

Strategies of Living

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Strategies of Living

Introduction

Currently we live in a society that “favours the young and devaluates older people” (Nelson, 2002, p. xii). This is remarkable, for age has the unique feature that “unlike race and sex,” it “represents a category (...) [that] most people (...) will eventually (...) become a member of” (Nelson, 2002, p. x). Therefore, to understand the specific mechanisms at work with regard to the devaluation of elderly people, there are several areas that require critical exploration.

Firstly, it is important to ascertain precisely what becoming ‘elderly’ means. Secondly, if becoming elderly really does entail a devaluation within society, what is it exactly that is lost or devalued in the process? This thesis on elderly people and their engagement with objects explores these questions. Vitally, as this project comes from a feminist and gender studies perspective, it is aimed specifically at “giving voice to [the] hitherto voiceless” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19; cf. Ackerley & True, 2010; Buikema et al., 2011). It therefore asks the question: ‘How do elderly people deal with the possible loss they face while living in an elderly home?’ More specifically, this thesis deals with the question of how elderly people in an elderly home within Dutch contemporary society deal with the loss of a partner and agency—events and processes that can leave an elderly person feeling worthless and no longer an active participant within other people’s lives or society in a wider sense.

In order to answer this question, two sets of sub-questions have to be addressed: 1) What does it mean to become an elderly person within Dutch contemporary society? How does this process of becoming old result in the destabilisation of people’s societal position, commonly accepted as tied to productiveness/productivity, abled-bodied-ness and social interactions? 2) How do elderly people mourn this loss of activity and agency? Or, in other words, what strategies do elderly people utilise in order to deal with these layers of mourning, which can include mourning the loss of a partner, health, and agency? Finally, how do they transform (and how are they transformed by) specific objects in order to deal with processes of loss and the transition to their new lives in the elderly home? As mourning and materiality are inherently intertwined (Hallam & Hockey, 2001), the loss of agency that elderly people face—as I will explain in this thesis—gets increased with the move to an elderly home, which brings up inevitable questions of materiality. Furthermore, in the course of this thesis it will become clear that elderly people, through hierarchies of *animacy*, are facing a very specific form of objectification as they are positioned as, and towards, being ‘lifeless’ whilst

still biologically living.¹ Therefore, it is interesting to ask or investigate how elderly people negotiate these feelings of being considered ‘lifeless’ through their engagement with objects that matter significantly to these elderly people. I will thus take a materialist perspective towards questions of loss faced by the elderly.

State of Art—Elderly People in the Netherlands

The Netherlands are faced with the phenomenon of ‘*dubbele vergrijzing*’ (double ageing). The baby boomer generation (born between 1940 and 1964) is ageing, whilst the numbers of young people are dropping. This means that where there used to be a demographic ‘pyramid’ (signalling there are more young people than elderly), it is now changing into a ‘demographic skyscraper’ (Westenbroek, 2014), going from 2.7 million people above 65 in 2012 to an estimated 4.7 million in 2040 (Rijksoverheid, 2016). At the same time there have been budget cuts within the Dutch healthcare system for several consecutive years (Groene Amsterdammer, 2016), which has resulted in many elderly homes failing to perform adequately (NOS, 2016a). One such failing is in the size of the rooms in elderly homes. Single rooms should be a minimum of 23m², yet 17 percent of the elderly homes fail to adhere to this standard (NPCF, 2014).² Another such failing came to the fore when elderly people in care homes were asked to sign a ‘toilet contract’, which stated that they were allowed help for going to the lavatory no more than three times a day (AD, 2016; NOS, 2016b). This clearly illustrates that healthcare workers experience very high work pressure in the Netherlands and have hardly enough time to tend to the physical needs of elderly people (CBS, 2016) and that there are very few moments of engaging socially with the people in their care (Abvakabo FNV, 2014).

It is therefore no surprise that a staggering number of elderly people report feelings of loneliness: 50 percent amongst those aged 75 and over, rising to 60 percent amongst those aged over 85 (Ouderenfonds, 2016). These narratives of loneliness mean that elderly people are no longer active agents in the lives of other people, and that engagements with elderly people—other than by visitors—take place from a purely ‘task-’ based perspective (getting dressed, getting washed, etc.). Thus, elderly people experience what Michael Mulkay (1991) describes as social death. Social death is a state of being in which people “cease to exist

¹ A term introduced in Mel Chen’s (2006) book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect* (2012). It roughly translates as that which “is considered living and to what extent”. I will explore the topic of animacy in more depth in the first chapter of this thesis.

² This norm of 23m² already tells us something about what Dutch society considers ‘liveable’ for elderly people in a spatial context.

socially before they have been defined as clinically and/or biologically dead” (Mulkay, 1991, p. 32). Social death is not a unitary state, for being socially alive within some situations (to some people) does not mean that you are socially alive within other situations (to other people). However, social death is reported to occur especially frequently when people move to an elderly home. Social death is a result of biopolitics and necropolitics. Foucault ([1978-1979] 2008) describes biopolitics as societal systems that determine who gets to live, and who is allowed to die, whereas Achilles Mbembe (2003) describes necropolitics as those systems that determine who gets to die, and who is allowed to live. Therefore, the concept of social death shows affinity with Achilles Mbembe’s concept of ‘bare life’ (2003). For Mbembe’s concept of bare life is the devaluation and dispossession of certain groups within a society, for these groups are considered insignificant or even detrimental to the whole population. Studies show that elderly people who are lonely and suffer from social death are likely to die earlier than their peers who experience less social death (Victor & Bowling, 2012). The way Dutch society currently treats elderly people in elderly homes is thus very problematic in moral terms, necessitating an inquiry into how exactly elderly people negotiate these systems.

It is important to seek answers from elderly people themselves to discover how they perform these negotiations. During the transitional time up to living in an elderly home, people are pushed towards what I argue is a position similar to objecthood. Whilst transitioning, elderly people face many challenges not least those relating to issues of materiality. Materiality in this context has a double meaning: it serves as a tool used within society to devalue certain people (i.e. elderly people), whilst also describing the ways in which elderly people interact with objects to renegotiate the border between the human and the non-human, deconstructing the hierarchical dichotomy between these two categories. Therefore, it is important to explore the relationship between the people and the objects they take with them (or leave behind).

Positioning of the Thesis

This thesis is firmly rooted in feminist studies. One of the major contributions of feminist studies in recent decades has been the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; cf. Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Intersectionality shows how single axis-analysis “marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140; hooks, 1981). However, within feminist discussions, critiques have also been posited that suggest intersectionality has often become “an analysis (...) focusing on gender, race and class” without critically engaging the construction of these specific categories themselves (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 139; cf. Geerts &

Van der Tuin, 2013). Furthermore, intersectionality has been “criticized for being too rooted in modern nature/culture and human/non-human binaries” (Decka 2013; Geerts & Van der Tuin, 2013). This thesis remains mindful of these critiques throughout its investigation of its used axes. The project focuses on age, able-bodiedness and the complication of the human/object division, and critically examines dichotomous hierarchies of the human and the non-human; young and old; the able-bodied and the disabled. These axes are foregrounded because they are underrepresented within the current body of research, while they –as I show within this thesis- have a significant impact on how lives are lived, and how entities are valued. Simultaneously, I am also very much aware in my methodological framework that the chosen approach here might contribute to the critical ‘whitewashing (of) intersectionality’ by undermining intersectionality’s genealogy—born out of the need to analyse systems of oppression for black women (Crenshaw, 1989).³ I am aware that this thesis is in this sense positioned in the muddy field of critically engaging with some concepts (such as ageism and ableism), whilst not being able to critically engage with others (such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation).⁴ Being aware and open to this critique, this thesis acknowledges its limitations and uses the gist of examining multiple sites of oppression and/or power differences in order to attempt to change these sites of oppression. It adheres to the feminist standpoint that in order to create change you need to get your hand dirty, for no research is ‘pure’ or exonerated from “the constraints of ... power” (Grosz, 2014, p. 8).

Intersectionality entails two levels of enquiry: that of “the macrosociological level regarding multiple systems of power and oppression and the micro sociological level regarding the effects on individual lives” (Decka, 2013, p. 49). Therefore, this thesis aims to combine the theoretical macrosocial level—to understand the different discourses at play within society—with the micro-sociological level via interviews with elderly people to understand the effects of these discourses on their lives. This is important in order to understand how society at large produces regimes of living and of dying, that elderly people negotiate in order to create a sense of liveliness.

This thesis forms an exploration of the topic of elderly people in an elderly home who face the loss of their partner and/or agency in the wider social environment. Rather than a systematic or statistical overview, this thesis understands itself as an exemplary study, and thus its outcomes should not be generalised. Instead, it has a feminist aim by critically

³ For an example of this critique, see the blogpost by ‘Struggling to Be Heard’ (2014).

⁴ Although I did not ask the people I interviewed about their sexual orientation, all had been in heterosexual marriages for over two decades, and all interviewees were white.

engaging with ‘seemingly natural’ concepts (such as being elderly, and the object as intrinsic and bound to utility). Simultaneously, it adheres to the idea that true objectivity does not exist, and rather seeks for a situated way of gaining knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993). As I will show throughout this thesis, the ‘strategies of living’ elderly people use in order to deal with the multiple layers of loss and ‘lifelessness’ they face differ vastly from one person to another. My aim is not to provide a unitary vision of this phenomenon, but rather to contribute to an exploration of the question of what is considered a ‘livable life’ (Butler, 2013).

Methodology

This thesis has at its core the feminist project to make visible marginalised lives in order to bring about social change (Harding, 1993). In doing so, it draws upon different fields of research, such as memory studies and psychoanalysis. Furthermore, it shows affinity with new materialism, as this approach has the potential to bring back notions of materiality within a research field in which “[m]ateriality (...) is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation” (Barad, 2003, p. 801).⁵ Therefore, this research has two points of focus: elderly people who are marginalised within Dutch society due to discourses of ageism, ableism and neoliberalism; and the material they engage with in order to deal with the losses they face due to these discourses. This thesis is embedded within a situated knowledge framework, as it endeavours to understand its partiality towards the knowledges that are produced whilst negotiating the “need (...) [for an] ability to translate knowledges among very different—and power-differentiated communities” (Haraway, 1988, p. 580). It therefore constitutes a critical enquiry into ‘normalised’ concepts by asking the question of “where, when and under what condition (...) [a certain] statement [has] been true” (Rich, 1984, p. 214). Furthermore, this thesis contains a combination of both theory and practice, and because of its exploratory design it works from the feminist belief that the ‘personal is political’, connecting experiences from elderly people to the normalised discourses that form the political and social landscape of Dutch society.

Mel Chen’s book *Animacies; Biopolitics, Racial Mattering and Queer Affect* (2012) provides a valuable resource for this thesis. Chen gives a powerful analysis of the ways in which the animate/inanimate border is policed—which is tied to the human/object and the

⁵ For a long time, feminist theory has shied away from the idea that matter should be approached as something the researcher has direct access to (for example, see Butler’s approach to gender and bodies [Butler, 1991; Butler, 1993]) because the oppression of certain people happened through the naturalisation of certain bodies, for example, the sexualised bodies of black women (hooks, 1981; Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2012).

living/dead border—and also shows how this policing often fails. This approach provides an opportunity to look at the ways in which the policing of elderly people's lives as un-worthy fails—positioned at the object/inhuman/inanimate part of the division—and how these individuals manage to find ways to make this border more porous. I follow Chen's example of combining different fields of study by combining feminist thinkers who have differing epistemological stances. In this thesis, I read Birgit Meyer's (2013) concept of mediation together with Karen Barad's (2003; 2012) concept of intra-action, by approaching mediation from a materialist perspective. Furthermore, Karen Barad's approach of intra-action will be shown as having affinity with Sarah Ahmed's (2006) concept of orientation. Both authors approach the human and the non-human as mutually influencing each other, even though Ahmed is critical of new materialism (Ahmed, 2008). I read these feminist thinkers together—although they might differ in their onto-epistemological standpoints—because they share their focus on materiality, and on how materials cultivate lives far beyond their assumed affect.

Also, as a result of studying at the gender program in Utrecht, this thesis has an affirmative approach towards the texts and interviews. Having an affirmative approach is an important feminist critical tool that enables ethical approaching of the multi-layered subject (Braidotti, 2006, p. 137; cf. Bunz, Kaiser & Thiele, 2017). It is, as Mercedes Bunz, Birgit Mara Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele write in *Symptoms of them Planetary Condition: A Critical Vocabulary*, “about diagnosing precisely “what is,” with an eye schooled in detecting inequalities, asymmetries, and the never innocent differentiations we live in.” (2017, p. 26)

In my inquiry, I want to show that within these processes of objectification into which elderly people often find themselves pushed, they also find objects with which to ‘remain’. These elderly people are—to a greater or lesser extent—showing resilience against the different disposessions they experience from the side of society.

I held five interviews with elderly people in a care home in Leiden. The interviews I conducted were open-ended interviews, so that they were orientated towards the interviewee (Reinharz, 1992). It was important to me to have interviews that were focused on letting the interviewees speak and verbalise their ideas, for such an approach gives “access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). Thus, the interviews were not structured, apart from general topics that I considered beforehand, such as the objects in a person's room; feelings of loss; and the number of visits experienced within the home. This gave a wide variety of responses that approached concepts such as mourning and loss differently.

Amongst the five interviewees, there were two men and three women. All but one lived in the same elderly home in Leiden, and the person who no longer lived in the elderly home had resided at the elderly home during the time his wife had lived there. All but one were either a widow or a widower—one person being separated from his wife for many years. The ages of my interview participants ranged in age from 73 to 92. Because the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to two hours, I have not included the transcripts in this thesis, but rather made small biographies (at the end of the thesis) that introduce each of the elderly persons to the reader.⁶

Trust is an important factor within interview-based studies (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Reinharz, 1992; Warren & Karner, 2010). Especially during interviews in which culturally sensitive topics are discussed—as is often the case in wider feminist research, and equally within my own (Ackerly and True, 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Reinharz, 1992)—it is of vital importance to create an environment in which the interview participant feels safe to express their thoughts. In my research, I employed informed consent to make sure that the people I interviewed felt they could trust that the information I received would be treated in strict confidence. Because some elderly people had difficulty with either writing and/or reading, I also always verbally explained both the informed consent form and the aim of the interview to the participants. I am aware that the use of an informed consent form is something that is widely used within social science research and that there are many voices within feminist research who are opposed to the dominant modes of language used within the social sciences, as it “reproduces essentialism” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 22). Although I agree with this stance—as any uncritical adaption of dominant discourse reinforces structural power differences—I followed Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True’s (2010) guide on feminist research, in which they argue that “any account of research is at risk of relying on and producing its own essentialisms. Our best response is to be alert to this possibility and to attend to it” (p. 10). Mindful of all the above and specifically because an informed consent form could provide a basis for trust about the confidentiality of the conversation, its use was considered a necessary and valuable addition to my research.

Chapter Outline

In this final part of the introduction I will outline the general structure of the thesis and give an overview of the chapter structure. The first chapter provides the foundation of my analysis

⁶ Transcripts of the interviews are available at request.

by showing how becoming elderly within Dutch society causes a destabilisation of an individual's position within that society. I do so by taking a closer look at the term 'elderly', for this is neither a fixed nor a very well defined term, but rather a term subject to gendered, ageist, and ableist discourse (Nelson, 2002; Woodward, 1991). It will become clear in the discussion of this chapter that ageist and ableist discourses are an effect of our current neoliberal society, in which someone's worth is very closely tied to their productivity. I make clear how this process marks the elderly person as 'worth-less', whilst simultaneously burdening that person with responsibility for this loss of worth. By bringing in Mel Chen's (2012) theorisation of hierarchies of animacy—of what is considered animate, and to what extent—different discourses on ageism, ableism and neoliberalism are shown to be constitutive of, and constituted by, a hierarchy of liveliness in which elderly people are positioned towards 'lifelessness' or 'objecthood'. Therefore I will argue that elderly people—as a result of this process of becoming elderly within a neoliberal, ageist and ableist society—experience both a loss of agency and 'social death'—especially those who move to, or already live in, an elderly home. Experiencing this loss of agency and social death in a phase during which elderly people often experience (or have experienced) the loss of a partner means that they face an experience of existential loss on multiple levels. Simultaneously, elderly people are confronted with the question of what to take with them to the elderly home, inevitably leading to questions of how to engage with these objects during this period of one's life. I argue that this materiality situated within mourning processes is something that needs to be looked at in much greater detail. The multiple layers of loss and the questions of materiality associated with this time of change fail to be acknowledged by classic theories of mourning. Therefore, the last part of chapter one explores feminist theories on mourning in order to understand the loss of agency, a partner, and liveliness that elderly people face. Further, this final section will lay the foundation needed for the second and third chapter, in which I will look more closely at the role of objects within elderly people's processes of mourning.

The second part of the thesis consists of chapter 2 and 3, in which I present an in-depth analysis of the interviews I held with my participants in Leiden. Both chapters are sub-divided into two—a theoretical part and a more (textual) analytical part. Both of these chapters are driven by the following questions: What strategies do elderly people utilise to deal with these layers of mourning, including mourning the loss of a partner and their health/agency? How do they transform (and how are they transformed by) specific objects in order to deal with processes of loss and the transition to their new lives in the elderly homes? Because these questions are focused on the elderly person as well as on the objects that they did (or did not)

take with them to the elderly home, I start chapter two by complicating the Kantian human/object division—a division that is linked to the life/death division, and carries with it a hierarchical notion of the human above the object (Chen, 2012; , 1985). As chapter one will show that elderly people are ‘pushed’ towards ‘objecthood’, this human/object division is made into a critical point of engagement. This hierarchical positioning—of some beings above others within a framework of liveliness—means that “[o]ur moral indifference to so many supposedly significant beings (humans, animals, nature, etc.) starts with the idea that there are some beings that are less significant or not significant at all” (Introna, 2009, p. 404). I show how feminist thinkers have problematised the object/subject division by arguing that the human and the object are in a state of mutual becoming with each other (Barad, 2003; Haraway, 1983), without necessarily conflating the two. In order to show this I read Birgit Meyers concept of mediation together with Karen Barad’s intra-action. By reading together two thinkers who might not usually be positioned thus, I aim to follow Mel Chen’s approach—and in doing so, creating a transdisciplinary analysis. Barad and Meyer both show that the human and the object are co-constitutive of each other, but are also both subject to power relations. Discourses and histories influence how humans and objects become, which is why I follow with a section on memory, as feminist approaches towards collective memory add another layer to understanding how histories (which are formed by power relations) influence human- and object-based hierarchies. I point out that collective memory can play an important part in the strategies of living that elderly people display to alter these hierarchies of human/object and life/death.

