

# For the time being – temporality, ethics, aging.

Conversations between anthropology, art and philosophy

Aarhus, March 31<sup>st</sup> – April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020.

## *Abstracts*

### TEMPORALITIES AND ETHICS

**Joel Robbins, Sigrid Rausing Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge**

*On the Prospects for a Comparative Study of the Good: Beyond the Bad and the Ugly in Anthropological Relativism.*

In her influential recent article on “Dark Anthropology,” Sherry Ortner questions the critical potential of anthropological studies of ethics, and particularly of research focused on studying people’s perceptions of and efforts to achieve the good. Instead, she suggests that anthropological efforts are best directed at examining how people critique the darkness that besets their lives. In this paper, I argue that critical anthropology is significantly handicapped by posing itself in opposition to the study of the good. I develop this argument both through a consideration of recent work in critical theory and by means of reconsidering the critical potential of the anthropological study of difference. This critical potential, I suggest, has itself been hampered by the way anthropological relativism has tended to focus on the dark sides of various cultural formations. In response, I argue for an approach to difference based on a pluralism of the good. In developing this position, I illustrate my claims in part by considering recent work on what even now, long after the mainstreaming of the anthropology of Christianity, scholars continue to consider somewhat repugnant forms of the Christian faith.

**Harmandeep Kaur Gill, PhD student of Anthropology, Aarhus University**

*Waiting for death. Temporal perspectives in the Life of an Elderly Tibetan Monk in Exile, India.*

In this paper, I explore the case of a ninety years old Tibetan monk, *Khosho Tashi Gyaltzen* who is a resident at the Tibetan Children’s Village old age home in Dharamsala, India. Due to a large on-migration in recent years of exile-Tibetan youth to Western nations, Tashi

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Gyaltsen is like most elderly Tibetans, facing old age and death in the absence of family. Impermanence comes to pervade all sides of the elderly's lives; from an aging body, the absence of family to the unpredictability of death. Like most elderly Tibetans, his days are spent in religious practices in the preparations for death and rebirth. While different religious activities make up one important part of his days, exercise is another. Exercise is for him an important means to tame the unpredictability of increasing old age and for avoiding a bedridden future and death in the absence of family. Whenever I asked Tashi Gyaltsen about what thoughts occupied his mind, he only had one answer for me: death. He lived as if any day could be his last day, as if he were constantly waiting for death's arrival and preparing himself for the journey ahead.

Every day was an exercise in letting go.

In this paper, I explore how the constant waiting for the uncertain, yet inevitable future of death and *Khosho* Tashi Gyaltsen's daily efforts at letting go shapes his experience of time, personhood and relations with ethical others.

**Lone Grøn, Anthropologist, Primary Investigator and Senior Researcher VIVE - The Danish Center for Social Science Research.**

*Presents in Dementia – Exploring Temporality and Ethics at a Danish Dementia Ward.*

“The problem is how to make time explicit as it comes into being and makes itself evident, time at all times underlying the notion of time, not as an object of our knowledge, but as a dimension of our being.” (Merleau Ponty 1992:415). Taking up Merleau Ponty's reflections on time I will explore how we can make time explicit as it comes into being and makes itself evident in specific ethnographic settings like a dementia ward. How do present moments in ethnographic vignettes speak to “time at all times underlying the notion of time”, to time “as a dimension of our being”? How do spectral pasts, futures and presents come into being in lives with dementia? In my fieldwork at a Danish dementia ward, I have encountered multiple and distinct time-images, time-experiences and time-works, which are often seen by those who do not live at the ward, as pathological through and through. Joel Robbins has argued that western thinking about time centers on the fact that time is what makes everything hang together and what directs us towards the future. Living with dementia, thus, represents another mode of being in the world, another way of being in time – also in the west. In this presentation, I will reflect on my interlocutors as time beings in their own right and explore the possible presents of their presents, i.e. the gifts of time they might offer.

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## SPECTRAL AND IMAGISTIC TIME

**Robert R. Desjarlais, Professor of Anthropology, Sarah Lawrence College**

*The times of a life: aging, memory, and multi-temporalities within an elderly woman's lifeworld.*

This paper reflects on the multiple, interlacing strands of time and memory that course through the life of an elderly woman who has been diagnosed with “mild vascular dementia.” In considering the ways in which personal and family history, memories of loss, connection, and friendship, acts of forgetting, remembrance, and repetition, realms of dreaming and phantasy, and the spectral presence of the future inform this person's current situation in life, as well as that of her family, the author tries to convey the complex folds of time and relationality that inform the lifeworld of this woman (who happens to be the author's mother). The writing here thus implies an intimate biography of care, connection, and existential transformation within the good old age of one person's life.

