

The collective of minorities as the majority

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Africa Olle

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Dismantling white cis male narratives. A counter-hegemonic manifesto of today's men's appropriation of stories and representation.

This text is based and constitutes a document from the series of writings originated with my essay *The anti-isms, a new art and social movement*.

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I would like to acknowledge that this text would not exist without authors, academics, historians and sociologists like bell hooks, Shiri Eisner, Michelle Wallace, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison and many other academics which have opened for me the doors of knowledge, culture, history and critical thinking, broadening my mind and understanding of other people's experiences, views and realities.

In order to understand our biases, in order to change things, we need to listen to other people's voices especially those that have been put aside. Saying that we are outraged by oppression and discrimination is not enough. Being non-racist, non-sexist, non-ageist, non-homophobic and non-ableist is simply not enough.

We need to educate ourselves and actively seek the other.

We need to be allies and the work starts with listening, reading, rewriting, seeking. The work starts now and it never ceases to exist so we must continue.

'Freedom, liberation, happiness and fulfilment don't come "naturally". Rather they must be struggled for, moment by moment, against the tide of institutionalization, commodification and repression' (Wallace, 2015, p xxxiii)

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Summary of topic

Women, black and minority ethnicities, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people and elders are often seen as a minority. Whether we go to a university lecture, to the movies, read books, watch television, read the news, buy products, inadvertently consume advertisements... Most products and media we consume daily (unless we actively seek an alternative) are made by cis straight white males for the heterosexual white audience to fulfil the criteria of the male gaze.

This text will be exploring the effect of representation and the mnemonic effect of the archive created through the information we consume and the ways in which we are conditioned by the narratives that we are fed. It will be a showcase of the intersection of identities through alternative stories told by the people whom they represent. It will be a counter-hegemonic document in which we will be reclaiming the power of authorship and dismantling the current metanarratives.

Preface

This text is written from the perspective of a cis abled white queer woman/genderfluid who fluctuates from identifying as a woman to non-binary.

I would like to acknowledge that as a cis abled white person I am inherently biased as years of colonialism have put me in a position of power over others and that as a queer woman/genderfluid I am also considered to be within the realms of the margins because sexism, homophobia and biphobia have put in a position of subjugation. Thus, I would like to acknowledge that I am still holding a position of privilege and that might be reflected in my writing.

Whilst I am actively trying to not be biased and my main aim here is to be an ally, I acknowledge that to be an ally is to carry on educating myself and others and to stand next to those whom society has marginalized.

I also acknowledge that to be an ally is an ongoing work that will never stop, as there is so much to learn and because of that, I might be exclusionary and become part of this discriminatory system from which I am trying to detach and fight against; thus, I am accountable for any mistakes I make and I am prepared to be corrected. I am prepared to revisit my own writing and uncover the biases and stigmas I have not yet discovered I have and to deconstruct them and eliminate them from my belief system.

Introduction

Women, black and minority ethnicities, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people and elders are often seen as a minority. Whether we go to a university lecture, go to the movies, read books, watch television, read the news, buy products, inadvertently consume advertisements... Most products and media we consume daily (unless we actively seek an alternative) are made by cis straight white males for the heterosexual white audience to fulfil the criteria of the male gaze... to encapsulate those who are not in power into narrow boxes.

What would a day be like in a world where the narratives are written by women, non-binary people, trans people, from a diverse ethnic and racial background, from a diversity of sexualities, women with disabilities, older women!?

What would philosophy be like if we let go of Freud, Socrates, Plato, Foucault and all the white male philosophers? If we focused on the other thinkers? What would the discourses be like?

What would it be like if we do not back up academic texts with mostly male writers and philosophers? This is a self-fulfilling prophecy in which we want to change the world, but we are fed the same narratives again and again, so there is no room to imagine any other possibilities, any other realities.

‘Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency.’ (Butler, 1997, p2)

Judith Butler in her book *The Psychic Life of Power Theories in Subjection* explores the notion of identity formation through power, she notes that the self is created through the language and the environment in which we live, thus, we are subjected to the power for our own formation of the self, as the self is a performative act, triggered by these factors that surround us.

If we are what surrounds us, if we are what we see, what could we become? What if we looked further than what is in front of us, further than what we can see?

We, the majority have been told we are on the borders, that our voices do not matter, that we are the minority. Women, BAME, LGBTQ+ people, disabled people, elders, all together collectively are the majority. Our individual stories matter. The intersection of our identities matter. We matter and our stories should be told.