I then move into the analytical part of the chapter. I make a distinction between two different ‘strategies of living’—that of ‘negotiating properties’ and that of ‘blurring boundaries’. I start the analysis on ‘strategies of negotiating properties’ via an analysis of parts of a conversation I held with Francis about the re-reading and re-marking of her diaries from the time her husband was diagnosed with cancer. I make clear that the property of a diary, as something that contains a delineated timeline, gets altered. Furthermore, her diary frames Francis’ mourning process, by forming a human/nonhuman collective memory. The diary thus gains the property of being formative, rather than informative, of Francis’ memory and mourning process. Secondly, I make a comparison between Joop’s and Karel’s mourning ritual; lighting candles near pictures of loved ones. By understanding how power-relations influence engagements between humans and objects, I show how the elderly home supports discourses of ageism and neoliberalism which, for example, result in the prohibition of fire in the rooms of elderly homes. I argue that Karel subverts these regulations by changing the

properties of candles. Joop, who does not live in the elderly home, is less affected by these discourses of neoliberalism and ageism. Comparing his ritual of lighting a candle near his wife's picture has the purpose of showing the influence of context on mourning rituals. Furthermore, it forms a connection with the second 'strategy of living' that elderly people display, namely that of 'blurring boundaries'.

In the section on 'blurring boundaries', I look at parts of the conversation I held with Joop, which are about his afternoon nap in what he considers to be 'his wife's chair'. I argue that through his assignment of the chair as belonging to his wife and his physical presence connecting with the material of the chair, the chair becomes a connection with his wife who passed away, and thus blurs the boundary between life and death. Furthermore, the chair gains a sense of 'livingness' within a society in which objects are considered to be lifeless. Therefore, his mourning ritual blurs the hierarchy of animacy as well. This is followed by an analysis of my conversation with Johanna about the (absent) letters from her daughters. Although the letters were absent in their physicality—she had discarded them—I will argue that they were still fully present within the conversation. Simultaneously, they were a way of bringing her estranged daughters into the conversation. Therefore, Johanna blurred the boundaries between presence and absence, thus removing the hierarchy between these two states.

The final chapter will focus on a further two strategies of living—namely queering and diversifying agency. As with the preceding chapter, this final chapter will begin with a theoretical introduction to the strategies under discussion. I begin with an elaboration of Graham Harman's *Tool Being* (2002) and combine this with Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) to make clear how orientations towards objects are never neutral, and that histories and pasts are of influence to the way in which objects are perceived. Furthermore, Ahmed's work is central to understanding how, at the moment an object 'fails' to live up to its script, a destabilisation occurs in which the object can acquire new meanings and scripts—the object can be queered. This is followed by a section that examines agency, with a particular focus on the feminist theorist Jane Bennet (2009), who argues that agency as a trait belongs to both humans and non-humans—and to assemblages of human/non-human alike. This diversification of agency enables the use of material in manifold ways and undoes the hierarchy between human and object. Therefore, the queering and diversification of agency are helpful strategies via which to approach the feelings of loss that elderly people experience directly because of the traditional hierarchy that exists between the human and the object, in which the elderly are assigned the status of 'object'.

In the final section of this last chapter I focus tightly on these two strategies—the queering of objects and the diversification of agency. In the subsection on queering I look at the way in which a participant—in this case Riet—queers the script attached to her table in two distinct ways. Firstly, she queers the table by calling it a ‘dining table’ in order to connect her past to her present, simultaneously acknowledging her identity as a mother through this connection. Secondly, she uses the ‘dining-set’ that includes her table and chairs to welcome possible visitors. This way she creates social liveness for herself by being an actant in the lives of visitors. Karel queers his table too, but in his case, instead of focusing on people, he queers his table into his lost garden. In this way he turns his table—which commonly would not be considered living—into something that is ‘living’. Via this change he creates joy and thus regains something that was previously lost.

Within the subchapter on diversifying agency, I start with Johanna’s engagement with her chair, as she forms a human/non-human assemblage with it in order to seek social liveness by connecting with the staff. By engaging in this human/non-human assemblage, Johanna becomes like a Harawayian cyborg (1983), resulting in a transfer of agency to the chair. Francis, via her strategy of transferring agency onto her books, exhibits certain similarities with Johanna, as she tries to create a sense of social liveness for herself. However, instead of seeking social liveness by connecting with the outside world, Francis seeks social liveness by connecting to objects. Because Francis upholds a narrative that separates the frail from the fit within the elderly home—in which she assigns herself to the fit—together with a separation between the young and the old, she misses intellectual connection with both the inhabitants and staff of the elderly home in which she lives. By referring to her books as company, she recreates an experience of intellectual connection, making the books an active actant in her life. As she is free to consult her books any time, she also regains a sense of agency. Finally, in the concluding part of this thesis I will summarise my findings and make recommendations for further research.

Becoming Elderly in Dutch Society

Introduction

This thesis examines, in a contemporary Dutch context, how the residents of a home for the elderly deal with the loss of a partner, agency and objects. Moving to an elderly home, and thus no longer being an active participant within society and other people's lives, often leaves elderly people with feelings of worthlessness.

In order to answer this question fully, it is important to ascertain what constitutes being an elderly person in Dutch society and to take a closer look at the term 'elderly' itself, for it is neither a fixed, nor a very well-defined term—rather, it is an inherently fluid term that is subject to gendered, ageist, and ableist discourses (Nelson, 2002; Woodward, 1991). As will become clear over the course of this chapter, ageist and ableist narratives—as an effect of wider neoliberal societal discourses—result in the deprivation of agency for elderly people, especially those who move into, or already live in, a home for the elderly. These discourses constitute, and are constituted by, a certain hierarchy of liveliness—a hierarchy of how sentient or alive we consider something or someone to be. By looking at Mel Chen's (2012) work on this topic, I point out how these mechanisms of assigned or constituted levels of agency have to do with assigned levels of *animacy*. Chen's work is important, as it offers both an understanding of this mechanism, and a framework through which to critically engage with these discourses.

These gendered, ableist, and ageist neoliberal discourses constitute—but are also constituted by—each other. They reveal how the societal position of elderly people becomes destabilised. This instability and loss of agency is often coupled with a loss of materiality and even the loss of a partner. These narratives require an enquiry into theories of mourning, common understandings of which are lacking in their response to the question of how elderly people mourn this loss of activity and agency (Woodward, 1991). Therefore, introducing the work of feminist thinkers that address issues connected with mourning (such as Tammy Clewell, Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth), I lay a theoretical foundation upon which to develop an understanding of how narratives of mourning tension the lives of elderly people.

Becoming Elderly: A Gendered and Ableist Path to Becoming Invisible

Within the Netherlands, specifically concerning the Dutch population, there exists a phenomenon called *dubbele vergrijzing* (double ageing). This means that in the coming years, there will be an increase of elderly people in proportion to the overall population.⁷ This increase will occur because of two main factors: the aging ‘baby boomer’ generation, coupled with an increase in overall life expectancy. Whereas the ratio of elderly people to working population used to be 1 : 4, over the coming years the prognosis is that this will become a ratio of 1 : 2 (Nationaalkompas, 2014). In other words, the structure of Dutch society is, in demographic terms, going from a ‘pyramid’ to a ‘skyscraper’ (Westendorp, 2014). This, combined with a cultural trend away from multiple generations occupying the same house—because of the “preferred social unit” of the nuclear family (Barlett, 1984, p. 879)—means an increase of elderly people living in elderly and nursing homes.⁸

Being ‘elderly’ is not a pre-defined stage that everyone reaches at the same point in life. As with childhood or adolescence, becoming elderly is a label or categorisation that is constituted by intertwined processes of interpersonal assignment; labelling by society; or the claims of the individual. Despite attempts to create distinctions between the ‘old’ (55-75) and the ‘old-old’ (75 and over) (Nelson, 2002), current narratives surrounding age generally fall back onto the dualistic separation of young versus old, or youth versus old age (Woodward, 1991). Furthermore, although the concept of youth is a “movable marker” (Woodward, 1991, p. 6)—in the sense that ‘young’ people always argue that the people who are ‘old’ are the ones that are older than they are—old age within western society becomes a unified group lacking distinctions or diversity. Additionally, elderly people are often invisible, especially within media such as films, magazines, and television (Bazzini et al., 1997; Healy & Ross,

⁷ These figures are a projection up to 2040 (CBS, 2012).

⁸ Although the nuclear family, which refers to a “heterosexual married couple with dependent children” (Barlett, 1984, p. 879) and rose to prominence in the period since the industrial revolution, has been contested on many levels, such as the increasing heterogeneity of family forms (Benston, 2001); the whiteness of its point of view (Burton, 1995); and its need for intergenerational bonds (Bengtson, 2001), it is still a persistent approach towards family life, as there is currently no indicator included within the CBS for multiple generations living together (Kreule, 2016) and the naturalisation exam contains questions that favour the nuclear family above multigenerational cohabitation.

2002; Robinson & Skill, 1995).⁹ Elderly people are depicted as white and devoid of both sexuality and gender (Nelson, 2002; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2000).¹⁰

This homogenisation of the elderly highlights a cultural failure to accurately represent them (Woodward, 1991, p. 8). The normalisation and homogenisation of patterns of aging performs the function of ‘preparing’ younger generations for what is to come (Russo, 1999, p. 26). Kathleen Woodward (1991) notices how old age is “a time in life where many (...) feel anxiety and fear” (p. 4). Furthermore, this homogenising approach towards ageing and the elderly fails, as “older people do not become more alike by becoming old (...) In many areas, they become more varied” (Freedan as cited in Woodward, 1999, p. 156), especially because life style patterns—which are tied to identity markers, such as social economic status, ethnicity, and sexuality—become reflected in our bodies as we age (Kuwaza & Sweet, 2008). Next to narratives of invisibility and a lack of diverse representation within media, Dutch nursing and elderly homes also represent a form of spatial invisibility by assigning the elderly to certain areas or regions of living.

Within Dutch society, becoming an elderly person is also a gendered process. Current generation(s) of elderly people are a mix of pre- and post-WWII generations. After WWII, Dutch laws prohibited women from working when they got married and, after abolishing these laws, a period of pillarisation followed.¹¹ Most families—albeit dependent upon economic status—upheld a dynamic in which the man worked, whilst the woman stayed home and took care of the children. Thus, for men of these generations, becoming an elderly person is very much aligned with retirement (Mulkay, 1991). However, for women of these generations who stayed home and managed the household—an activity that was (is) not counted as labour by society (Engels, 1884; Hartman, 1979)—these lines are less clearly

⁹ I would like to thank Gabrielle Griffin for her insights into this phenomenon within literature, where the invisibility of elderly people—especially women—is reflected within the western canon. Novels that depict women’s lives, such as *Anna Karenina* (1877), *Romeo & Juliet* (1597) or *Lolita* (1955)—often written by white male authors—end the narrative with marriage, motherhood or death. This compartmentalises women’s lives into stages of growing up, marrying the ‘right man’ and bearing children (of which at least one must be a son). Because divorce was prohibited, narratives of infidelity either had to take a redemptive turn or end in death, which resulted in a lack of representation of elderly women within the literary canon.

¹⁰ The Dutch narrative of elderly people depicts mostly a heterosexual couple that recently retired, both wearing a similar short hairstyle and the same ANWB jacket whilst making bike trips through Dutch nature. For a characteristic example of this narrative, see the short mock documentary *Bike! The Amazing World of Cyclists in Utrecht* (Utrecht2015, 2015).

¹¹ I realise that the use of the word generation is not uncontested, as it establishes the very thing that I try to problematise within this chapter: a separation between certain ages, thus creating ‘old’ and ‘young’ (Buikema et al., 2011). Furthermore, from (some) feminist perspectives, the word generation marks a reproductive narrative that upholds the oedipal structure of “struggle and recrimination” (Roof as cited in Woodward, 1991, p. 156).

defined. For them labour did not stop when their children left home, nor did they have a clear retirement age, as they kept on being responsible for the household. Ironically, the threshold for becoming an elderly person for women is generally far earlier than the retiring age of men. It is defined by a narrative in which women are considered to be old or elderly once they cease to be ‘reproductive’ or, in other words, when they start their menopause.¹² This process is not relevant for men, as they are perceived to be able to reproduce until their seventies. Rudi Westendorp, professor in geriatrics, shows this narrative—and fallacy—in his book *Oud Worden Zonder het te Zijn* (2014). He states: “Zo rond het 50^{ste} jaar is het definitief afgelopen en breekt de menopauze aan. Maar daarna hebben vrouwen nog aanzienlijke overlevingskansen en sommigen worden grootmoeder” (p. 97). Although not a scientific publication, the book was ranked 39 in the top 100 bestsellers in the Netherlands in 2014 (CPNB, 2014).¹³ It shows how the narrative of women being old once they are menopausal is very much prevalent in Dutch society—both amongst scholars and non-scholars alike. Additionally, the position of older people in society—specifically elderly women—is almost exclusively made visible through narratives of nurture. Westendorp (2014) reiterates this by stating that one possible ‘purpose’ of elderly women is to become a grandmother.¹⁴ Thus, they only take up an agential role when they imitate the parent-child relationship, again tying their liveliness or visibility to the ability of (in this case, symbolic) reproduction (Woodward, 1999, p. 157). This narrative of reproduction aligns with a discourse of sexuality or sexual availability, in which to become elderly as a woman is to become sexless or desire(d)-less (Nelson, 2002).¹⁵ Lastly, amongst current generations elderly men have a lower life expectancy because of the aforementioned working life, resulting in a less healthy lifestyle. Therefore, significantly more women become widows than men becoming widowers. Thus, becoming elderly is to become invisible within society—a process that starts earlier and lasts

¹² This is an interesting phenomenon, as through current technological developments the maximum age for childbirth has increased. This brings up the question of whether the threshold of becoming elderly as a woman might also increase.

¹³ [translation] Around their 50th year it is completely over and the menopause arrives. But after that women still have a considerable rate of survival and some become grandmothers.

¹⁴ This is called the ‘Grandmother Hypothesis’, which (coming from an ‘evolutionary perspective’) assumes that women survive after menopause because they can become caretakers of grandchildren whilst parents take up other activities in hunting-gathering societies. However, this assumes a patriarchal hunter-gatherer society, something that is not supported by the data found on such societies. An elaboration on this hypothesis is written by Kristen Hawkes et al. (1989), and its debunking is written by Jocelyn Peccei (2001).

¹⁵ Even though the menopause brings bodily changes—such as decreased androgen hormones (Guay et al., 2004) or complications with vaginal lubrication (Dennerstein et al., 2000)—which might lead to lowered sexual impulse, the idea that one has to be sexually active or has to have a desire to be sexually active is problematic and genders the narrative of becoming an elderly person.

longer for women compared to men, due to differences in life expectancy. Combined with the fact that for elderly women visibility can only be maintained via narratives of nurturing, it becomes clear that becoming elderly is, in a myriad of ways, an inherently gendered process.

The Human Enterprise: The Pressure to Be Young and Able-Bodied

As we have seen above, in addition to the gendered processes at work, ableist and ageist discourses also influence how people become elderly. This section will focus on what these ageist and ableist discourses entail, and how they are constituent of, and constituted by, neoliberal discourse, which assesses someone's value as inescapably tied to their productivity. Currently, we live in a society in which we favour the young and in which it is "undesirable to get older" (Nelson, 2002, p. ix). It is therefore no surprise that when we encounter someone, age is one of the first things we notice (Kite, Deaux & Miele, 1991). Many stereotypes about elderly people exist, such as being slow-thinking, dependent, self-centred and having physical, cognitive and interpersonal deficiencies (Hummert in Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2000). These stereotypes are not equally divided amongst elderly people, as the 'old old' (over 75) are more negatively stereotyped than the 'old' (age 55-75 [Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2000, p. 335]). The act of negatively evaluating and stereotyping elderly people is highly stigmatising, and discourse that supports the perpetuation of this stigma is called ageism (Nelson, 2002).

Within psychological research two ways of coping with stigma are distinguished, namely primary compensation, and secondary compensation. Primary compensation is described as "behavior that facilitate achieving desired outcomes despite the stigma", whereas secondary compensation is described as "changing the way one feels about outcomes that the stigma affects" (Miller & Myers as cited in Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2000, p. 336, p. 345). Elderly people are reported to show more secondary compensation, due to their inability to achieve the goals that are part of primary compensation. However, the inability of showing primary compensation because the required behaviour is no longer possible for a person is part of another form of stigmatisation called ableism. Ableism is the system within our society whereby "[a]ble-bodiedness (...) still largely masquerades as a non-identity, as the natural order of things" (McRuer, 2006, p. 1). As a result, society favours able-bodied people over disabled-bodied people, for the pull to be 'normal' is strong. "Nearly everyone wants to be normal (...) [especially] if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant" (Warner, 1999, p. 53). This naturalisation of able-bodiedness happens through a justification that places the

responsibility of the disability on the individual. Eli Clare very poignantly questions this assumption in his book *Pride and Exile* (1999):

Disabled. (...) in all its forms it means unable, but where does our ‘inability’ lie? Are our bodies like stalled cars? Or does disability live in the social and physical environment, in the stairs that have no accompanying ramp? (Clare, 1999, p. 82, emphasis in original)

Is it the body that is unable to walk that makes it disabled, or is it the absence of an elevator that labels a person disabled?¹⁶ This mechanism of ableism wherein the environment localises disability as an individual’s problem (and responsibility) rather than a problem entangled within the environment is why elderly people show mainly secondary compensation behaviours.

The individualisation of disabled-ness is an effect of our neoliberal society, in which one’s worth is tied to one’s productivity. In his lectures on biopolitics ([1978-1979] 2008), Michel Foucault describes how, after WWII, neoliberal societies developed across Western Europe, in which the human became “a sort of enterprise for himself” ([1978-1979] 2008, p. 225). Through this development an economic interpretation could be given for a “domain previously thought to be non-economic” (Foucault, [1978-1979] 2008, p. 219)—that of human capital. In this way, the worth of the individual became expressed through a

series of wages which (...) will begin by being relatively low when the machine begins to be used, then will rise, and then will fall when the machine’s obsolesce or the ageing of the worker insofar as he is a machine (Foucault, [1978-1979] 2008, p. 225).

Thus, ableism is an effect of neoliberal society—something that can be seen through the dictionary definition that “being able bodied [is] being capable of the normal physical exertions required in a particular system of labor” (Oxford English Dictionary as cited in

¹⁶ As can be seen from this example, labeling bodies as dis-abled is problematic as it shifts responsibility for the inability solely to the person rather than their environment. However, as Eli Clare continues in his book, creating euphemisms such as different-abled or physically challenged merely functions as “to cushion us from the cruelty of language.” (1999, p. 83). The language then does not serve to defy the stigma around disabled people, but rather obscures it to protect the sensibilities of the able-bodied by using less confrontational language.

McRuer, 2006, p. 8). By turning each of us into an enterprise, we become responsible for our own circumstances, and the body seemingly becomes an investment, or “the set of investments we have made at the level of man himself” (Foucault, [1978-1979] 2008, p. 231). Resultantly, “all the problems of health care and public hygiene must, or at any rate, can be rethought as elements which may or may not improve human capital” (Foucault, [1978-1979] 2008, p. 230). When the body is considered an enterprise, ableism gets justified through the individualisation of responsibility. This results in a naturalisation and normalisation of ableism, forming a “system of compulsory able-bodiedness [which seemingly] emanates from everywhere and nowhere” (McRuer, 2006, p. 8). Returning to the division between young and old; this system of compulsory able-bodiedness and the individualisation of responsibility serves to mask youth as the neutral norm. Thus, when able-bodiedness is the norm, and disabled-ness the deviant or abnormal, elderly people are more often considered to fall into the category of abnormal. This mechanism of assigning someone’s status as ‘different from the norm’ means simultaneously assigning another status to the (invisible) norm. Therefore, this dichotomous division between youth and old age only serves the purpose of unmarking the young body. Constituting the elderly body as an ‘object’ or an abnormality leaves the one who constitutes this subject—the young—disembodied and whole (Tanner, 2006, p. 2).

