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Through the Utopian Lens of Opportunity Using fiction and theatre to reimagine the post-COVID-19 future

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Can we imagine a future for older age that is based on desires, not simply practical needs? In *Reimagining the Future in Older Age* [<https://reimaginingthefutureinolderage.stir.ac.uk/>], we aim to draw on Ruth Levitas' utopia as method theory to critique dominant, exclusionary narratives around ageing and explore the potential to create new ones. A utopian method "facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with the principles and practices of those futures. And it requires us to think about our conceptions of human needs and human flourishing in those possible futures. The core of utopia is the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively. Its expressions explore and bring to debate the potential contents and contexts of human flourishing." (Levitas, 2013, p. xi).

Utopian methods help us approach older age through the lens of opportunity, desire and human flourishing.

The possible futures of older age are often undervalued and represented as a problem to be addressed (Cruikshank, 2003, p. 7). Utopian methods help us approach older age through the lens of opportunity, desire and human flourishing. This seems more urgent than ever; since the start of the pandemic, perceptions of older people and intergenerational relationships have become the subjects of recurring debates that focus on tensions between older and younger adults. In the press, younger people have been portrayed as irresponsible ravers putting vulnerable older people at risk (Bland, 2020), and ageism has been exacerbated on social media, with the virus dubbed a "boomer remover" (Meisner, 2020; Elliott, 2021).

Running through this discourse is an assumption that older people are a burden and have little to gain from the futures they influence, and that younger people are flagrantly selfish. The assumption that older people have no stake in the future is striking. Using utopia as method allows us to explore and bring to debate these issues, not to create a blueprint for change, but rather to engage in an ongoing, reflexive inquiry into how these narratives take hold, as well as how we might deconstruct and create new ones.

In *Reimagining the Future in Older Age*, we used two creative methods to prompt utopian thinking: reading groups and forum theatre workshops. In the reading groups we discussed novels depicting themes of ageing and intergenerational relationships with adults of different ages. We then worked with theatre company Active Inquiry [<http://www.activeinquiry.co.uk/>] to support a group of older adults to create and perform their own alternative narratives of the future in later life. We found that arts-based methods were not only integral to the research project, but also that they helped to build community and solidarity in online environments in ways we had not anticipated.

Fiction requires imagination and gives us the chance to encounter different characters and societies that humanise experiences beyond a problem to be fixed.

From June to October 2020, four reading groups met online every month to discuss five different novels. The novels came from a range of genres and eras, but shared common themes of age, time and intergenerational relationships. Participants were invited to use these fictional narratives to reimagine societies in which everyone's futures are valued, regardless of age or circumstance. In the discussions, adults of different ages

imagined new futures in older age and unlocked a variety of topics: care, intergenerational friendships and tensions, environmental concerns, media stereotypes and, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic.

We found that reading novels opened intriguing lines of flight; although we started from the details of the books, discussing character and plot, these opening discussions often led to sharing real-world situations and imagined solutions. Discussions about Yoko Tawada's *Last Children of Tokyo* began with chats about the eloquent prose and lack of chapter headings, but moved quickly to explore themes of environmental guilt, cross-generational care and future-planning. The novel follows Yoshiro, an older man who could live forever, who cares for his great-grandson Mumei, born frail.

Considering the relationship between the two characters, one reader suggested: "Perhaps reimagining future in older age should also be about imagining what effects our behaviour now will have on the generations that will follow us... not as simple as living innocently and then being cared for in your old age but living with a radical responsibility."

Whether we were exploring the sci-fi fantasy of longevity in John Wyndham's *Trouble with Lichen*, dystopian care roles in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* or the intergenerational friendships in Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* and Neil M. Gunn's *Old Hector and Young Art*, the plots opened up imaginative ways to think about solidarities among different age groups and how ageing could be perceived and experienced differently. Fiction requires imagination and offers the opportunity to view different characters and societies that humanise experiences beyond a problem to be fixed.



Trouble with Lichen, front cover.