What we consume daily is what makes us perform in certain ways and believe certain ideas as individuals and society, and the narrow narratives that we consume refrain us from what we could be or express what we already are.

This text will be exploring the effect of representation and the mnemonic effect of the archive created through the information we consume. It will be a critique of the current worldwide agenda in terms of media and literary production, as well as a counter-hegemonic document in which we will explore media that is inclusive and intersectional

through a series of works by people whose identities intersect with BAME, LGBTQ+, disabled people and elders. We will discover the voices of activists, authors, philosophers, artists, filmmakers, musicians. We will find the stories that we do not very often consume naturally through mass media (in this case I am referring to mass media as visual and literary products that become mainstream due to the extra funds and political agendas that only market certain products).

Narratives, stories and other nuances

Black and Ethnic Minorities. From Latino to Arabic, Black, Asian, Native American representation. There are different problematics in the ways in which BAME, LGBTQ+, disabled and elders are represented and all are very specific to each ethnicity, race, culture, disability, age, identity and its intersection. Very often we see people's identities portrayed by others who are outsiders to the subject's experience. In many cases those portrayals are biased, full of stereotypes and only show one side of that reality; an unidimensional story.

The author and speaker Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her talk *The danger of a single story* (2009) speaks about the impact of narratives on our perception of ourselves and others, creating stereotypes based on certain signifiers.

Neuroscientist Dr Kerry Sargent-Cox, in her article *Ageism, we are our own worst enemy* (2017) notes:

‘Cultural beliefs and stereotypes that are perpetuated and reinforced across the lifespan manifest as personal beliefs and attitudes regarding aging and the aging process. In turn, these personal beliefs and attitudes are impacting health and wellbeing outcomes in older adults, most likely through several pathways, such as cognitive, psychological, and behavioural’. (2017, p. 3)

This can also be applied not only at stereotypes regarding age but across the span of identity.

In her talk Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also notes that this single story 'robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar' (Adichie, 2009). Similarly Maria Edström talks about stereotypes in reference to agism in her study *Visibility patterns of gendered ageism in the media buzz: a study of the representation of gender and age over three decades*, where she notes:

'The media can be seen as a place for knowledge production, where cumulative unintentional representations of gender exist that may enhance epistemic injustice within society'. (2018, p. 80)

We are surrounded by narratives, we encounter them every day. What we do not very often acknowledge is that a big percentage of those images and stories are distorted representations of identities that are considered from the margins and that those depictions are often rooted in sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia and other isms, thus reinstating those identities on the borders, rather than the centre.

Maura Reilly in her book *Curatorial activism* notes: 'sexism and racism have become so insidiously woven into the institutional fabric, language and logic of the mainstream art world that they go almost undetected' (2018, p. 14). Reilly here is referring to art institutions, but this is also true for other institutions and other sectors like cinema, television and literature, editorials, publishers, producers. We are accepting these ideas of the other, questioning the representations of ourselves, as well as questioning our own values and beliefs based on the representation, or therefore lack of representation on the media.

What if we started curating all the mediums? What if we started curating not only what we see and support but what we produce? Reilly in her book speaks about 'Strategies of resistance' (2018, p. 23) ways in which, as curators we can counteract the omission and discrimination of artists through history. What if publishing houses considered what has been published before when deciding what to print next, so they bring onto the world a diversity of works by a diversity of authors with different identities?

What if cinema and music producers looked at their companies and rethought what the next film or the next song produced should be based on what is missing?

What if advertisers rethought the ethos behind their campaigns and tried to not sell products to the detriment of their customers? What if advertising did not try to sell the person you could become (but really could not) with that product and instead just sold the product for what it is? What if we used that power of representation when portraying people in advertising to show positive perceptions of age, gender, disability, race, sexuality and identity?

As kim Vickers notes:

'Perhaps one day we will turn on the television and see a commercial for an aging cream that brings out the best in your wrinkles rather than trying to hide them' (Vickers. 2007, p104)

Historical context.

The origin of race and the concept of otherness

In order to understand representation of BAME we need to understand representation through history and the context in which the concept of race was created. Asad Haider in his book *Mistaken Identity: Race and class in the age of trump* explores this concept through the texts by academics like Nell Irving Painter, Noel Ignatiev, Ted Allen and W.E.B. Du Bois. Through these texts Haider notes that race originated with capitalism and that racism was not subject to the colour of skin, but class.