The entanglement of ableism and ageism is also something that gets reflected through the use of language. Language is an inherent part of discourse, as discourse consists of “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e. a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (Hall, 1992, p. 291). This can be seen when looking at discourse surrounding issues of health, and how those issues change in the context of age. Young people are presupposed to be able-bodied and ‘working on your health’ means moulding the body into a desired ideal. However, for the elderly the absence of an able-body is the assumption and ‘working on your health’ means to (re)gain this able-bodiedness (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999).¹⁷ This idea of having to be ‘lucky’ with one’s health as an elderly person is a good example of the discursive power of both ableism and ageism, for “it is power which makes things true” (Hall, 1992, p. 293). Additionally, by ingraining a discourse that assumes a lack of health among elderly people, this idea creates a normalcy and naturalises the able body—one which is also, by definition, a young body. Of course, this is

¹⁷ This ties into a specific capitalist framework, in which the body gets positioned as malleable—something that forms itself in accordance with desired (and purchased) choices. This creates an illusion of the body as unmarked or (ironically) disembodied because the body does not require to be felt. It upholds an illusion of being limitedless, and this illusion is threatened by the dying, ill, or elderly body (Tanner, 2006). When health is not a given, it shows the body as embodied and limited—and something that cannot be bought.

not to say that there are no physical differences between bodies of different ages, or that elderly people do not face health difficulties. Rather, the intention here is to point out that the assumptions accompanying an absence of health, coupled with assumptions of having to be ‘glad’ or ‘lucky’ in case one is able-bodied, work together to create a narrative in which being disabled is not valued and carries only negative connotations. It reflects an imbalance, through which an institutionalisation of able-bodiedness occurs that relies on the subordination of disability (McRuer, 2006, p. 7). Other mechanisms by which elderly people’s lives are devalued are reflected linguistically through temporal metaphors. An elderly person is often approached with metaphors of ‘natural cycles’, such as seasons or days. For example, the saying ‘to be in the evening or winter of your life’ positions elderly people closer to death, suggesting “acceptable change rather than termination” (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999, p. 52). Another example of this temporal narrative is the phenomenon of ‘acting one’s age’, which is a strong social norm. Yet, for elderly people acting their age ultimately “means to die” (Russo, 1999, p. 27)—something that is reflected in the sayings ‘they died before their time’ and ‘they lived passed their time’.

It can therefore be concluded that discourses of ageism and ableism, as products of neoliberal society, consolidate the devaluation of elderly people’s lives. Furthermore, these ableist and ageist discourses take away elderly people’s agency, which is something that I examine below.

Social Death, Social Liveness, and the Lack of Agency

The loss of agency amongst elderly people is described as social death. Social death is a concept that originates from different thinkers across the disciplines of psychology and philosophy (Glaser & Strauss in Mulkay, 1991; Mbembe, 2003). Within the field of psychology, the initial focus was solely on patients who “cease to exist before they have been defined as clinically and/or biologically dead” (Mulkay, 1992, p. 32). However, the concept is expanded by Mulkay into one in which both patients and non-patients participate. Central to the idea of social death is the loss of being perceived as an active agent within other people’s lives, and therefore the loss of a degree of acknowledgement by others.¹⁸ In this sense social death is an *experience* of being, rather than an *inherent state* of being, and therefore never a

¹⁸ Within psychology, acknowledgement is seen as one of the most important human needs. To be ‘seen’ or acknowledged, to gain or have agency, are closely tied to concepts of attachment (Bowlby, 1970; Maslow, 1943) and concepts of justice (Sen, 2009).

unitary state. One can be socially alive to certain people, whilst socially dead to others.¹⁹ The concept of social death has an affinity with what Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013) call precariousness. The concept of precariousness is proposed as associated with precarity. Ontological precarity—vulnerability—is something that all humans share and something that renders impossible any chance to deem either the body or the self whole. All humans, for example, have an ontological precarity to injury. Precariousness then, would mean a vulnerability or the deprivation of some humans of their “lands, rights, livelihood, desire or modes of belonging” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 5). However, this does not mean that there has to be a conscious agent of this deprivation (even though this can be the case). Rather, it means that whilst ontological precarity is equally shared, precariousness is unequally distributed. Social death—which arises when one is deprived of agency—is the effect of a system that renders some people with, and some people without, agency. That social death happens frequently amongst elderly people is an effect of western society being preoccupied with ‘being’ and attempting to stay ‘young’ (Nelson, 2002; Woodward, 1991), as well as an effect of our neoliberal society, in which the worth of the self is tied to productivity. Social death is thus a form of precariousness that a certain group of people experience because of the system of ageism and ableism as an effect of our neoliberal society.

The precariousness of social death gets reinforced through the infrastructure of the country. As mentioned previously, the norm of the nuclear family within Dutch society does not extend to grandparents. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Michael Mulkay (1991) argues that social death is a general happening associated with the move to elderly or nursing homes²⁰. Spatially, elderly people become assigned to certain spaces when they make such moves. The expectation is that they will not move out again, with the result that their surroundings mourn them before they have passed away—a type of “anticipatory grief” (Mulkay, 1991, p. 36). This way of grieving declares the person moving into the elderly home as already (partially) socially dead to the outside world. Ironically, within nursing and elderly homes both inhabitants and staff reiterate this narrative through creating a hierarchical division between the ‘fit’ and the ‘frail’. The fit inhabitants distance themselves physically, verbally, and socially from the frail as a way of maintaining their status as active agents

¹⁹ This often happens to elderly people whom are visited by some of their grandchildren, whilst not by others.

²⁰ The phenomenon of social death as occurring when moving to an elderly home is not bound to Dutch society alone. Many Anglo-American societies have such an infrastructure of elderly homes and nursing homes. An exemption can be found in Deventer, the Netherlands, where the elderly and the students live together in a unit (Pilon, date unknown).

within the home.²¹ In an attempt to keep their social liveness, inhabitants repeat the same structure that excludes them as social agents within society outside of these homes (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999, p. 38). Thus, social death occurs with the move to an elderly home, and becomes increased for some inhabitants more than others via ableist discourse within the home itself.

Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth (1999) add another dimension to the concept of social death by introducing the concept of social liveness, meaning a person can be biologically dead whilst being socially alive. For example, research amongst widows in England showed that research participants sometimes maintained an active relationship with their biologically dead partners. They had conversations with them; asked for advice; or experienced the dipping of the mattress on their (absent) partners' side of the bed (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999, p. 150). These experiences constitute the biologically dead person as an active agent via an interaction "through and within the body of the widow" (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999, p. 151).

Thus, social death and social liveness can be experienced through many different relations and settings. Social liveness—the presence and agency of biologically dead people—incorporates the dead within society and undermines the metaphor of mourning as a defined healing process (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999, p. 152). Furthermore, it shows that social death and social liveness as experiences are not tied to common ideas about being alive or being dead. Instead, it challenges our ideas about the role of matter within the experience of liveliness. The concepts of social liveness and social death show an entanglement with Mel Chen's theory of animacies, upon which I elaborate in the next section.

Elderly People, Matter, and Hierarchies of Animacy

Thus far, I have examined the concept of liveliness itself as expressed through age, gender, health, and ability, as well as the entities that exhibit liveliness (and to what extent), demonstrating that these concepts possess no definitive 'truth'. The feminist philosopher Mel Chen engages with these questions in a particularly vibrant way in their book *Animacies, Biopolitics, Racial Matters, and Queer Affect* (2012). This section will elaborate on their work, as both their argument and their approach serve as a framework for this thesis. In order

²¹ This, for example, can be noted within many elderly homes in which people suffering from dementia are placed on a specified floor (mainly the ground floor) of the building. Spatially they are separated from other inhabitants. This separation is often motivated by arguments of safety for both staff and residents.

to fully grasp Chen's arguments and approach, it is important to look at the conventional understanding of animacy.

Conventionally, a distinction is made between the living, the dead, and the lifeless (Smits & Waas, 2005).²² These categories can be defined as that which is living; that which has lived, but is now dead; and that which has never lived and shall never live. Albeit incomplete, these categories—coming from a Cartesian perspective (Descartes, 1637)—align with hierarchical and juridical positions. 'Life' is considered to be at the top of this hierarchy, followed by 'death', and—at the bottom of the hierarchy—'the lifeless'. This is reflected in the division between the legal rights of humans and animals—which are considered to be living—versus the rights of, for example, stones, which are considered to be lifeless. Owning a stone is allowed, whilst owning a person is (now) against the law—although this has not always been the case. That the category 'dead' often holds a higher position than 'lifeless' can be easily understood via the example of how it is considered to be unproblematic to build a house out of stones, but unacceptable to build a house out of (human) bones. Yet, the distinctions in hierarchy between these categories are not clear-cut. Plants are considered living, yet it is not considered problematic to harvest grain or to have a wooden house. In a hierarchical sense, the remains of humans hold a higher position compared to living animals, as mourning is highly ritualised within many societies (Hallam & Hockey, 2001).

This categorisation in terms of liveliness is what Chen refers to as animacy, and it is this concept of animacy—what is considered animate, and to what extent—that forms a (rather complex) hierarchy in which the positions are not always stable, but dependent upon context. Chen (2012) formulates that to be animate is to have "a set of notions characterized (...) variously as a quality of agency, awareness, mobility and liveness" (p. 2). The acknowledgement of these qualities within a context thus constitutes the hierarchical position and categorisation of animated-ness. Furthermore, these hierarchies tie, not only into categories of life and non-life, but also into categories concerning the living—of race and sexuality (Chen, 2012). On the surface it seems that within western societies the categorisation of animacy takes place within a dichotomy in which one seems to be either with or without animacy. For example, stones are considered to be completely devoid of animacy. However, Chen argues that animacy is far more akin to a spectrum in which both context and discourse determine the level of animacy. To explain this, Chen brings in the

²² This reference is telling, for it is the book most commonly used in the Dutch educational system, in which biology is a mandatory subject and covers the topic of animacy. Everyone aged twelve and up learns explicitly about this system of categorisation.

arbitrary but informative scheme developed by John Cherry on the hierarchy of animacy (Chen, 2012, p. 26). This schedule is based on linguistic analysis and roughly defines four hierarchical categories of animacy. Firstly, (and thus considered the most animate) there is the category of humans; followed by animals; inanimates; and incorporeals. Within these categories smaller hierarchies are observed. Within the category of humans, for example, the male (masculine) is considered dominant compared to the female (feminine). Further to this, familiar humans—relatives—are considered more animate than unfamiliar humans. Within the category of the inanimate, entities that can be counted (for example pencils) are hierarchically dominant to mass entities (such as sand). Thus, a man is considered more animate than a woman, but a woman is considered more animate than water. Yet, as this schema is a linguistic one, it avoids the realms of the social and political. Therefore, Chen warns against taking the list rigidly (2012, p. 26). However, they show that these hierarchies of animacy—which get solidified through different discourses, but also solidify these discourses in return—are very much political, for they are shaping, and shaped by, “what (or who) counts as human, and what or who does not” (Chen, 2012, p. 30). By highlighting several examples that engage with multiple discourses at once, it becomes clear how amongst different entities, different aspects bleed into the assessment of those previously thought to be without animacy. It shows how those entities that are considered to be lifeless have a living effect on entities that are considered living, with the converse also being true.

Chen’s analyses focus on intersecting axes of race and gender. However, looking at the structures and dynamics of animacy it becomes clear that the patterns found in the discourse on elderly people in society fit within this observed hierarchy of animacy. Ageism and ableism are important in constituting these hierarchies as well. For example, the aforementioned ideas on health are inscribed into this hierarchy, distinguishing between disabled and abled entities, but also between mobile and immobile entities. Elderly people are thus subjected to different positions within these hierarchies—something that Laura Tanner shows in her book *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (2006). In a description of her father, she speaks about “a body rendered so abject by the process of dying that it transformed the familiar subject into an unfamiliar object” (Tanner, 2006, p. 1).²³ Her father, who loses mobility and speech due to illness, therefore becomes closer to ‘an object’. The hierarchies of animacy therefore constitute an ableist discourse surrounding elderly

²³ This idea of the abject body comes from Julia Kristeva. An elaboration of the concept can be found in her text *Powers of Horror* (1982).

people, whilst this discourse simultaneously solidifies such a hierarchy through the reiteration of speech.²⁴

These hierarchies of animacy, as well as the division between the animate and the inanimate, are highly policed. Chen tries to map the important political consequences of these distinctions (2012, p. 2). Chens work effectively criticises and works through the hierarchies of animacies that determine how we live and how we die. This is of crucial importance to this thesis, as elderly people are considered to be less animate and thus face social death as an effect of these hierarchies. In order to understand how elderly people negotiate the effects of these hierarchies of animacies, it is important to know what mechanisms are at work in consolidating them. Chen shows that in order to stabilise a certain hierarchy, a shared understanding of animacy is needed. For example, to enable the understanding that the saying ‘being in the winter of your life’ means that someone is close to death, a shared understanding is needed of winter as a concept that is characterised by darkness, cold and death, but also indicates the end of the year or a certain time-frame. Using the expression ‘winter of life’ to describe elderly people, one thus places them—through a shared notion of animacy—at the same level of the abstract concept of winter, which is hierarchically lower than the category of humans. Furthermore, this devaluation of elderly people through a shared notion of animacy contains another layer, as winter is also considered less animate than other seasons, for little grows or moves during winter. This example shows how shared notions of animacy get solidified through the reiteration of sayings and speech-acts, and how this hierarchy of animacy—which deprives elderly people of their animacy (and with it their agency and liveliness)—simultaneously solidifies ageist discourse. However, Chen (2012) also argues that this shared notion of the hierarchy of animacy simultaneously offers the possibility to ‘open up’ the discourse by changing these shared notions. Once these hierarchies become more complex, or less generalised—and thus fail to create a shared notion of a certain hierarchy—the positions associated with them become less rigid. For example, it is harder to insult someone by comparing them to an entity from a different category (such as saying a

²⁴ This effect of two concepts co-constituting each other is described in Viviane Namaste’s article ‘The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality’ (1994), in which she explains that “heterosexuality needs homosexuality for its own definition: a macho homophobic male can define himself as ‘straight’ only in opposition to that which he is not-an effeminate gay man” (p. 222). Another example of this mechanism can be found in ‘SEEING “STRAIGHT,” Contemporary Critical Heterosexuality Studies and Sociology: An Introduction’ by Nancy Fischer (2013).

person is like a monkey; an often-used racist slur and one of Chen's examples) if those categories no longer stand in a strict and clear hierarchy.²⁵

In the second and third chapter of this thesis I seek to complicate the hierarchy of animacy –which I will show entails a human/non-human binary- through an analysis that shows how these 'non-living' entities can function as living through their engagements with humans. I derive this approach from Chen's work, in which they show how "matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise 'wrong' animates cultural life in important ways" (2012, p. 2). Thus, Chen's work on animacies will form a framework within this thesis via which to examine the interplay of objects and humans, and the way that interplay constitutes the experience of liveness or lack thereof. Focusing on the intersecting axes of ableism, ageism and biopolitics, I will continue their line of argument on the possibility of changing hierarchies of animacy by making those hierarchies more complex.

Thus far, I have shown how becoming elderly is a gendered process formed by ageist and ableist discourses that are informed by Dutch neoliberal society, and how these discourses both constitute, and are constituted by, hierarchies of animacies. These processes result in an objectification of elderly people, who become less 'animated' and thus face social death. As this happens when moving from their own homes to elderly homes, these processes of social death and losing animacy (and agency) are combined with questions of materiality—what to keep, and what to throw (or give) away. Therefore, these elderly people face loss on different levels: the loss of one's former home; the loss of agency as a result of neoliberalist discourse; and a loss of animacy via discourses of ableism. Thus, in the last section of this chapter I engage with theories on mourning, and how the elderly might encounter mourning on many different levels.

Mourning: A Multi-Layered Process

Individuals who move into elderly homes may experience mourning and loss on multiple levels. In this section of the chapter I will examine the types of mourning elderly people face and how these discourses of mourning are constructed. In order to understand the narratives of mourning elderly people face it is important to look at theories of mourning and how these have developed over time. I will show that the dominant discourse on mourning approaches

²⁵ Apart from Chen's excellent elaborations on this mechanism in her book, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Rosemarie Buikema for her explanations on undoing hierarchies, highlighting that you cannot take away certain things within society, but you can make them less appreciated. For example, you cannot take away money as a solution for risky financial speculation, but you can make it unappealing to be a stockbroker.

mourning as a ‘task’—something that can be completed by an individual. Furthermore, this task-based approach to mourning assumes people to be replaceable, and thus implies that they carry no intrinsic value. This replicability shows similarities with objecthood, for our society has no problem with replacing one object for another. Therefore, I will elaborate on feminist and queer approaches towards loss in order to pull into question conventional ideas on mourning and to draw attention to how the elderly face ongoing processes of mourning in which materiality plays an intrinsic part. I will start with introducing conventional discourse on mourning, which is heavily influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud.

In the western hemisphere, few thinkers have had such an impact on the theorisation of mourning as Sigmund Freud. Although in a contemporary context considered fallible in psychological discourse, Freud’s elaborations on the labour of mourning and melancholia have been significant and are still—at least partially—of influence within contemporary ideas of mourning (Maes & Dillen, 2014). When looking at Freud’s work on mourning, his famous text ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917) is often paired with a personal letter he wrote to Ludwig Binswanger in 1929. These two texts, seemingly different in format—one an academic text, the other an informal letter—show Freud’s (then) evolving stance on the concept of mourning. In ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ Freud introduces, and makes a distinction between, these two concepts. Freud (1917) argues that, despite having the same “exciting causes”, mourning and melancholia differ in their levels of normalcy (p. 243). Mourning should be considered and accepted as a regular reaction to the loss of “a loved one, ideal, liberty or country and so on” (Freud, 1917, p. 243)—as something that requires necessary (mourning) labour and results in a final ‘cutting of ties’ with the loss. Conversely, melancholia would be its pathological counterpart, in which the mourning labour goes wrong, resulting in an internalisation of the lost object into the self, thus the self fails to ‘let go’ and creates an ongoing suffering.²⁶ Despite an elaborate engagement with melancholia and its difference compared to mourning, Freud admits that he does not completely understand the process of mourning, especially ‘reality testing’—a concept to which I will return later in this section. He states that “it (...) draws our attention to the fact that we do not even know the economic means by which mourning carries out its task” (Freud, 1917, p. 255). However, Freud suggests that within the mourning process the libidinal object is lost, resulting in the

²⁶ Freud assumes this is because of the form of loss, which is known when mourned, but rather unknown when people fall into melancholia. Thus, the person who develops melancholia is not completely aware of “what he [or she] has lost”. Mourning thus takes place in the conscious, and melancholia rather in the unconscious (Freud, 1917).

libido needing to retract itself from the object. This does not happen willingly: a conflict between a fictive, desired situation and the truth emerges—within the desired truth the object is still present, whilst in truth, the object is not. This results in a process of reality testing, in which “[e]ach single one of the memories and expectations which bound the libido to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected” (Freud, 1917, p. 245). Over time, if mourned ‘correctly’, this process of reality testing forces the person to acknowledge the truth—the libidinal object is no longer present or available—which causes the libido to fully retract, leaving the ego “free and uninhibited again” (Freud, 1917, p. 245). Thus, according to Freud, at least in the context of the early twentieth century, mourning can be considered a task that can be completed.

