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PORTFOLIO

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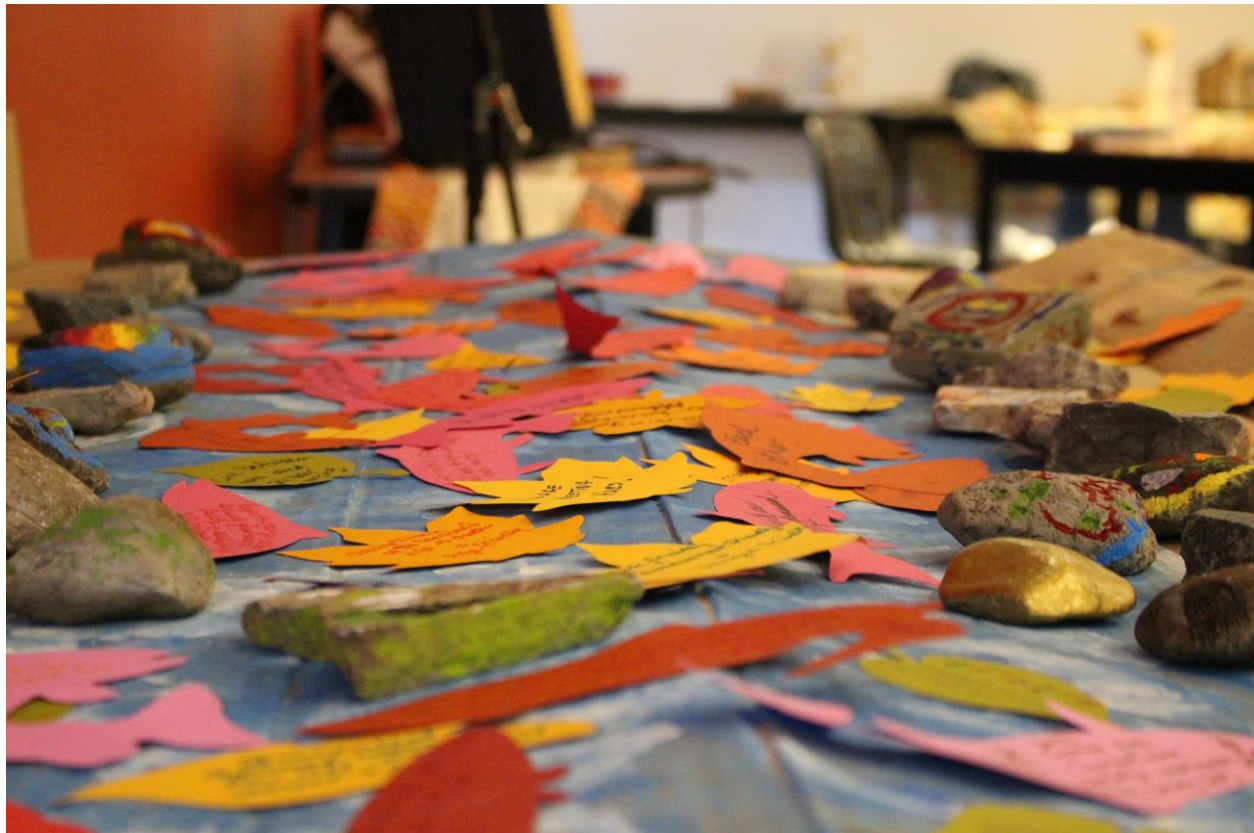
Intergenerational storytelling and the art of making

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Trent University lies on Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg territory, in what has been known for millennia as Nogojiwanong, and which now includes the City of Peterborough, Canada. The Michi Saagiig named this place after the powerful river that runs through it, Odenabe Ziibi¹; Nogojiwanong is loosely translated as “the place at the foot of rapids.” Odenabe, roughly translated to “river that beats like a heart,” sustains life in Nogojiwanong.² It is, as aging studies scholars might describe, the basis of generativity and intergenerational connection to the future.