Haider notes: 'The first Africans to arrive in Virginia 1619 were put to work as indentured servants. In fact, until 1660 all African American labourers, like their European American counterparts were indentured servants who had limited terms of servitude' (2018, page 53)

As capitalism bloomed there was need for more workers. Since plantation workers relied mostly on voluntary migration, there was a shortage of laborers. Thus the ruling class started to change laws in order to deny an end to the terms of servitude of some workers (page 55)

Haider gives the example of the colony of Virginia and Bacon's Rebellion 1675 where black and white servants united to rebel and destroy the colonial capital. This event Haider claims to be the turning point in which the white race was created as a way to control the working

class and segregate them to prevent them joining forces and take the streets and unite for better working conditions.

The white laborers were given a new status which they accepted in order to reap the benefits from the oppression of the other, thus leaving black laborers to be exploited and become slaves. Moments like this through history, helps us to understand how power relations play a big role in the way we interact and see each other. As Toni Morrison notes in her book *The origin of Others*:

‘Because there are such major benefits in creating and sustaining an Other, it is important to
1 Identify the benefits and 2 discover what may be the social/ political results of repudiating
those benefits’ (Morrison,2017, p19)

Drawn from the idea of how race was created, we need to ask ourselves how the concept of otherness was created, as it is the main commonality between the discrimination and creation of the sense of separation based on the otherness. In her book Morrison speaks about ‘the illusion of power through the process of inventing another’ (p. 24) and the creation of the other as a way to exert control. The formation of identity as the vehicle used to excuse our behaviours in order to separate ourselves from those who we find a difference with.

In order to illustrate the act of othering Morrison draws our attention to early post abolition literature, analysing the works of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. Noting how for example the novel *Absalom Absalom* by Faulkner dehumanized black people through its narrative by describing interracial, romantical and sexual relationships being portrayed as

repulsive and reason for murder (page 42) or Hemingway's colourism in his book *To have and have not*, using the word negro through the narrator and the actual name of the character on the dialogues.

Through works like those of Hemingway and Faulkner we can clearly see how literature back then reflected the realities of the slave owner, creating a narrative, an ideal of black people as non-human to justify the atrocities they did by slaving people, mutilating, raping...

'routine media representations deploy images and language that narrow our view of what humans look like (or ought to look like) and what in fact we are like. Succumbing to the perversion of media can blur vision; resisting them can do the same.'(Morrison, p. 37)

Disability and aging as a hindrance to capitalism

There are several ways in which the origin of racism, ableism, ageism and homophobia have been investigated and analysed. There is the historical moment in which we can pinpoint the start of either concept, the actual act of discrimination or the perception of the other as less. These moments in time can inform us about the stereotypes found through history and contemporary media and literature.

Ageism is another concept, another act that historians and sociologists have seen a link with the bloom of capitalism. Todd D. Nelson in his article *Ageism: Prejudice Against Our Feared Future Self*, speaks about the origin of ageism, noting that the two main changes in society which changed the position and perception we have about elders were: 1. the advancement

of the printing press, thus making us rely on books instead of elders to transmit information, 2. the industrial revolution with the creation of arduous jobs far from home, which were more difficult for older people, and finally 3. the advancement of science and medicine, being able to elongate people's life expectancy. All these factors changed the view we had of elders. From an active, essential role in society, to the perception of elders as a burden.

If we look at ableism, the body and mind are seen as lesser when they do not function as fast, and efficient as an abled person, thus the person is seen as less valuable, less of a person.

Susan Wendell in her book *The rejected body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* notes:

'Disability tends to be associated with tragic loss, weakness, passivity, dependency, helplessness, shame, and global incompetence. In the societies where Western science and medicine are powerful culturally, and where their promise to control nature is still widely believed, people with disabilities are constant reminders of the failures of that promise, and of the inability of science and medicine to protect everyone from illness, disability, and death. They are 'the Others' that science would like to forget' (1996, 63).

Pathologization of the LGBTQ+ community

There is speculation, if not evidence, that homosexuality has been part of humanity since ancient times, From wall paintings in Egypt portraying two men in an intimate attitude, like that of Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum (Reeder, 2000), to the rhetoric of the texts of Sappho (Sorkin and Auanger, 2020, p. 62-62) in which Sappho's relationship to the goddesses can be contextualized as a homoerotic narrative.