It is therefore unsurprising that in the case of melancholia reality testing fails. Instead of cutting ties, a part of the lost object gets incorporated into the self as “an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object” (Freud, 1917, p. 249, emphasis in original). This, then, allows for attachment to the ego as if it were the original object. However, as the ego fails to truly be the original object, the person who internalised the object reacts with anger and despair towards their own ego. This results in an internal split that Freud would later call the split between ego and the superego (Freud, 1929). Thus, as the person is unable to truly separate from themselves, they will suffer from an internalised aggression and an ongoing feeling of depression. Freud states:

Melancholia (...) is on the one hand, like, mourning, a reaction to the real loss of a loved object; but over and above this, it is marked by a determinant which is absent in normal mourning, or which, if it is present, transforms the latter into pathological mourning (Freud, 1917, p. 250).

And yet, over time Freud’s vision on the separation between mourning and melancholia has become less strict. Here, the letter to Binswanger (1929) becomes significant, in which Freud writes about his personal loss—his daughter—who would have celebrated her 36th birthday on the day he writes the letter. He writes: “No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. (...) It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.” (n.p.) This marks a change from the idea of the mourning process as a defined project to one that has no ending, the latter being favoured over the former. Freud is not only unable to ‘replace’ his daughter, he would not want to do so either. However, the idea of the mourning process possessing a defined ending became further

solidified within the social sciences (mainly within psychology) through models that proposed stages of grieving that had to be worked through—often hierarchically—such as the Kubler-Ross model (Kubler-Ross, 1970); the ‘Four Tasks of Mourning’ (Worden, 1982); or the stages of grief formulated by John Bowlby and Colin Parkes (1970).²⁷ Thus normative mourning became a process much like Freud’s initial phrasing of mourning; that of a defined phase one goes through and completes.²⁸

So, if mourning is a task to be completed, the aforementioned loss of agency, liveness, and self-worth by elderly people could be mourned for a certain amount of time. Once completed, this feeling of loss should evaporate. Yet the occurrence and prevalence of social death among elderly people, which is reflected in the experiences of loneliness of elderly people within Dutch society—a staggering 50% amongst those over 75, and 60% amongst those over (Ouderenfonds, 2016)—shows that this approach towards mourning is insufficient. Whilst social death can occur with the move to an elderly home, it can also occur after the loss of a partner—something that mostly affects the elderly, as 86% of Dutch widows and widowers are over 65 (CBS, 2017). In cases in which the partner was also the primary care giver, this loss might itself precipitate the move to an elderly home, resulting in social death on multiple levels.

The insufficiency of approaching mourning as a finite task that can be completed is pointed out by feminist and queer perspectives. Tammy Clewell critiques Freud’s formulations as being a narcissist way of mourning in her article ‘Mourning Beyond Melancholia’ (2004). By looking at Freud’s earlier work *On Narcissism* (1914), in which he formulates object-love as self-love, she argues that Freud implies that “we love others for (...) that part of ourselves that we invested in them” (Clewell, 2004, p. 46). It would mean that retracting the libidinal ties from the object is a retraction in which one retracts oneself from the object, thus leaving the mourner unmarked once the mourning process is completed. The mourner would not lose the object, because the object is not truly seen in the first place. In view of this, Clewell suggests that Freud assumes the possibility of a “subject who might exist

²⁷ Not all of these models approach the process of grief as something that can be completed. However, the interpretation of these models for use in mourning therapy mostly approached mourning as something that had a definite ending. Within Kubler-Ross’ book *On Death and Dying* (2009), this phenomenon is voiced very well in the introduction. It points out that Kubler-Ross never intended to create a working model for mourning. Rather, it was an attempt to privilege the “voice of the dying” (Kubler-Ross, 2009, p. vii). The famous five ‘stages’ (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) that were proposed could “overlap, occur together or ... missed altogether” (Kubler-Ross, 2009, p. ix).

²⁸ This is important to note because of its effect on society. The social sciences work closely with healthcare providers, and thus the available support for mourning has been focused on working through and ‘completing’ a process of mourning for a very long time.

without its losses” (2004, p. 60). By formulating mourning as a retraction of the self from the object without seeing the object, Alessia Ricciardi observes in her book *The Ends of Mourning* (2003) that the person who mourns becomes separated from their history afterwards—if one has no resulting marks of one’s loss after the mourning process, one bears no marks of the past. The subject that mourns is positioned with a “certain indifference to the value of a past (...) [which] the reality principle eventually must declare nonexistent” (Ricciardi, 2003, p. 6).

This critique of the disconnection that occurs between a person and their past as an effect of formulating mourning as a delimited process is also addressed by Theodor Adorno—albeit not on an individual level, as Clewell and Ricciardi do, but rather, on a collective level. In his analysis on ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’ (1959), he argues that the past is very much alive and entangled within the present. Although he is a firm advocate of Freud’s psychoanalysis, his argument can be seen as a critique of Freud’s theory on mourning. Adorno explains that acting towards the past as if it were finished or done with would result in a denial of responsibility and vulnerability that needs to be taken by the people in the present. Taking the holocaust as an example, claiming that the past is no longer of influence on the present acts to reduce the labour of mourning to relatives of victims (and the surviving victims themselves), thus avoiding collective responsibility for the events that have taken place. This (lack of) collective ways of mourning is also addressed by queer theorists, who point out that some forms of mourning—for example, for the victims of AIDS—require both a collective memory (Hirsch, 2002) and collective mourning (Sturken, 1997). Adorno’s critique points out that the individualisation of mourning broadcasts the message that nothing has been learnt from the past. Thus, to be able to take up an unscathed position after mourning, or by stating that something is in the past and thus no longer affects the present, is a problematic claim. For it could mean that certain regimes—and the ways of dying associated with these regimes—could happen again, because there is no collective act of remembrance towards it. It is “as if it never happened” (Goethe as cited in Adorno, 1959, p. 91). Adorno thus nuances Freud’s formulation of mourning—as do Clewell and Riccardo—but they still praise the element of reflection that Freud offers.

When approaching the mourning process as something individual, it leaves the environment unscathed. It leaves the suffering of social death to the elderly person, whilst the environment does not have to take (or accept) any responsibility. Combined with an approach to mourning as something that can be completed, this ensures that the ongoing loss that elderly people face is systematically ignored. Thus, these queer and feminist approaches to

collective and ongoing mourning are crucial, for they allow the elderly person to be incorporated within society. Additionally, to propose mourning as something that is ongoing, as mentioned in the above paragraphs, also leaves room for another critique of Freud's formulation of mourning by pointing out its implicit monogamous norm. If the mourner needs to retract his or her ties completely from the libidinal object, the implication is that the mourner only has one 'place' for a relationship of a certain categorisation at a time. It also assumes that people are replaceable, as each partner takes up the exact same space left open by the former partner (Clewell, 2004; Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999). However, as mentioned in the section on social liveness, this does not have to be the case. Clewell (2004) also offers an affirmative reading of Freud's theory by focusing on melancholia instead of mourning. She writes that to incorporate someone into the self does not necessarily imply an incorporation that is negative. The incorporation of the other—which leads to melancholia, or an ongoing process of feeling loss—can also be “an affirmative and loving internalisation” that “does not necessarily have to do with (...) rivalry” (Clewell, 2004, p. 60). Following this line of thought, mourning is an ongoing process, incorporating the dead into society and keeping them socially alive. For elderly people, this might also offer a sense of social liveness by keeping the past alive.

Approaching mourning as something that can be done collectively means the burden of mourning is not solely placed on the elderly person themselves, but ignites a shared responsibility for ways of living and ways of dying—biopolitics and necropolitics. This collectivity of mourning ties in with the questions of materiality that people face when moving to an elderly home. Laura Tanner observes in her book *Lost Bodies* (2006) how, in Freud's work, mourning becomes disembodied, and is formulated in terms of the symbolic (p. 13). This means that, instead of replacing one partner for the other, one can also substitute a partner with the symbolic—by, for example, developing a love for literature.²⁹ This is not surprising, as Freud's approach falls within a long tradition in which the subject substitutes the object that has been lost, and therefore neutralises the pain (Clewell, 2004). This tradition—albeit problematic in its approach of substitution by assuming that one entity can perfectly replace another—holds ground within this thesis because material objects can offer a link within the mourning process to the person (or the object) that has been lost. In this sense, the object does not form a complete substitute, but rather an addition or linkage between the mourner and the mourned. Furthermore it assumes an 'everydayness' about mourning that

²⁹ This is a very traditional trope in classical literature of a person who is left by their romantic interest and then turns their love for a specific human being into a love for producing and/or reading literature.

Freud introduces within his work.³⁰ Hallam, Hockey and Howarth's (1999) observe that materiality is at the core of mourning and mourning rituals: the move to an elderly home, and the living in the elderly home—which often means a vast difference in available living space—brings questions of materiality to the fore. Elderly people might face a loss of objects that no longer fit in the 'permitted' living space. Also, certain objects might be kept as they are entangled within a mourning process. Discourses on ageism, ableism and neoliberalism place elderly people low on conventional understandings of the hierarchy of animacy, in effect placing them closer to objecthood. Because this happens at a time when questions of materiality come to the fore, the loss of objects themselves as well as their entangled presence (or absence) can be mourned along with the mourning of agency, and/or the loss of a partner. Therefore, it is important to look at narratives of mourning and what role objects play. The proceeding chapters will focus on these narratives, centring the questions of what strategies elderly people utilise to deal with these layers of mourning—including mourning the loss of materiality (space/objects), a partner, and their health and agency; and how they transform (and are transformed by) specific objects in order to deal with processes of loss and the transition to their lives in elderly homes.

Conclusion

In this chapter I examined what it means to become an elderly person within contemporary Dutch society. By looking at the basic concept of neoliberal society, I demonstrated how people are tied to their productiveness—a stance that inevitably reduces the 'worth' of elderly people. Discourses of ageism and ableism add to this by making the lives of elderly people less significant than those of the able-bodied youth. Furthermore, the concept of social death—a prevalent narrative amongst elderly people moving into, and living in, elderly homes—points towards the fact that elderly people face a destabilisation of their societal position. These forces imbue elderly people with reduced agency—something that is reflected within a shared notion of animacy. Feelings of loss experienced by the elderly occur with the move to an elderly home, often at a time when the person's partner has already passed away. All of this is further compounded by situations in which elderly people experience a loss of materiality—issues that are closely intertwined with the experience of mourning. Thus, the main question of this thesis—'How do elderly people in elderly homes within contemporary Dutch society deal with the loss of a partner and agency—losses that render them feeling

³⁰ This comes from Alessia Ricciardi's *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film* (2003).

worth-less and no longer an active participant either within society or other people's lives?'—requires an inquiry into their engagements with objects. This includes objects that are lost as well as objects that are kept, and crucially, what role these objects play in processes of mourning. The framework proposed in Mel Chen's book on animacy serves as a guide in approaching these entangled questions of mourning and materiality. In the upcoming two chapters I focus on what strategies elderly people utilise to deal with these layers of mourning. Furthermore, I look at how elderly people transform (and are transformed by) specific objects in order to deal with processes of loss and transition in the context of their lives in elderly care homes.

Human/Non-Human: A Negotiation of Properties and Blurring Boundaries

Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined what it means to become elderly in a contemporary Dutch context. I revealed how, due to narratives of ageism, animacy, ableism and neoliberalism, the position of the elderly within Dutch society becomes unstable, resulting in multiple layers of mourning—mourning the loss of people, and mourning the loss of agency. Simultaneously, elderly people face questions of materiality during this process. This chapter focuses on these questions of materiality, and what role they play within the life of an elderly person. This is the first of two chapters examining the strategies that elderly people utilise in order to deal with these multiple layers of mourning. The chapters further seek to ascertain how they transform—and are transformed by—specific objects in order to deal with processes of loss brought about by the transition to, and their lives in, the elderly home.

In order to answer these questions, it is important to understand how differences between humans and objects are constructed. This division between the human and the object is linked to a division between life and death—one that, as I will show, can deprive the elderly person of animacy. Therefore, this chapter will begin by looking at the human/object division. Utilising a feminist new materialist approach, the chapter aims to expose the problematic dualism that lies behind the commonly assumed division between humans and objects. To this end, Birgit Meijer's (2013) concept of mediation and the concept of intra-action by Karen Barad (2012) will be employed so as to enable a different becoming with objects—one that allows for an ethical approach towards the complications of the human/object division. Furthermore, via an elaboration on memory I argue that the dynamic between the human and the object is influenced by past knowledges and histories. Therefore, power-relations and context have an influence on the intra-action between human and non-human agents.

The second part of the chapter will focus upon the participant interviews held with five elderly people in Leiden. Through my analysis of the interviews, I show how these elderly people engage in various ways with objects in order to mediate their transition to (and consequently living in) an elderly home—a transition in which they often mourn both agency and people. I show that these manners of engaging with objects can be broadly distinguished into strategies that blur boundaries and strategies that are transformative. These two 'strategies of living' are addressed because of their suitability in connecting to the discussed

theory, whereas two other strategies—those of queering objects and of diversification of agency—will be discussed in the next chapter.

Kant and Rethinking Dualisms

The classical canon of white western philosophy often looks to Kant (1790) when addressing the separation between being (object) and thought (subject). Thoughts would be genderless and immaterial, as they are completely separated from the gendered and material body.³¹ Apart from an internal division between (human) mind and body, Kant simultaneously poses a division between human (subject) and non-human (object). Thus, according to Kant there is a split between the human and the world (Harman, 2002).

However, this formulation of the human as subject and the world as object upon which the thinking human can act has been contested by many feminist scholars.³² They show this formulation to be “a fiction, in that the individual is continuously made and remade through the ever-shifting performance of identity and negotiation of power relations within specific social contexts and histories” (Goldberg, 2014, p. 147). In other words, the human is not a separate entity that acts upon the world. Rather, the human is shaped by the world upon which he or she acts and vice versa (Barad, 2012; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993). Nevertheless, this dichotomy between object/subject, mind/body, and thought/material is still prevalent in many schools of thought today.³³ Furthermore, this fundamental dichotomy lies at the root of many other dichotomies, such as male/female; nature/culture; rational/emotional; and active/passive (Lloyd, 1985), and—most importantly for this thesis—lies at the root of the separation between life and death. Additionally, these dichotomies entail a hierarchy between the two concepts, in which the male/object/rational side is valued above the female/culture/emotional side of the division. Luce Irigaray (2013) states: “diversity was therefore still conceived of and lived hierarchically, with the many always subordinate to the one” (p. 122). In a similar way, Braidotti (2002) states that “to be different from means to be worth less than” (p. 4). In

³¹ This is also addressed by Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer in their book *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (2012). Houtman and Meyer posit the idea that religion—as it is tied to the act of believing—becomes separated from materiality, for thoughts are to be perceived as immaterial. However, simultaneously, religion is posed as the opposite of rational thought (Meyer, 2013).

³² For an insightful overview, see *The Man of Reason* (Lloyd, [1985] 2002), and ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong’ Objectivity?’ (Harding, 1993).

³³ An example is given in Achilles Mbembe’s ‘Necropolitics’ (2013), in which he shows how our thoughts on nations are subject to this dichotomy (p. 13). Modern political theories of democracy equate the democratic state as the ultimate realisation of reason (thought), with its opposite of irrational war (feeling). Furthermore, the state itself gets a narrative of ‘the body’ upon which the sovereign government must act—thus re-creating a subject/object split (Wilcox, 2014).

the preceding chapter I explained the societal division of young versus old, and this division resonates with a lively/lifeless division according to the dominant hierarchy of animacy. Therefore, maintaining the human/object division in a Kantian perspective produces certain systems of living and dying in which elderly people face a position of ‘objecthood’ and (social) ‘death’ (Mulkay, 1992).

However, feminist thinkers have critiqued these Kantian divisions in two fundamental ways: they have questioned the strict border between concepts that form a dualism, as well as the hierarchical nature of the concepts that make up any given dualism. Donna Haraway formulates the complication of maintaining the strict border between humans and objects her ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ ([1983] 2000), in which she argues that humans and technology are inseparable. Although technology is not intrinsically tied to objects, often it manifests itself through objects. Thus, to be intertwined with technology is to be intertwined with objects, and by definition defying the separation between human and object. As Haraway states: “[in our] time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (2000, p. 292). This thought is substantiated by Lucas Introna, who formulates in his article “Ethics and the Speaking of Things” (2009) that “it is no longer possible to say, in any definitive way, where we end and they [objects] begin, and vice versa” (p. 399). Thus, feminist thinkers show that the border between human and object is far more porous than Kant suggests and call for a “multi-layered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity” that “takes place in between nature-technology” (Braidotti, 2002, p. 2).

However, feminist thinkers are not the only ones critiquing the Kantian human/object division. OOO thinker Graham Harman problematizes the Kantian human/object division by arguing for an ontological sameness of humans and objects.³⁴ In his book *Tool Being* (2002), he states that, by approaching human and objects as erupting out of a void, “[w]hat emerges (...) is a ghostly cosmos in which humans, logs, oak trees, and tobacco are on precisely the same footing as glass bottles, pitchforks, windmills, comets, ice cubes, magnets and atoms.” (p. 2). Yet, the aim of feminist thinkers (and subsequently this thesis) is not to collapse the borders between the human and the object—or life/death—but rather, to critically engage with the position of the border between these concepts and how embedded power relations produce

³⁴ OOO stands for Object Orientated Ontology, a philosophical movement that argues for an ontological sameness of humans and objects. The core argument of OOO is that that even though objects exist in their relatedness to others, their ‘true’ being can never be captured by such relations (Harman, 2002, p. 21) as the object itself “exists in a void” (Harman, 2002, p. 225). This counts for all entities that encounter each other. Harman writes: “Just as we never grasp the being of two pieces of rock, neither do they fully unlock the being of each other when they slam together in distant space” (2002, p. 5).

hierarchies between them. In their article ‘Speculative Before the Turn’ (2015), feminist philosophers Cecilia Åsberg, Kathrin Thiele and Iris van der Tuin argue that collapsing the human/object division in terms of onto-epistemology—as proposed by OOO-thinkers such as Harman—leads to a failure to “find a substantive distinction between, say, a hair dryer and a farmed mink in a cage” (p. 148). However, simply collapsing the border between the object and the human would leave out power differences between entities that encounter each other. To exclude the responsibility between entities by claiming that everything exists in a void (and thus independently), and by forgoing the power relations that exist between entities (which create dynamics of responsibility) means that the same avoidance of responsibility takes place as the avoidance Adorno formulates when he speaks about forcing history into the past—as explained in the former chapter. Thus, Åsberg, Thiele and Van der Tuin argue for a feminist new materialist approach when looking at the human/object division, arguing entities should always be viewed within context, and from a perspective of accountability—i.e. to be mindful of the power dynamics at play in producing borders between concepts. Thus, when looking at the life/death dichotomy, feminist thinkers answer Kantian dualism by complicating the border—yet, importantly, without collapsing the different concepts into an ontology according to which ‘all is relative’ or ‘all is the same’. This is a crucial point, because collapsing the human and the object would simply re-create the very problem elderly people encounter already, namely that of being perceived as lifeless and thus pushed into objecthood. Instead, the aim is for a critical enquiry into the hierarchisation that takes place between these concepts and how to be accountable for the ‘cut’ that is made between concepts of human/object and life/death (Åsberg, Thiele & Van der Tuin, 2015; Barad, 2012; Haraway, 2003).

