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DEBATE

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DEBATE

The Ageless Self: A Relic or The Reliquary?

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I grappled with writing this essay.

Its writing touches and entwines my senses with spaces and transformations from the time of Kaufman's *The Ageless Self* to now and uncertain futures.

Sharon is present as I work.

A steadfast colleague sharing walks, literal and figurative, through life and its messiness.

She insistently sought to meld insights from a spectrum of scholarly disciplines and immersive fieldwork.

Wordsworth hints at Sharon's spirit.

My heart leaps up

William Wordsworth, 1802

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a man;

So be it when I shall grow old,

Or let me die ...

My thoughts below are an essayed reaction to the invitation to consider a passage from "Reflections on 'The Ageless Self'" and do not aspire to the rigor of critique.

Sharon Kaufman's *The Ageless Self* (1986) contributed greatly to the denaturalization of pernicious stereotypes of old age and helped early cohorts of scholars to erode archaic views of old age as a time for infirm minds and bodies and dimming inner life. Energizing generations of scholars, today it presents us with a Janus face: a relic, and a reliquary. In this debate piece, I urge scholars to engage the notion of the 'ageless self' not as a relic – an ossified thing to preserve. This is how it rears up in the literature: as an idealized static identity, and thereby an analytic category that narrows our gaze. Instead, in the sense that a reliquary is a placeholder, a shrine, or a container for something of value but not the thing itself, *The Ageless Self* enfolds and opens up spaces of indeterminacy. Engaged as a reliquary, it irritates social certainties in ways that can renew curiosity about aging lives. The notion of the 'ageless self' urges us toward fresh explorations about the particularities in times, places, and understandings of actual persons aging – to 'leap up and behold' ethnographically, as Sharon insisted in her scholarship and how she lived her life, sharing Wordsworth's investment in empiricism. Thus, I argue, we should engage Kaufman's 'ageless self,' not as a stabilized identity, but as a productive Proustian arena, one featuring a lifelong fluid self-biographic "embryonic journey" (apologies to Jack Kaukonen 1967) of contingent protean meanings in the (un)(re)making. Further, I argue that idealizing Kaufman's 'ageless self' as a relic promotes a romanticized enterprise for meanings that instantiates Western cultural notions of individualism and interiority and concern with sources of meaning and

continuity. My reflections on the ageless self instead consider its underlying evocation of inner life and its complexities.

Whence the Reliquary for 'Inner Life'?

It's important to understand that *The Ageless Self* was among the early empirical studies designed to refute the pernicious negative stereotypes of life in old age as a natural, inevitable time of frailty, social and psychological disengagements, sadness and dimming inner life. A marker of early anthropologists' success in creating new foundations for gerontological knowledge is that the National Institutes of Health funded projects by Sharon Kaufman, Gay Becker, Linda Mitteness, and Judith Barker were cited as exemplars by Directors at the NIH/National Institute on Aging in public testimony to Congress to justify increased funding (Ory and Williams 1984). These were the first studies funded by the NIH/National Institute on Aging that used ethnography to identify opportunities used by subsequently funded multidisciplinary interventions to solve problems that were previously socially and scientifically reproduced as 'natural' for old age.

Kaufman's *The Ageless Self* (1986) was rooted in the then-nascent gerontological domain centered inward on the individual's own sense of personal meaning in a lifespan lens. This was a site for scholarship designed to counter the domination of behavioral and biomedical paradigms. As such, a focus on personal meanings introduced a more valid and robust way to define the range of relevant phenomena salient to creating an accurate definition of what constitutes the "case" (Ragin and Becker 1984) for the analysis and description of aging lives. Yet, arguably, notions of an ageless self—a particular instantiation of the construct of personal meaning and lived experience—spring from a deep Western cultural heritage which, I argue, overly idealizes the inner self as a well-spring of autonomous meaning-making unsullied by external public authoritarian forces.