Even though homosexuality has been part of humanity, homophobia has been part of society too, and it still is.

Homophobia and the stigma of the LGBTQ+ people are also a complex topic in which several events in history have added to the intricacy and roots of discrimination and stereotypes.

One of the events in history that has played a big role in the way in which LGBTQ+ people have been discriminated against, was homosexuality being included as a mental health disorder in the manual ICD (International Classification of Diseases) by the World Health Organization (WHO).

'In 1948, WHO published ICD-6, which was the first ICD version to include a classification of mental disorders. Although ICD-6 classified homosexuality as a sexual deviation that was presumed to reflect an underlying personality disorder, subsequent research did not support this view'. (Cochran, et al.,2014). It was not until 1992 (Hirsch et al, 2016) and the update of the ICD to the ICD 10 that homosexuality was taken out of the ICD as a mental disorder in the 43rd World Health Assembly. It was not until May 2019 that the ICD-11 was

presented, where transgender would not constitute a mental disorder but instead would go under the category of sexual health. The ICD- 11 has not yet been applied, it 'will come into effect on 1 January 2022'. (WHO, 2018).

Pathologisation of the LGBTQ+ community has put queer people in the margins even more, not just by inciting stereotypes based on sexual identity, but by enforcing and creating the perspective of LGBTQ+ people as different, which connects very closely to ableism and the rejection of the other based on what is believed to be normal, effective and successful through the lenses of abled cis heterosexuality.

Case studies

Authorship of our own stories versus representation by the other. Njideka Akunyili Crosby
versus Dana Shutz; "Open Casket" (2016)



Figure 1. *Garden Thriving* (2016) by Njideka Akunyili Crosby

Njideka Akunyili Crosby is a black African American artist born in Nigeria. Crosby's works explore how different traditions merge into something new through the concept of syncretism and the intersection of identities to convey her own identity and its complexity. Her works explore the identities of those who do not belong to a single space; merging footage, images, depictions from different cultures, thus bringing connotations of different experiences into her paintings. (Crosby, 2018)

Njideka's works are not a representation of race but a representation, a conceptualization of personhood, fully dimensional works in which the audience encounters the essence of the artist, the essence of a person, an experience, a set of cultural signifiers. Njideka's paintings are not a simple representation of a figure, but an immersive piece of art.

On the other hand 'Open Casket' (2016) by Dana Schutz, is a painting representing the corpse of Emmet Till, 'the 14-year-old black boy murdered in 1955 after it was falsely claimed he flirted with a white woman' (Basciano, 2017). This painting was, and still is very controversial.

Another black life taken due to racism, the belief that that boy did not deserve to live. What can be the purpose of such a depiction? Did Schutz consider how insensitive it was to depict that boy's corpse, not just to the black community, but also to any members of his family who might still be alive?

A white artist representing a black subject can have problematics but in this case the artist is not only representing a black figure, a black person. She is representing a real past event but also the past, current and future unacceptable reality which is white supremacy, racism, dehumanization of the other because of the colour of their skin, culture or ethnicity. The murders of black people that continue to happen every day around the world...

Schutz is representing white supremacy not just through the picture but through the act of painting, the lack of research, the lack of understanding. As white artists we have no right to represent that body, that story, that death; to depict the atrocities that our ignorance is allowing to happen when it is our fault, our privilege... We even have less right to profit from those depictions.

In a sense what Schutz did could be considered cultural appropriation, the appropriation of the black body, the pain of living in a society which sees you as the other. Schutz declared that she would not sell the painting (Gibson, 2017) but she is still benefiting from a black death through media attention and exposure.

The commodification of the black body, of the black death, the use of our privilege for our own profit.

Queer represented versus queer representations. The watermelon Woman as the example to strive for.



Figure 2. Screenshot from the film *The Watermelon Woman* by Cheryl Dunye

Films and media portraying queer characters often fall in the categories of: 1. Drama, in which one of the characters often ends up dying. 2. Coming out story, in which we see the characters struggle as they inform friends and family that they are not heterosexual. 3.

Romance, in which the main plot is about a love story which is often employed with the two categories aforementioned.

One of the big problematics of television series and cinema is that very often they are created for and by heterosexual people, following the cis binary heteronormative narrative in which the norm is being heterosexual. Thus, we queer people need to come out of that paradigm.

