educational and arts settings which focus on 'promoting life reviews', 'stimulated reminiscence' and the 'transmission of values and stories to others' (2007: 398). Flicking through the brochure for the 'Luminate' creative ageing festival which recently took place in Scotland one is taken aback by the disproportionate number of events that focus on retrospection as a tool for creative activity.<sup>2</sup> Some of these are designed with dementia sufferers in mind but even here, as has been pointed out recently, there is much to question (Jenkins, 2013). Through the ethnographic example this paper questions such dominant narratives. Like ageing, creativity is inextricably linked to both selfhood and temporality: while the ageing self is often evoked as one that is retrospective, creativity is associated with the prospective; the process of ageing (taken to be a demise in physical and mental capacity) is experienced as a loss of self, whereas being creative is popularly associated with finding and celebrating the self. An assumption emerges that seems to suggest the older adult's need for a reconstitution of selfhood either through expression, recollection or production. There are, in other words, certain narratives about 'older people' and about 'creative selves' that inform both the theory and practice of education for older adults.

The intention of this article is not to question the link between creativity and feelings of wellbeing (indeed, the material presented here confirms this connection) but to explore it in some depth through one detailed example. The difficulty of capturing, or proving, what is a subjective state or feeling has, no doubt, contributed to a lack of rigorous research in the area. However, the tendency to write about older people's learning from the perspective of policy makers or practitioners, instead of the perspective of the learners themselves has also been highlighted (Chen et al., 2008; Withnall, 2010). Taking an ethnographic approach, the research presented in this paper aims to redress this by using the claims participants made as the starting point of the paper. These claims challenge assumptions about ageing, retrospection, creativity and learning in later life found in the literature. The questions I wish to ask are these: how do older adults who are involved in creative processes experience time and what role does this play in feelings of wellbeing? What is the relationship between their creative writing and their sense of self? Are these learners interested in reminiscing about their past (selves), or in looking to their future (selves)? Given that the class is a success (it

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<sup>2</sup> The Luminate Festival is part of a wider trend in the developed world for 'Creative Ageing' Centres and Festivals. Some notable examples are: National Centre for Creative Aging, Washington D.C.; Creative Ageing Centre, Queensland, Australia; Ireland's Bealtaine Festival.

has been running for five years with a stable membership) what values do the Group ascribe to it and what role does it play in their wider lives?

### **'Painting Words' – a creative writing class.**

The group described in this paper is composed of fourteen members and was instigated approximately five years ago by an employee of the gallery in which it is based. It was the first foray into a creative writing class based at the gallery and has been to date, the most successful. Unlike many of the workshops and events I alluded to in the introduction, this particular class was *not* designed specifically for an older age group. However, because of the scheduling – ten o'clock in the morning on a Monday – it attracted a group of older adults. Most of them were post-retirement and all were above the age of 55. What I present here is not a critique of the planning of this particular class; instead I am interested in what this successful, and largely self-directed, case of an older adult education class can tell us about theory and practice in general. All of its members had either seen the class advertised originally or had subsequently heard about it through word of mouth. The members are white, middle class and university educated; in this sense they are aligned with the typical adult education participant (Merriam et al., 2007). A number had had careers as teachers; some had been in fields such as journalism, one was a composer and one a professional artist. Others had worked as an economist, a personal assistant and a university administrator. The group is still running and its membership, bar one or two departures and arrivals (including myself), has remained surprisingly stable throughout this time.

This Group meets once a fortnight on a Monday morning throughout the year, other than in August when they have a summer break. The regular pattern of meetings is such that a tour session, lasting approximately two hours, is followed two weeks later by a writing session of approximately two and half hours. The guides are often freelance artists, or art historians; occasionally the Group chooses to lead the tour themselves. The gallery is based in a major city in the United Kingdom and is spread across three sites housing different collections. The tours are conducted in any one of these three sites however, the writing session always takes place at the main gallery building in the centre of the town. In this session, the Group members bring a piece of writing that has been 'inspired' by the tour and completed at home. They take responsibility for photocopying these themselves and at the start of a session they are placed at one end of a long rectangular table in front of the writer leading the feedback. The writers are also employed on a freelance basis; they are published authors themselves and have experience of working with creative writing groups. The writing, which is always type written, is distributed in turns. The piece of work is then discussed by all members of the Group, under the guidance of the professional writer. It has become a custom to time the feedback using an egg-shaped kitchen timer so that one person's work is not given more consideration than another's. During the feedback session the Group members make comments, take notes on their own work, and that of others. Some of them work on the pieces afterwards in the light of the comments made; sometimes, they told me, they simply put the work away in drawers or boxes. At the end of a tour session and half way through a writing session the Group have a tea break. These are used to catch up with individuals but

also for notices and announcements about upcoming sessions, readings, exhibitions and personal achievements such as winning competitions. In the following sections I describe my methodology in more detail; I then go on to outline the theoretical framework I use to analyze the ethnographic material later in the paper.