**Maria Speyer, artist**

*Drawing the Figure as Presence and Response.*

In this paper, I will talk about the five tall, charcoal drawings that form my part of our project on aging. Each drawing is addressed to one of the anthropologists in our group and, through them, to a particular experience of aging – all in challenging circumstances. Specifically, the drawings respond to a set of papers whose common theme is ‘intimate others in old age’.

The drawings all focus exclusively on the figure, but these figures aren't representations of bodies. Rather, they are a residue of trying to come to terms with our presence in the world. As an investigation into intimate others in old age, each drawing explores how a sense of self might be expressed, fought for or acted out in response and in relation to the intimate other. How might each situation be considered as an insistence on presence? And how might the figure in aging be considered as relational presence, and as the not yet finished, rather than a body defined by its proximity to finality?

I will probe this notion of presence and the ‘not yet finished’ both in terms of the figure, but also in terms of the drawing process. I will talk about what a drawing is as it is drawn, that is, as uncertainty and as something not yet finished and about how these five drawings have been developed as an ongoing response to academic research.

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**Lawrence Cohen, Professor of Anthropology, Berkeley University**

*Enemies: the estrangements of home in late life.*

Risking melodrama, this essay examines a theme across disparate aging worlds: the becoming-unfamiliar of the home and the experience of being under siege, beset by enemies. Its focus is on estrangement as a temporal problem. It moves between four settings, some based on research and some on personal and civic experience: a street in a Kolkata (India) neighborhood in which one woman is heard to cry she is imprisoned in her home by strangers; an apartment building of retired professionals in a downtown San Francisco (USA) neighborhood in which one woman has become paralyzed by the certainty that hackers continue to have access to her computer and telephone; a lane in a residential San Francisco suburb watched by a woman increasingly alert for thieves lurking in the shadows; two women living in adjoining apartments in a Montreal (Canada) neighborhood who listen for hours on end to the radio, increasingly attentive to what one calls the enemies that threaten their personal and national identifications. The essay asks how the figure of the enemy may mark not only or even primarily the dislocation and presumptive paranoia of some dementia experience, but can more broadly characterize a mode of development in late life, one that appears to collapse the world into a state of siege but which may as well be part of a (painful) opening to the possibility of the world, to a kind of natality.

**Maria Louw, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Aarhus University**

*Specters of possibility.*

In Kyrgyzstan, the *arbak*, ancestor spirits, remain involved in the lives and worlds of the living. They care for the living and often do so by pointing their attention to possibilities they might not have noticed themselves, communicating with them through dreams. In my paper I will discuss how the temporality of the possibilities they offer change as people get older. Among the younger generations, the *arbak* most often bring omens for the future, helping them envisioning and revising life trajectories. Among the elder, they more often appear as hinges to unlived lives: lives that could have been but were never realized. Drawing on fieldwork among elderly Kyrgyz who become old in the absence of their younger relatives, I approach *arbak* as specters of possibility; sometimes haunting, sometimes comforting, sometimes provoking wonder. The *arbak* gain in importance in the lives of many elderly as connections with living others fade. Allowing spectral presences more space in one's life should not be seen as a dwelling in the past (contrary to the common idea that nostalgia is a distinguishing feature of old age) but, rather, a dwelling in possibility

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itself; in a world in the subjunctive mode. This dwelling in possibility *may* sometimes be accompanied by moods of nostalgia, but equally often by, say, regret or bitterness, or by wonder, amusement or humor. In more abstract terms, the paper explores the relationship between the possible and the real in human life, and how an attention to the spectral may help us think about this relationship.

