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Aging in/with Comics

Processes of Selection and Reflection

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1. Our Project and Its Relevance for Comics and Aging Scholarship

We take our start when Nicole and I were awarded an American Library Association Carnegie Whitney Grant, a grant that supports the creation of reading lists. While we both hail from library and information science, my research has focused on teen and young adults' experiences of reading comics and Nicole's work has focused predominantly on experiences in later life. Our focus on different segments of the life course has elicited lively conversations that center on the constructions and representations of age and aging and that question the ubiquitous (and problematic) use of age as a categorizing tool in society. These conversations ultimately prompted our desire to create a reading list that collects and showcases comics that depict a variety of older adult characters and experiences in later life. While the reading list was initially created to align with the Grant's mandate, that is, to support library workers and library patrons in locating these types of materials, we also promoted our list among age studies scholars, media studies scholars, and library and information science scholars. Our reading list (available at comicsandaging.blog) seeks to feature titles that might be less likely to be encountered in everyday life, ultimately prompting reflection and engagement for conversations that challenge the stereotypical and ageist associations of decline and loss with older age.

Our project is informed by (and perhaps, in part, the result of) the rapid shift in distribution of the population towards older ages. By 2030, one in six people in the world will be aged 60 years or over, and older people are expected to account for over 25% percent of the population in Europe and Northern America (WHO 2021). Population aging has and will continue to shape many facets of our social, economic, cultural, and political practices. A growing and increasingly diverse older adult population is challenging older age stereotypes that have typically drawn on a binary model of either ›positive‹ (e.g., the sage, the perfect grandparent, the golden ager) or ›negative‹ (e.g., the curmudgeon, the recluse, the

vulnerable) age stereotypes (Low and Dupuis-Blanchard 2013; Schmidt and Boland 1986). Our reading list joins other works (e.g. Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Ylänne 2012) that critically analyze representations of aging in a variety of media artifacts (television, advertisements, movies, children's books, etc.). Such artifacts can reveal how shifts in demographics are captured in popular media. Artifacts can be analyzed to understand how they might impact feelings of identity in later life and be examined as potential spaces of resistance against the assumptions and roles that are stereotypically associated with later life.

As we began to search out background literature to inform our project, we were struck with the absence of available literature at the intersection of aging and comics. In one of the earliest and only overviews of representations of older age in comics, an analysis of American comics strips from the 1970s to the 1990s, Hanlon, Farnsworth, and Murray (1997) reported a general underrepresentation of older individuals, with a majority of the comic strips in their sample perpetuating ageist stereotypes. More recently, Neumann (2015) and Miczo (2015) each highlighted comics as spaces where superheroes wrestle with aging, particularly as superheroes typically show no visible signs of aging, despite appearing in comics for decades. As there is so little research, thus far, that takes up representations of older age in comics, our thinking has been informed by research that explores visual representations of later life in other media, including film, television, and news sources, looking at, for example, the portrayal of older adults in teen movies and older characters in children's picture books (e.g. Hollis-Sawyer and Cuevas 2013; Robinson, Callister, and Magoffin 2009; Shary and McVittie 2016; Smith et al. 2017).

Building on this existing scholarly work, our project and our reflection here is the culmination of conversations we have shared at the 2019 Comics Studies Society conference, the 2019 Graphic Medicine conference, the 2019 Canadian Society for the Study of Comics conference, and more formally in a chapter »Imag(in)ing aging futures in comics and graphic novels« (Dalmer and Cedeira Serantes 2022) published in an edited Policy Press collection, *Ageing and the media: International perspectives*.¹

2. Can Comics Shape the Way We Think about Age and Aging?

It might seem, at first blush, almost contradictory to turn to comics as a media source for understanding and analyzing older age. Comics as a medium, its themes and characters, as well as its historical (and sometimes also stereotypical) audience have often been targeted to and at children and young people (Cedeira Serantes 2010). This focus on youth, reflected both in comics' target audiences and themes represented in publications, also extends to scholarly work. However, this scholarly focus is slowly being called into question, at least most visibly in the larger field of Fandom Studies. Harrington and Bielby (2017), for exam-

ple, called for further research on fans and aging, a call that has been initially addressed with a 2019 special issue of the *Journal of Fandom Studies* (though not one of the articles focuses specifically on comics readers/fans). When thinking about aging fans and the texts they read, we have identified a number of questions to unpack: are aging fans and readers currently finding themselves in the stories they read? Do aging or older fans even *want* to find themselves in the comics? In relation to the project of focus in this article, we question whether there are currently enough comics with older adults as main protagonists to create or experiment with the unpredictable, stereotyped or hegemonic experiences in older age.