## **Methodology**

This research was based upon a mix of qualitative methodologies including long-term participant observation over three and half years, field notes taken at all Group sessions, and a series of semi-structured interviews with museum educators and Group members. In addition to this, I have attended readings, exhibitions and other social events at which Group members have met outside of the formal classes. The interview data was transcribed and thematically categorized. The research commenced in April 2010 and is still ongoing at the time of writing this article. In line with an ethnographic approach outlined above, I used myself as the primary research tool. This involved a large investment of time, some persistence on my part, and a commitment to building relationships and trust (Walford, 2008). I pay to attend the class, I am part of the Group email list and I am invited to the shared events, such as the annual Christmas lunch. The members of the group and the gallery staff have been aware throughout the project that I am a researcher interested in their engagement with art, and their creativity. I have shared my own academic writing about them with them. Some of them have engaged in conversation, email communication and even some criticism with me about what I have written. While the Group of older adults studied here would not be classified as 'vulnerable', there were times when a great deal of sensitivity and tact had to be exercised, particularly in interviews. Over the time I have worked with them, there have been bereavements, serious illnesses, long absences and returns by some members of the Group. These subjects, rarely alluded to in the space of the class, have occasionally entered formal interviews and informal conversations but always at the instigation of Group members themselves. What I present here, through an immersion in the class, is a perspective that is rarely shared, and one which has given me an insight into the tacit knowledge of the Group. In participating and attending the classes myself I am able to reflect on, and contrast, my own experience with that of the others. This is of particular value given the context of ageing presented here – I am significantly younger than the other members of the Group.

This work was carried out within an anthropological tradition of ethnographic research (Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion & Rees, 2008), rather than the more systematic approach common to educational and sociological ethnographers in the U.K. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In accordance with this, rather than entering the field site with a predetermined design and theoretical frame, I have allowed these to emerge over time and *through* the material gathered. This, I would stress, has been different again from a 'grounded theory' approach to research with its assumption that it is possible to be free of preconceptions and reach 'some kind of reliable knowing' (Thomas and James, 2006: 791). While the data has been categorized, organized, and labeled at various stages of the research and analysis process, in order to allow argument and structure to be constructed, this process

has not been a formal one of coding. In what follows theory and data are juxtaposed in order to illuminate, comment on, and unearth assumptions about each other. It is not my intention to use my findings to generate a new theory of creativity, or learning in later life. Rather, I take the claims my subjects make about creativity, time, and self, seriously and use them to illuminate assumptions about the relationships between education, creativity and ageing. While the research focuses on a small group of older learners from a very particular demographic, the ethnographic method allows me to see the complexity of this world in close detail. There are two important areas that this paper does not have space to dwell on. Firstly, the particular context of this class within a museum education setting and the role that art objects play in that pedagogical process is something I have written about elsewhere (Sabeti, 2015) but do not consider here. Secondly, I am also aware that I do not pay attention to the specifics of the *kind* of writing these subjects are engaged with. Creative writing and its relationship to self and narrative are an important area for exploration, but again not dealt with here.

### **Creativity and the Ageing Self: anthropological approaches.**

This paper employs two theoretical frameworks both from the discipline of anthropology. The work of social anthropologists is of relevance because, like them, the concern here is to unearth dominant cultural narratives and, in particular those that inform educational theory, planning and practice. Firstly, in thinking about creativity and the ways in which it is conventionally perceived, I turn to the work of Hallam and Ingold. Hallam and Ingold question our cultural assumptions about creativity – its individuality, its location in the imagination and its objectification of time (2007). Secondly, I use the work of Degnen who conducted an ethnography of older people in a former coal mining village in the North of England. Degnen's concern with time, memory, selfhood and the category of 'old age' is another lens through which the material is viewed (2012). By bringing together these anthropological approaches to creativity, temporality and the self, it is hoped that a better understanding of the ways in which 'creativity' can contribute to feelings of 'youth' and 'wellbeing' might be reached.

