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Research Article

Care, Dementia, and the Fourth Age in Erica Jong's Later Work

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: This article addresses the representations of dementia and caregiving in the fourth age as depicted in Erica Jong's later-life work. It shows how the experience of parental care leads to the discovery of new ways of human interaction and expressions of personhood.

Research Design and Methods: Framed within literary–cultural age studies, this article shows how humanities-based inquiry can illuminate important aspects of aging and care of the oldest old, which are significant and revealing, but often hidden under the dark shadow of dementia.

Results: Newly discovered ways of communication challenge the notion of the loss of agency as they demonstrate that the body itself has the power of creative and intentional capacities and self-expression.

Discussion and Implications: Care-related narratives offer new insights into aging, dementia, and subjectivity that can help pursue a better analysis of the "deep" old age, strengthen collective solidarity, and manage increasing ageism, especially pronounced during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic.

Keywords: Cultural–literary gerontology, Humanities, Literature, Oldest old

What on earth are we going to do with our old, old, old, very old parents?
(Jong, 2015, p. 122)

This study employs cultural–literary gerontology as the main framework to address the issue of caring for the oldest old whose agedness and both physical and mental frailty are associated with declining cognitive impairment, as represented in contemporary American writer Erica Jong's later work. Specifically, the article focuses on the author's latest novel to date, *Fear of Dying* (2015), which deserves particular attention because, in contrast to her previous writings, it is primarily about aging, losses, and death. This coming-of-age story depicts a 60-year-old actress, Vanessa Wonderman, who is faced with the caregiving duties of her dying parents, her husband's impotence, and the fear of her own aging, the loss of youthful looks and rationality, and mortality. With her honesty and witty humor, Jong brings her readers closer to age-related challenges and questions the meanings of life, death, and growing older in contemporary society. Although, in the novel, old age is accompanied by pain, dependency, bodily decay, and, ultimately, deaths, Vanessa also discovers that the perplexing experience of aging and carework, as well as the proximity of death, can yield remarkable insights about later-life stages and make the fictional character less fearful of aging and the end of life. Jong's novel also examines parent narratives that elicit different subjectivities and give voice to the often-silenced social and psychological realities of human aging. It tackles

the problem of conveying the meaning of personhood in old age when faced with gradual mental decline, which is especially difficult to capture and represent (Barry & Vibe Skagen, 2020). The author's later writing, very often autobiographical in nature, also contributes to the growth of literary texts that only recently are beginning to portray older people living with dementia in contrast to the many accounts that witness dying of our beloved ones. Finally, this study aims to demonstrate how humanities-based inquiry can illuminate important aspects of the fourth age and caregiving experiences that are both challenging and revealing, but often underappreciated and hidden under the dark shadow of dementia and the "deep" old age.

The "Black Hole" in Age(ing) Studies

There is a substantial body of theory on the so-called third age, closely related to the retirement age of the now-aging baby-boom generation; yet, the last stage in life, commonly known as the fourth age, has not been the object of so much attention and has even been considered a "black hole" in age(ing) studies (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010; Higgs & Gilleard, 2021). This phase in life is usually marked by numerous emotional and bodily illnesses, dementia, and deaths and is linked to dependency and the loss of mobility and cognitive capacities (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010; Lloyd, 2015). As Lloyd observes, this life stage is usually regarded as "a troublesome concept, an inevitable outcome of the emergence of the third age as a period of personal growth and active engagement" (2015, p. 261). The importance given to the third age masks the darker aspects of social realities of the fourth age, which is hidden "behind the screens of nursing homes and geriatric wards" (Blaikie, 1999, p. 110). As Barry and Vibe Skagen contend, aging is a nonlinear "inexorable process with no dramatic arc" that becomes even more complex in the fourth age, especially when looked at through the lens of the "intractable materiality," which manifests itself when we are faced with the mismatch of our material selves and our inner perceptions of ourselves (2020, pp. 1–2).