Ilene Chaiken, pioneer director and creator of *The L word*, one of the first mainstream tv series about queer women, notes on an interview that: 'the thing that is still missing is more shows with gay characters, especially with women that are not necessarily, specially about gay life but that really portray gay life'. (Moennig and Hailey, 2020)

Many queer identifying people, especially women feel as though they are not represented enough and that their stories do not have depth. We need films that feature queer characters in which the main plot is not about their love but about something else. We need plots in which queerness is seen and it is part of the character but their sexuality is not at the centre, the story is.

An example of a film that does this is the fictional documentary *The Watermelon Woman* (1997) by Cheryl Dunye. The plot is about Cheryl who works in a rental video shop and who is also a budding filmmaker. Cheryl has discovered a black actress from an old film and tries to find her and find more about her. The actress she is looking for on the credits of the film goes by the name The Watermelon woman. This story is about Cheryl tracing back this actress through people in the community who might have met her while making a documentary about this process. In the film we follow the main character interviewing people and going to different places to find this information.

Leaving the main plot aside, we see friendships, we see queer love and community, we encounter round, full developed characters with a story line that is not only powerful in terms of representation of the black community and the queer community, but it also speaks about the lack of documentation of all these black artists, actors, personas that were there back then, and others who are now here but that do not get seen. All of this is happening while also employing humour which again breaks from the drama that is very often used aside of romance in queer movies.

Nowadays the topics of representation and its impact are starting to be explored and analysed by the people whose representation is at stake, which means that we have more narratives by queer people, but most of them are still not mainstream and difficult to find.

An example of a queer documentary that has transcended that barrier is the film *Disclosure* by Sam Feder, which is shown on the online streaming platform Netflix. The documentary explores the ways in which cinema has portrayed trans bodies through early cinema to current media. The documentary shows a range of footage of films featuring trans characters, together with interviews and analysis of the features by trans actors and academics. The documentary is not only critically analysing media but also giving a voice to the trans community.

From the sculpture of Juliana Huxtable to that of Alisson Lapper. Are sculptural works seen as having a positive impact in society when creating representation of a minority? Nude, white cis abled male lensed works and other nuances.

When we think of representation, especially through the sculptural medium, we might think that if it is a realistic sculpture that representation of the subject must be a positive one and that the impact of that sculpture will immediately be positive too. Far from truth realistic sculptural works have more complexity than the portrayal of the subject.



Figure 3. Untitled (In the rage) (2015) by Juliana Huxtable

As a literal depiction of the subject, we might take into account how the subject is portrayed. Is she/ he/ they portrayed with clothes, if so, how? Which clothes? Or are they portrayed nude? What position do they have, are they placed in a plinth?

More importantly, as audience and artists alike we need to question the conceptual process of the artist, *raison d'être* of the piece. Who is the artist in relation to the person being portrayed and what is the reason for choosing the model? And finally, what are the power dynamics between the subject and artist within the understanding of identity politics, knowing that we live in a society in which we are not equal? Knowing that we do not have equal opportunities, that there are biases and discrimination. What does it mean for a cis white privileged male artist to be sculpting the body of a black woman, or a black woman who is born intersex? Or a white woman, or a disabled woman?

There are layers of intersection within those identities, in which all of them are placed on the margins, treated differently, overlooked.

Juliana Huxtable is a multidisciplinary artist, poet and DJ. Her works have been displayed in museums and galleries across the world, her work speaks about identity, culture, race, class and gender. She uses a varied range of mediums to compel the topics of her enquiry, which are very often drawn from academic research and her own identity.



Figure 4. Juliana Huxtable in *Installation view: There are Certain Facts that Cannot Be Disputed* Museum of Modern Art, New York 2015

Alisson Lapper is a disabled artist whose main medium is painting. Lapper is also a presenter and teaches mouth and foot painting and works for and is part of *the Mouth and Foot Painting Artists* (MPFA) association.



Figure 5. *Untitled* by Alisson Lapper

Both artists are on the intersection of identities, both have been sculpted by white cis abled artists.