Hallam and Ingold have argued that conventional readings of creativity in Western societies are symptomatic of our modern concern with production, entrepreneurship and commercial success. We tend to view creativity as about innovation (the production of something 'new'); as the work of a talented individual; as about a present moment freeing itself from the conventions of the past and, finally, as mind over matter – the agency of the intelligence or imagination over the materials of the world (2007: 3). They argue that creativity is not about innovation, but *improvisation* – it is simply our way of living and being (socially and culturally) in the world. Being creative, or improvising, is actually 'the way we work' and it is inherently 'generative' (it produces culture), 'relational' (lies in the 'dynamic potential of an entire field of relationships') and 'temporal' - in Bergson's sense of a duration – an ongoing movement (2007: 7-10). The challenge here to the dichotomy of 'everyday' creativity and 'real' creativity is an important one but it can also be problematic. In positing a situation in which 'living' is 'creative', there is little space to take account of the claims individuals make about 'creativity', or moments where they claim that what they are doing is, or is not

'creative'. Hence it may become difficult to discern the distinctness of certain processes (for example, creative writing) for individuals above and over the day-to-day process of living. Nevertheless, the theory – particularly its understanding of creativity as 'temporal' and 'relational' are helpful ones. In enabling us to see our particular concerns with creativity as culturally situated we are then able to take better account of when and where these assumptions and practices both privilege and marginalize certain individuals. As Harvey and Strathern have argued, in Euro-American cultures, there is a preoccupation with 'how [people] will get into the future... [t]here is a strong need felt to propel oneself forward' (2005: 109). These potentials are seen as 'lying in the passage of time' and as a consequence of this there is a division between those who use time productively, and those who do not; between those who realize their potential and those who fail to do so; between those who are 'creative' and those who are not (2005: 109).

Degnen's work with older people in the North of England illustrates this point clearly. She argues that older people are often thought of as inhabiting a non-creative and non-productive temporality. In a very real sense they have less of a future, and therefore less potential to fulfill. Degnen's work does not focus on creativity; however, she is concerned with interrogating – from the perspective of older people themselves – epistemological assumptions and cultural practices about old age. As she points out, recently anthropologists have challenged assumptions that 'past, present and future all need to be consecutive components of temporal framings in order to avoid disordered personhood' (Hazan, 1996 as referenced by Degnen, 2012: 18). Our particular concept of time, she argues, is as a 'measurable, universalist and linear' entity – and this has become naturalized in metaphors such as the 'life course', and indeed, 'lifelong learning', 'the learning journey' and so on. These assumptions are a form of 'soft power' that work against the actual lived experience of older people. She argues that the self can be both individualistic *and* relational and that self-formation is a complex process that is not necessarily chronological but can be 'a cyclical and contradictory relational process'; it is, in other words, about 'becoming, rather than being' (2012: 13). So being 'old' is not a discrete category but one that is formed in relation to others. In particular, Degnen wishes to challenge the stereotype that older people are 'lost' in the past, or retrospective, and fail to engage meaningfully with the future. She aligns herself with other anthropologists who have positioned themselves against the assumption that older people live in a static time universe. They argue that growing older is actually experienced as a time of enormous and rapid change (Hazan, 1980, 1984; Heikkinen, 2000). Degnen's work is useful when thinking about educational planning and processes because it challenges both normative models of temporality and normative models of self.

### **'Feeling fifty years younger': wellbeing, youth and creativity.**

Katharine was the third member of the Group who I interviewed and one of the oldest in age. At the time she was seventy-seven and had been in Painting Words from its inception. Like many of the other members, Katharine has a long-held interest in words, writing and being creative. We met in the café of the gallery one afternoon for coffee and sat by the window from where we could see a large sunken garden. It was September and there was a distinct autumnal chill in the air.