The concept of the fourth age, also known as the deep old age (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989), is closely related to carework. Although care is especially needed in the first years of life as well as in case of illnesses, it becomes much more pronounced when older people, often infantilized and perceived as a homogeneous group, start to require daily assistance and support because of illness, loneliness, dementia, and/or disability (Fine, 2015; Gilleard & Higgs, 2010; Twigg, 2000). In today's fast-aging society, challenges related to the care of older individuals are becoming high-priority issues for families, caretakers, practitioners, policymakers, and scholars working in these fields (Furstenberg et al., 2015; Katz & Lowenstein, 2019; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). Cognitive impairment is one of the major sources of caregiver burden and reasons for the institutionalization of older adults (Bannon et al., 2020; Friedman & Kennedy, 2021; Reinhard et al., 2008; Sheehan et al., 2020; Strommen et al., 2020; Voutilainen et al., 2018). Those living with dementia, especially, are assumed to lack meaningful participation and interaction and are often regarded "as major sources of burden to family carers, formal care providers, and the healthcare system" (Kontos & Grigorovich, 2018b, p. 719).

Although the fourth age is seen through rather negative lens, it can offer us significant discoveries about growing older, subjectivity, and human interaction (Beard et al., 2009; Hennelly et al., 2021; Kontos & Grigorovich, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Lee et al., 2020; Skinner et al., 2018). A humanities-based approach to care-related stories serves as a powerful tool to give meaning to old age and offers significant insights into the aging experiences and care relationships (Chivers & Kriebernegg, 2017). Care narratives not only "capture the rich interplay of subjectivities and the complex relationships," but also provide us with "a cultural repository for fears and hopes about an aging population" (Chivers & Kriebernegg, 2017, p. 17). Additionally, the narrative inquiry allows us to find the meaning of life and make our lives meaningful by telling stories because "humans are fundamentally storytelling creatures," and life narrative is "the paradigm for human time" (Randall & Kenyon, 2004, pp. 333–334, emphasis in original).

Cultural–Literary Gerontology

During the last decades, there has been a visible growth and interest in age(ing) studies from interdisciplinary perspectives that go beyond the traditional field of gerontology. Scholars working in these disciplines argue that collective cultural–literary perceptions of later life are imperative to better comprehend the current realities of aging and bridge the gap between the social and medical sciences and humanities (Barry & Vibe Skagen, 2020; Calasanti & King, 2015; Casado Gual et al., 2016; de Medeiros, 2016; Falcus, 2016; Twigg & Martin, 2015; Zeilig, 2011). Since the so-called longevity revolution (Butler, 2008), literature that explores the dynamics of aging has proliferated—there are more people writing into older age because they "remain well enough to reflect on the experience" and, thus, can share their compelling stories in many different ways, which also connects to the wider tradition of self-help and life writing (Barry & Vibe Skagen, 2020, p. 3; Amigoni, 2020). Literary approaches to later life broaden the gerontological scholarship as they show that aging is a dynamic process that constitutes multifaceted meanings of older age and allows us to explore the depths of agedness that move beyond the reach of narrative as we approach the limits of life and the sociocultural representations of old age (Barry & Vibe Skagen, 2020; Casado Gual et al., 2016; de Medeiros, 2016; Falcus, 2016; Hepworth, 2000; Woodward, 1999; Zeilig, 2011). Recently, there has been an increasing number of fictional and personal narrative accounts that address the relationship between care, dementia,

and age (Barry & Vibe Skagen, 2020; Beard, 2016; Chivers & Kriebernegg, 2017; Clare et al., 2008; Falcus & Sako, 2019). Broader knowledge about these issues is becoming especially important because of a fast-aging society and the growing need of caregiving services for older adults (Furstenberg et al., 2015; Katz & Lowenstein, 2019). As Chivers and Kriebernegg argue, care of older people is "at the crux of age/ing studies. Changing the meaning of care stands to substantially change what it means to 'age well'" (2017, p. 20).

This article contributes to the growing interest in parental care narratives and tries to illuminate the "black hole" in age(ing) studies. In her later works, Erica Jong, a spokeswoman of the American postwar generation women, highlights both anxieties and significant discoveries about the oldest old and calls for a rethinking of the fourth age and the moral imperative of care. Today Jong's writings continue to be as significant as they were during the feminist movement (c. 1960–1990), when her groundbreaking novel, *Fear of Flying*, was published in 1973. In her early works, Jong openly discussed intimate experiences and professional aspirations of young women and illustrated the sociocultural and political climate of the seventies in the United States, characterized by the sexual revolution, social upheavals, and the second-wave women's liberation movement. Yet, the issues regarding older women, dementia, and old age have not been addressed in the feminist agenda of that period. As King states, there was "a significant silence regarding women's ageing, a lacuna which deserves examination" (King, 2013, p. xvi). This is exactly what Jong does as she grows older—by incorporating the voices of the female representatives of the baby-boom generation, she examines the ways they approach their latest-life stages and explore the often-silenced aspects of parental caregiving.