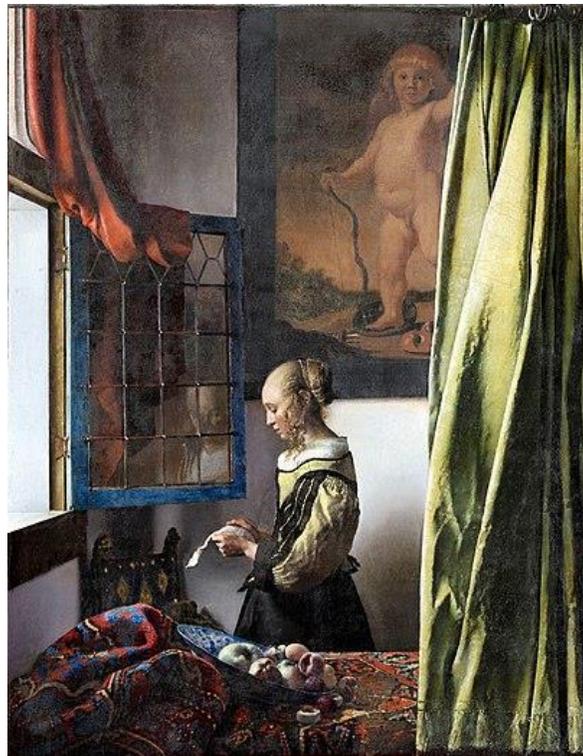


Figure 1: *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, Johannes Vermeer (1657-1659) (Source: [Wikipedia](#))



Figure 2: *Lunch in the Greenhouse*, Louise Abbema (1877) (Source: [artsy.net](https://www.artsy.net))

This quest for personal meaning is recent in our cultural history. Convergent traditions in Western culture and history contribute to our taste for the personal meaning-making enterprise. One relevant historical change has been the emergence of subjectivity, interiority, and privacy concepts. Where formerly the private and secluded were associated with nefariousness and treason, these became supplanted by modern notions valuing the private and domestic spheres. Johannes Vermeer's (1632-1675) paintings that make the quietness of interior domestic spaces and subjectivity visible are indicative of this trend (see Figure 1). In the 20th century, historical demographers also chronicled the emergence of the interior and private arenas – spaces of sociality inside the family, household, and individual (Ariès 1965; Burgière 1987; Perrot, Ariès, and Duby 1990). These private spaces are differentiated from collective public life and from persons as defined by roles in social estates and public statuses. For example, Louise Abbema's *Lunch in the Greenhouse* (1877) centers our eye on such a casual sociality (see Figure 2).

In our era, processes of meaning-making throughout the lifespan were further differentiated as childhood emerged as a new life stage to replace the conception of children as little adults and as eras of old age were further divided in the Third Age, youngest-old, middle-old, and oldest-old. In recent centuries a lifespan mode of personal meanings was also introduced in the literary idiom *Bildungsroman*, a story script telling of an individual's coming of age and growing maturity (e.g., Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847); Sue Kidd's *Secret Life of Bees* (2001)). It is now pervasive in popular culture. More recently, extended lifespans bring longer arcs of the self-making enterprise over time. Such self-making can tend to the precarious, for example in lives lived with dementia, as depicted in the dire self-portraits by William Utermohln (see Figure 3).