As one consequence of this potential scarcity, with so few narrative spaces that privilege or experiment with an older adult at the center of the story, it may be difficult to imagine *who* or *where* we would like to be in older age. Although our current project focuses on texts, in asking the following questions of the texts (What roles do older adults play? How are older characters included? How do characters ›do‹ older age as narrated and visualized throughout the texts? How do characters learn to age with, against, or even in spite of different societal expectations? What tropes associated with older age might be unavoidable, even in alternative narratives of aging?), the answers invite reflection that moves the reader beyond the text, prompting an exploration of the multiple ways one might live and act in older age; answers that can ultimately impact and shape readers' understanding and imaginings of their own later life.

3. Analyzing Comics and Older Adults: Commonalities and Differences

Our reading list currently includes 32 titles in which we are slowly including more titles. Creating, evaluating, and maintaining our reading list was not and is not a straight-forward process, and we continue to grapple with some decisions. For example, in its current version, our list does not carry many serialized titles, including superhero series such as *Old Man Logan* or Marvel's *The End*. This temporary gap in our list is a result of the format that emerges from the publishing cycle in many of these works, from single issue floppies to trade paperbacks. This cycle may affect narrative arcs or the presence and development of characters, making it difficult to determine how to best evaluate and include these titles (e.g. by issue or collected in trade paperbacks) in a manner that aligns with the reading list's purpose to easily locate titles. Similarly, during our initial searches we soon realized that many of the works that included older adults focused predominantly on death, decline, and/or dependency experienced by older people or their families. While these narratives such as *Tangles, A Story of Alzheimer's, My Mother, and Me* (2010), by Sarah Leavitt, Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (2014), or *Things to Do in a Retirement Home Trailer Park* (2012) by Nye Wright are all important as they often document and depict lived experiences felt by a number of older adults and their families, the Graphic Medicine International Col-

lectiveii already features and reviews these titles as part of their website project. Furthermore, as a majority of these titles are what Green and Myers (2010) have called graphic pathographies or »illness narratives in graphic form« (540), we have been wary of the normalization (or perhaps the even over-representation) of the medicalization of older age, where illnesses and frailties in older age might receive more attention than other everyday life practices.

Our selection process has been facilitated by the generous support from a number of publishers who have been instrumental in helping us identify a wide range of initial titles from a number of different countries. Their help was especially necessary as we uncovered that the titles were inconsistently classified in terms of library subject headings. For example, some titles that we were familiar with had no subject heading indicating that the title involved older age. The most general subject heading related to our search, *Older people – Comic books, strips, etc.*, was not consistently used and searches were sometimes more productive with the subject heading *Grandparent and child – Comic books, strips, etc.*, though this term inevitably narrows the representation of the older adult to one aspect of their life or their relationships. This may also indicate that the publishing market has been historically more interested in representing one potential role in older adults' lives. We have noticed an increased presence and heterogeneity in the types of older characters and stories that are being published since our first set of intensive searches in 2018 and 2019. Works recently published such as *Lifetime Passes* (2021), *Shadow Life* (2021), *Sixty Years in Winter* (2022), or the series *Once & Future* (2021-) open up the possibilities of analysis and representation of older adults. For example, the older adult characters in these recently released comics are part of less common intergenerational narratives (*Lifetime Passes* (2021) or *Once & Future* (2021-)) or are situated in less conventional settings (*Once & Future* (2021-) or *Shadow Life* (2021)). These titles point to a continuity in publishers' interests to support and market stories with older adults at the forefront, but also to a decrease in the predictability regarding what stories are being told about older adults or *how* they are being told. This diversification should attract the attention of researchers, not only as signifier of a market or creative change, but also as a potential expansion of how older adults are perceived or even who makes up comics audiences.