Katharine wore a heavy sweater and a colourful bead necklace around her neck. Like the others I had interviewed, there was a slight trepidation; a concern both about what I would ask, and whether or not she would be of any 'help' to me. I found her loquacious and enthusiastic in responding to questions and prompts. As well as asking questions about what writing meant to them, the role of the Group and of the artworks they saw, I was also interested in what happened to the work they produced. It was in response to this latter question that Katharine said:

It lies around in various boxes and files and if there's a bit in it that I like then I keep it and I go back and I look at it... If I feel that it's a really good thing that I've written, then I'll give it [publication/competition entry] a try...but I'm not driven to it. I don't enter competitions per se. Writing actually makes me feel about fifty years younger. That's the effect it has on me.

As I continued with interviews, this notion of 'youthfulness' came up frequently both explicitly and implicitly, and by both Group members and those who worked with them. Graeme, another member, described the Group as a 'fairly old bunch' but then qualified this by saying, 'though quite young at heart, I think.' Lydia, one of the writers, told me when we were discussing the Group, 'They seem so young; their minds are young'. Later when she was telling me about her previous work with older people she repeated this feeling, 'I never think of it like that because they do all seem so youthful in their attitudes'. This odd contradiction also converged with my own sense of the Group. As I myself became more and more involved, continued to interview them, and sat listening to them reading their work out or discussing artworks whilst on a tour, I too began to feel something of this 'youthfulness'. Indeed, my overwhelming feeling was one of envy. I wanted to be like them, to feel how they felt, to inhabit what I took to be an intensity of focus. And yet, there was also a feeling of discomfort – should I envy people who were twenty to thirty years older than myself? It was more than the envy of a busy working mother with little time on her hands. It was to do with a perception of wellness, the alertness and concentration they exhibited, and an enormous sense of vitality and interest in life and art. In the sections that follow I will argue that the feelings of 'youth' and 'wellbeing' – which my subjects repeatedly told me they gained from engaging in creative writing – can be understood by considering two areas: the self and its relationship to others, and temporality.

### **The creative self: relationality and the 'virtue of the Group'.**

Hallam and Ingold argue that creativity (or improvisation) must be seen as a constitutive element of 'social life', rather than being about an individual's agency over 'society' (2007: 6). It is a relational process dependent on entanglement and 'mutually responsive' entities. Here I want to draw out exactly this relational understanding of the creative self amongst the Group I worked with. During interviews and discussions participants never identified a desire for 'novelty' or 'originality' as the motivation for their writing. If they entered a competition or attempted to publish their work, it was not out of a desire to imprint themselves on the world, or gain affirmation of their individual talents. It was, they claimed, about the *life of their writing*. Graeme, speaking of his witty short stories, said:

It matters more to me that people find it interesting to listen to and want to read to the end, cared about the characters within the story, or cared about

where the story was going. I think these things matter in the end to me more. I count those as successes.

When I asked Joan about publication she said:

It's not so much for the sake of posterity. I want to share. I want to be good enough to share with people and for other people to get pleasure from them. It's not just about me writing in a garret.

On the one hand, the Group itself provided the forum for sharing the work – it was written for the coming round of the Group, and for those in it to hear being read. However, occasionally these pieces of writing found themselves in other arenas – being read out at Poetry Events, being published in pamphlets and magazines. From my observations of the members of the Group, they were proud of these moments, enjoyed seeing their work go out into the world and yet, when I asked them about the reasons for this, they always returned to an insistence on the idea of its relationality. Katharine, speaking about the whole creative process, from being inspired in the first place to sharing a piece of writing, put it in her characteristically eloquent way:

I need something that twangs my emotion, and somehow or other comes out in something I've written... But then it's got to twang somebody else if it's to have a life. Does that make sense?

The text or artwork can only have a life if it has the power to 'twang' someone but by the same token, 'twanging' is the process by which creativity also comes about. A theory of art - and life - emerges from this, then, that is about mutual 'twanging' and which may help us begin to explain the ways in which these individuals experience and derive feelings of 'youth' and 'energy' from creative engagements with the world. Jarvis has pointed to the importance of 'sharing' in third age education. 'It is often through sharing,' he argues, 'that people become empowered and assume responsibility for some of their own activities' (2001: 58). While the kinds of sharing highlighted by Jarvis (and others) often focus on the concept of past experience, what I found here was quite different and distinct from notions of individual empowerment and responsibility. The value of creativity for my subjects does not lie in its agency over time and materials, but its relationality, its ability to spread and connect to others in the present moment. This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider the *reception* of their work – whether that is within the Group or beyond it. However what surprised me was that this relationality also applied to the *production* of their texts.