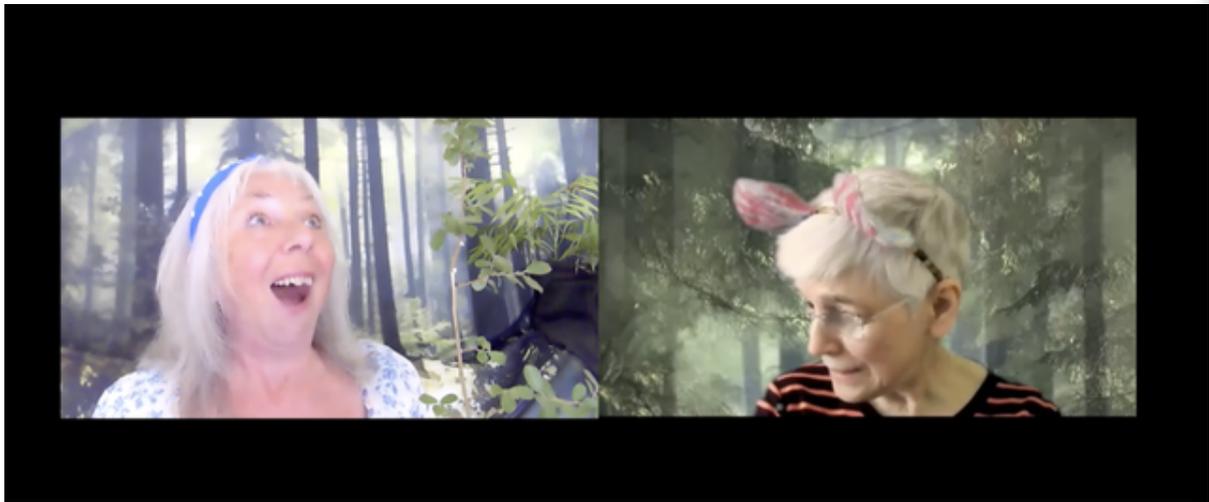
Photograph: Valerie Wright.

Where the reading groups deconstructed narratives of older age, our theatre groups rewrote them. From February to June 2021, we worked with Active Inquiry and members of the public to rewrite narratives of older age, and challenge the ageist assumptions that dominate contemporary public discourse. We used forum theatre techniques developed by Brazilian drama theorist Augusto Boal and discussed in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* [<https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745339290/theatre-of-the-oppressed/>]. Forum theatre is a type of participatory art-based method that sees theatre as a democratic forum; each play ends with an unresolved crisis that the audience is invited to address. The play is then performed again, but this time the spectators (or spect-actors) step into the world of the play and replace different characters or change the dialogue to see if the scenes can be played out differently.

Over a series of online workshops, the groups devised characters and plots. As with our research project's reading groups, the potential alienation of conducting research online with participants we had never met was offset by our shared experience of the pandemic, our ability to get to know each other over a series of months, and our glimpses into people's homes.

Working online meant we could also use digital tools to collaboratively write our scripts and to create character mood boards. Slipping in and out of breakout groups, we shared personal stories and collectively worked on two performances: *Waiting for Dot*, a story about an older activist who is torn between speaking at a meeting or retiring from protest under pressure from her family, and *Return to Wonderland*, which reimagined an older Alice trying to gain access into her surreal, beloved childhood world.

Leaning into the online platforms, we were able to highlight different characters – creating moments where the Cheshire Cat could fade in and out of view in the top left hand corner, as an older Alice stared up greeting. Separated in their small, square boxes, we were struck by how involved the audience could be while watching a theatre performance devised for the screen.



Return to Wonderland, screen capture of performance.

The online elements of both the reading groups and forum theatre workshops/performances were not planned. As was the case with many research projects in recent months, restrictions necessitated by the pandemic meant we had to move our fieldwork online. This threw us a methodological curveball, as we had to reassess how we could share, rehearse and perform online. In doing so, we learnt more about utopian methodologies. Firstly, they are flexible, as we were able to still pose questions, create connections and imagine new futures together. Secondly, these methods helped develop a solidarity and empathy within our online community as we began most sessions checking in with one another. Thirdly, there was a flattening of researcher-participant hierarchies, as we all responded to pandemic developments in real time. Some participants said they were more likely to join a theatre group online than in person, but we are also aware that the opposite can be true. Research from The Centre for Ageing Better found that for older audiences, a digital divide exists, where over one million individuals aged between 50 and 69 had never, or had not recently, used the internet.

Discussions about how long the virus might last and the ways it will affect our lives in the coming years were part of our conversations throughout both the reading groups and theatre workshops. Future hope did not always feel tangible, and as one of our participants put it: "One age-related issue would be the number of times it's been implied on TV and radio discussions of the pandemic that essentially we don't need to worry too much because it's really only old people with underlying conditions who are dying – and they would have died anyway!"

In Arundhati Roy's essay "The Pandemic is a Portal", she invites us to "imagine another world", and suggests the pandemic has effectively pressed the pause button, giving us an opportunity to consider whether we want

to go back to how things were immediately before the pandemic hit, which she implies would leave us on the same trajectory to a disastrous future, or whether we want to chart a new course. The pandemic might have intensified concern for the future, but fears about the future were already present. Conducting our research during this time has only encouraged us to pursue Ruth Levitas' utopia as method, where imaginative research processes are perhaps more important than ever as we keep fostering ongoing, critical reflections on how we can all better flourish.

Reimagining the Future in Older Age [<https://reimaginingthefutureinolderage.stir.ac.uk/>] is an ESRC-funded research project: ESRC ES/S011889/1.

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