## GENERATIONAL AND HISTORICAL TIME

**Anne O’Byrne, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Stony Brook University.**

*Aging in Generational Time.*

Heidegger describes our condition as futural being-in-time, and identifies being-towards-death as the way in which we live our existential thrownness. This captures something vital about how we exist between our coming to be in the world and our passing from it, but it is not particularly helpful regarding the fact that we experience futurity, mortality and time very differently through the course of our lives. This changeability and the forms of the change are often studied in terms of the arc of growth, maturity and aging of our bodies, but it is crucial to also think of them as relations to the world we inhabit, a world that was there when we came and which we assume will continue after we have gone. It is a world populated by those older and younger than we are. Alongside growth, maturity and aging we undergo changing, generational modes of sharing the world: we are brought into it by those older than us, inherit it alongside our contemporaries, and pass it on to the new ones. That is to say, futurity falls short if we understand it only as a matter of projection on my own death. Even as we experience ageing as feeling less at home in the world (as Jean Amèry describes), we also care about the world that we hope will continue after we die. Being born we owe the world a death (as Hannah Arendt puts it); we are aware that we die so that others may live (in Samuel Scheffler’s terms). In this presentation I will examine the elliptical temporality of being-towards-death that changes as we age, and also the fugue of overlapping temporalities of our generational being-in-the-world.

**Cheryl Mattingly, Professor of Anthropology, University of Southern California**

*Time Interruptions: Misrecognition, Alterity and the Historical Social Self.*

How can close attention to small histories and small moments – the singularities of experience -- simultaneously reveal and destabilize typified “collectivist” representations of aging and social history? I approach this question through an investigation of African American women raising grandchildren (or great-grandchildren) with chronic illnesses and

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disabilities. Many of these women exemplify characteristics common to this population. They serve as matriarchs of extended households. As grandparents, they are statistically younger than the US average but have health fragilities associated with old age, exemplifying the increased prevalence of health problems among U.S. Blacks. They also evince attitudes widely shared in the African American community where old age is not so much a unique stage of life as a yet another practical matter of “facing life difficulties.” I consider some moments in the life of one grandmother, “Mama Summer,” who has faced many life difficulties. She is haunted by the specter of lives not lived – especially her young dream to become a fashion designer. Her personal history intersects with two key events in the social history of African Americans: (1) the “great migration” from the rural south to urban centers like Los Angeles (1940-1970); (2) the 1980s “drug epidemic” and the concomitant mass incarceration of Blacks. But Summer’s historical experience is also constituted by singular events that interrupt this history, however fleetingly. I explore the salience of ephemeral interruptions as moments that perplex her in their mysterious singularity while also, paradoxically, marking her deepest sense of self as a historical being.

**Thomas Schwarz Wentzer, Professor with Special Responsibilities, Philosophy, Aarhus University**

*Ghosts from the past – German elders and the presence of World War 2.*

In a nursery home for men, driven by a public charity related to the Catholic Church in Germany, biographies crossed in a way that exhibits the intricacies of German history. The material of this paper goes back to a ten-months-stay at a particular nursery home in the city of Aachen thirty years ago. In those years, victims of the Nazi-regime were living side by side with their perpetrators, having to deal with the daily prospect of eating together, celebrating Christmas or Cologne carnival, going to service on Sunday etc. These settings did not only encompass the actual victims or Nazi-representatives, but their relatives and family care-givers too, as well as the professionals (the nurses, the priest, the community service people etc.). How does one conceptualize these intergenerational experiences in and with history? – Drawing on a phenomenological account, the paper will try to elaborate the idea of lived history as responsive experience, when one has to respond to the claims of the past.

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**Rasmus Dyring, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Aarhus University**

*“Older than Being”: For a Critical Phenomenology of Aging and Generationality.*

This paper explores the temporality of human coexistence in terms of aging and generationality. The paper takes its point of departure in the apparent paradox that philosophy, while focusing excessively on death and time, has tended to neglect “aging” as an essential feature of the human condition. While this could be taken simply as a function of the pure formality of ontological or transcendental conditions, on closer inspection it turns out to hide an age-bias that seems to favor the future-rich, active, projective life of the able-bodied and –minded adult. Building on these critical insights, the paper proposes a phenomenology of aging understood as a generational phenomenon. Generationality here means two things: (1) Aging *is* generation since it is the carnal emergence of being over time. (2) Aging is inter-generationally constituted such that this carnal emergence of being over time unfolds in, and is structured around, the perpetual shifts, deferrals and interruptions of social relations that occur with such vital events as births, miscarriages, illnesses and disabilities, puberty, marriages, divorces, parenthood, grand-parenthood, bereavements, deaths etc. Drawing on anthropological literature on vital conjunctures and kinship time, the paper develops an understanding of the “generational differentiation” that happens in these ontologically charged interruptions where lives cut across and emerge in and out of each other. At this point, we touch a plane of ontological indeterminacy in the phenomenon of aging that – as Derrida wrote of his so-called *différance* – is “older” than being itself.