Aging and Care Narratives

In *Fear of Dying* (2015), a middle-aged protagonist Vanessa struggles with parental care and observes that her parents "have deteriorated drastically in the last few months" (Jong, 2015, p. 9). The fact that Jong does not place Vanessa's aging parents in a nursing home can be interpreted as the author's belief in dignified care at home, which, in contrast to residential care, may appear "as an unquestioned ideal" (Chivers & Kriebernegg, 2017, p. 20). The choice of a home might also suggest the importance that the writer grants to family bonding in later life and her critique of the medicalized institutions that have invaded the intimate home space (Blaikie, 1999). Additionally, being taken away from home can be seen as a betrayal and may cause pain and disappointment to aging individuals (Blaikie, 1999). The vital energy that Vanessa's parents used to possess decreases as they grow older. Her parents' frequent bad mood, their anxiety, unpleasant smells, and the sick-like atmosphere propel the daughter to wish that people did not get as old and ill as her parents:

> They both wear diapers—if we're lucky. Their apartment smells of urine, shit, and medications. The shit is the worst. It's not healthy shit like babies produce. It seems diseased. Its fetid aroma permeates everything—the oriental rugs, the paintings, the Japanese screens. It's impossible to escape—even in the living room. (Jong, 2015, p. 9)

In her novel, Jong does not shy away from explicitly describing care-related challenges, but exposes her readers to the often hidden aspects of the fourth age and the negativities of aging bodies, which are often neglected in the field of gerontology. Twigg (2000) states that caregiving for older people is often a missing dimension in gerontological research because it represents the human dirt, low status, and ageist and gendered accounts in contemporary culture: "carework is about dealing with human wastes: shit, pee, vomit, sputum; and as such involves managing dirt and disgust" (2000, p. 395). Jong gives a special focus to smell, which, as she writes, permeates the whole environment and even seems to linger upon her own body. Smell is especially present and significant in care for older individuals as it "extends the patient's corporeality in such a way that intrudes and seeps into others' spaces. Odours by their nature cannot be easily contained; they escape and cross boundaries" (Twigg, 2000, p. 397). Gilleard and Higgs also point to the "dirty work" performed by caregivers that is often unseen and unvoiced, but which has a huge impact on caretakers' emotions and the management of their own personhood and moral identity (2017, p. 235). Playing down the issue of the human dirt and, instead, stressing care and emotional aspects reveals the contemporary inability to accept aging realities and negotiate an aging body (Twigg, 2000). Repugnance generated by sagging and smelly aging bodies also reveals the fear of contamination and moral pollution, which has become especially problematic in contemporary society that is based on individualism, self-management, and "the construction of persons as self-contained, bounded entities" (Twigg, 2000, p. 396).

The negativities of the sagging bodies of Vanessa's aging parents and the shadow of the daily "dirty work" hinder the daughter's relationship with them and generate troubled feelings. The protagonist tries to avoid seeing the body of her aging mother—"the crepey neck, the sagging arms, the bunioned feet"—because it reminds her of the ravages of time and presents a vision of her own future of aging (Jong, 2015, p. 9). Therefore, the heroine secretly wishes not to get as old as her parents. Vanessa confesses that she has to force herself to look at her mother's aging body because it generates anxiety, the fear of growing older, and makes her feel uneasy. Being middle-aged herself, Vanessa becomes even more aware of her own aging body and confronts the unpleasant truths of growing older:

> Her cheeks are sallow and crosshatched with a million of wrinkles. Her eyes are rheumy and clotted with

> buttery blobs. Her feet are gnarled and twisted, and her thick, ridged toenails are a jagged mustard color. Her nightgown keeps opening to reveal her flattened breasts. (Jong, 2015, p. 10)

Although Vanessa is also exposed to the bodily deterioration of both her mother and father, her mother's physical decay is more visible and more explicitly described, while her father's aged body is hidden under the blankets. The disclosure of her mother's body alone suggests Jong's critical standpoint in terms of the female aging body politics and the rigid ideals of beauty and attractiveness that are based on youthful images and, thus, the discriminatory representations of older women, which reveals the "double standard" of aging (Sontag, 1972). In fact, contemporary anti-aging-oriented society does not provide us with many bodily images of aging women, especially those stepping into the "deep" old age (Silver, 2003; Twigg, 2000; Wolf, 2002). Even if we have become more open in the treatment of the naked aging body in modern society, only slim, fit, and youthful-looking older bodies are allowed to be visible (Twigg, 2000, p. 397).