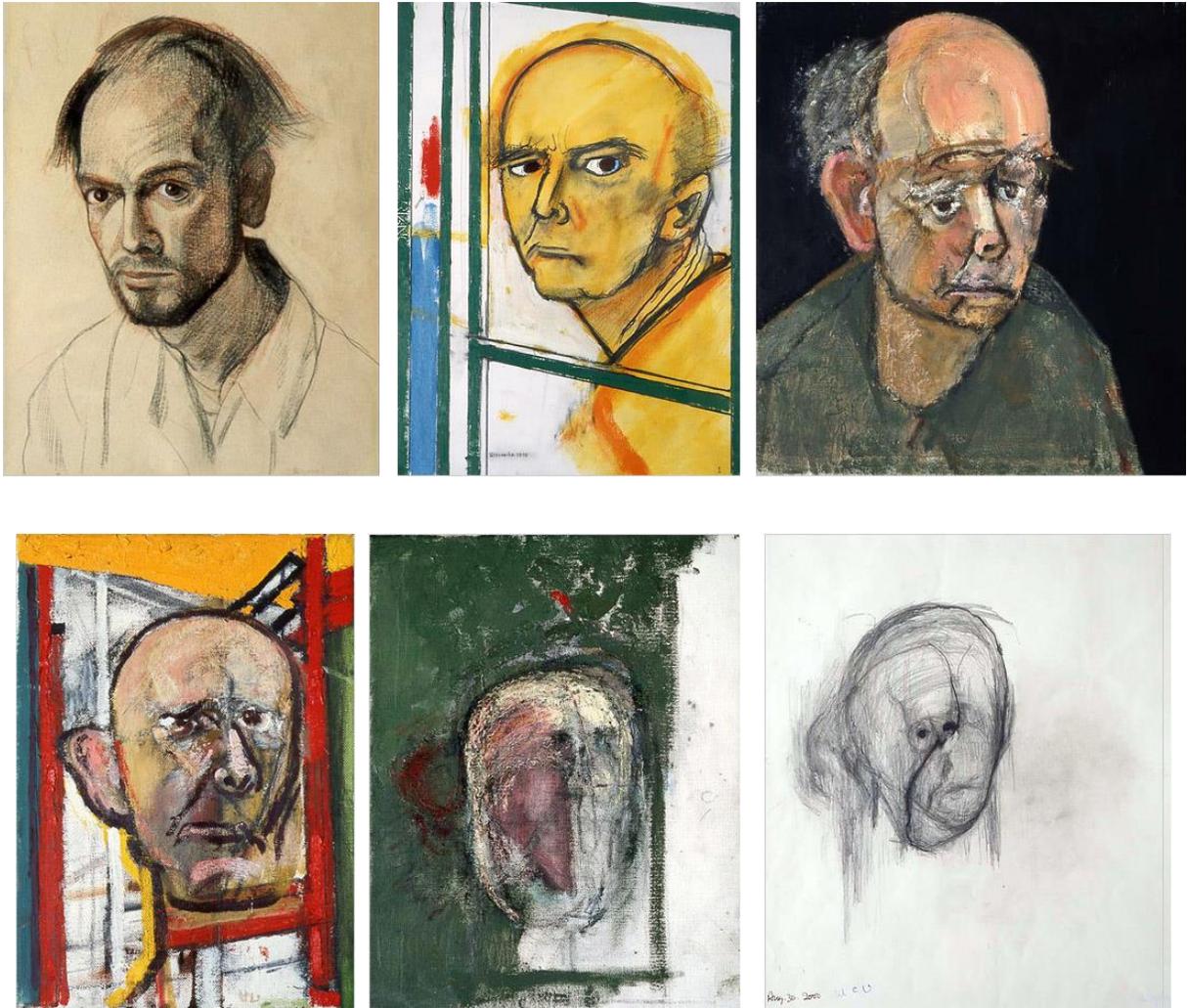


Figure 3: Selfportraits, William Utermohlen (1967-2000) (Source: [Artesociale](#))

A second tradition emerged in a profound ethos of the individual as autonomous and independent. The individual as 'a-part from' others replaced the individual that was for long defined as 'part of' a group. This modern Western ethos grew only after the onset of industrial economic-political conditions created systems of impersonal bureaucratic control over persons' public lives, a radical change that was powerfully characterized by Louis Dumont (1965). This ideal of independence and autonomy minimizes interdependence in social life as exemplified in the emergent normativity of the nuclear household as self-sufficient (Segalen 1986). It underlies Western psychological models of the self as a monadic, autonomous, coherent whole (Geertz 1986; Marsella and White 1982; Shweder and Bourne 1984). Anthropologists Kathy Ewing (1990) and James Fernandez (1986) and historian Robert Nisbet (1969) offer provocative alternatives by highlighting the rhetoric and metaphoric nature of a 'whole' person or culture and the use and misuse of metaphors of development and progress.