During writing feedback sessions, when we would sit around the long rectangular table commenting on each other's work, I noticed something that I thought odd. Most people had a pen or pencil in their hands and the writer of the piece would make notes and annotations, adjustments and deletions to their work as we went along. However, I realized that others were also making changes to their copies of the pieces. This is an example from a session following an exhibition focused on the theme of 'Witches':

**Joan:** [holding her piece of paper in front of her] This could be two, or three poems; or none, so bear with me.

[A gentle laugh goes round the group at her self-deprecation. She was generally acknowledged as one of the better writers. She tells us that it is not based on an individual picture but on several.]

**Joan:** I was greedy. I didn't want to lose any of it...at the same time I wanted to say something about ageing.

[After she read it several suggestions were made for changes and for where the poem could be separated into two works. It was generally agreed that there were two poems in what Joan had written.]

**Martha:** I'm not sure about the 'I'.

**Lydia:** Yes, I wasn't happy with the first person.

**Joan:** I just don't want anyone to think that it's me.

**Kirsty:** I don't think it ever crossed my mind that it was you, Joan. What about the line, 'How she has inverted beauty with her name'? I'm not sure what you mean by it.

**Joan:** I think that's the case for the writer too, which is perhaps not such a good thing!

**Kirsty:** I'm in awe of your breadth of language.

**Joan:** You have to dig to find words. When I write things off the top of my head, the language is very dull.

As Joan made various changes to her copy, so did Kirsty, Katharine, Martha and Sarah. At the end of the session I saw that they all took the edited photocopies home with them. While the poem(s) were Joan's in a technical sense, other people in the group would determine, to some extent, the final version. And, they felt enough of an involvement in the process of creating the poem that they wanted to take their edited versions home with them. This is a creative process that is collaborative and relational. The poem that is produced is the outcome of the interactions between members of the Group. Even though Joan says the poem is about ageing and it employs the first person, she insists on a move away from anything deemed to be self-expression; in fact, self-expression is sometimes seen as self-indulgence. This was a theme that emerged in interviews: Graeme, for example, recalled a period of his life where he had studied art. He said, 'I was becoming less and less concerned about the skill and craft involved in drawing and painting and more with the subject matter, with expressing something I thought mattered.' He told me that he thought this was, 'heading to a place' that was 'no good' for him; that he 'had to turn [his] back on it' and that, 'I just wouldn't trust myself to get involved with art again.' Graeme went on to tell me he liked the Group because, 'there isn't anybody in the class who gets terribly precious about themselves or their writing'. Andrew, another member, enjoyed it because it was 'uncompetitive...Nobody has a hidden agenda.' This prompted a certain degree of

trust and sharing of work, particularly at the revision stage as we have seen in the example above, but also beyond the event of the class itself. Katharine told me about a time when she had given Andrew one of her poems and asked him to edit it. She said:

He did what he doesn't do in his own poems; he had huge lines and spaces. I haven't got back to him to say, 'You'll do it with mine, but you won't do it with your own!' It was fascinating.

I asked her if she liked what he had done. She replied, 'I loved it. Absolutely loved it! I knew exactly what he meant.' Later in the interview she called this process 'cross-fertilization' suggesting that while there is an understanding of individual agencies at work, the process of actually being creative, as well as its product, is seen as relational. It lies, as Hallam and Ingold have argued, 'in the dynamic potential of an entire field of relationships to bring forth the persons situated in it' (2007: 7). Many of them told me about the way in which the Group functioned as an 'outside eye' on their work, a perspective they were eventually able to internalize with varying degrees of success. However, these improvements in the skill and craft (the distinction Graeme made between this and the subject matter of art) of writing are attributed to the collective, not their individual selves. As John put it: 'I think I'm improving by virtue of the Group.' For these subjects, we could argue, creativity is a release from the burden of self, not a re-inscription of it in the cause of posterity, expression or fame. However, there is also another important point to be made and that is about 'temporality', its distinctiveness for older people and how it plays into and out of the creative process.