Mediation and Intra-Action: How We Become ‘With’ Rather Than Alone

Calling for a theory of materiality that neither collapses nor completely separates the object and the human—or life and death—evokes the question of how to be accountable for the mutual affect/influence of object and subject. This problem is reflected in the research question of this chapter: ‘How do elderly people transform, and are transformed by, objects within their mourning process?’ To answer this question, I would like to bring in the concepts of mediation by Birgit Meyer and intra-action by Karen Barad, for they both offer an approach to the human and the object that posits them as mutually constitutive.

The Kantian division between object and subject creates what Donna Haraway (1988) calls ‘the god trick’, in which the objective eye observes all, without being seen itself (p. 581).

This objectivity is a false assumption, as everyone develops within certain systems and is thus always already partial to knowledge. Our perception of the world is never a simple ‘clear’ or ‘complete’ perception without history or context. Furthermore, it is also not a ‘neutral’ or even ‘direct’ perception. We are formed by our histories (as are the things that we encounter), and thus our interpretation of the world, our meaning making, memory making, and sense making is a result of—and constantly merging with—those histories. This ‘becoming within’ the world (‘worlding’ in Haraway, Barad, Meyer and other feminist thinkers’ terminology), is a matter of mediation (Meyer, 2013).

The concept of mediation has its roots in media studies, literature studies, and philosophy, and was further refined within religious studies by Birgit Meyer. According to Meyer (2013), humans relate to others (the world, themselves, etc.) via mediation; a process that is performed by mediators—shortened to: media (Meyer, 2013, p. 4). These media are not having an impact on a pre-existing world, but rather shape the world through the transportation of messages. Therefore, media are not neutral, nor is their outcome neutral or transparent (Meyer, 2013, p. 3-4). What a medium does and is, is not fixed, but negotiated, and includes “the body—and more broadly, materiality” (Meyer, 2013, p. 9). In her approach to ‘worlding’, Meyer shows a co-constitution of human and object, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that this co-constitution is not neutral, but negotiated by discourse and power. Mediation, according to Meyer, is not artificial, but intrinsic to the process of world-making. It produces the world as experienced as real or ‘immediate’, which means mediation is something that cannot be avoided. It is important to note that, not only is media constitutive of the world, but the world also constitutes media—it goes both ways (Meyer, 2013, p. 13). Therefore, when looking at elderly people and their engagement with objects, Meyers theory on mediation shows that both the elderly person and the object with which they engage are of mutual influence to each other.

Now that we have established the relevance of Meyer’s materialist interpretation of mediation in the context of this thesis, we can—in a possibly unconventional move—bring in the work of feminist philosopher Karen Barad (2012) and her concept of intra-action. Intra-action is the ongoing process by which two entities ‘become’ with each other, rather than apart from each other.³⁵ By co-constituting each other, there is no ‘before’ of the constituting

³⁵ This ongoing-ness is often referred to as performativity. Performativity as a concept stems from linguistics, in which a performative sentence ‘performs’ what it aims to do. For example, the sentence ‘I now pronounce you married’ does what it aims, as one is married after uttering the sentence. The concept of performativity is developed in depth within Judith Butler’s famous work *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she adds an ‘on-goingness’ to it. This results in a performativity that is meant as a do-ing without do-er.

parts, thus distinguishing itself from interaction, in which two already existing entities engage with each other. However, these entities are not reducible to each other, and “neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other” (Barad, 2003, p. 822). This forms a response to the Kantian dualism of human/object and life/death, for it explicitly de-hierarchises the different concepts on either side of the border. Barad works with the concept of intra-action to open up the separation between nature/culture—a separation that parallels Kant’s formulation of object/subject (Lloyd, [1985] 2002). According to Barad, to work with the concept of intra-action is

not to blur boundaries between human and non-human, not to cross out all distinctions and differences, and not to simply invert humanism, but rather to understand the materializing effects of particular ways of drawing boundaries between humans and non-humans (Barad, 2012, p. 31).

The concepts of intra-action and mediation are pivotal to this thesis, as both offer a feminist approach to becoming ‘with’ objects rather than ‘apart’ from them. They do this without collapsing the categories of humans and non-humans, by showing that “we are, in a very profound way, each other’s co-constitutive condition for our ongoing becoming of what we are” (Introna, 2009, p. 399).³⁶ These theories offer a way of being accountable for questioning the human/object division without collapsing into relativism. Furthermore, they offer an opening up of hierarchies of animacy in an ethical way to enable the inclusion of objects into research that are “not merely [using] non/humans as tools to think with, but in thinking with them to face our ethical obligations to them” (Barad, 2012, p. 33). Therefore, intra-action and mediation are useful approaches via which to understand, not only the role of objects within the lives of the elderly, but also how these objects might influence their sense of liveliness, whilst still acknowledging the dominant discourses that are forming these engagements between the elderly person and the object.

³⁶ Again, it is not my intention to simply erase categories or constructs, as we live those categories and thus the acknowledgment of them is core to their renegotiation (Buikema et al., 2011). Collapsing the human/object does not undo the hierarchisation of the division. An example of this problem is the argumentation ‘I do not see race’, which is intended to create racial equality. However, as race is very much lived within society (as we have a society that maintains a system of racism and white privilege), claiming that one does not see race results in a bias for this systematic racism, rather than undoing it (El-Tayeb, 2015).

Collective Memory Making

In the previous parts of this chapter I elaborated on a feminist approach towards human and object—one that acknowledges their mutual influence on each other without conflating them. Furthermore, I showed that this process of influencing is not a ‘neutral’ process, but rather is subject to power relations and context as it is mediated by past ideas and events. The question of how elderly people transform and are transformed by certain objects is influenced by the individual’s ideas and knowledge of these objects. Therefore, memory plays a significant role in this process, and—as mourning has close ties to memory and remembering (Adorno, 1998; Clewell, 2004; Freud, 1917)—the following section will look at memory in order to theorise how this might influence elderly people’s engagement with objects.

Literature on memory has grown significantly in different fields of research, so much so that it “has become an object of study” in itself (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3).³⁷ Therefore, it is important clarify what ‘memory’ means in the context of this thesis. I will focus on the feminist approach of collective memory, which offers elderly people a sense of keeping their pasts present through their engagement with objects, as well as the possibility to maintain a stable sense of self. This possibly allows elderly people a sense of liveliness within an environment that otherwise marks them as (socially) dead. This approach is quite different from the ‘common’ perspective of western psychology, in which memory and materiality are currently connected through the body—specifically the brain. In the field of psychology there is a pre-occupation with localising memory, focusing on the question: where is memory stored? (Whitehead, 2004, p. 48).³⁸ This approach to memory upholds the assumption that there is a specific ‘place’ in which memory resides—like an archive. This vision on memory as an accurate archive in which things get stored or filed implies an individualisation of memory (memory as something that can be owned) and a sense of linearity (the clear demarcation of the beginning and end of a given memory [Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Nünning & Young, 2008]). The individualised memory as an archive thus approaches memory as something that upholds objectivity, like a taperecorder that records all surrounding sounds (Gray, 2002). However, both the notion of objectivity and the notion of memory as something

³⁷ For an overview of the discipline of memory studies and the diverse conceptualisations of memory, see Groome (2006); Klein (2000); Steiner and Zelizer (1995). Interestingly, memory-studies’ primary focus is mostly concerned with remembering rather than forgetting. An attempt at countering this tendency to focus on remembering can be found in *De Heimweefabriek* (2008) by Douwe Draaisma.

³⁸ This is also dependent on the formulation of what memory entails. Within the field of psychology, there is a focus on researching the ‘neural pathways’ in which memory is stored and the ‘laws’ of these neural pathways (Kalat, 2015; Johnson & Proctor, 2004). This focus on neural pathways is especially common within research on traumatic memory; responses of fear or anger (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2010); and the HPA-axis (Sapolsky, 2004).

that functions like a tape recorder are widely contested by feminist and non-feminist thinkers alike (Buikema, 2006; Hirsch, 1997; Hirsch & Smith, 2002; Gray, 2002; Nünning & Young, 2008; Rothberg, 2009). The idea of memory as an individualised archive reveals its ties to the fallacy of Kantian objectivity. This individualisation of memory has been contested through the theorisation of collective memory.³⁹

Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (2002) present a feminist approach towards collective memory—albeit one focused on a collective consisting of humans. Collective memory is formulated as a shared history, stating that memory is “both public and private” both “individual and cultural” (Hirsch & Smith, 2002, p. 2). Collective memory is “an act of transfer” that is “in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested, norms, conventions, and practices” (Hirsch & Smith, 2002, p. 5). Thus, it is through our memories of the past and their interpretation that we establish a stable sense of self. Stevi Jackson (2010) formulates this eloquently when talking about narratives of the self as “[t]he idea that the present re-shapes the past is (...) fundamental to understanding the temporal, social and reflexive character of the self” (p. 124).⁴⁰ Michael Rothberg (2009) writes that “our relationship to the past (...) partially determine[s] who we are in the present, but never straightforwardly and directly” (p. 4). In both its individual and collective versions, memory is closely aligned with identity (Rothberg, 2009). Thus, within the context of a society that (de)values elderly people’s identity in terms of worth and liveliness, feminist formulations on collective memory might offer a strategy by which to regain a sense of self as ‘worthy’.

Furthermore, collective memory is closely tied to objects and material environments (Rothberg, 2009). Therefore, it can be of use in thinking about collective memory making in terms of both human and non-human intra-actions. The material environment, and therefore the objects that people engage with, might provide individuals with a tangible link to histories and pasts. Rothberg (2009) addresses memory—collective memory in particular—as a ‘zero-sum negotiation’, meaning that the addressing of certain collective experiences inevitably lead to the diminishing of others.⁴¹ However, he also approaches memory as multidirectional and

³⁹ The contestation of the individualisation of memory does not question individual memory, but rather approaches memory as something that interacts with the outside world, and thus cannot solely be contained by a single person (Rothberg, 2009).

⁴⁰ This interpretation of the past through the discourse of the present is eloquently explained by Joan Scott in her article ‘The Evidence of Experience’ (1991).

⁴¹ This especially comes to the fore in discussions on monuments and memorial sites, where the question is posed whose history gets remembered in the public sphere (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3-4).

thus as something that can address multiple layers and multiple histories at once. Memory making does not take place on the *tabula rasa* (blank slate) of the human mind. Rather, it is an ongoing engagement with former memories, experiences and knowledges.⁴² As Rothberg (2009) states: “Memory is the past made present” (p. 35). Therefore, memory making is not a singular process. As with the mediation of processes of ‘worlding’, memory is in a constant engagement with the ‘outside’ world. Hallam and Hockey (2001) suggest that “memory practices and perceptions of the past are reworked in the context of the present and in anticipation of the future” (p. 3). Therefore, the collective memory making of humans and objects might be important within the strategies that elderly people display during times of immense loss, for it ties their pasts to their presents, and allows them to anticipate in an agential future.

Analysis of the Interviews 1

As addressed in the preceding paragraphs, human and non-human entities are in a constant engagement with each other. According to Karen Barad (2003; 2012), they are also (trans)formative of each other during this engagement. In this part of the chapter I address the question of how people change—and are changed—by the non-human during the process of mourning by looking at the different ‘strategies of living’ that elderly people employ. I focus on the interviews I held with five residents of an elderly home in Leiden. Through an analysis of several parts of the interviews I present two strategies of living through which elderly people change and are changed in their engagement with objects. Firstly, I look at strategies that involve the negotiation of properties. This refers to the perceived properties objects and humans have, and how these properties change within the mourning process. I do so by focusing on a conversation I had with Francis about the re-reading of her diaries, and by focusing on the similarities and differences between Joop and Karel’s mourning ritual of lighting a candle near a photograph of their loved ones. Secondly, I will look at strategies that blur boundaries. Via a continuation of Joop’s mourning ritual of lighting a candle; his elaboration on his daily nap in ‘his wife’s chair’; and Johanna’s comments on the (now lost)

⁴² The idea of the *tabula rasa* is problematic, for it assumes a sense of neutrality of ‘a’ body (Bernstein, 2011). Furthermore, it assumes that all bodies are in a similar environment and uphold the same starting point in a system, and thus have an equal ratio of measurement—one that has an absolute zero point (Leary, 2008). Therefore, the idea that everyone ‘comes’ from the same ‘starting point’, in an exact same context with an absence of history is thus a “return of biological essentialism, under the cover of genetics, molecular biology, evolutionary theories and the despotic authority of DNA” (Braidotti, 2002, p. 4).

letters of her daughters, I argue that Joop and Johanna blur the boundaries of the life/death and presence/absence dichotomies.

Negotiating Properties

a. Francis' Diary

Francis lost her husband ten years ago. When I entered her room to interview her, she was re-reading the diary she kept throughout the year in which her husband had become ill and eventually passed away. She stated: "...dat ga ik nu toch maar weer eens lezen dan heb ik dat maar weer eens gehad."⁴³ The phrase 'het maar weer eens gehad hebben' can be translated into 'to be done with it'. Thus, the re-reading carried an aspect of 'going over' something—in the sense of a 'working through'—very much in the manner of performing a 'task'.⁴⁴ This shows how her diary, by virtue of being a book that can be read linearly from the front to the back, shaped her mode of mourning. When the reading of the diary ended, Francis argued, so would her mourning process. Simultaneously, Francis' past knowledge of her diaries significantly influences the way she reads them now. She explains that she is at the point in the diary where her husband is waiting for the test results. She comments: "En nou zit ie te wachten op de uitslag. Maar dat weet ik natuurlijk al hoe dat gelopen is."⁴⁵ Pre-existing knowledge about what is coming marks her apprehension towards the readings. Therefore, her task of reading the diaries gets mediated by the diaries themselves—by an object—and is thus subject to past histories and memories. The diary she engages with forms a collective memory with Francis, because of the written memories contained within. This becomes clear by her comment that she notices new aspects about the thoughts she wrote down. She notices—with a note of disapproval—how she mostly wrote about herself rather than about her husband, and she is angry with herself about having her writing so focused on her inner musings:

F: Ja. Ja, en ik, en en wat ik ook heel erg vervelend vind, ik ben ook heel erg met mezelf bezig. (...) Dan denk ik verdomme Francis waarom zit je nou toch over jezelf te praten in plaats van dat je aan Piet denkt zo, dat soort dingen heb ik nu.

A: Maar kan dat ook zijn dat, omdat je de hele dag bezig bent met je man, met Piet, dat dit de ruimte is om over jezelf te schrijven?

⁴³ I am going to read that again now, then I'll be done with it.

⁴⁴ This could be a sign of showing the prevailing narrative of working through mourning like a task, as mentioned in chapter one.

⁴⁵ But I already know how it went [from here on] of course.

F: Dat is waar. Dat is waar.⁴⁶

Francis seems to be focused on a level of the diary that mostly concerns her thoughts and feelings—the parts where she wrote about herself. For Francis, the diary helps her to remember, as well as to constitute a sense of her (past and present) self within the mourning process. They shape her sense of self by showing a particular selection of thoughts that were written down, whilst leaving others out. This selectivity is in agreement with arguments that contest the notion of objective memory. Through her apparent focus on herself, it appears as if the diary is not crucial to her mourning process, for it does not affect her in the same way as the assumed patterns of sadness associated with mourning. She describes the impression made on her by the reading process, saying: “Dat is indrukwekkend moet ik zeggen.”⁴⁷ Even though she does not directly state how she mourns her husband, she does feel a sense of loss because she wrote less about her husband than about herself. This can be seen as a form of loss as well, because she may have hoped that she would find more memories of her husband in the diary—although this was not explicitly stated. Francis approaches the diaries as if they contain a direct relationship with her thoughts in the past.

The multiple layered memory that Rothberg (2009) argues for can also be found within Francis’ engagement with the diary. At an earlier (unknown) moment, Francis had marked all the pages upon which she wrote about her husband. She reads one of those marked pages to me, saying: “We bridgen met Fieke en Hans. Heel gezellig maar Piet heeft toch pijn. Zo dat soort dingen.”⁴⁸ Here, a change in the dynamic between Francis and the object has taken place, because the object is now marked by her—and thus physically altered. The diary changed in its material appearance throughout her engagement with it, and therefore by re-reading it she engages with multiple layers of memory. These multiple layers show that the diary and her engagement with it can be considered a form of collective memory—a collective comprised of human and non-human agents. Furthermore, by marking it, Francis changes a fundamental property of the diary—that of containing a delineated amount of time. The diary acquires a multi-layeredness by defying the property of only being written in once.

⁴⁶ F: Yes. Yes, and I, and and what I also find very annoying, I am also very busy with myself. (...) Then I think damn Francis why are you talking about yourself instead of thinking about Piet so, that kind of thing I have now.

A: But could it be that because you are busy with your husband all day, that this is the space to write about yourself?

F: That's true. That's true.

⁴⁷ That is impressive I must say.

⁴⁸ We are playing bridge with Fieke and Hans. Very nice, but Piet still has pain. Those kinds of things.

Through her mourning process and through the pencil marks she made, Francis has influenced the appearance of the object. Simultaneously, these marks also show the change in Francis herself towards the object and the mourning process. Francis' sense of herself becomes altered and is (re)formed within the mourning practice, by reading her diary. The diary thus performs, not only the 'task' of mourning, but also Francis' position during this task. By the mutual change of properties, both the diary and Francis are transformed.

b. Karel's and Joop's Tea Lights

Apart from the mutual influence that objects and humans have on each other, context and power-relations shape the way objects and humans become with each other as well. Via the similar mourning rituals of Joop and Karel, I argue how mourning rituals are enabled or limited because of different discourses, especially the neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility and its entanglement with ableism. As mentioned in chapter one, Dutch neoliberal society individualises responsibility with regard to being able-bodied. It is therefore no surprise that the discourses of neoliberalism and ableism inform the drawing-up of regulations within the elderly home, not least because how mourning rituals take place is formed by discourse (Katz, Hockey & Small, 2001). Joop, whose wife had lived in the same elderly home, and Karel, who is living in the elderly home, both light a tea light near pictures of loved ones who have passed away. However, the elderly home prohibited the use of open fire, and thus Karel found another way to light candles, namely by using plastic tea lights:

A: En u heeft [plastic] waxine lichtjes ervoor staan.