Juliana Huxtable in an interview explains how the sculpture of herself made by Frank Benson was not made for the exhibition on the Triennial but ended up being exhibited with her work. She noted that when she agreed to the sculpture, it was for it to be shown in very specific contexts and galleries, she also noted that very early on the sculptural process and conceptualization she was not going to be nude. She also noted that Benson adopted the colours from her palette, the colours that she had been using on one of the characters she had been working on for years (Brito and Huxtable, 2019) which was not the original agreement. An example of the character can be seen on the portrait called: Untitled in the Rage (See figure 3)

Lately this year, 2020 Huxtable has reflected again on the creation of her sculpture and has made a public statement on her social media platforms saying:

‘Yearly update for those who do not know I don’t talk to Frank I resent that sculpture, I got paid little to no money for that... It is a literal embodiment of exploitation. I have come to hate it’ (Huxtable. 2020)

If we go back to the first interview there were a few pointers that showed that Benson lacked ethos; we have to question the necessity of the nude, the appropriation of Huxtable’s palette and the colonization of the space in which Huxtable was first asked to exhibit, which brings us to reflect on the role of the curator.

Frank Benson in a talk in Boston University of Visual Arts, notes that he and Huxtable decided to do the sculpture together and 'that it would be much more interesting to do the sculpture in nude' (Benson, 2017). It was Benson who asked Huxtable to model, yet he declares they decided to collaborate. In his talk the connotations of the language used to describe this collaboration indicate that collaborating was not his intention. Huxtable, as we have seen above, has mentioned on several occasions that the choices made for this sculpture were not consensual, thus Benson would not be collaborating with Huxtable but appropriating her body, her image to be reproduced indefinitely, for her body to be looked at, objectified and seen. It seems this sculpture does more for the cis community imagination and enquiry than for the intersex, trans and non-binary community, who might feel that their body has just become a commodity.

If we want to represent somebody else's experience there is need for dialogue, for a conversation in which the creation is not only by the artist, but by both artist and model/collaborator, in which the model/collaborator benefits not only monetarily but also in terms of representation, in which consent is on the forefront of the collaboration.

Representing the other should not be taken lightly, especially when representing people from the margins as the impact is greater than what we can imagine. By representing the other we are being curators of the contemporary social and cultural narratives, we are taking part in the creation of the current social cognitive archive, in which expectations of the other and ourselves are created.

In their essay *Inclusive archives and recordkeeping: towards a critical manifesto*, Joanne Evans and Jacqueline Z. Wilson talk about inclusivity and the importance of enabling 'decolonised, imagined and participatory archives built on principles for acknowledging, respecting, representing, and negotiating multiple rights in records in and through time and space'.

We do not very often think of media and literature as archive and that is when we fail to acknowledge the power of those works and the power of representation, a reason for which we need to put systems in place to make sure that the people who we are representing are happy with that representation through the years to come.

In the article *Between speaking out in public and being person-centred: collaboratively designing an inclusive archive of learning disability* (Brownlee-Chapman et al., 2018, p.17), the Inclusive Archive Research Team speaks about the term *archival autonomy* and the ideas they have put in place in order to allow the disabled community to create their own archives and narrate their own stories through a fully consensual process.

Some of the main ideas could easily be translated into representation of different groups through art and photography. For example: 'Choose what you share', 'Choose who you share it with', and 'change your mind'.

If we considered these three pointers and made a contract in which we set limits of how our images are shown, and our stories told, the ownership of that archive would truly belong to us. By choosing what we share, we are creating boundaries and being open about what we feel comfortable with. By choosing who we share it with, we can meditate on the effects of our narratives in different contexts. By having the option of changing our mind, we are

allowed to detract from our contract, we are allowed to stop sharing that information, we are in charge to choose at all times how things are shown and to whom.

On the other side of representation and the perception of the self, we have a sculpture of Alisson Lapper by Marc Quinn, placed in Trafalgar Square in London. Lapper sees the representation of her body as a way forward to the acceptance of disabled bodies and inclusion of disabled people in society.

Even though Lapper, unlike Huxtable, is proud of that representation, in one of her interviews she notes how if she had had the money, she would have created the sculpture herself, as it explores the topics that she herself uses in her work, which are motherhood, disability and feminism. (Lapper, 2014)

It seems sculpting people from the margins and claiming the ownership of those works is a recurrent topic with Marc Quinn, who has lately sculpted the activist Jen Reid in Bristol. One could claim he is profiting from those experiences, those people, those bodies, their representation.

Which poses the question should we represent the other just because we can? Because we have the means? And if we do decide to, should it have our name as artist if we are representing an experience that is not our own? Should we not be inquiring for our personal reason to be representing the other? Should we not collaborate with the people who we are portraying so their representation is a truthful portrayal, a positive portrayal, instead of a biased work created from our privilege? Should we not create a piece of art that benefits the community, instead of benefiting ourselves?