Contrary to her mother, whose sagging breasts are seen through the nightgown that keeps opening, Vanessa's father is described as a little mummy that is immobile and almost invisible: "His wasted body takes up remarkably little space under the blankets" (Jong, 2015, p. 11). His smallness, calmness, and practical nonexistence are also shown in his disconnection from the exterior world. Because of his impaired hearing, he can no longer follow conversations and communicate. However, according to Vanessa, even if he could be helped by a hearing aid, he would not be interested in talking, because he "prefers to spend the day sleeping" (Jong, 2015, p. 11). After a cancer surgery, he has become even more enclosed in his inner world: "Just six months ago, before his cancer surgery, he was a different man" (Jong, 2015, p. 11). As Vanessa's father approaches his death, he becomes more negative, nihilistic, and bored with everything to the point that he even considers life as a big joke. If, in his younger days, her father thought that competition and fighting for goals were important, aging and the presence of death made him realize that he was fooling himself only to stay active and functional. According to him, all the things "you were so passionate about don't mean a thing. You only did them to keep busy" (Jong, 2015, p. 25). His comments make the daughter rethink her pursuit of personal goals and her life choices. Yet, the heroine refuses to see life as a joke: "Please tell me that life is worth living. Please tell me that all the hassle of getting up, getting dressed, is worth the trouble. I don't want to believe that life is only a joke. I don't think parents ought to tell that to their children" (Jong, 2015, p. 26). Yet, although Vanessa's father is nihilistic about life when still alive, he becomes more positive when he appears in her dreams after his death. In them, he encourages his daughter to keep on living and writing:

> And the strangest thing is this: When he was alive, I thought all our conversations were partial, frustrating—unintelligible. But once he was dead, we really began to talk. We talked through all my dreams. We talked every night till the small hours of the morning. Alive, he was closed and careful. Dead, he told me everything. I think he may be dictating to me now. (Jong, 2015, p. 126)

The cancer operation of Vanessa's father also makes her realize the inevitability of the end of life and the insignificance of the human body. Even though the cancer tumor was successfully removed from her father's body, he could not prolong his life because "the anesthesia invaded his brain," thus, showing that "if death can't march in the front door, it'll sneak in the back" (Jong, 2015, p. 21). Vanessa believes that Americans disregard death unless it manifests itself through a grieving chain of deaths: "We have trouble with death. We think it's un-American. We think it won't catch us" (Jong, 2015, p. 134). This observation points to the popularity of the idea of successful aging in Western countries and, especially, in the United States, where this model was originated in the second half of the twentieth century (Calasanti, 2016; Katz & Calasanti, 2015).

Successful aging discourse, aimed at replacing the narrative of decline (Gullette, 2004), according to which aging individuals are seen as dependent and frail, disseminated the idea that it was possible to avoid disease and illnesses in later years by actively engaging in life (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). The main idea behind this model was that as long as older people were able to enjoy life, maintain healthy habits, and enthusiastically participate in social circles and leisure activities, they were aging in a successful and gracious way (Calasanti, 2016; Katz, 2000; Katz & Calasanti, 2015). Equated with the current concepts of happiness and well-being, Rowe and Kahn's model continues to heavily influence our daily lives and social trends to the extent that getting and looking old is considered immoral, unethical, or even "heretical" (Katz, 2000, p. 135). Hence, Vanessa's statement that death is "un-American" can be seen as a response to the powerful influence of successful aging discourse and antiaging tendencies. Closely related to neoliberal rationality and capitalist ideology, this model ignores the diversity of the experiences of aging and, in its stead, imposes new pressures and requirements for older adults who are held responsible for their own aging, well-being, and "failures" (Calasanti, 2016; Katz, 2000; Katz & Calasanti, 2015). Furthermore, Katz (2017) observes that the idea of successful aging has also invaded the governance of human minds, which have become quantified and measured by the use of digital technologies and brain sciences. Online brain-game performance or "bio-games" promise to optimize people's brain health and "cognitive fitness," which is now regarded as an indicator of a successful adaptation to societal expectations and successful aging. In this way, according to Katz, individuals are made responsible for their own cognitive performance and, consequently,

become "align[ed] to capitalist standards of productivity, efficiency and speed" (2017, n/p), which is also visible in dementia-related research and treatment.