K: Ja andere lichtjes mag niet.

A: Ah. En brandt u die vaak?

K: Nee, een keer in de week ofzo.

A: Heeft u een vaste dag waarop ze aangaan?

K: Ja, meestal op zondag. [...] En ik steek zeker een kaarsje aan op verjaardagen [van de overledenen]. Ik weet niet, ik zet ze meestal niet zo lang aan want ze zijn zo leeg.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ A: And you have [plastic] candles in front of them [the pictures].

K: Yes. Other candles are prohibited.

A: Ah. And do you light them often?

K: No. Usually once a week or so.

A: Do you have a specific day to light them?

K: Yes. Usually on Sunday. (...) And I definitely light them on birthdays [of the people who passed away]. I don't know, I usually don't put them on too long because the battery empties fast.

The neoliberal environment of the elderly home has become normalised in Dutch society, and multi-generational living arrangement have become a rarity. Thus, the elderly person within the elderly home has also become a normalised phenomenon, including the person's adherence to the rules of the institution. What can be seen here is that within the elderly home there is a specific discourse on safety—one that exhibits an individualised approach to risk. The elderly person is responsible for the candle, and the risk of fire is thus assigned to the individual inhabitant rather than the whole organisation of the home. Furthermore, it assumes the elderly person to be 'unable' to 'manage' this risk—possibly through the idea that the person is not 'fast enough' to put out a flame in case it catches onto something else, or the possibility of the elderly person falling asleep or forgetting to put out the candle. Thus, the individualisation of the risk of a fire placed upon the inhabitant shows the assumption of the elderly person as 'unable'. In this way neoliberal discourse reveals its entanglement with ableist discourse, and together they influence the mourning ritual by prohibiting certain material practices. This is why Karel has plastic tea lights near the photographs of his loved ones. There is a transformation of the traditional wax and wick candle into an electronic and plastic object, changing the properties of the object—without losing its meaning as a candle. Karel navigates the discourses of individualism and ableism on the one hand, and the mourning practice on the other, and renegotiates the meaning of 'lighting a candle'. It is this (re)negotiation of meaning making that has transformative effects on the properties of the candle, by changing the materiality of the candle into plastic. Simultaneously, this material change influences the mourning practice, for its different material form shapes (limits) when the mourning ritual takes place—as can be seen in Karel's answer—by lighting the candles only on Sundays and birthdays, because 'the battery empties soon'. His answer might also refer to monetary limitations that influence mourning rituals (Katz, Hockey & Small, 2011). Karel's mourning practice of lighting tea lights shows that the engagement between object and human does not take place outside of context, and thus not outside of power-relations (Åsberg, Thiele & Van der Tuin, 2015). The power difference between the elderly home (formed by a neoliberal and ableist discourse) and Karel results in his strategy of changing the properties of the tea lights. The mourning ritual of lighting a candle near a photograph carries different negotiations of what is considered a candle, and simultaneously changes the mourning ritual via the different properties of the material—for example by having batteries that empty.

That the context is of influence to how humans and objects engage with one another becomes even clearer when looking at Karel's tea light ritual in comparison to Joop's ritual of

lighting a tea light near the picture of his wife who passed away. Joop had lost his wife a few months before the interview took place. Every day he lights a candle next to a picture of his wife; the picture that had sat on the coffin during the funeral. The following excerpt of our conversation shows that he tries to make contact with her through the mourning ritual of lighting a candle:

A: Praat u nog weleens met uw vrouw? In uw hoofd of...?

J: Oh ja, ja.

A: Wat voor dingen zegt u tegen haar?

J: Ik vraag haar weleens wat. Eh, als ik dat lichtje aansteek; blaas eens in dat lichtje. Maar, dat doet ze niet. [lacht] Ik denk, dan weet ik zeker dat ze eh...

A: Dat ze er is?

J: Dat ze er is. Maar... heb ik nog niet kunnen ontdekken.⁵⁰

As Joop was not living in the elderly home anymore—he had moved out after his wife passed away—he was able to light a traditional wax and wick tea light with a flame.⁵¹ His mourning request to his wife to blow into the flame could happen because there were no regulations on having an open fire. Simultaneously, because the tea light had the property of a flame that could flicker, he was able to try and connect with his wife through the material of the tea light—a strategy of blurring boundaries as I will elaborate on in the following section.

Through conversations with Francis, Karel, and Joop, the question of how people transform and are transformed by objects within their process of mourning is (partially) answered by understanding that they transform objects through changing their properties. These examples also show that the objects shape and (trans)form the mourning rituals and processes of Francis and Karel. They determine the time of the ritual, limiting it for Karel to Sundays and special dates, and the length of the ritual; and turning it into a task for Francis. The comparison between Karel's and Joop's similar ritual of lighting a candle shows that the transformation of object and human happens within the context of Dutch contemporary

⁵⁰ A: Do you ever talk with your wife? Mentally or...?

J: Oh yes, yes.

A: What kind of things do you say?

J: I sometimes ask her things. Eh, when I light the candle; blow in the candle, please. But, she doesn't. [laughs] I think then I know for sure...

A: That she is there?

J: That she is there. But... I haven't noticed it yet.

⁵¹ This is contradictory to the narrative surrounding the moving into an elderly home.

society, which upholds discourses of neoliberalism and ableism. It creates a power difference between the human and the object, but also between the outside world and the elderly person in the elderly home (a metaphorical repetition of the young/old dichotomy). Both Karel and Francis find ways to be within this context via the transformation of the objects with which they engage during the mourning process.

Blurring boundaries

c. Joop's Tea Light and Chair

In this section I elaborate upon the strategy of blurring boundaries that elderly people show within the mourning process in order to deal with loss. I continue by elaborating upon the last fragment of Joop and the tea light that he lights every day near the picture of his wife to show how he blurs the life/death boundary and the absence/presence boundary. The candle that Joop lights every day near the picture forms a link between his deceased wife and himself. This link is intrinsically tied to materiality because, in order for Joop to 'know she was there', he requested her to blow into the flame of the candle. Thus, the flame—something deemed to reside at the absolute bottom of the hierarchy of animacy—plays a crucial role in animating Joop's life. As Mel Chen (2012) describes, "not only can we not tell what is alive or dead, but the diagnostic promise of the categories of life and death is itself in crisis" (p. 139) Joop bases the social liveness of his wife on the candle—specifically onto the flame of the lit candle, although the flame is an object that is linguistically lowest on the 'common' interpretation of the hierarchy of animacy.⁵² Joop does not need his wife to embody a 'human body', to have a beating heart, an electrically active brain, or breathing lungs. He only needs her to interact with the light of a flame in order to render her present. This redefines what it means to be considered alive, as well as what it means to 'embody'. The border between life and death gets blurred, as is the boundary between living and lifeless.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, engaging with people who passed away can keep them as an active agent in their partners' life (Hallam, Hockey & Howarth, 1999). This could also provide an experience of social liveness for the person still biologically living, as they are engaging and communicating with someone close to them, even if that other person is not biologically alive.⁵³ Thus, a co-constitution of social liveness can be produced via these

⁵² Although it can be argued that fire, because of its multitude of symbolic meanings, can be considered an exception within this pattern (Lakoff, 1897; Park, 1997).

⁵³ An example of this would be to talk to someone, either out loud or in the mind. This is an often-reported activity by people who lose someone (Katz, Hockey & Small, 2001).

interactions. Joop engages with the candle in order to keep his wife as an active agent in his life, and, as we will discuss, further applies this strategy of engaging with objects to keep his wife close during his afternoon sleep. As mentioned before, ‘worlding’ can be done through the body (Meyer, 2013). However, often this is also done via objects. Linking persons who have biologically passed away to persons who are biologically alive, the object proves to be invaluable in constituting what is “immediate or present” (Meyer, 2013, p. 5). I explore this mechanism through the interview I held with Joop, who napped in his wife’s chair every day:

Joop: Ja hoor. Ja, daar zit ik ook wel in. En zij had eigenlijk, toen ze hier wegging was dat haar stoel. (...) Deze. Want die kun je verstellen. Naar achteren. En daar zat ze veel. Maar het stoeltje aan die kant, dat hebben ze meegenomen naar Groenhoven. (...) Laat ik je dat vertellen, deze stoel daar eh slaap ik iedere middag in. Na het eten dan rust ik daar uit. Want die stoel die kan naar achteren en dan ligt ie heerlijk.

A: Heeft u dan het gevoel dat u dichterbij uw vrouw bent?

Joop: Dat gevoel heb je wel ja. Ja.⁵⁴

The excerpt above of our conversation shows that his sleeping time coincided with the hours that Joop would have spent with his wife before she passed away—the afternoon hours between lunch and dinner. His body is now connected to his wife in those hours by taking a nap in his wife’s chair. Joop’s body takes up the same space, and the same form that his wife’s body did. By its presence, the chair enables Joop to experience the same experience that his partner had whilst also sitting in the chair. The use of this chair within his mourning process is a process of gaining comfort, whilst simultaneously forming a connection between his wife and himself. He describes the feeling of being closer to his wife whilst napping in the chair, saying: “One has that feeling, yes.” Again, Joop uses the strategy of blurring the boundaries of life and death, but also of blurring the hierarchy of animacy: his feeling of being closer to his wife, to have her a little more present, relies upon the properties of the chair. Thus, the chair holds meaning to Joop, via its material self. The chair becomes a ‘specific’ object, rather than ‘any’ chair, gaining a ‘uniqueness’ usually reserved for humans.

⁵⁴ J: Yes. Yes, I sit there sometimes too. And she had actually, when she left the house that was her chair. This one. Because you can alter the settings. Let it lean backwards. And she sat there a lot. But the chair on that side, that one they took to the elderly home. (...) Let me tell you, this chair I eh sleep in it every afternoon. After dinner I rest there. Because the chair can move backwards and then it’s very comfortable.

A: Do you have the feeling of being closer to your wife at that moment?

J: One gets that feeling yes. Yes.

The materiality of the chair cultivates his life far beyond its assigned animacy of being lifeless. His wife's chair gets characteristics that normally would be assigned solely to people, such as agency. Nevertheless, Joop talks about the chair as his wife's chair, saying that "when she left, this was her chair". The chair thus still remains separated from the living in terms of being possessed by someone. It never transcends its objecthood completely, yet the engagement between Joop and the chair becomes de-hierarchised because the chair is so important to Joop. Therefore, Joop does not collapse human and object, but rather entangles them to keep his wife close. In Joop's mourning rituals, social liveness, materiality, and levels of animacy tie into each other through the lighting of a candle and the hope for a movement of the flame combined with napping in his wife's chair in order to feel close to her. Joop combines the strategies of blurring boundaries and negotiating properties, and by doing so, de-hierarchises the human/object dichotomy and challenges common ideas about the life/death dichotomy.

d. Johanna's Letters

In ways similar to Joop and Karel and their engagements with pictures of their loved ones, all the elderly people I had conversations with had pictures of loved ones in their room. In her room, Johanna had pictures of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Very early into the interview, she spoke of having six children—three daughters and three sons. When I asked her who was displayed on the pictures in the room, she told me they were her sons, whose visits range in frequency from every two weeks to irregular short visits. However, none of her daughters are displayed on any of the pictures and Johanna explained that she had become estranged from them. She stated:

J: Ja drie jongens komen thuis, Frits, Paul en Jan. En dan de meiden Marie en Loes en Ankie, nou die zie ik niet meer. (...) Nee, ooit kwam Ankie met twee kinderen. [Ik zocht contact] [o]m een andere dag te bellen [met mijn dochters] ik had er zo'n spijt van, om het uit te praten. En kwam m'n schoonzoon aan de telefoon, zei ik, ik wil zo graag met Marie praten. Ik zei over het geval van gisteren. Hij zei nou ik zal het eens vragen, maar het zal wel niet mogelijk zijn. En toen eh nam haar zoon het aan, kreeg ik zo'n jochie. Of tante Marie met oma wilde praten. Nou daar kreeg ik helemaal geen antwoord van.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ J: Yes, they come home, Frits, Paul and Jan. And then the girls Marie, Loes and Ankie, well, I don't see them anymore. (...) No, there was a time where Ankie visited with her two children. [I wanted] [t]o call on a

Although I experienced some difficulties hearing what she was saying as she spoke very softly, it became clear that at some point in her life, when her daughters were present, she had said that she wished she never had any children, after which her daughters (partially) broke off contact with her. She tried calling one of her daughters, but they were not willing to talk with her. Instead, she received letters that she described as ‘lelijk’ (ugly) and ‘naar’ (awful).

J: Kreeg ik twee hele boze brieven. Vreselijk van m’n jongste dochter. Dat was... ach zo’n moeilijke. En dan stond erboven ‘en dat noemt zich nog moeder’. (...) Ja ik kreeg van allebei een brief. Was niet meer mee te praten. Ik wou toch geen kinderen hebben, nou dan hoefde ze ook niet meer te praten ook. (...) En weet ik veel allemaal hele vieze dingen. Uh. Ja ik heb spijt. Ik heb ze eigenlijk verscheurd hoor, maar ik had ze eigenlijk moeten bewaren.⁵⁶

There were no pictures of her daughters present in her room, and she had torn the letters and thrown them away—something she regrets, although she did not elaborate on why she regretted discarding them. Thus, despite being absent in any material representation, the daughters appeared multiple times throughout the interview. This can be seen in the following excerpt, which is a compilation of different moments in the interview when Johanna touches upon the topic of her daughters:

(...) En m’n jongste dochter, nou dat is een kattenkop. Jongens ga mee? Nou ze liepen allemaal weg. Ik heb ze niet meer gezien (...). Ik heb echt weleens weg willen lopen, maar ja. Je laat je kinderen niet in de steek he. Wie laat z’n moeder in de steek? Nou ik heb er vreselijk om gehuild. (...) Maar nou ga ik er boven staan. Je kan er toch niets mee. Je bereikt er niets mee. Ze komen toch niet terug. Dat kinderen zo tegen hun moeder kunnen zijn. (...) Ik zou het nooit meer over willen doen. Nee wat dat betreft eh, heb ik heel veel meegemaakt. En nou zes kinderen en die komen niet meer thuis.

different day [with my daughters], I regretted it so, to talk it through. And my son in law answered the phone, I said I, I want to talk to Marie so much. I said, about the thing yesterday. He said I will ask her, but it will probably not be possible. And then eh, her son took the phone, and I talked to this little boy. If Aunt Marie wanted to talk to grandma. Well, I didn’t receive an answer from him at all.

⁵⁶ I got two very angry letters. Horrible from my youngest daughter. That was (...) oh she was so difficult. And the first line said ‘and that still calls herself a mother’. (...) Yes I got a letter from both. They were unable to converse with. I didn’t want to have kids, well then I didn’t have to talk with them anymore either. (...) And I don’t know, very awful things. Eh. Yes, I regret having torn them, actually I should have kept them.

De jongste helemaal. (...) Oh zulke lelijke brieven, bij allebei stond er nou en dat noemt zich nog moeder.⁵⁷

What is significant about the above conversation and, in particular, Johanna's repeated returning to the subject of the letters sent by her daughters, is that her daughters and the (now discarded) letters were far more present in the conversation than her sons of whom she had pictures in her room. Thus, it was not only the presence of pictures that offered insights into processes of mourning and engagement with people who were bodily absent in the person's life, as was the case with Joop and Karel; the absence of pictures was equally telling. The absence of objects that Johanna possessed from, or representing, her daughters, either in the form of letters or images, seemed to represent the absence of the daughters—a failure to stay in contact with her children, realised through a failure to keep objects. Johanna's expression that she should have kept the letters, combined with her grief about the loss of her daughters, might imply that she wanted to keep something that represented them. Furthermore, the (lack of) pictures and her speaking of her regret for not keeping the letters allowed Johanna to show the sense of loss she feels towards her daughters. It was through the materiality—however absent this materiality was—that she could speak of them, and thus keep them as active agents in her life. As Ahmed (2006) formulates, the absence of pictures and letters was in effect a “making present of something that is now absent” (p. 158). Something considered to be lifeless, both in its physicality and its absence, is thus very much a living agent in Johanna's life. In this instance the simultaneous presence and absence of her daughters—their enunciated presence versus the physical absence of pictures and letters—are directly relatable to the non-binary thinking that lies at the core of new materialist formulations of rethinking materiality and hierarchy (Åsberg, Thiele & Van der Tuin, 2015; Barad, 2003; Haraway, 1988). The simultaneous presence and absence of Johanna's daughters demonstrates, as Chen (2012) states, how “the subject is, and is not” (p. 140). Therefore, in this context, Johanna's strategy of keeping her daughters close can be considered a blurring of the presence/absence boundary, but also a de-hierarchising of the difference between the presence/absence and human/object boundaries. The absent letters and the absent daughters were as important to

⁵⁷ Eh, my youngest daughter, well she is mean. Come with me? Well, they all walked away. I haven't seen them since. (...) Of course I have wanted to walk away sometimes, but yeah. You don't leave your children, do you? Who leaves their mother? Well, I have cried about it a lot. (...) But now I am above it all. I can't do anything about it. I won't be able to change anything. They won't come back anyway. That children can be like this to their mother. (...) I would never want to do it again. No, when it comes to that, I've been through a lot. And well, six children and they don't come home anymore. Especially the youngest. (...) Oh such ugly letters, both of them stated and that calls herself a mother.

(and influential on) her as her sons, who were physically present in her life and via images. In addition, I argue that the blurring of the presence/absence boundary is a way for Johanna to create a sense of a ‘just’ self that emerges from a merging of the past and the present. By frequently referring to her daughters and the letters, she continuously “makes the past present” (Rothberg, 2009, p. 35).

Johanna ties the estrangement of her daughters to her sense of self by arguing that her daughters acted unjustly by leaving her, whilst she has acted justly by staying with her children (and husband), even though she “wanted to walk away sometimes”. She counters the norm of ‘one does not leave their children’ into ‘one does not leave their parents’ by asking “who leaves their mother?” The fact that she stayed with the family—a decision based on the societal norm of ‘no parent leaves their children’—forms an argument in her defying the opening line from the letter her daughter sent, stating “and that calls herself mother”. Her identity as a mother, as well as her sense of self, are formed and defined through her memories of staying with the family. Therefore, her continued mentioning of the letters, and especially of that one opening line, do not only show the hurt, but also the need for a confirmation of the injustice enacted upon her by her daughters. Similar to Butler’s (1990) argument that the need for an ongoing confirmation shows the instability of a seemingly stable construct, Johanna’s continued repetition of the injustice of the opening line of the letter shows her ongoing engagement in shaping her own sense of self. Through her past memories and the materiality within that past, her sense of the present is constructed. This is a sense of self that she marks as morally ‘just’ and ‘right’. Thus, blurring the boundaries of presence/absence and past/present via the letters and pictures allows Johanna to keep her daughters close and present within her life. It offers her a way to mourn her daughters, whilst simultaneously offering a way to let the past influence the present, and thus (re)gain a sense of self that is ‘just’, or ‘good’.