Portrayal of aging and elders. Whose views, what reality? Representation as a way of subjugation.

Gerontology, the study of aging often takes into account issues of gender and race, understanding that age is not a separate identity but its experience is interlinked and influenced by several factors. Vasu Reddy and Naida Sanger point this out in their article *Matters of Age: An Introduction to Ageing, Intergenerationality and Gender in Africa* 'ageing is never a homogeneous process, but rather is profoundly mediated by gender, race, class, and place.' (Reddy, 2012, page7).

Depictions and representation of aging vary broadly across cultures and countries.

Blossom Fondo notes in her essay *Coming to Terms. Ageing and Moral Regeneration in J.M. Coetzee's Age of Iron and Elizabeth Costello*:

'Ageing is represented in many cultures as the dulling of the emotions and hardening of perspectives. It is seen as the moment when the individual becomes unreceptive to new ideas and when change is consequently impossible.' (Fondo, 2018, p.135), on the other hand if we look into Maori culture, elders are seen as an essential part of the community, creating intergenerational relationships in which the members of the community help each other and form part of each other's lives. The Maori see aging as the path of learning and growth, in which, as we age, we accumulate that knowledge (Valle, 2018, p. 172). This belief is represented in the traditional art of Pōutama, which are 'stepped pattern

of *tukutuku*¹ panels and woven mats - symbolising genealogies and also the various levels of learning and intellectual achievement' (Maori Dictionary, 2003-2020)

If we focussed on western representations of elders in mass media, the first depictions that come to mind are of ageing women in advertising, with a main focus on “beauty” products. These advertisements try to contain, repair or stop the ageing body as flesh, turning the ageing woman into an object which is no longer desired, an object that can only be seen through the concept of physical improvement. We see this being executed through the means of selling products, selling a prototype of desirability and unidimensional narrative in which women are nothing more than their bodies, and that as we age there is nothing left to portray about us.

As Maria Edström notes on her article *Visibility patterns of gendered ageism in the media buzz: a study of the representation of gender and age over three decades*:

‘the presence of older people as news subjects seem to be gendered, and women beyond 65 years of age are more likely representing ordinary persons whereas older men serve as experts or spokespersons more commonly’ — (Edström, 2018, p. 79)

Women blend into the background, not just in the news, but in other media too as our body is no longer attractive by mainstream standards, which means we no longer serve the purpose of objectification. Men on the other hand, carry on being subjects of representation, since they have always been portrayed as something more than rather just a figure of desire.

Another example in literature that defies the western notions of ageing and elders as a synonym of dull and lacking interest, are the novels by John Maxwell Coetzee. In her essay Blossom Fondo analyses the books by Coetzee in relation to age in postcolonial literature, she explores the aspects in which Coetzee's book counteracts master narratives in which black people and people of old age are very often negatively represented and stereotyped. In reference to the main character in the novel *Elizabeth Costello* she notes:

"In refusing to occupy the state of helplessness and dependency attributed to the aged, she is making a statement against ageist doctrines. Even her son Michael is exasperated by her non-conformist attitude and complains 'why can she not be an ordinary old woman living an ordinary old woman's life? If she wants to open her heart to animals, why can't she stay at home and open it to her cat?'" (Coetzee 2004: 83)' (Fondo, 2018, 134)

As Fondo notes in her essay, in *Elizabeth Costello* we discover the character of a woman who is in the last years of her life, a woman who is an activist, who has values, who keeps discovering herself. She fights for what she believes in and continues to believe in change and also creates change, a woman who is not defined by her gender or age. Even though the character transgresses the stereotypical depictions of aging, as we can see through that small excerpt, ageism and stereotypes are portrayed through the narrative but at the same time are defied by the character. (p. 123)

If we research the current media, one of the ground-breaking series that portrays aging women is the television series *Grace and Frankie* (Figure 6).

This series portrays the lives of women in their seventies, it shows the stories of older women like never before on television. We see two women who are critical thinkers, who are fun, who have a sex life, friendships, new projects. We see multidimensional characters; we experience their full life, not only through the aging body which we see through the characters sometimes struggle, but with the main plot portraying their full life's.