**Susan Reynolds Whyte, Professor of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen**

*Still Here: Age and Generational Time.*

The passage of time is experienced in the shifts of generational place: becoming a grandmother; losing a father. One conventional way to consider generational place and time is in terms of life stages—child, parent, grandparent. Another is to show the correlations of generational time and social place as did the scholars of lineage societies where descent from a common ancestor was key. The approach I take is more intersubjective. In following the ways in which aging persons are ‘still here’ for themselves and others, we may begin to understand how people in any given society age through relationships to others. In the African setting I know best, persons are unique individuals, but they are always also place markers in a living social constellation: the daughter of that son, the brother of this father. Older people are links in a lattice of relationships built up over a lifetime, connecting their children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, friends and enemies. When they die, their children assume their places, though never exactly. Historical conditions affect the links in generational time and the state of being ‘still here’ in a changing web of intimate others. Death, burial and the location of the grave are managed and negotiated in terms of

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generational place. The dead person is insistently 'still here' as a spirit or memory and place holder. Those left behind may feel not only that they have aged, but also that their connections to one another have taken on different shades.

**Anne Marie Pahuus, Associate Professor, Philosophy, Aarhus University and Dean of Research**

*Meaning of the Past in Human Interaction and Human Interdependency*

Loneliness is never a pleasant state to be in. But what do we get from close human relationships that are so vital to us? And what is the meaning of remembered or lived time in close relationships – relationships of care and love? The past is present in two different ways, one is of particular relevance to respect and esteem, another to accept, friendship and love. Respect has to do with our individual needs and a person's dignity and autonomy. If we do not find that we are respected in our old age, we might search for respect by telling about past merits, the work done, things completed in the past – past contributions. Even in a state of great need, we hope to receive care and treatment, and to be treated with dignity and respect at all times. To secure this, a story about the lived life can be told and help us see the person behind the needs, and we can pinpoint the common and universal value of having preferences and the respect we owe to these. Another way to go about this in care ethics is to introduce a notion of trust and openness as a spontaneous expression of life in the sense that the Danish philosopher K.E. Løgstrup introduces in *The Ethical Demand*. Openness towards past experience in friendship and love is not about summing up past experience, but about recognizing the continuity, the unique and particular way that the other person meets the world and seems to have done this since the day he or she was born. An openness towards this transforms the relationship into a question of not only being a decent and respectful person, but also being a good person and a friend. Friends care about each other's pasts. Not only the uniqueness of the person we love, but also the uniqueness as a pattern in lived time come to the fore when we turn from respect and dignity to openness and emotional engagement in love and friendship. Shared past or sharing pasts is of particular relevance to a phenomenological understanding of trust.

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## INSTITUTIONAL AND DYSTOPIC TEMPORALITIES

**Jason Danely, Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, Oxford Brookes University**

*Doing Time in Deviant Spaces: Aging and the Carceral Condition in Japan.*

Older offenders in Japan are not only the fastest growing incarcerated demographic, but they also have a higher recidivism rate than any other age group. While older offenders in most countries are associated with 'lifers' serving long or indeterminate sentences who age in prison over years, most older prisoners in Japan are serving short sentences for petty crimes such as shoplifting. This paper looks at how this pattern of re-offending constitutes a particular way of growing older as "doing time," encompassing a range of practices, habits, and moods that spill across the borders of carceral spaces. No matter what side of the wall they are on, older re-offenders continue to do their time, moving in and out of different institutional spaces in ways that deviate from both the slow denouement of aging gracefully or the active aspirational ager. As anthropologist Carolyn Sufrin (2017) observes, recidivism and care are not only "sutured," but produce a "rhythm" over the life course that both connects and separates the lifeworld inside and outside of custody. Drawing on my fieldwork with older ex-offenders in the Greater Tokyo area, this paper argues for a need to critically question not only the ethics of incarcerating older people with care needs, but also current approaches to offender resettlement based on the moral return to normative temporal embodiment. I suggest that doing time opens up possibilities for rethinking the connection between the temporal and the topological in dimensions of aging, and provokes us to think about how deviant configurations of these dimensions can carve out space for agency and care even in the most constraining circumstances.