These two cultural dynamics have informed a gerontology that is largely dominated by the behavioral sciences, and that pursues an uncomplicated culture-bound approach to the nature of experiences and contents of inner meaning-making. Anthropologists take pains to document the social, community, and family threads informing 'individual' meaning-making, and have as such contributed more nuanced views to understandings of this process. For example, Gaylene Becker (1993) explored meanings of place

and sociality among older Latino, Filipino, and Cambodian immigrants living crowded in inner-city housing. She identified the complex difficulties that this living situation caused, as well as how intergenerational housing afforded family support and long-term intimate friendships buffering adversities. This work sheds light on how a range of disparate issues such as memory, place, displacement, social relations, and identity politics merge to comprise the everyday life of these older adults.

Another important anthropological destabilization of the autonomous aging individual is Barbara Myerhoff's (1974) ethnography of a Senior Center attended by older Jewish in an urban ghetto. She depicts the vibrant everyday social world they created by weaving multiple elements including their shared histories of immigration, their experiences of integration in the new world, cultures of origin, as well as the local culture they construct together at the Center." The Center provided a social space and resources for resilience in the face of poverty, loneliness, and disability. Yet, Myerhoff was discomforted by the regularity of heated arguments among her informants; they did not interact gently and sweetly in line with prevailing ageist stereotypes. She finally asked her informants why they argued so much. They happily explained that "we fight to stay warm" and, Myerhoff wrote, "fighting is a partnership, requiring cooperation" (1974, 184) meaning they worked together to be spirited and to show they took each other's existence seriously. I chose these examples from decades ago to highlight how anthropologists have a long tradition of bringing needed insights to gerontology.

Even these early scholars might be questioned for being duplicitous in shifting the focus to individuals from the social structures and conditions of life (exceptions include Carl Cohen and Jay Sokolovsky 1989; Carroll Estes and Elizabeth Binney 1989; Mary Pietrukowicz and Mitzi Johnson 1991; Susan Whitbourne 1986). Today, a variety of important, yet incompletely addressed questions remain. One of these sets of questions is: for whom is the desire for an ageless self a salient 'good,' for whom not, for whom is it possible? In this paragraph, I have tried to show that critical attention to the historical embeddedness of the scholarly pursuit of an ageless self can reveal its multiple faces. It can serve as an exemplar of progressive research from the era of its creation. It is, however, also clear that the ageless self is also a siren call that is hard to ignore. Gerontologists ought to become more resistant to the seductive familiarity of the subjective, internal, and private sphere, and to the simplistic operationalization of it as a fixed, monolithic thing.

Diverse Lifespans, Temporalities, Places, and Societal Aspirations¹

If *The Ageless Self* were written today, we would look for attention to issues of intersectionality and inequality in access to political and economic structures, which may nourish or erode the ageless self. Next, I will discuss how *The Ageless Self* could be seen as situated in an intersectional conversation, albeit in the context in which it was written, and second, I offer some examples of those earlier modes of thinking about intersectionality and diversity that have been addressed and what opportunities exist to extend them in the future.

It should be acknowledged that *The Ageless Self* engaged issues of diversity if seen as positioned historically in the context of how such concerns were coming into nascent attention at the time of its writing. Clearly, in today's view a robust intersectional approach to the ageless self would ask much more. We would want to think further about for whom and how fully the ageless self as a form of meaning-making supports the person, and whose agendas it serves, and — and importantly in my mind — where and how the ageless self is socially (de)legitimated? The intersectional lens can complicate our inquiries by directing us to consider differences, inequalities, and disparities (Braveman 2006) in the

social distribution of access to cultural and material resources, living conditions and social positions, developmental and health differences, and layers of lived experiences in a pluralistic world.