Figure 6. Screen Shot from television series *Grace and Frankie*

A critique about this television show is that even though the actresses have the same age as their characters, one could argue that they still represent an ideal of western youth beauty that most people will not attain in their late seventies or in any age at all. As Merce Mass from *La federacio d'associacions de gent gran de Catalunya*² notes in the documentary *La gran vellesa* (The great aging)³ (tv3, 2020):

'Old age is something that people dislike, there are never old people on the screen, the old people we see in the advertisements are not really old, we usually see people in their 60s or younger with the aesthetics of older people with white hair'⁴.

Does *Grace and Frankie* represent an unattainable aesthetic, an appearance that really does not show how older women really look like as they get to their late 70s? Probably, but it still does not deflect from the fact that this series is showing us women in their late 70s thriving professionally and personally.

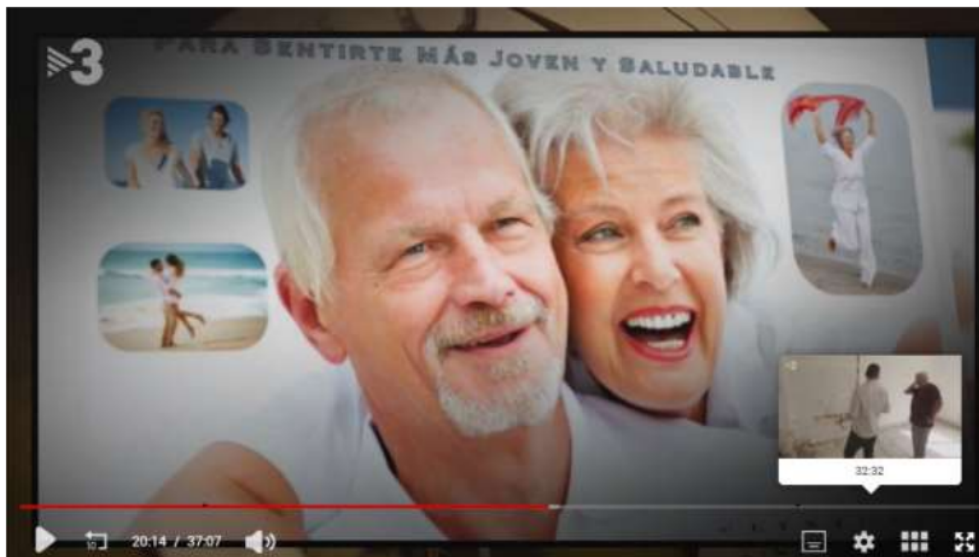


Figure 7. Screenshot from documentary *La gran vellesa*

Conclusion

Representation matters and the narratives we read and see are important. They play a big role in the way we see ourselves and others and the way in which we interact with each other.

Even though narratives in media and literature are slowly becoming more inclusive and there are more works that are not based on stereotypes, there is still a lot to do.

We must start producing material based on a multiplicity of stories. We need BAME, LGBTQ+, disabled and elder creatives to tell their own stories and those stories to be pushed forward and not to the side.

We need to take control of the media.

We can control what we produce, we can get help to create meaningful, diverse works.

We can choose what we consume, what we watch, who we support.

By actively seeking, by actively going against the grain and not consuming what is given, by supporting works from diverse creative artists, by educating ourselves, by critically thinking... We can create change.

If all of us who identify as women, non-binary, BAME, disabled, elders and LGBTQ+ decided to purposefully watch only shows that represent all of us, there would be no choice but to produce more of these works as there would be a clear demand to the eyes of the producers, publishers, curators and filmmakers to fund our stories, our projects, our people, our majority.

Let us create mindfully, think critically, and choose wisely what we consume.

NOTES:

1 Definition of tukutuku by The Maori Dictionary: (noun) ornamental lattice-work - used particularly between carvings around the walls of meeting houses. *Tukutuku* panels consist of vertical stakes (traditionally made of *kākaho*), horizontal rods (traditionally made of stalks of bracken-fern or thin strips of tōtara wood), and flexible material of flax, *kiekie* and *pīngao*, which form the pattern. Each of the traditional patterns has a name.

2 *Catalan association of federations of elders*

3 I have translated the title as *The great aging* for the purpose of understanding the title but the original connotations of the title in Catalan would be of a magnificent aging, denoting the beauty on aging. The documentary itself explores ageism but also gives the humanity back to the elders through unbiased representations of people across the spectrum of older age.

4 This extract was originally in Catalan: 'La vellesa no agrada, no es veuen, mai anuncis de vells, no són persones velles de veritat, tenen el cabell blanc, són gent de 60 o així.' The text shown in the main body is a translation of the original.

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