Dementia and the New Colors of Life

Progressive neurodegenerative conditions affect approximately 46.8 million people around the world and create significant limitations that obstruct their social participation and interaction (Portacolone et al., 2021; Skinner et al., 2018). Alzheimer's disease and related dementias are chronic illnesses that increase with age and affect a person's capacity to manage one's life and make meaningful decisions (Lee et al., 2020; Portacolone et al., 2021). Yet, Alzheimer's is not only about rendering older individuals forgetful and dependent; rather than that, it "represents a malignant forgetfulness that causes people to lose their sense of who they are and what is most important to their sense of self […] and their place" in the world (Gilleard & Higgs, 2017, p. 232). As Gilleard and Higgs argue, it gradually lessens not only people's social interaction and participation, but also "their connections to themselves and their 'individual representations' of their personal past" (2017, p. 232). Therefore, the possibility of developing Alzheimer's is regarded as one of the most fearful aspects because it represents a loss of one's cognitive capacities, selfhood, power, social status, and attractiveness (Gilleard & Higgs, 2017). Katz (2017) also observes that the growing preoccupation of dementia contributes to the use of innovative anti-aging-oriented digital technologies and, accordingly, equates people's cognitive abilities with successful aging and global capitalist ideologies. The scholar highlights that the fear of dementia, similar to that of aging, is now seen as a contagious disease that can *only* be cured by "the brain enterprises." As a result, our society has generated "a new dimension of ageism that equates hypercognitive abilities with successful aging" (Katz, 2017, n/p).

The challenges related to dementia are also present in Jong's later work. The writer expresses Vanessa's worries and difficulties when caring for her aging mother who lives with Alzheimer's disease. The fictional character observes how her mother's progressive cognitive impairment affects her mood, communication, and her relationship with the outside world. The heroine ponders if her aging mother is even aware of her "near extinction of consciousness" and the fact that "she's ending her days" (Jong, 2015, pp. 224–225). Vanessa confesses that many times she prayed for her mother to die sooner because she could no longer stand the sight of her mother's loss of rationality and her silent suffering in a smelling room that embittered her own life: "There were many times I prayed for her to die. She was so frail and so sad that I often couldn't bear to visit her. I always preferred to be with my daughter and grandson rather than with her" (Jong, 2015, p. 237). The protagonist even thinks that the pain of the dying should not be prolonged, because "lingering may be much worse" than dying (Jong, 2015, p. 175). Yet, Vanessa observes that sometimes her mother seems to have some glimpses of consciousness and is aware of the burden she places on her daughter:

> "What are you thinking about?" my mother asks.
> "Nothing," I say.
> "You're thinking you never want to get as old as I am," she says. "I know you." (Jong, 2015, p. 11)

Even if faced with caregiving struggles and coping with dementia, Vanessa, as the narrative unfolds, learns new ways of interacting with her aging mother. The daughter realizes that language is not the only means to connect with the external world: "When dementia has been with us a long time, the means of communicating change" (Jong, 2015, p. 226). Although the protagonist confesses that sometimes she was not "alert enough to her new ways of communicating," her mother has taught her that senses, colors, tastes, smells, sounds, and body language can be as powerful and efficient as the spoken language: "Music delights her, though I think she doesn't hear. Chocolate slides on her tongue like love" (Jong, 2015, p. 228). Gradually, Vanessa realizes that:

> We are so unaware of different languages—not Latin and Greek, but the language of color, the language of food. We hardly know all the different kinds of human music. My mother could speak without speaking, laugh without laughing, sing without having voice. The parents of special-needs kids know this and so do the children of the dying. (Jong, 2015, p. 229)