It is a misjudgment to cast Kaufman's 'ageless self' as completely naïve about such issues. In its time, the concept targeted a venomous source of disparities. It faced off against the segregation of older persons as no longer whole persons or citizens, uninterested in life, and old age as a life not worth living. Kaufman's work turned interest to meaning-making of older adults who were otherwise socially disenfranchised and relegated to the bare life of a State-sanctioned zone of exclusion from accountability (Agamben 1995; Biehl 2005; Luborsky 1994). Today, William Dressler's (2005) conceptual and methodological contribution of "cultural consonance" might provide a fresh path for amplifying understandings of the ageless intersectional self. His work examines how individuals believe and behave in ways that approximate, or are dissonant with, the values and ideals defined by each community's own cultural models. Inequalities of social valuation have well-documented consequences; low levels of cultural consonance harm mental and physical health. Dressler's strategy may offer another approach for developing more complex notions of the ageless self as constructed in particular contexts through a cultural consonance lens.

Another mode of discourse on diversity was visible at the comparative system level of cross-cultural and cross-national comparative studies in the time of *The Ageless Self*. Examples include *Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives* (Sokolovsky 1990) and *The Aging Experience: Diversity and Commonality Across Cultures* (Keith et al. 1994). Many disciplines joined conversations about the 'delicate category' of self, experience, and personhood and especially the cultural boundedness of notions of the self was the site of great debate. Cross-cultural studies exploring notions of the 'self' highlighted the social and experiential consequences of different cultures' conceptions of relatedness and independence/interdependence (e.g., Hsu 1989/1953; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Marsella et al. 1985). These studies contributed alternative conceptualizations of consociated forms of self that contrast with the Western singular individual self. Just as these studies moved us beyond stereotypical comparative binary distortions of a 'collectivist' conception of the individual and the unique 'individualistic' Euro-American notion, today we might increase our sensitivity to diversity in forms of later life meaning-making within local contexts given today's multicultural and globalized world.

Historical, global, and political eras across the lifetime of persons within one age cohort can create another kind of diversity in the ageless self by redefining fundamental societal life values and meaning. For example, older persons in Poland (Robbins-Panko 2020) complicate our understanding of the ageless self as one that resonates with political-economic and societal changes in the shift from socialism to capitalism. Meanings made by the aging self are an alloy forged by the juxtaposition of an ethos from an early life of socialist and Soviet-era society and, after its collapse, by capitalist structures and values in a Postsocialist society. Similarly, David Plath (e.g., 1970) provided a nuanced understanding of ways to consider diversities among older Japanese persons. One concept is "co-longevity," for older Japanese aging as "collectivities" and consociates rather than Western autonomous individuals (Plath 1970). Another finding was that older Japanese persons drew resources for meaning making from contrasting cultural eras. The first era was grounded in youth and adulthood defined by the pre-WWII imperial society, and the latter was in the transformed post-war defeat, Westernized era. Briefly, such diversities in the resources and contextual support for meaning-making in later life require greater attention today.

Varieties of the ageless self may also arise from displacement or migrating between the sociocultural context of one or several nations across the lifespan and in old age. Massive modern global population movements have posed novel challenges to early gerontology concepts of 'aging in place.' Consideration of places and spaces of aging under conditions of life migration remains little addressed and is an

opportunity for further research and policy attention. Older individuals who experience migration potentially have multiple selves, ones grounded in the places they have left and the places they arrive. These places constitute sources of experiencing and remembering. Meaning-making is supported or challenged at the level of macro contexts (multiple cultures, social esteem, social positions, languages) and local level settings (communities, ways of life, and daily habits) (Becker 2003; Johansson et al. 2012.) These amplify and complicate the otherwise normative lifespan dilemmas for building meaningful lives and self-representations.