### **Temporality and the older creative self – 'lost' in the past?**

Degnen, as has already been indicated, challenges the stereotype that older people are 'lost' in the past and care little for the future. These are commonplace assumptions that 'stem from the assumed alignment of older age with the end of life and thus the end of time' (2012: 57-8). On the contrary, I found that my subjects, like Degnen's, inhabited the present. That is not to deny the significance of the past but I found that this was significant because of its *relevance to the present*. One good example of this from my interviews was when I asked the Group about their biographies. They never dwelled very long on their life stories, moving through them extremely quickly and with matter-of-factness. John, for example, talking about his teaching career, told me:

I started off in East Africa, in Uganda. Then I had to leave Uganda because of Idi Amin and then I went to Kenya. I came back to Glasgow and then I took promotion from Glasgow and came through to Edinburgh. And then I was promoted up through the ranks in Edinburgh.

And this is Jeanette discussing her background:

My parents moved to Edinburgh when I was eleven. I started school in Edinburgh when I was nine – we were living out in West Lothian, in Bathgate, at that time. So I finished my schooling and university career in Edinburgh, and then I travelled quite a lot and came back to Edinburgh quite a few years later.

These sorts of accounts were in marked contrast to the ways in which they narrated themselves and discussed their biographies as writers. John told me about the natural scenery that inspired him:

All my life, I've been a very keen walker and I've walked in mountains, the hills. Of course, everyone walks in the hills. But it was so I could be inspired, I suppose. Walking across the moors from Boat of Garten to Aviemore...but there's something about the changing nature of seascapes. The cottage we usually rent, it's quite close to this huge bay called West Kintyre and it's an incredible area for seafood. I mean there's people who just make their living working on the bay. Every time you look at that bay you just see something different. So you don't move from the place but almost by the half hour you see a different picture. The changes in the colours are remarkable.

Discussing her enjoyment of writing, Jeanette told me:

It's always been there. I don't know, I just like words. I like reading. I think I was quite a lonely child. I was an only child until I was five and a half, and then I had two small brothers. It takes a long time for – you know – that sort of gap to be made up. Then when the boys were growing up they gravitated more towards each other, so I was always kind of a very *lonely* child.

Both John and Jeanette dwell on their past selves here *because* they trace a continuity with their present selves as writers. There is an attempt to explain this trajectory through situating themselves as 'hill walkers' or 'lonely' children who had to fall back on their own resources and amuse themselves. Similarly, they spoke of their writing selves as temporal entities changing through time. Katharine made a distinction between her younger self – a writer of short stories who cared about publishing and external validation – and herself now. She had taken to writing short pieces of poetry and poetic prose and, unlike some of the other writers, she did not like to be constrained into a traditional form. She described this shift as 'something that has come to me with age'. Now, she told me, 'I just want to be able to go with it.' Joan also told me about her past writing self and how it had evolved over time in terms of the form writing took:

I thought, well, if I do nothing else, I'll do this family memoir for my daughter and my granddaughter. But the tenses kept muddling up and I couldn't keep track of the story. Instead I loved writing poetry, you can really focus in on the words and you're allowed to have a real voice which you aren't really in fiction these days. The best poems are when you get into another character's head.

Joan here confirms my point about the ways in these subjects locate their pasts in their present writing selves – 'the tenses kept muddling up'. They are not retrospective, nor are they nostalgic. Indeed, there is a move away from the past and towards the present.

Degen argues that it is precisely these kinds of narrative that younger people perceive as indicative of the older person being 'lost' in the past, but that it is *'not necessarily perceived by the older person in this way* and the relevance or salience of those experiences when younger can instead be seen as *much of who I understand myself to be today*. That is to say, there is a temporal foreshortening that occurs' (2012: 132, emphasis in original). Therefore, there are not two selves here – the younger, and older self – but one self held together. However, Joan's interview also reiterates the way in which the creativity these subjects value is seen as a move away from self (memoir, life history, personal feeling). This again throws into question the assumption that biography and memory are the keys to learning and creativity in later life. What Joan values instead is a 'focus in on the words'. My own

observations of the Group during the writing feedback sessions I attended confirmed the importance of intense concentration on the minutiae of language. Here is an extract from a meeting where writing based on a self-led session is being shared. The poem under discussion was written by John in response to a statue of the French chemist Antoine Lavoisier. The writer working with them on this occasion was Lydia. Both John himself, and then Martha had read the poem out.

- Kirsty:** There's a weight to every line. You have to stop and consider it. I don't know how you manage it, John.
- Katharine:** I think it's the best thing you've written.
- Lydia:** Yes, I definitely agree. It still needs some work but it's the best thing you've written.
- John:** Tell me. Tell me. What do I need to do to it?
- Sheila:** Do you think it needs some punctuation?
- Lydia:** It definitely needs some punctuation. Did the punctuation keys on your keyboard fall off?