Through her body language, her mother tries to show her approval of Vanessa's clothing, which reminds her of her younger days and makes her happy, even if she cannot verbalize her emotions:

> She sits up and tries to exclaim at the color of my shirt—red and purple with mossy green. An Etro confection she might have worn when she was young. Her taste in clothes was always over the top, ahead of her time, widely artistic. But she can't speak. She croaks like a frog that might sit on mossy green ledge, then dive swiftly into the water. She lifts her shoulders strongly, though by now she can't sit up. She exclaims without exclaiming. I know she is approving of my colorful colors—so like those she wore in her salad days. She has found a new sort of speech that is wordless. (Jong, 2015, pp. 228–229)

The challenges of caregiving and old age are not only represented in Jong's fiction, but also in her more personal accounts, in which the author writes about her parents' longevity and her experience with parental care. In her essay "Breaking the final taboo," which precedes *Fear of Dying*, Jong states:

> When I tell people my mother is a hundred and a half, that my grandmother lived to ninety-eight and my father

> to ninety-three, they look at me approvingly and say "You've got good genes" as if they are about to find a new reason to be envious. They have no idea what they're saying. (Jong, 2014, p. 84)

Jong, likewise her fictional character Vanessa, discovers her mother's alternative ways of communication and self-expression. The author explains that during her mother's last days, she would only react to color, which made Jong realize the power of nonverbal communication and the complexities of living and aging with dementia:

> In the last few days, she was alert enough to respond to color, though she could not speak. I came to realize that I had underestimated her grasp of language. Color was her language, and a bright shirt I wore to sit by her side and tell her I loved her evoked a passionate response. (Jong, 2014, p. 92)

In the poem "Dying is not black" (2014), the writer again emphasizes the newly found ways of interaction with her dying mother. The caregiving experience allows Jong to reestablish their conflicting relationship (Stončikaitė, 2016) and reconnect emotionally through color, touch, and wordless language:

> Touch, words, color, / my expiring mother / notices the red & purple of my shirt / with delight. / Color is her language / though she taught me / both painting & poetry / interlocking languages for her / & now for me. / She has no words for my shirt / but exclaims nonsense syllables / of joy, her only brush now / for the ecstasy of red, / the blue note / of mauve over it, / making plum. / Her sounds become / a damson jam / like her mothers, / sweet but muddled. / But her love is clear. / Her love assails / my eyes / as if it were / blood glittering / on a knife / aiming for / my heart. (Jong, 2014, pp. 92–93)

The power of nonverbal communication is getting more attention in the field of age(ing) studies, especially in dementia-related research and person-centered care, which significantly contributes to improving quality of life and cognitive function of older people and their carers (Dewitte et al., 2020; Hennelly et al., 2021; Kelley et al., 2021). Creativity and arts-based activities, such as painting, music, drama, and/or dance, can improve the physical, emotional, and neurological well-being of people living with dementia and provide them with new ways of social interaction and emotional support (Kontos & Grigorovich, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Li, 2021; Skinner et al., 2018). Such nonpharmacological interventions allow for alternative ways of communication and the creative–expressive power, which help reveal novel opportunities to express people's thoughts, emotions, and capabilities. Additionally, different forms of interaction challenge the notion of the loss of agency, as older people with dementia show that the body itself has creative and intentional capacities and the power of natural expression (Kontos & Grigorovich, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Skinner et al., 2018). Kontos and Grigorovich emphasize the importance of "embodied selfhood" and the persistence of agency even when living with cognitive impairment: "embodied selfhood highlights our intrinsic corporeality of being-in-the world, which sustains and animates self-expression, and which is always intertwined with a shared world" (2018a, p. 718). Even when faced with dementia and a lack of coherent and rational engagement, diverse forms of personhood and sense-making still remain—older people strive to negotiate their everyday lives and incorporate their cognitive decline into their existing self-identities (Beard et al., 2009; Hennelly et al., 2021; Li, 2021).