A parent, activist, professor, and lover of dark chocolate, I have been living in Nogojiwanong and working at Trent since 2013. I grew up in Kanien’keha:ka territory (now Montreal, Canada), where my family landed as Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe three generations ago. At Trent, I cross a footbridge over the rushing Odenabe each day. Lately, every time I cross that footbridge, I think about how my own ancestors crossed big water, making life possible for future generations – for me. It wasn’t until I was a parent in my 40s, engaging in intergenerational storytelling research in Nogojiwanong, that I began to

understand the importance of these connected stories of survival and futurity. I coordinate *Aging Activisms*, a research program and activist-research collective, which connects academics, students, organizers, and artists from their late teens through to their 90s. The last seven years of my research have thus involved learning from hundreds of social changers in intergenerational storytelling processes and arts-based research gatherings. In part, this work is about aging, activism, future, and place. Beyond this thematic focus, this methodology offers me a way to be continually and collaboratively making: making counter-normative art; making relations and communities; making resistant, resurgent, and sovereign stories; and, perhaps, making futures. My learning is profoundly influenced by Michi Saagiig territory: by making my home here for the past seven years – by the water, the land, the relationships, and the varied knowledges shared with me in and through this place.³

In this Portfolio, I offer a series of methodological and epistemological reflections from this project, inflected with some emerging thoughts about storytelling as a process of making; about survival and generativity; about the epistemic value of water; about connected histories and futures; and about how all of this might contribute to aging studies. Alongside these reflections, I have curated select visual pieces, created as part of this work, each telling complex stories, which, as such, are open to readers' own interpretations.

Making Media, Art, and Archives



As part of *Aging Activisms*, and together with graduate students, community groups, and colleagues,⁴ I explore the diverse ways activists of different ages, abilities, genders, and backgrounds work for social change over the course of their lives. This research considers how participants tell and circulate their own stories, and how stories can challenge and extend dominant ways of thinking about both aging and resistance. The project draws on a pluralized definition of activism, including outward protest as well

as lesser recognized forms of making change, such as quiet advocacy, arts, ceremony, cultural resurgence, parenting, and survival.⁵



Between 2016 and 2019, *Aging Activisms* hosted six research workshops, which involved creating, sharing, and recording stories of change-making in intergenerational, cross-cultural groups. In these workshops, participants take up a variety of roles: they not only share their own stories, but also interview others, take photos, and listen supportively. After each workshop, members of my research team collaborate with storytellers to turn their recorded interviews and photographs into short digital stories.⁶ To date, we have produced almost 100 media pieces and thousands of photographs of our research-in-process. These gatherings are deliberately creative: we engage in zine-making, collage, collaborative art, performance, music, and poetry. We make this material freely available online and have established a digital archival collection at the Trent University Library and Archives.⁷ This research thus fosters cultural production in a concrete way.

Making Multiple Knowledges

Producing knowledge through storytelling and co-creation, invites certain critical epistemological interventions into aging studies. From the outset, this project has aimed to extend and challenge whose and what knowledges are typically hegemonic in this field. In our workshops, we centre stories from people and groups whose knowledges have most often been omitted from academic scholarship – and indeed from aging studies.⁸ From Anishinaabe elders to disability rights activists, from trans storytellers to migrant rights advocates, from Raging Grannies to performance artists, the participants we bring together are diverse and interconnected, and their knowledges and ways of knowing challenge dominant, normative (white-centric, heteronormative, ableist, classist, colonial) epistemologies. Each workshop is destabilizing

by design: we begin each workshop with a deliberate selection of participants—storytellers across ages and subject positions—who we invite through existing relationships, prioritizing invitations to participants who are racialized, Indigenous, disabled, and/or LGBTQ2IA+.

Delving explicitly into questions about who and what holds knowledge, we explore different methods of knowledge generation. We build opportunities to go outdoors into our research process, sometimes visiting Odenabe, other times taking photos amidst the trees. We also invite participants to bring their own epistemic offerings to the work, which has often taken the form of sharing knowledges through ceremony or ceremonial teachings. Participants have, for instance, at times intervened in our processes, asking us to replace conventional ‘data collection’ methods with smudging and circle discussions. In any given workshop, we work to remain flexible and are prepared to shift our expectations of what might be produced and how. Further, creativity is part of our research process: through arts, music, performance, and embodied practices, we explore what emerges from collective creativity. We also consider whether and how creating together might challenge conventional modes of knowledge production in this field. In doing so, we navigate the fluid borders between *making* and knowing.