**[John laughs]**

- Katharine:** The word 'passers' was interesting.
- Joan:** Yes, in fact when both John and Martha read it out, they said 'passengers'.
- Martha:** Did I? I didn't even notice.
- Joan:** I think when somebody reads it out as different you need to think about it.

**[Several people nod]**

- Lydia:** The syntax is a bit odd. I wonder if it's too ambiguous.
- Kirsty:** No, I think it's just right.
- Lydia:** I'd like to see a few more syntactical words, but Kirsty says 'no'. I'd definitely like to see some punctuation!

This material presence of words on paper, and the intense concentration on the crafting of language, is another means of staying in present time and is a matter of seriousness to them all. This is 'work' in a good sense because it is free of the pressure of a 'future' goal, though it is about a 'future' poem and a writer getting better through time. Joan told me: 'there's nobody careless about it; so if somebody makes a comment, it is considered, and it is from somebody who is trying it themselves.' In fact, Graeme made a clear distinction between the pressure presented by the rhythm – the regular coming round of the Group – and a future-oriented goal. He spoke about the time that Jenny, the gallery educator who had set up the Group, suggested they work towards an exhibition and an anthology. He said:

We were all taken aback by that; it suddenly became a little more serious at that point.

The exhibition and anthology went ahead and the Group members are proud of these, but there was also a deep ambivalence in the way they discussed it. This

ambivalence implied a certain lack of comfort with the idea of 'going public' and of thinking about the future. They took comfort, instead, in the cycle of the Group sessions, using the gentle pressure of these as a form of self-discipline. During one of our tea breaks, Kirsty said:

This Group is what keeps me going. The summer break feels long and desolate.

The momentum of the Group and its cyclical nature was important. One thing I learned, after spending a lot of my time with the members of the Group, is how carefully they had learned to choose their words – another means, arguably, by which they stayed in the present moment. This was not just when they were 'having a pick' (as one of them put it) at someone's work, but simply within the flow of conversation. So when Kirsty says here that the Group 'keeps me going' there is a resonance to the phrase that goes beyond its status as a cliché. This activity literally (and metaphorically) *keeps life going for her*. However, its power does not lie in a temporality that is linear, or future-oriented, but one that focuses instead on a dwelling in the present.

### **Conclusion: Some implications for educational theory and practice.**

The research presented in this paper has taken the claims of one group of older adults – that creative writing made them 'feel younger' – as the starting point for exploring this connection further. At the beginning of this paper I posed four specific questions about the relationship of these learners to time, creativity and selfhood; I would now like to return to these to discuss the implications of the findings. For these individuals it was neither the remembered past, nor the imagined future, that was the source of creativity or feelings of wellbeing. Rather, it was the intense focus on the crafting of language - a means of *being in the present* – that gave them feelings of youthfulness and energy. Furthermore, the act of writing creatively was of value because of its ability to connect them to others not because it endowed them with a sense of 'responsibility', 'mastery' or 'control' (Jarvis, 2001; Cohen, 2006). Indeed, the sense of 'self' gained through this activity was neither biographical, cathartic nor empowering - in the ways in which much of the literature on older adult learning would suggest. By placing the claims my subjects made within the context of anthropological literature, I have questioned some of the cultural assumptions about creativity as a future oriented practice, and older age as a period of retrospection that inform educational theory and programming for older adults. Many of these are still based on deficit models of older adult learners as needing to reconstitute selfhood, or simply come to terms with being old. The idea of 'creativity' as residing in the production of something new, an exertion of individual agency, or a propulsion into the future does not accord, I have argued, with these older peoples' sense of themselves or their experience of time. Tim Ingold's theory has been helpful in illuminating the value of the educational process for my subjects. Creative writing is, indeed, a means of being, dwelling and living – a form of 'social life' constituted of mutually responsive instances of 'twanging'. However, as I implied earlier, this way of theorizing creativity also throws up a problem. If living is a matter of improvisation, and all improvisation is creativity, what need do we have for activities that are distinctively 'creative'? And if being creative brings a sense of 'life' and presence, a being-in-the-world to people, then does this imply that the rest of their lives are

not creative? What, in other words, is the value of this activity beyond the class, and how does it spread into the rest of their lives? In order to address this last question I will return to the claims of the learners themselves.