These reasons collectively moved us to select a core corpus to serve as a pilot list for our analytical process that we detail in our publication (Dalmer and Cedeira Serantes, 2022). This corpus contained nine titlesiii that we found attempted to depict the fullness, contradictions, and complexities of later life and that featured an older adult as the main or prominent character. While the chronological age of 65 years is normatively accepted as the definitive turning point of being classified as an »old person« (Higgs and Gilleard 2017; Jones and Higgs 2010), this number does not necessarily adapt well to the interpretation of older age across all countries, and so we have been mindful of approaching older age with a broad lens when picking titles for our reading list. This broad approach to defining and locating older adults in texts was further influenced by our reaction to two ways of understanding older

age. First, we wanted to avoid a quantified approach to understanding and representing age, one that is based on trait clusters or physical representations. Second, we wanted to include texts that could respond, positively or negatively, to what Sandberg and Marshall (2017) have called for, a »queering aging futures«, and could speak to (current and potential) ways of being old. Our use of the term ›queer‹ draws on Kafer's delineation of the concept, in that it draws attention to the »social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds and ways of being« (2013, 6). More specifically within an age studies context, in conversation with feminist and crip theories, queer theory can be used to »critique socially-constructed binaries and embrace diversity in aging experiences and identities« (Sandberg and Marshall 2017, 2).

3.1 Storylines

Based on the nine core titles we initially selected for the reading list and for our analysis, comics that feature older adults as main protagonists tend to situate their narratives in realistic and recognizable settings, grounded in the everyday behaviours and routines that build one's life. Two titles, *Upgrade Soul* (2018) and *Wolverine: Old Man Logan* (2012), were the exception. During our initial searches, we noted a lack of comics series or graphic novels in the superhero, fantasy or science fiction genres. For example, two characters, Aunt May and Vulture, both from the Spiderman universe, were consistently brought to our attention during our conference presentations. Both characters deserve scholarly attention, especially Aunt May, but in our case, these characters exemplify the complexities of tracking superhero storylines and character representation in superhero titles, especially when the objective of our recommendations was to give visibility to titles for library and information professionals. We also hope that the future inclusion of titles such as *Once & Future* (2021–), *Deathbed* (2018), or *Spider-Man: Life Story* (2021), along with the *Old Man Logan* and *Dead Man Logan* series might broaden our reading list's current focus on realistic settings.

The realistic settings that pepper our reading list's titles, however, are still playful and idiosyncratic in their own creative and unique ways. A comedic or humorous tone tends to accompany some of the stories, even those titles that are not comic strip anthologies (*Old Farts* (2017), *Old Geezers* (2017–), *Agrippina and the Ancestor* (2016), *NonNonBa* (2012), *Sea of Love* (2018), *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?* (2014), *Displacement* (2015), *Sunny Side Up* (2015). For example, in the case of *Sea of Love* (2018) and *Old Geezers* (2017–), the realistic setting and general comedic tone is also mixed with adventures that are seamlessly at the core of the plot arc for both titles. This tone and playful plot lines challenge the common narratives that surround older age, associated often with sedentary activity or overly sombre themes. In *Sea of Love* (2018), *Memories of a Crappy Pooch* (2017), and

Blossoms in Autumn (2019), their creators also brought a sense of possibility, almost magic realism, making plot lines seem plausible that might otherwise seem impossible in real life. The manga title *NonNonBa* (2012) is a special case owing of two elements. First, it is the only title clearly situated in a rural setting; and secondly, it introduces a fantastic element, the *yokai* (spirits and supernatural elements common in the Japanese folklore), that become a type of third character in an otherwise childhood-focused memoir. *NonNonBa*'s creator, Shigeru Mizuki, is a recognized initiator and master in that manga genre, the *yokai*.

Intergenerational relationships were present among many of the titles, but it is this theme that reveals striking differences between the titles published in North America and the titles originating from other parts of the world. While the North American titles that include intergenerational relationships do so in the context of the demands of family caregiving or frailty on the part of the older adult (*Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?* (2014), *Bird in a Cage* (2016), *Special Exits, Tangles* (2010), *The Song of Roland* (2012), *Displacement* (2015)), the titles from other parts of the world situate these relationships in more diverse contexts and situations. For example, *BL Metamorphosis* (2020-) (Japan) invites us into the blooming friendship between a teen and a widow, and in *Agrippina and The Ancestor* (2016) (France), the story brings together four generations of women in the same family, highlighting their differences and frictions. Similarly, in *Old Geezers* (2017-) (France), Sophie, the granddaughter of Antoine, one of the main protagonists, becomes the voice of a younger generation, often discussing and even arguing with the three main older protagonists about generational differences, while they care for her newborn baby. A similar clash between generations is part of the plot of *Cassandra Darke* (2018). Finally, even in plots focused on caregiving contexts, the French title *While the King of Prussia was Waging War, Who Do You Think Was Darning His Socks?* (2017) presents a unique situation among our titles, where 72-year-old widow Catherine Hubeau takes care of her 40-year-old son Mickey, who cannot care for himself following an accident.