These processes are, however, not intended simply to ‘add diversity’ to aging studies. In a more profound way, we consider critically how knowledges co-created by people with different subjectivities and worldviews – in connection with land, ceremony, and creativity – might push the epistemic boundaries of aging studies and challenge key aging studies concepts.⁹ Through these workshops, I am learning that critical knowledges exist and can be produced outside of what aging studies scholars conventionally consider ‘data sources.’ Through stories of being in ceremony with water, of protecting the land as an act of generativity, of researching intergenerationality through embodied performance, of turning to relations with past and future ancestors to sustain activist aging, of hearing whispers of identities from the stars,

participants share with us, how knowledges about aging and intergenerationality are held in bodies, land, water, cosmos, ancestors, and generations to come.¹⁰

Making Relations and Connections

Relationship-building is central to this work of *storying together*; it is, indeed, yet another form of *making*; another way to create together. To be effective and ethical as a research process, *storytelling* requires trusting relationships. For me, building mutual understanding and support across difference is not just about enabling the research; it is a central goal and outcome of the project itself. Each new workshop reminds me that the process of this research (i.e., building relationships through creative *storytelling*) is also its product.

Building relationships takes time, and taking time is complicated. Time holds different meanings, and is valued differently, by people at different ages and life stages, and it certainly operates differently within and outside of academia.¹¹ My research team starts the process of connecting with participants long before a workshop is scheduled, and we maintain these relationships after the workshop is finished (e.g. through supporting participants' work in the community, inviting them to ongoing events and seminars, sending out newsletters, etc.). In the periods before and after the workshops, our method is *visiting*: we meet up for slow, unpressured conversations about this work.

During the workshops, we dedicate time for building trust among participants. We often joke about 'eating soup' as research method, but, in fact, this is not a joke. We make time in every workshop to eat together, and often to sing, share poetry, and socialize, without the pressure of 'data collection.' We often engage groups in establishing group-specific practices that foster a sense of safety in the *storytelling*, as well as design protocols and processes for dealing with difficult moments that might arise.



We also make time and allocate resources for care. For instance, I typically bring together a large team of facilitators (trained students, research assistants, and community members) in each workshop, at a ratio of one facilitator for every two or three participants. In addition to assisting with facilitation and documentation, each member of this team is explicitly tasked with caretaking, including such activities as making tea, active listening, ensuring access to food, supporting accessibility needs, and/or arranging participants' transport. In some workshops we have had professional counsellors and/or Elders participate in the role of mental health supports. These relational practices are integral to the relationships we build, and the stories that flow from those relationships. Participants often contrast the care and the slow listening in the project to the extractive, contractual, and/or time-pressured encounters they experience in other similar spaces (like meetings, events, workshops, etc.). While this work is not intended to lead directly to structural or material change, the fostering and deepening of relationships reverberate trust and connection into participants' lives, relationships, and community spaces in Nogojiwanong.



Participants also tell us that these gatherings foster intergenerational connections that are desired but were largely absent from their lives. These are not conventional ‘youth-elder’ gatherings, where older participants are positioned as teachers to younger participants. Instead, we bring together participants of all ages because we believe each has a story to share, and each can interview, photograph, share their story, and edit. Rather than practicing intergenerational knowledge exchange as a ‘passing down,’ we aim to foster learning in all directions. This exchange has tender and beautiful elements, and sometimes difficult ones too. I am learning that these connections are different from conventional familial scripts; they are counter-cultural in a society that is largely age-segregated.¹²



While these connections are often powerful, our research is not without challenges, complex power dynamics, and even missteps. This is important because such tensions often offer the most profound learning.¹³ I aspire to practice ongoing consent within the project, continuously checking back with each participant about their own desires and needs as we go. This means repeated visits and debriefing conversations with participants, which often extend for years following the research; or participants choosing to withdraw their stories from the project; and/or processes that are altered on the fly to address or curb harmful dynamics.

On this relational level, it also means staying in the moments of discomfort and valuing those relationships that challenge me most. I learn that *making* can be messy. Each workshop brings complex emotional and ethical questions about what it means to invite and create with people whose stories have rarely, if ever, been centred.