Conclusion

This chapter attempted a partial answering of the question: ‘What strategies do people utilise to deal with multiple layers of mourning, and how do they transform—and are transformed by—specific objects in order to deal with processes of loss within the transition to, and their lives in, elderly homes? I showed how the Kantian dualism of object/subject—which simultaneously implies a dualism of human/object and life/death—is problematic, for it creates a false sense of both objectivity and meaning making. Using the work of feminist thinkers from various fields of study, such as religious studies and new materialism, I

approached material and thought, and the human and the object—which are in an ongoing intra-action with each other—as neither apart nor together. These feminist thinkers do not collapse the human/object division, but rather engage with it critically and argue for a de-hierarchisation of the division. I showed that the way things matter, in both their materialisation and meaning, are always a result of context, discourse, power relations, and are thus exposed to forces that constantly shape and reshape them. Furthermore, I argued that within this shaping and reshaping memory plays a crucial role, as past histories and knowledges influence the way humans and objects become. Through their ongoing engagement, a collective memory making emerges—both human and non-human.

The second half of the chapter focused on the interviews, and the different strategies of living that the elderly people used in order to deal with their losses. I distinguished two strategies, namely that of negotiating properties and that of blurring boundaries. Via an analysis of Francis' diary it became clear how mourning transforms both mourner and object, and that this transformation also implies changes to the properties of the diary itself. Furthermore, via an analysis of Karel's and Joop's practice of lighting candles near pictures of loved ones, I showed how mourning rituals do not exist outside of discourse and power. Via a circumvention of the neoliberal and ageist discourses within the elderly home, Karel changed the properties of his candles in order to navigate his mourning process. Thus, a change in the properties of objects within the mourning process takes place within the context of society.

As I argue in the section on blurring boundaries, the binary of presence/absence gets blurred, as well as the divisions between life and death, and past and present. Through an analysis of Joop's chair I showed how objects gain a sense of livingness usually reserved for humans, and that via the candle and the chair, the life/death dichotomy becomes unstable. This destabilisation—or blurring—simultaneously means a de-hierarchisation of the human/object division, as these objects are crucial in keeping Joop's wife socially alive. Further to this, via the conversation I had with Johanna about her daughters and the letters they had sent, I revealed the blurring of the hierarchies of animacy by showing how objects that are absent—in this case letters—can still have an enormous impact (and thus agency) on someone's life. Objects that were not present in the elderly home were still present in the interview with Johanna and via her memories. Thus, there was also an ongoing engagement with materiality that was not physically in the room. As with Francis' engagement with her diary, Johanna's engagement with absent material allowed her to stabilise her sense of identity and motherhood as 'just' and 'right'. Therefore, the two strategies of living—that of negotiating properties and blurring boundaries—show how elderly people transform, and are

transformed, in a myriad of ways through their particular engagements with objects during times of loss.

Social Liveness: A Queering of Objects and Diversification of Agency

Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis explored the myriad ways in which elderly people (in a specifically Dutch context) are subject to gendered, ageist, ableist, and neoliberal discourses. Due to these discourses (and the changes they experience when moving into elderly homes), elderly people face a profound destabilisation of their societal position. The elderly—especially during, or after moving into an elderly home—face significant issues of loss, which can be divided into the loss of people and a loss of agency. Overall, my thesis aims to explore how elderly people deal with this loss, and what strategies they employ to deal with these processes of mourning. In the second chapter of this thesis I introduced two strategies residents of an elderly home in Leiden used, namely the blurring of boundaries between human/object and life/death, and the negotiation of the properties of objects. In this final chapter of the thesis, I want to add another two strategies through which the elderly engage with objects—namely the queering of objects and the diversification of agency. This chapter will follow the same structure as the preceding chapter, beginning with a theoretical introduction and followed by an analysis of several interview excerpts to illustrate the different strategies elderly people use.

This chapter begins with an elaboration of Sarah Ahmed's theory of queer phenomenology (2006). I bring in Ahmed's concept of queering, because it offers a perspective on engagements with materiality that unpacks otherwise 'natural' seeming concepts, such as being elderly, or the idea that objects possess intrinsic properties bound to (their) utility. Ahmed shows that the background or the context in which an object is placed inevitably shapes the object, and reveals buried or hidden histories of labour that further shape the object. It shows how objects can have many uses and how materiality can be made use of in manifold ways by destabilising the scripts that are attached to any given object. Thus, Ahmed's theory might be of importance to this examination of how elderly people re-orientate themselves towards objects after moving to an elderly home. As I will reveal via one of the analytical interview subsections, the elderly exhibit this strategy of queering within their processes of loss. Further to this, an elaboration of the concept of agency is given, as a diversification of agency might offer (new ways of creating) social liveness for the elderly. Diversifying the uses of materiality and the properties of materiality—such as agency—could help elderly people in their mourning process towards situations of loss.

Proceeding, I show how the elderly people I interviewed used strategies of queering and diversifying agency in their engagements with objects. It will become clear within these subsections that these strategies are deployed in order to reclaim a sense of social liveness; regain some of the things that are lost; and to form a connection between the elderly person's past and present. This chapter thus forms my final elaboration on the overarching question of how the elderly transform and are transformed by specific objects during times of mourning.

OOO and Queer Phenomenology

In the previous chapter I briefly introduced Graham Harman's 'Object Orientated Ontology' (OOO). However, this approach proves to be insufficient when it comes to undoing the hierarchies that exist between the human and the non-human, and for this reason OOO is critiqued by feminist thinkers for failing to take into account the inevitable power relations that exist between humans and non-humans. Despite this criticism, I want to engage further with Harman's OOO, as it exhibits some similarities with the critical feminist work of Sarah Ahmed.

Ahmed's thoughts on queering objects and the orientation of people towards objects will be central to this chapter, as it reveals the possibility to engage with objects in a myriad of ways. It therefore provides elderly people with the possibility to re-orientate themselves towards their objects of engagement and allows for a (re)negotiation of the meaning of these objects. Graham Harman's book *Tool Being* (2002) is based on Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* ([1996] 1927)—a seminal work that engages with human tool use. However, Harman approaches tools as objects and vice versa. According to Harman, humans interact with objects in various ways—visual, tactile, and cognitive. Harman explains that Heidegger makes a distinction between objects that are present-at-hand, and objects that are ready-at-hand. The present-at-hand refers to the ideas that surround an object, or the theoretical encounter between the human and the object. Ready-at-hand refers to the practical encounter. Taking Heidegger's example of a hammer, present-at-hand would be the thoughts someone has on the hammer, such as its ability to hammer, whilst ready-at-hand would be the nearness of the hammer, either in someone's hand, or in the garage—poised for when needed.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ This assigned place informs my possible anticipation about the object as well. Writing about where the hammer would be (in the garage, nightstand, kitchen drawer, etc.) could potentially say something about my ideas of where hammers are supposed to be stored, and with that, my socio-economic status (if hammers are supposed to be stored in a garage, then one needs to have a garage in order to store a hammer). This is how our ideas about anticipations are already formed by the systems we grow up in—systems that leave some humans dispossessed more than others.

However, Harman argues, this ready-at-hand-ness can never capture the ‘true’ being of the tool, as the present-at-hand always already forms its ready-at-hand-ness; I have a hammer near because I expect it to be useful in a certain way. However, when translating this notion to the encounter with a table, our perspective on the table (which, for example, might be called frontal) causes the other perspectives and angles (such as, for example, from behind) to withdraw as they cannot be seen, in the same way that ideas that are present overshadow other possible ideas. Thus, the tool in its entire being is always withdrawn or withdrawing. The present-at-hand is in constant interplay with the ready-at-hand (as there is a constant withdrawal and presenting of the tool). Harman concludes that this means that objects and humans hold the exact same ontological position.

As noted in chapter 2 of this thesis, Harman argues that the true being of entities would always be withdrawn, existing in a void—in an absence of hierarchy. To argue for a being without hierarchy because the true ‘being’ of something (object or human) cannot be shown in its entirety is problematic, for it assumes that if true objectivity (about an entity) cannot be, all subjectivity is the same. This reveals that Harman fundamentally fails to understand the shaping effects of power differences. Elderly people’s perceived loss of agency is an example of such an effect of power differences. With the push of elderly people into ‘objecthood’ a devaluation takes place. Therefore, how entities are perceived—even if they share their ongoing withdrawal—is not equal across subjectivities. Power differences have a shaping/living effect on the entities that are perceived, and it is this mechanism of perceiving (or orientation) that Ahmed foregrounds in her book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006).

Whilst Ahmed also bases her work on Heidegger, she does not avoid the importance of context or power, and therefore includes an analysis of the hierarchies made between objects and humans. At the core of Ahmed’s theorisation is the notion of orientation. Orientation is something that an object possesses in addition to the orientation of the person (or other objects) towards the object. Ahmed starts from the same basic premise as Heidegger and Harman by stating that objects are not perceived in their ‘true’ being. Rather, “perceiving an object involves a way of apprehending that object” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 27) Ahmed therefore takes into account the histories that tension this withdrawal of objects, and the power relations that are entangled with the parts that are not perceived. She states: “[w]hat is ‘present’ or near to us is not casual; we do not acquire our orientations just because we find things here or there” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 21). To be orientated is never neutral; orientations act more towards some things than others, which means that the direction we take “excludes things for us,

before we even get there” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 15). What is unseen and what is seen is not accidental or based on a ‘random’ or neutral erupting out of nothing. Instead, it is based on histories and discourses. Furthermore, it is based on the concealment of other histories and discourses. Ahmed writes: “Orientation (...) might depend on [histories and discourses], while it erases the signs of [these histories and discourses]” (2006, p. 31).⁵⁹ Ahmed further expands upon the idea that orientation is never neutral, but reliant on the discarding of other orientations. She writes: “Some things are relegated to the background in order *to sustain* [emphasis added] a certain direction” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 31) Therefore, orientation does not happen outside of context and power relations, but conceals these shaping effects in order to appear ‘neutral’, or (in Meyer’s terms) ‘immediate’. Therefore, deeply rooted ideas on dichotomies, and the hierarchies that exist between these dichotomies, influence how we live, for they shape our orientations towards both objects and elderly people. Yet, as these orientations towards entities rely upon certain other things to exist in the background, changing their context inevitably influences how the entity is perceived. This is apparent in the case of elderly people who move to elderly homes and thus place their objects into new environments that might alter the perception of the object. Simultaneously, the elderly person finds him- or herself in a new environment, which might also alter their perception of the object.

Objects manifest themselves via their properties—something upon which Bruno Latour and Couze Venn(2002) and Heidegger ([1996] 1927) elaborate extensively. For example, a key is perceived as a key and thus becomes—and is—a key through its use as a key. The object is therefore read in accordance with its dominant script. However, Heidegger argues that these properties are shown especially when the object fails to do what it is expected to do. If the key is broken, its property—of unlocking a door—becomes manifest specifically because it can no longer perform its property. Yet, Ahmed argues that this failure depends on context, for our orientation towards the object shapes our expectations of it. To return to the example of the table: if the table fails to seat me as it might be too small for me to sit at, it fails my expectation, but it might be suitable for a toddler to sit at. The failure of an object is thus not showing an intrinsic property of the object, but emerges as the result of my orientation towards the object. “In other words, what is at stake in moments of failure is not so much access to properties but attributions of properties, which become a matter of how we *approach* the object” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 49, emphasis in original).

⁵⁹ For a different yet interesting example of the concealing of the history of concepts, see Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Volume 1* (1978).

This failure—which reveals the assignment of properties, or the way of approaching the object—is important to this thesis. Ahmed explains how, when objects fail to live up to our expectations, a disorientation occurs. It is this moment of disorientation that creates a space in which it is possible to change the script attached to something. This move defies any notion of the naturalisation of objects and thus, queering the scripts of objects—whether deliberately or not—could also change our orientation towards objects and hence both the objects and our ways of appearing or being with them. Ahmed argues for, not only the queering of the object, but also a reassessment of the value of objects that fail to be of our apprehension. She sees the merit in what Lucas D. Introna (2009) formulates as the actions of people “that draw upon them, use them in unintended ways, ignoring or deliberately ‘misreading’ the script the objects may endeavor to impose” (p. 401). To do so might evoke a different orientation, and also a different valuation of objects. Thus, through the queering of scripts, concepts and constructs become more porous—their artificiality is shown in the moment of queering, and therefore a renegotiation of the script can take place. Queering objects therefore carries the potential to open up space for the de-hierarchisation of the human/object division. Taking into account Sara Ahmed’s approach to object orientation and queering scripts, it is important to look at how we approach or orientate agency. Agency—a key aspect of social liveness—is widely regarded as solely belonging to humans, for it is tied to ‘livingness’ (Chen, 2012). However, in the next section I will look at the possible agency of objects as they become with us, and how this might affect the idea of liveness for both objects and elderly people.

Who Is Afraid of Agency and Social Liveness?

As a result of the object/subject division dominant in Western discourses, agency is often assigned solely to the human.⁶⁰ Whilst the diverse uses and meanings of agency in various different fields of science (such as economics, psychology and sociology) lie outside the scope of this thesis (not least, due to limitations of space), agency is commonly referred to as the power to make an intentional action.⁶¹ This does not imply free or limitless options, but rather the intentionality—or choice—of the action made (Jackson, 1982). However, Jane

⁶⁰ For an eclectic collection of thinkers who have been influential on theories of human agency, see Hegel (1821 [2014]), Spinoza 1677 [1979]) and Kant (1790 [2005]). These are thinkers upon whom Jane Bennet elaborates in her work (2009).

⁶¹ For different sources on agency, see Eisenhardt (1989); Bandura (1989); and Taylor (1985). Agency appears frequently within the field of economics and organisational behaviour. However, it is also widely used within social sciences, political sciences, and philosophy.

Bennet (2009) and other thinkers in the new materialist field posit agency as something that can be both human and non-human. They argue that human agency is based on assemblages of the human and the non-human (Bennet, 2009; Latour, 1999). For example, the decision to write, and further, to write with a certain purpose, depends on the human who wants to write, but simultaneously on the graphite of a pen, the electricity in the brain, and so forth (Bennet, 2009, p. 30). Bruno Latour (2004) notes that the “source of action (...) can be either human or nonhuman” (p. 248). Therefore, to be an actant (and thus to have agency) “depends on the collaboration [and] cooperation (...) of many bodies and forces” (Bennet, 2009, p. 21).

Bennet articulates the idea of agency as occurring in assemblages—based on Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980)—of humans and non-humans (Bennet, 2009, p. 24). She does not equate material agency to human agency—like “the strong, autonomous agency to which... Kant... aspired”, but talks about an agency in which the effects are “more porous, tenuous, and thus indirect” (Bennet, 2009, p. 36). This formulation of agency might also include that which is created in a collective manner (within an engagement of both the human and the object) rather than individually (Bennet, 2009). This is echoed by Karen Barad (2012), whose formulation of intra-action carries the explicit intention to “[shake] loose the crusty toxic scales of anthropocentrism, where the human in its exceptional way of being gets to hold all the ‘goodies’ like agency, intentionality, rationality, feeling, pain, empathy, language, consciousness, imagination, and much more” (p. 27). The complication of the border between the human and the non-human, or between the human and the object, thus calls for a redistribution of agency that can no longer be considered a solely human trait. The approach Barad, Bennet, and Latour employ towards the human/non-human border de-hierarchises the concepts on either side of the division. Redistributing and diversifying agency as something that is not solely human serves the wider purpose of understanding the importance of being with objects. The argument is not that because elderly people are pushed into ‘objecthood’, an acknowledgement of the agency of objects would lead to a further acknowledgement of elderly people’s own agency. Rather, the importance of object agency is that it blurs hierarchies of animacy by understanding objects as ‘living’, whereas they are commonly understood to be ‘lifeless’. This understanding of the value of objects, their agency, and their impact on humans, provides a new perspective in the quest to understand how elderly people find ways of being with objects that are meaningful within a society that strips both the elderly person and the object of agency.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, experiences of social death and social liveness align with being (or not being) an agentic actant in someone’s life. At the same time, loss of

agency is often accompanied by other narratives of loss—health, mobility, reproductive ability, and/or the passing away of a partner. These experiences of social death and social liveness are based on human or ‘strong’ agency. Understanding that agency can also be created within a human/non-human assemblage, and therefore acknowledging the impact of such assemblages as powerful actants, is important because elderly people make obvious use of agency in their engagements with objects. Elderly people—as I will show in the analytical part of this chapter—find social liveness through, and within, their assemblages with objects.⁶² Therefore, objects have influence on both the ‘mattering to’ elderly people and the ‘mattering of’ elderly people (within society). Diversifying agency defies the narrative of objects as “disposable, [meaning] that when we deem them broken or throw them away, we have no problem with it, for it was intended to be disposable anyway” (Introna, 2009, p. 413). This thought resonates to an extent with Hallam and Hockey’s (2001) formulation of the expectance of death for elderly people that renders them disposable.⁶³ Thus, the diversification of agency does not collapse the object and subject into one another, but rather allows for the redistribution of agency as no longer a solely human trait. Understanding the agency of objects as well as human/non-human assemblages helps in understanding how materiality can be used in manifold ways. These manifold uses—especially in their more unexpected forms—might be of help to the elderly, either in their mourning processes or in situations of loss.

Analysis of the Interviews 2

In this final part of the last chapter I address once more the question of what strategies elderly people utilise to deal with multiple layers of mourning, which include (but are not limited to) mourning the loss of a partner, health, and/or agency. This fundamental question is further combined with the question of how people change, and are changed, by material during

⁶² This is not to say that objects should replace human-human interaction. Caregiving institutions management would probably interpreted the idea of remaining with object as a lack of need for human-human interaction and therefore as an argument for the furthering of social death amongst elderly people. Nevertheless, several articles, experiments and documentaries have been published on the topic of human-object interaction as a replacement of human-human interaction. A recent documentary called ‘Nooit meer eenzaam met Zora, een Zorgrobot’ (Dit is de Dag TV, 2014) focuses on a trial period of a humanoid robot in an elderly home and how the elderly people engage with the robot. It explores the way a robot—designed to have a human-like appearance—can lessen experiences of loneliness when elderly people do not receive visitors.

⁶³ This discourse is upheld within elderly homes via the imagery of the ‘good death’. Posing death as ‘the expected path’ for elderly people frames the passing away of inhabitants who accept the idea of their own death as having a ‘natural’ death. Simultaneously, it labels the death of inhabitants who struggled with the prospect of death, or with a painful sickbed, into ‘a release’ or ‘salvation’, thus turning all deaths into ‘good deaths’ (Hallam & Hockey, 2001).

processes of mourning, loss, and the transition to the elderly home. I look at selected sections of four conversations that I had and distinguish two strategies: queering objects, and creating social liveness through the diversification of agency.

