

Points of Exit:

New Directions in Age Studies: Exploring Exits from the Narrative of Decline

On Thursday, March 19, and Friday, March 20, 2009, the Centre for Gender and Diversity, Maastricht University, the Netherlands, will mark its ten-year anniversary with a conference entitled *Points of Exit: (Un)conventional Representations of Age, Parenting, and Sexuality*. The conference aims to examine the potential deconstruction of conventional scripts of age, parenting, and sexuality.

For one of the panels, entitled *New Directions in Age Studies: Exploring Exits from the Narrative of Decline*, we invite papers that deal with the following theme:

In modern western societies, the modeling of the human life course is characterized by a fixed chronology. It takes the shape of a stairway or curve based on complementary and hierarchically structured stages of age. This curve peaks in mature adulthood and gradually moves downwards according to the development into old age. The stage of old age is seen as an inevitable phase of decline, i.e. of mental and physical ordeal, and, as such, legitimizes the social construction of a defined age class on seemingly pure biomedical grounds. Stereotyping the ageing process as a period of decline has severe repercussions on the individual experience of old age and fosters ageism or discrimination against the aged on a structural and everyday basis.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette has repeatedly scrutinized the master narrative of decline and clarified the meanings of age and its different stages as cultural phenomena (*Declining to Decline, Aged by Culture*). She pleads passionately for age studies as a multidisciplinary research field and movement of thought that bridges critical gerontology and cultural studies by focusing on age as an identity marker similar to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and nationality. By means of analyzing cultural representations of old age Gullette illustrates how the discourse of decline can be turned around. Other well-known scholars that try to bridge the humanities and the study of aging and later life from a social and gerontopsychological perspective have contributed significantly to this critical practice. Outstanding examples are *Figuring Age*, edited by Kathleen Woodward, and Anne Davis Basting's *The Stages of Age*.

This panel would like to focus on possible points of exit from the age ideology of decline, on revisions of the master narrative of decline in cultural artifacts such as film, literary fiction, theater performance, ... In particular, the question arises how pitfalls like falling into an optimistic longing for one-sided progress narratives or conceding to rather fashionable accounts of so-called aging successfully can be avoided. Theoretical insights into the tasks, possibilities and new directions of today's ageing studies as well as specific case-studies in which the notion of decline is questioned are welcomed.

Send in a 500-word abstract and a short bio to info-gender@cgd.unimaas.nl (subject heading: "New Directions in Age Studies") before November 1, 2008.

We aim at publishing a selection of conference papers in a special issue of a peer-reviewed journal.

For further information on the *Points of Exit* conference, see:
www.genderdiversiteit.nl/pointsofexit/.