Making Counter-narratives of Aging

In addition to these epistemological and methodological contributions, what can such a storytelling methodology offer, thematically, to aging studies? Ultimately, this project is creating a collection of counter-narratives about aging and aging futures; in doing so, it is a response to calls from prominent scholars in the field.¹⁴ By centring lesser-told stories of queer, trans, Indigenous, racialized, and/or disabled aging, we capture diverse experiences of later life and multiple ways of envisioning the future at all ages and stages. In aging studies terms, these counter-stories push back against binary aging narratives – ‘aging as decline’ and ‘successful aging’ – offering instead possibilities for aging resistantly and resiliently, in the face of ongoing oppressions.

They challenge colonial, heteronormative, capitalist and ableist ways of conceptualizing what and whose aging is deemed successful or positive and why, and, by corollary, whose futures are regarded as failed (Sandberg and Marshall 2017). For instance, in contrast to widespread notions of ‘success’, as defined by financial security and independence in later life, many storytellers tell us that they experience aging as a process of growing to better understand how systems of oppression impact them, or as a process of shedding internalized oppressions and normative scripts. In other words, some participants describe aging as a process of becoming more whole and self-accepting, not less. Many discuss aging with purpose, as a social or collective process. Their acceptance of responsibilities to future (and sometimes past) generations – not their withdrawal from these – is integral to their experiences of aging.¹⁵



These stories also call into question the ways in which, in much research and policy, human aging is understood as isolated from land, water, plants, animals, and the spirit world. Storytellers often express their aging futures as interwoven with land, water, climate, and food sustainability: they speak not only about their individual aging futures, but also about the aging processes of generations to come, and about

the aging of the Earth itself. These more-than-human entanglements inform their narratives, as do the intergenerational dynamic of our conversations. For instance, we ask youth and young adults about their own aging to-date and their imagined futures. Many explain that ‘aging well’, for them, will require far more than care and service provision. They question whether the Earth can sustain any form of aging successfully into the future without radical economic and societal transformation.¹⁶ Aging, then, through these intergenerational stories, reappears as the radical entanglement it is.

Making Futures along Odenabe’s Shores



Collectively, the stories in this research depict complex lives: aging with joy, struggle, pain, purpose, and care. It is in their complexity, particularity, and diversity that these stories most significantly contribute to expanding the contours of aging studies scholarship. It is also in their complexity, particularity, and diversity that they are part of worlding alternative futures. I am learning, with each workshop, that these counter-stories not only document what is, they also make possible what can be: they make alternative futures and other worlds imaginable. They have the potential to help reshape cultural imaginaries, influencing what we believe, expect, assume, and desire. Thus, this intergenerational storytelling work is, in small ways, a worlding project – a project of making, and re-making, worlds along Odenabe’s shores.¹⁷

I would like to dedicate the last part of my writing to what the Odenabe is teaching me, as a parent, professor, activist, and most especially as a scholar of aging. Odenabe emerges as motif in this research. It is invoked frequently in the stories we have documented, particularly when storytellers describe their relationship to Nogojiwanong and Michi Saagiig territory. Odenabe is a life force, and a symbol of the interrelated makings I have discussed throughout, perhaps most imperatively of the making of futures. I am beginning to understand that Odenabe offers epistemic expansion to aging studies research, as water

holds memory and knowledge, contains stories of the past and teachings for the future. Some participants describe their ancestors' lives sustained by Odenabe's gifts, connecting these to their own lives and their responsibilities toward future generations. Others tell of their ancestors' harrowing passages over water as they relocated to this territory from other continents, linking diverse histories of intergenerational violence to their ongoing activist alliances.¹⁸ When asked to imagine what might support positive futures in this community, many storytellers describe Odenabe rushing as it did before colonization, teaming with life, teaming with the salmon that disappeared with colonial development.¹⁹ This river certainly underpins generativity in this place; it connects pasts with collective futurities. Odenabe poignantly begs a way of thinking about all human aging as mutually dependent and connected to the vitality of the land, water, other creatures, rocks, plants, minerals, ancestors, not-yet-borns, and the cosmos.