When I asked the members of the Group about the other ways in which they considered themselves to be creative I received an array of responses that ranged from diurnal activities such as 'cooking' and 'gardening' to perhaps more traditionally viewed creative activities such as 'music', 'composing' and 'craft', to the odder 'dreaming'. However, what became clear was how creative writing – and being a writer – had been absorbed into their daily lives and identities. Joan told me:

I try to write everyday. Every day I try to write something and every week I try to have a poem that is either brand new or coming to the boil. All the rest of the time I've got things that I'm revising, so it's really important that the time we spend in the gallery is not spent idly chatting or idly looking. It is a time to gather things that might be...that you might use. That is the key thing. The whole two hours of that leads to other spin offs.

Here Joan, like many of the others, had learned a different way of being in the world that was 'creative' and involved different practices, like writing every day or carrying a notebook around with her. However, the event of the class was still an important lynch pin in this new life and the activity of writing, as well as the artifacts of being a writer (a notebook and pen) were still important. Katharine noted the distinctness of writing from other forms of life. She said:

I reveal a bit of myself in my writing that sometimes I didn't know was there, and very often, no one else knew. And I love the surprise and shock of what comes. It's not something that happens in social life, in meeting someone for lunch, that sort of thing. I call it a kind of madness. It doesn't have to make sense for me, but it has to make it's own kind of sense.

In her account creativity appears to come out of 'nowhere' rather than a remembered past – it is articulated as a discovery, not a retrieval, of self. In doing so, her conventional relationship to time is also disrupted. Instead of time existing as a linear object that is outside of oneself, so that the self is forced to relate to time by, for example, chronologically narrating the events of one's life; it becomes subjective, flexible and non-linear. This is Katharine telling me about a period when, after some frustration, she managed to write a poem:

I said [to herself], 'For goodness sake all you have to do is put words on a line!' and suddenly I got a poem out of that. It was just a push, a feeling and I just let go and something came out. It was literally like seeing a baby in front of you. I suddenly realized that words that I liked the feel of – dodecahedron, Pontefract – they went into the poem and they reminded me of – we had a year in Washington DC when the children were small and I remember the glow worms and how they used to hang. The females hang on threads waiting for the males to come and that was the image. The words 'glowed' and the words were small word beetles, so I used the metaphor absolutely subconsciously.

In this account of her personal process of creating a poem, Katharine highlights several things. Again there is the intensity of the creative moment, the focus on words and images – the glow beetles. But there is also a link to her past (a remembered event) and to a future (the metaphor of the baby, the blank page that

becomes a poem). In this process there is unity of self that is constituted as part of a creative moment in the present but one that also stretches across time. This temporality, however, is not linear or straightforwardly retrospective. It is, on the other hand, different from how she might experience temporality when she is *not* being creative. What Katharine relates here is a moment of 'inspiration' where there is both a temporal dislocation and a feeling that self, and agency, is disrupted – 'I just let go and something came out'. There is then, something quite distinct about this moment; and, interestingly, what she describes is not empowerment or control but their opposite – a moment where she 'let go'. It is a feeling experienced during solitary acts of creativity (as above) and through collective moments of creative work (as in the Group – indeed the Group prolongs and extends this creative moment). It is, in other words, the way in which this activity *recalibrates both self and time* that generates feelings of wellbeing and energy.

A focus on the present and a move away from a straightforward sense of self, which I have argued define the way this Group experience and value creativity, could simply be regarded as a means of distraction. Given their particular time of life, we could argue, the class is a way to put the realities of loss, death and ailment to one side. Their decision to focus on *fiction* rather than memoir; and the way they situate their 'work' – both product and process – firmly within the realm of aesthetic form could similarly be regarded as a distancing or coping strategy. The meetings could also be seen as ways of filling time, engaging in social activity and keeping their minds alert. I do not wish to deny that they are any, or all, of these things. But they are also something more, and that something more is important in the context of learning, creativity and ageing. It is what I have begun to explore in this paper by considering the distinctiveness of a creative activity for a particular group of older adult learners. For them it is an educational process that not only sustains them (it 'keeps me going') or connects them to others ('it has to twang someone else') but also makes them feel alive, and perhaps a little 'younger'.

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