Ongoing biographic constructions of the self, notions of the culturally expectable life course, and experiences of transitions across the individual lifetime are shaped by the culture in particular societal times, presenting another arena for diversities. This is discussed in Glen Elder's landmark *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (1974/1998), a longitudinal study of persons living and managing long lives that traverse dramatic societal political-economic transformations in one life. Readers here are now personally familiar with the multiple impacts of pandemics, wars, economic calamities, and polarized politics and have been forced to understand that the social implications and personal interpretations of economic, societal, community, or physical events are neither uniform across individuals nor predictable. We ought to consider how the timings of these events impact individuals differently at varying life stages and cultural contexts. The salient elements differ and must be discovered (rather than assumed) in the content of an ageless self's memories, hopes, and values. Notably, these elements are defined by each particular life course stage's roles and expectations (e.g., childhood, emerging-adulthood, adulthood), and psychosocial developmental stage tasks (individuation, identity autonomy, generativity). For example, in the case of HIV among African Americans or LGBTQ populations during the earliest years of the AIDS epidemic, there was massive social condemnation and dire stigmatization. At that time, those afflicted with AIDS lived in the knowledge of its lethal nature and lack of medical treatments. Because later cohorts acquiring HIV could regard it as a chronic, treatable condition, the biographical story schemas and contents of those aging with HIV today are very different since they acquired the disease before treatments became available (Nevedal et al. 2017). Similarly, the polio epidemic produced divergent experiences for cohorts of persons aging after polio infections. People who were infected when HIV was widely feared, often fatal, and with no known cause or mode of infection, had aging lives that contrasted to those acquiring HIV in a later era after the discovery of its cause and a treatment was available (Luborsky 1993).

Where might the many openings that Kaufman's 'ageless self' offers be taken next? Some suggestions were presented in earlier paragraphs. New scholars should take up the challenge of better articulating issues of its social distribution, varieties, contexts, and salience within individuals over time and settings. Further insights might be provided by continuing critical explorations of the underlying historical and cultural traditions entwined in the concept. Conceiving the aging self as a reliquary, not a relic, may extend anthropology's capacity to counter gerontology's propensity for a fixed, monadic, approach to the self. To rethink the 'ageless self,' we can consider it in light of Renato Rosaldo's (1993) concept of culture, as busy intersections of several histories, heritages, and notions of human worth in particular places. Gerontologists need to be reminded to allow for multiple possible selves (past, current, future hoped for or feared) and of fluid coherence in the construction of a socially and personally valued later life worth living.

William Wordsworth to Bob Dylan with Sharon

My Back Pages, Bob Dylan (1964)

In a soldier's stance, I aimed my hand
At the mongrel dogs who teach

Fearing not that I'd become my enemy
In the instant that I preach

My existence led by confusion boats
Mutiny from stern to bow

Ah, but I was so much older then
I'm younger than that now

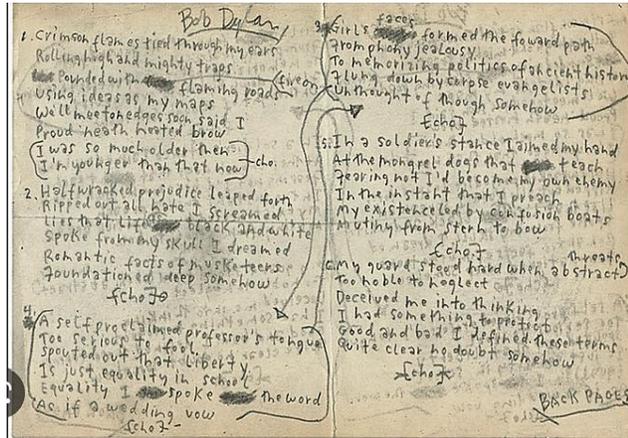


Figure 5: Bob Dylan handwritten notes, "My Back Pages"

William Wordsworth and Sharon aligned in finding joy and clarity in empirical details observable in the world around us as the path for a life worth living. Bob Dylan is in my mind after time writing many words (erasing most) and thinking with the ageless self of KAS and my own. The takeaways for me from this time are happily more uncertainty and joy in discovery of what is ahead.

Thank you for the opportunity to mull and scribble.

Notes

1. Given the voluminous and growing literature on diverse and minority populations and experiences in gerontology, piling up illustrations of such differences, inequalities, and aging disparities, I demur from presenting these. They are readily available elsewhere. Instead, my ambition was to surface a few of the less patent domains shaping the modes, means, and contents of meaning-making for a self in later life.

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