The images offered throughout illuminate how this project is about the art of making stories, knowledges, relationships, and futures. They begin with a photograph of a collective art installation of Odenabe, created as part of our most recent workshop, in October 2019, in response to the river emerging as a motif in previous workshops. The other photos feature participants taking time out of their busy lives to immerse in the slowness of sharing, listening, eating together, and being cared for – experiences that often change them and their connections to this place. These images illustrate our processes of recording and circulating non-normative stories, so that wider audiences can witness – and potentially live – such powerful and complex aging futures.

Notes

¹ This is known in English as the Otonabee river.

² For some excellent writings on this territory, including Nogojiwanong and Odenabe Ziibi, see Gidigaa Migizi (Williams) (2018) and Simpson (2011).

³ So many people have contributed to my work that I could not name them all in a short piece like this. However, I want to acknowledge the following people for sharing teachings about this territory, Water and Land, Odenabe, Anishinaabe cosmologies, Anishinaabe and Cree intergenerationalities, and the importance of my own connected settler histories: Elder Shirley Williams-Pheasant, Elder Audrey Kewaquom-Caskanette, Tasha Beeds, Jenn Cole, Kerry Bebee, Anne Taylor, waaseyaa'sin christine sy, Lynn Gehl, Jean Koning, Ziysah von Bieberstein, Smokii Sumac, Maddy Macnab, Emma Langley, Melissa Baldwin, Mehrangiz Monsef, Brendan Campbell, and so many others. Some published pieces by these people that have been important to my work include: Beeds (2013), Cole (2019), sy (2016), Taylor (2015) and Williams-Pheasant (2018).

⁴ I especially acknowledge the contributions of the Trent Centre for Aging and Society, Project Re•Vision/Bodies in Translation, and Aging Communications Technology, including such scholars as Sally Chivers, Nadine Changfoot, Barbara L. Marshall, Kim Sawchuk, and Carla Rice.

⁵ See Chazan (2018) and www.agingactivisms.org.

⁶ www.agingactivisms.org/our-stories.

⁷ <http://digitalcollections.trentu.ca/collections/stories-resistance-resurgence-and-resilience-nogojivanong-peterborough>

⁸ For a discussion of the limits of representation in aging studies, see Chazan, Baldwin, and Evans (2018)

⁹ For instance, as I have written elsewhere, many stories generated in this work queer and unsettle the central aging studies concept of generativity. Instead of relating solely to biological heterosexual reproduction, their stories point to a less constricted concept of generativity that encompasses continuance with future and past life, ancestors, water, land, and all of creation (Chazan 2019a).

¹⁰ Stories on our website (www.agingactivisms.org) that explore these ideas include: Tasha Beeds, Audrey Kewaquom Caskanette, Jenn Cole, Monique Mojica, Shawn Redskye, and Charlotte Kennedy.

¹¹ Changfoot, Ansley, and Dodsworth (2018); Cole (2019).

¹² I have written about this intergenerational dynamic elsewhere: Evan, Swanson, Chazan, Baldwin (2018); Chazan and Macnab (2018).

¹³ Chazan and Baldwin (forthcoming).

¹⁴ e.g. Sandberg and Marshall (2017); Grande (2018); Fabbre (2014); Rajan-Rankin (2018); Karasik and Kishimoto (2018).

¹⁵ Storytellers in the project speaking on these themes include Tasha Beeds, Audrey Kewaquom Caskanette, Brendan Campbell, Shan Culkeen. For my own writings on these issues, see: Chazan (2019a); Chazan and Baldwin (under review).

¹⁶ I acknowledge the participants in our *Imagining Our Futures* workshop, in particular, for offering these insights (www.agingactivisms.org/imagining-our-futures). These emerging points of learning extend aging scholarship by incorporating youth perspectives on aging, as well as by considering the ecological/climate crisis underway as integral to aging.

¹⁷ Carter, Recollet, and Robinson (2018).

¹⁸ See stories from Tasha Beeds, Elder Shirley Williams Pheasant, Shawn Redskye, Jenn Cole, Carmela Valles, Ziysah von Bieberstein, and more; Chazan (2019b).

¹⁹ Participants such as Ziysah von Bieberstein, Tasha Beeds, Jenn Cole, and many of those involved in *Imagining Our Futures* have offered these insights.

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