Personhood as a concept has both metaphysical and moral roots: metaphysical aspects relate to rationality and agency, whereas moral selfhood is linked to equality of all human beings (Higgs & Gilleard, 2016). However, people with dementia are often regarded as nonpersons because they lack these competencies and skills (Hennelly et al., 2021). Yet, the problem of conveying selfhood marked by dementia is not only difficult to conceptualize and describe, but is often absent from gerontological research. In her essay "Critical interests and critical endings," Barry (2020) explores the issue of subjectivity in relation to dementia of the oldest old and those who provide care for them by aligning these aspects with moral philosophical positions on identity and cultural and fictional representations of aging. According to the scholar, although dementia is often related to the end of life story in sociocultural assumptions and, thus, the culmination of a person's meaningful judgment and significant living, it can also offer alternative narratives marked by new findings and inner transformations for both the carers and those in need of care. Even if darkened by the declining cognitive condition and reduced capacities, people preserve their personhood and autonomy until the end of their existence. However, these significant aspects are often undermined by successful aging discourse and its neoliberal imperatives, which are mainly focused on the third age and cognitive optimization. Therefore, contemporary society fails to reconsider the power of "embodied selfhood" and the traits of personhood in "extreme" years.

In her later work, Jong brings to light these important discoveries and shows how the experiences of parental care can offer new visions about dementia and subjectivity that are not revealed by "bio-games" or empirical data, but disclosed through the body language and emotional intimacy. Both Jong and Vanessa realize that personhood goes beyond speech or rationality as it manifests through alternative ways of interaction with the outside world. The author also demonstrates that to notice and appreciate these little glimpses of life and the assertion of agency requires patience and love. Caregiving experiences also reveal that the narrative of one's life is never a single and isolated story, but, as Barry puts it, "a set of causes and effects, memories and influences, that reverberate through and colour one's own and others' lives, both past and

present" (2020, p. 132). By depicting challenging but also illuminating aspects of parental care and aging realities, Jong also stresses the need for innovative humanities-based approaches to person-centered care and dementia research in order to produce new knowledge and improve quality of life for older people, and, at the same time, provide carers with different visions about the suppressed stage of the fourth age.

Conclusions

By focusing on Erica Jong's later-life work, this article has addressed the complexities of parental care shadowed by dementia in the deep old age (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989; Gilleard & Higgs, 2010). It aimed to show how literature can illuminate alternative ways of representing later years and caregiving experiences that are marked by new perceptions of aging and the discovery of the power of nonverbal communication, "embodied selfhood," and emotional intimacy. In her work, Jong exposes the usually silenced and avoided aspects of care, such as "dirty work" and bodily decay, even if they represent the fear of growing older and go against the ideals of successful aging in our modern secular society that emphasizes youth, beauty, and self-management (Calasanti & King, 2015; Silver, 2003; Smirnova, 2012; Twigg, 2000, 2012; Wolf, 2002). The writer seems to offer different perspectives about aging in the hope to unite her readers in an act of mutual support and solidarity when faced with dementia-related care. Her work also shows that taking care of old parents is an act of gratitude and love, and that only through compassion and resilience can we learn to better understand and appreciate all life stages. Ultimately, while there are many different opportunities to interrogate the concept of the fourth age and the moral imperative of care in the current cultural imaginary, dementia, and parental caregiving accounts can provide us with new perceptions of old age through particular life journeys of aging individuals and their expressions of agency and personhood, however insignificant or minute they might seem.

This study has also aimed to demonstrate that a humanities-based approach can extend the gerontological framework, and care narratives give voice to those aging individuals who struggle to communicate and are "silenced" in nursing homes that represent the "society's greatest fears of old age" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2017, p. 239). Instead of escaping from the uncomfortable truths and realities of the fourth age, we should open out the debate because of its relevance and importance today "even if—or most likely because—its resolution is so hard to realize" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2017, p. 240). Taking care-related narratives into account would strengthen collective solidary and help manage the increasing anger toward the aging population, which has become especially pronounced during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic (Ayalon et al., 2020). If, before this crisis, older people living with dementia were already at high risk for negative health outcomes and exclusion, the COVID-19 outbreak has acted as a magnifying glass that has exposed increasing ageism and the fear of old age (Ayalon et al., 2020; Portacolone et al., 2021). However, this global tragedy not only uncovered "a story of failed humanity that needs to change," but has also showed that older people, even made invisible, can teach us what it means to be human and how to "show kindness, love and care," even "when everything breaks to pieces around us" (Douglas, 2020, n/p).

Author Notes

For an in-depth analysis of aging body politics in Erica Jong's work, see Stončikaitė, 2019, 2020.

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None declared.

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