3.2 Characters

One of the recurring challenges in this project has been deciding when or whether a character is an older adult or not. We looked at a combination of factors, among them biological age as mentioned in the comics work, visual representation(s) of the character, and social and/or professional roles that the character assumes in the storylines. Even with a broad and inclusive approach, in some cases, making a decision was not as straightforward as it might seem, especially if one is trying to not succumb to the stereotypical (and often ageist) representations of older age. An example of this challenge is Klara, a character from *Saga* (2012-), a science fiction comics series. Klara is the mother of one of the main protagonists, Marko.

All characters are from different alien species, their birthdays or ages are not mentioned, and, for example, it is complicated to decide what physical markers might represent aging for the different characters. Early in the series, Klara also becomes a grandmother, she is always active and intervenes in fights using her magic to protect her family; later on in the series, she develops a grey-like lock in her hair and starts using a cane, both of which are often clear markers of aging or older age. Could this character, for example, be an example of how to queer older age or is she simply a young grandmother? As the series is coming back from a long hiatus, we will need to revisit this character and keep these discussions alive based on her ongoing development.

Despite the realistic settings among the titles, the older adult characters present a rather homogenous population, lacking diversity in many categories of the main social spectrums: class, race/ethnicity, ability, or sexual orientation. Characters across titles are often portrayed with those stereotypical or perhaps classic markers of later life, such as grey (or no) hair, wrinkles or bags under the eyes, mobility issues and mobility aids, and glasses. That said, many titles, especially those from outside the North American market, elect to feature older adults' bodies (sometimes nude, as in *Blossoms in Autumn* (2019)). These bodies, while carrying those visual markers of later life, were simultaneously portrayed as living and being, capable of engaging in both mundane and extraordinary activities.

Two American titles, *Bingo Love* (2018) and *Upgrade Soul* (2018) introduce the only couples that are BIPOC, and in the case of *Bingo Love* (2018), also queer. *Old Geezers* (2017–) is also the only work where we see the main characters engaging in political activities. It is important to note that in this title, despite the three main protagonists' comfortable economic status, readers observe Pierrot, one of the main characters, involved with an anarchist movement, which includes his interactions at the house the movement maintains as a shelter and educational center for young families and older adults. The importance of friendship, community, and chosen family (relationships outside of the nuclear family) among characters that we observe in *Old Geezers* (2017–), *BL Metamorphosis* (2020–), and *Memories of a Crappy Pooch* (2017) is also a point of a difference between North American and other comics cultures' titles. In a majority of the North American titles, the focus of characters' relationships explicitly takes up and centers on the (predominantly heteronormative) nuclear family.

Conclusions

In our book chapter (Dalmer and Cedeira Serantes 2022), we posit that the five titles we examine act as liminal texts since they allow different narratives about older age to co-exist and thus »interrogate the narrow binaries of success and failure in dominant successful aging discourse«. As this finding and many other themes and ideas still require further exploration,

our conclusion here acts more as an invitation where we briefly outline, in broad strokes, some questions and ideas that have arisen as we collected and analyzed the comics in our reading list that might spark ideas among other scholars. For example, those researching digital comics or fan-backed projects may be interested to note that the titles with characters who are BIPOC and LGBTQ2IA+ did not start their publishing path as part of a mainstream publishing company. *Upgrade Soul* (2018) was originally an immersive digital app before it became a graphic novel and *Bingo Love* (2018) was first a successful Kickstarter project that was later embraced by Image Comics.

Similarly, for those interested in examining the impact of the publishing industry, we would be remiss if we did not highlight the important role that the Europe Comics publishing project is playing in giving visibility to many of these titles. Six titles on our current reading list were initially made available digitally and in translation through this Pan European project.

For those interested in the comics medium, the recurrent use of vignettes as a formalized way to organize the stories may be of interest to examine in further detail. Although vignettes are inevitable in comic strips because of their formal constraints, in the case of *Agrippina and the Ancestor* (2016), *George Sprott* (2009), *Old Farts* (2017), and *While the King of Prussia was Waging War, Who Do You Think Was Darning His Socks?* (2017), the use of vignettes seemed to be a conscious decision made by the creators.

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