**Tine Rostgaard, Professor in Comparative Social and Welfare Studies, Stockholm University**

*Time and temporality in long-term care for older people.*

This paper investigates the meaning of time and temporality as it is institutionalized in long-term care policy and practice. From the perspective of older people receiving home care and the care workers assisting them, we focus on how time as a dimension structures the organization of care provision and its relations. This includes how time with the New Public Management focus on efficiency has increasingly been used as a marker to control care provision, applying rules for when, how quickly and for long care is to be given, but also governing the maximum length of time of the relationship between the cared-for and the care-giver in order for the care relationship not to become too intimate. The paper describes how time as a structuring factor is ever present but nevertheless sought disguised in the

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organization of care, as it disturbs the inherent notion of care rationality and therefore the ability for the care worker “to think and act on the level of the particular and individual (...) and to understand from the position of an insider” (Waernes, 1984:197).

**Lotte Meinert, Professor of Anthropology, Aarhus University**

*The ID Card and the Good Life? Enigmas about the Invention of ‘Old Age’ in the Ik Mountains.*

In what sense can an ID card and a cash program be said to invent ‘old age’? If ‘old age’ is a new bureaucratic subject position characterized by interpellation how do old people experience this? Can an ID card be an access to new origin – another way of being a ‘time being’? What kind of enigmas do an ID card and a cash program raise for old people about possibilities, ‘the good life’ and consequences? I follow elderly people in the Ik mountains in Uganda who were registered for the 2016 elections and got ID cards including their photo, name and (estimated) year of birth. The same year a Senior Citizen Grant was introduced for individuals in the parish who were registered to be above 60 years. The combination of the ID card and the grant became a ‘critical event’ for the temporary invention of old age in this part of Uganda. It came with particular ideas of vulnerability in old age and state/donor ambitions to care for older citizens in ways that had implications for old people and their families. Yet, rather than redefining their entire (time) being, the ID card and cash raised conundrums: What can this card do for me? Who can I be with this? Prior to the ID card few people knew their age in years, but knew their status in the generational hierarchy, and some – especially men – would be considered ‘elders’ depending on their initiation and wisdom. The ID card interrupted existing ideas about age and created questions about temporary possibilities of belonging to the category ‘old age’. It introduced yet another mysterious and bureaucratic way of being ‘a time being’.

**Helle Wentzer, Philosopher and Senior Researcher VIVE - The Danish Center for Social Science Research**

*Timework in a Danish Rehabilitation Unite.*

Jan and Ben do not know each other. They might have met at the local pub or at one of the local farms, where elderly men occasionally meet for a beer and some company. They both have been discharged from hospital after having fallen; in the case of Ben there were several serious falls, backwards down the staircase. He has been bedridden for three month. In Jan’s case it was a minor fall, but it gave him serious brushes that worsened his situation as terminal cancer and asthma patient.

The two cases of ‘Tour de Jan’ and ‘The Staircase of Ben’ both build on an ethnographic field study of fragile elderly discharged from hospital to a rural municipality. The study suggests

that their patient care path and their safe return to a continuous way of daily living as single men at home depend on different kinds of time work. Hannah Arendt (1958) describes human life as conditioned by three kinds of activity: labour, work and action. Lisa Guenther (2005) interprets these as different kinds of time modes: *cyclic time, linear time and ethical-political time*. Drawing on these conceptions, the paper exemplifies the break of circular time of 'labour' from the accidents; and how patients through disciplined 'work' at the municipality's rehabilitation unit restore their bodily capabilities, and rebuild their world and daily life of independent living. The cases also shows how they respond differently to the nearness of death and to the ethical other.

**Sverre Raffnsøe, Professor, Research director of The Human Turn, Copenhagen Business School**

*Coming of age and ageing. Human temporary existence in the Anthropocene.*

As urgent as it may be, the discussion of global warming as the greatest ever threat to human civilization is but one example that the overall 'climate' on Earth is changing to such an extent that survival is at risk. This issue should be understood within the wider context of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene forms the common denominator for a wide array of realizations that an all-decisive threshold in the history of the Earth and humankind is being crossed: Human activities are gaining overarching importance and beginning to play a dominant role in key processes of the earth system. This alters the material conditions of subsistence for human beings so radically that the ground on which humankind has stood is quaking.

The Anthropocene is heralded as a new epoch distinguishing itself from all foregoing eons in the history of the Earth. It is characterized by the overarching importance of the human species, but also by the recognition of human dependence, precariousness and frailty.

On the one hand, the Anthropocene seems to imply that human beings must measure up to and assume responsibility for the fact that the human species has come of age. On the other hand, it appears to suggest that human beings must learn how to live with radical uncertainty and the experience of impermanence as they detect ominous signs of the end times indicating that the human species may be over the hill and growing old.

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