Firstly, I elaborate on the strategy of queering objects by looking at the conversations I had with Karel and Riet, both about their engagement with tables (although for Riet her engagement included chairs as well). This queering happens, as understood from Ahmed's theorisation on queer phenomenology, as the tables fail to live up to their former role/script, thus allowing for a renegotiation of the table and its position in the elderly home. Secondly, I elaborate on the strategy of creating social liveness through the diversification of agency by looking at conversations I had with Johanna about her chair, and with Francis about her books.

Queering Objects

a. Riet's Dining Set

The 'table' is a significant piece of furniture within philosophy. Sarah Ahmed (2006) notes for example that "it is not surprising that philosophy is full of tables" (p. 3), and that "the table (...) [is] an object that matters within phenomenology" (p. 26). Additionally, the table functions as a symbol, and carries a notable history that is predominately masculine, both in histories of labour and the history of science (Ahmed, 2006). In this section on queering objects I want to look at the appearance of the table within two conversations I conducted with Karel and Riet.

Neither Karel's nor Riet's tables still upheld the scripts associated with them before the move to the elderly home. These tables were originally located in apartments, family houses, or detached houses.⁶⁴ Both were, in the words of Riet: "[E]igenlijk... te groot."⁶⁵ Riet followed her comment on the size of her table with "Ik moest toch een tafel hebben? (...) eh, ik had een kleinere tafel moeten bewaren." Later on she states: "Ja, hij is te groot voor hier."⁶⁶ First, I want to focus on her expression of the table as being 'too big'. Instead of talking about the physical or 'absolute' size of a table, Riet's expression of size engages more with its 'relative' size. As Ahmed (2006) suggests, Riet's engagement with the object entails that she "already apprehends [it] in a certain way" (p. 28) The size of the table—which fits in Riet's

⁶⁴ Within the Netherlands detached houses are a sign of affluence, as the country is the 27th most densely populated country in the world (Bosatlas, 2016).

⁶⁵ Actually... too big.

⁶⁶ I needed a table right? (...) I should have kept a smaller table.
Yes, it is too big for this place.

room in terms of absolute measurements—was considered too big in the context of its new location. Riet’s orientation towards her table also included an orientation of the table towards her, as it is placed in a ‘new’ room, as a new “background through which [the object] appears” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 26).⁶⁷ Still, even though Riet thought her table was too big for the room it was in, she had decided to take it with her from her former home, saying: “Alleen die eethoek heb ik nog meegenomen, en die twee fauteuils.”⁶⁸ Nevertheless, she does not engage with the table by sitting at it—when I ask her if she does, she answers: “Nee, ik zit altijd beneden.”⁶⁹

What is interesting about Riet’s table, is that she refers to it specifically as an “eettafel”—or dinner table in English. I want to argue that this way of referring to her table—at which she no longer sits—is a strategy of queering enacted by Riet. This queering is performed by keeping its former role, which is attached to hidden histories of labour. Riet’s orientation shows a certain direction (towards her table), “which depends on the relegation of other ‘things’ to the background” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 27). She calls it her dinner table because it always upheld that function, which can be seen in the following excerpt of our conversation:

A: Waar stond uw tafel, in uw vorige huis?

R: Hij stond in de achterkamer. Vlakbij de keuken. Dat was een mooie kamer, heel licht.

A: En at u aan die tafel?

R: Ja, daar aten we ja. Altijd met de kinderen. En met mijn man als hij thuis was.⁷⁰

In order to understand why this referral to the dining table reveals Riet’s hidden labour, her personal history must be placed within context. The dinner table—because of being part of the interior within the home—carries a domestic script. It is an area commonly associated with the feminine (Stimpson & Herdt, 2014). The dinner table thus carries a family-orientated

⁶⁷ This environment in which the table is placed is not a neutral environment but, as mentioned before, an environment subject to the regulations of the household. Furthermore, it is an environment designed according to certain standards of elderly homes. These norms and regulations are a product of dominant discourses. Thus, Riet, the table, and the environment exist within an unequal power distribution.

⁶⁸ I only took the dining area with me, and those two chairs.

⁶⁹ No, I am always sitting downstairs.

⁷⁰ A: Where was your table positioned in your former home?

R: It was in the backroom. Nearby the kitchen. That was a beautiful room, very light.

A: And did you have dinner at the table?

R: Yes, we always ate there, yes. Always with the kids, and with my husband when he was home.

narrative, and in particular a feminine narrative, as is reflected within Riet's conversation.⁷¹ During the period that Riet describes— the 1950s in the Netherlands—dinner was always cooked by the mother of the family. Looking at Riet's use of the words 'dining table', this reference to the domestic further places her within the (then) dominant discourse within the Netherlands. That Riet prepared the meals is not explicitly stated, but another part of the interview shows that this is probably the case, because her husband was often away, as he was in the navy. She explains:

Ik kon dat niet want hij maakte natuurlijk veel mee. (...) En ik had eigenlijk dezelfde, ik zorgde altijd voor de kinderen. (...) [H]et is altijd hetzelfde. En als de kinderen lastig zijn, dat ga je niet zitten vertellen in een brief [lacht]. Dat deed ik dan ook niet.⁷²

Between Riet and her husband there was a clear division of who was responsible for the domestic part of the household, explained as 'taking care of the children'. Furthermore, because her husband was in the navy and therefore away for long periods, Riet was the consistent presence within the household. It is therefore likely that she prepared the meals that were eaten at the dining table that she subsequently took with her to the elderly home. By referring to the table as a dining table—even though no meals are consumed at it anymore—she reflects upon her position within her former life. As Ahmed (2006) notes, "the arrival of things may be shaped by the work that we do" (p. 34). Riet's perception of the table as a dining table showed its conditions of arrival—its inherited past. Therefore, the past and present merge within Riet's engagement with her dining table. In doing so, she transforms the table into an object with a script it did not perform in terms of action. This represents a deliberate failure, for no one ate dinner at the table anymore; yet it did perform by being a reminder of Riet's memories and her social position within her past. Riet and the table formed a human/non-human assemblage by affirming her position within the household, thus allowing her to experience an important part of her identity by recreating the home—even if that home was now only one room. Thus, the table got queered in the sense that its surface was no longer used to dine upon, but rather served to remind her of her former household and part of her identity as a mother.

⁷¹ Research on the domestic setting of the family meal often focuses on the involvement of the female parent (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003).

⁷² I could not do that, because he went through a lot. (...) And I actually had the same, I always took care of the children. (...) [I]t is always the same. And if the children are difficult, you wouldn't write it in a letter [laughter]. So I did not do that.

I would like to argue for another queering of the dining set, by showing how Riet's table (and chairs) provided a possibility of social liveness through their function in the welcoming of visitors. During the interview, I asked Riet where her family sits at the dining table when they visit her. She answers: "Ja, dan wel als ze [op bezoek komen], dan zit ik weer in de rolstoel" (whilst gesturing to the set of chairs and her dining table).⁷³ Although she does not explicitly mention the dining table, her gesture makes clear that she is talking about the dining set she brought with her from her former home. Thus, the chairs from the dining area in her old home, now in her new room, give Riet the ability to provide a place to sit for her visitors—a place that ties Riet's past to both her present and that of the visitors. The way in which Riet talks about her family visiting indicates that Riet (re)creates the narrative of domesticity by letting people sit at the dining table, just as they had sat at the dining table in her former home. Thus, she changes the script of the table from somewhere to sit for her, to somewhere to sit for others. Crucially, by providing comfort for visitors, she becomes an actant in other people's lives. Thus, she creates a sense of social liveness for herself via her dining table. Riet's queering of her table happened via the disconnection of its dominant script of being a place at which to sit. She changed this script into a script which the table forms a connection between her past and her present—a script that acknowledges her identity as a mother. She changes it into a means of providing comfort for possible visitors, such as her family. In this way she is an actant in the life of the visitor, and therefore creates a sense of social liveness for herself.

b. Karel's Table/Garden

When looking at the transformations of objects and people within processes of mourning, hierarchies of animacy become blurred. Via this blurring that which might otherwise be considered devoid of any form of animacy can 'gain' a sense of livingness. This is the case with Karel and his garden/table—the subject of this subchapter. In that which follows, I argue that the change from a table into a garden implies a distinct queering of the script of the table.

Karel volunteered in the elderly home for some time before he became a resident. He had been living in the home for the last seven years. He is still mobile, but is partially paralysed due to a cerebral haemorrhage. As a result, he has lost feeling in one arm. Speaking of his arm, he states:

⁷³ Yes, they do when [they visit me], then I am in the wheelchair again.

[Ik voel] helemaal niks meer. Ja, als je er op slaat zeg ik au. (...) [I]k moet met de arm rusten. En daarvoor moet ik hem ook steeds vasthouden. Ik heb geen kracht meer. Ik moet alles met één hand doen.⁷⁴

As a result of his paralysis Karel could no longer work, and thus his cerebral haemorrhage and subsequent disability were the primary driving forces behind his move to the home. He explains:

Maar de woningbouw wilde het drempeltje niet weghalen. Daar had ik moeite mee met die drempels. Anders had ik best kunnen zitten daar nog. Want ik sleep nog al eens met m'n voet. Ik blijf met m'n hak achter de tree zitten, daarom ga ik nooit de trap op.⁷⁵

Karel moved from his flat to the elderly home, in which he now has a single room. During this move Karel was unable to bring his table. In his own words: “Ik had nog een hele grote tafel. En die kon hier niet in. Was in de vorm van een klaverblad.”⁷⁶ His expression of a ‘really big table’ that ‘did not fit in here’ is an indicator of its size in relation to the space of his current room. Therefore, he needed to replace his clover-shaped table, and now had a smaller one in his room. This new table is the property of the elderly home. The ‘common view’ on the table is entangled with the script of ‘furniture to be sat at’. This is, for example, reflected in the definition of a table in the Cambridge Dictionary, which states that a table is “a flat surface, usually supported by four legs, used for putting things on” (Cambridge Dictionary of English language, 2017). This dictionary entry includes an exemplary sentence which reads: “the people sitting at a table” (Cambridge Dictionary of English language, 2017). The scripts of tables are commonly linked to the activity of sitting at them. However, when I asked Karel whether he ever sat at his new table, he answered: “Eh die tafel nooit.”⁷⁷ Thus, the dominant script of a table as something ‘to sit at’ is no longer applicable for Karel—his new table thus fails to meet the property of being sat at. Reading this through Sarah

⁷⁴ I feel nothing. Yeah, if you hit my arm I say ‘ouch’. (...) [I] need to rest my arm and that is why I need to hold it all the time. I have no strength anymore. I need to do everything with one hand.

⁷⁵ The housing authority did not want to remove the step. I had difficulties with those steps. Otherwise I could have been there still. Because I often drag with one foot. I get my heel stuck behind the step, that’s why I never take the stairs.

⁷⁶ I had a really big table. It did not fit in here. It had the shape of a clover leaf.

⁷⁷ Eh, never [at] that table.

Ahmed's work, we can say that a destabilisation of Karel's table takes place, because of its failure to exhibit the properties that are in line with the dominant script surrounding tables.

However, when the conversation continues, the usage of the table takes a different turn. When I asked him what he misses most from his old home, he stated that, rather than the building itself, he misses his garden. He told me: "Nou, ik had een benedenflat met een achtertuin. En dan zat ik iedere dag in die tuin te rommelen. Ik houd erg van tuinieren. (...) Bloemen zaaien, alles."⁷⁸ After hearing this statement, I noticed that his current table was stacked with flowers—a vase and several pots with plants in them. Karel explained that he misses the front and back garden from this former home. He added that, besides working in the garden at his old home, he would also sit there after working in the kitchen of the elderly home. He stated: "Toen zat je te werken, en 's avonds in de tuin."⁷⁹ Therefore, within his new home Karel queered the script attached to the table into that of the garden he so missed by stocking it with plants and flowers. This changing of the script showed that "the actions performed on the object (as well as with the object) shape the object. The object in turn affects what we do" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 43). Karel's strategy of queering transforms an object into something that he had lost, and as a result the object gains a sense of livingness, and this livingness in turn creates a sense of enjoyment and liveliness in Karel. He stated in reference to the flowers: "Ik kijk daar graag naar."⁸⁰ Whilst Karel cannot work in his garden anymore, he can sit in his room, enjoying his garden/table. In doing so, he recreates the experience of sitting in his old garden. Therefore, Karel's renegotiation of the properties of the table demonstrates that these properties are not intrinsic to the table. It no longer functions according to the idea of what a table should be; instead, the table becomes a garden, gaining animacy through gaining a script that includes both growth and movement. This is only possible because the table's script failed. Its function as Karel's garden is a matter of "what [it does], but also what [it] allows us to do" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 33). The disorientation of the table (as it was no longer usable to Karel) allowed him to change its script into that of a garden and, through this strategy of queering, he maintained the presence of his garden. Therefore, the table became 'living', blurring categories of animacy through the scripts attached to it and by gaining extra materiality—via the plants and flowers. It thus became a hybrid, consisting of multiple elements that function as an individual "calling into question the individual/group

⁷⁸ Well, I had a ground floor apartment with a garden. And I rummaged around the garden every day. I love gardening. Sowing flowers, [and] everything.

⁷⁹ Then you were working, and in the evenings you sat in the garden.

⁸⁰ I enjoy looking at it.

binary” (Barad, 2012, p. 26). What can be seen from these two examples with tables is that queering, in both Riet’s and Karel’s case, leads to an acknowledgement of identity; a sense of social liveness; and a regaining of objects that were hitherto lost with the move to the elderly home.

Diversifying Agency

c. Johanna’s Chair

Within the conversation with Riet on her dining set, it became clear that there were chairs that she was able to sit on, and chairs that she was not able to sit on. Johanna, however, had a chair in her room in which she could sit, but only occasionally, as she needed help getting in and out of it. In this section I want to look at her engagement with this chair and the way she diversifies agency. I argue that the chair functions as a link for social liveness—albeit a link to the nurses of the home rather than a link to the ‘outside world’. At the beginning of the interview Johanna mentions that she cannot get out of her wheelchair, saying: “Maar ik kan niet uit m’n stoel he.”⁸¹ Furthermore, she mentions being very uncomfortable throughout the day, and that her body hurts all the time: “En al die pijn overal. Mijn voeten zijn ook helemaal ingezwachteld ook allemaal.”⁸² She calls the wheelchair that she uses during the day “een rot ding”—‘an awful thing’. Thus, Johanna experiences significant discomfort during the day, because of her body and an uncomfortable chair. For these reasons her other chair, positioned in the room opposite the television, is very important to her. The chair contains a part that can unfold, forming a footrest, and Johanna explains her enjoyment sitting in it: “Ja, dat is een fijn ding hoor. Dan zit je een poosje lekker.”⁸³ Sitting in her chair gives her great physical comfort. The materiality of the chair provides what her own body does not, namely a sense of feeling less injured and limited. The chair thus takes over part of her bodily functions; it becomes an extension to her body, creating—in a Harawayian sense (2006)—a cybernetic connection between Johanna and the chair. The chair merges with the body, whilst simultaneously keeping a separation between these different materialities. Johanna diversifies agency by enabling the agency of the chair. The chair is an actant in her life by creating comfort for Johanna in her own body. By diversifying agency as something that also belongs to objects/non-humans, Johanna de-hierarchises the border between herself and the chair. Thus, the chair’s value is enacted through the importance that it has within (and to) Johanna’s

⁸¹ But I cannot get out of this chair huh.

⁸² And all that pain everywhere. My feet are also bandaged too.

⁸³ It is a nice thing though. Then you sit comfortably for a while.

personal comfort. However, unfolding the chair is a task she cannot perform on her own, which means that she has to be ‘lucky’ to be able to sit in it. It is only possible—“als het kan”—when a nurse is there to help her. She says about this:

Maar dat kan op het ogenblik niet meer hoor. Ja, soms staat er een zuster zo bij. En dan drukt ze op de achterkant en dan gaan m’n benen de hoogte in. En dan doen ze een kussen onder m’n hielen.⁸⁴

Thus, the chair does not only support her physically, but also provides an important link to social interaction and social aliveness; where her body is neglected, the chair is not. Through the materiality of the chair she can request contact with the staff from the elderly home. So, in a similar way to Jane Bennet’s (2009) approach to agency as human/non-human engagements, Johanna’s engagement with the chair leads to an experience of social liveness, offering a connection to the staff of the home. The chair offers two ways of connecting, namely via her own body, and via the nursing staff. Therefore, Johanna’s chair and her engagement with it represent a way of diversifying agency, and a way to create social liveness via this diversification.

d. Francis’ Books

In the previous paragraph I discussed how Johanna’s chair offered her a way of creating social liveness by connecting with the staff of the elderly home. In this part of the chapter I want to look at a part of the conversation I had with Francis about her books, and their importance to her. I argue that Francis diversifies the agency of both the books and herself by experiencing social liveness through her engagement with them. Whereas Johanna’s experiences of social liveness are focused on humans, Francis’ experiences are focused on the material.

Discourses of ableism create a division between ‘youth’ and ‘elderly people’ (Woodward, 1991) that strips the elderly person of their agency. This division simultaneously entails a division between ‘able-bodied’ and ‘dis-abled’. The discourse of ableism is widely spread within Dutch society, and is repeated within the environment of the elderly home. As Hallam and Hockey’s (2001) research shows, residents of nursing homes make an internal division between fit and frail people—always counting themselves amongst the fit.⁸⁵ This

⁸⁴ But that is not possible anymore at the moment. Yes, sometimes a nurse stands nearby and then she presses on its back and then my legs go up in the air and they put a pillow beneath my feet.

⁸⁵ This is confirmed by Hallam and Hockey’s (2001) research on social liveness in nursing homes in England.

common repetition of a dominant discourse also happened in the elderly home in which I conducted my interviews. Francis was one of the inhabitants who made such a division. However, her distinction was not focused on bodies in terms of movement or of being physically ‘able-bodied’, but on being ‘clear of mind’.⁸⁶ Francis formulates it as follows:

Nou, het moeilijke vind ik dat er zo weinig mensen zijn die waar ik gewoon mee kan praten. Gewoon met eigen niveau. (...) [W]at me pijn doet is de omgeving he, de menselijke omgeving. Er is bijna niemand die echt nog helemaal helder van geest is. Dat vind ik erg. (...) [En dat is omdat ze] aan het dementeren zijn of heel doof zijn, héél doof. Of op het randje van dementerend. (...) Dan denk ik oh met die mevrouw kan ik wel aardig praten, maar dan vraagt ze opeens voor de zesde keer hoe heet u of waar komt u vandaan of bent u ook hier ofzo.⁸⁷

As this passage shows, Francis finds it sad that she is not able to find someone on the same ‘level’ as she sees herself. The ‘level’ to which she refers implies both the intellectual—i.e. the depth in which a given topic can be spoken about—and, in a broader sense, the ‘clarity of mind’ exhibited by other residents. For Francis, the inability of other residents to reach this desired level comes to the fore either because others are unable to hear well, or because they suffer from dementia, whilst still others fail intellectually even without any of these factors. The inability of the other residents to match Francis’ level of conversation is a reason for her often to stay in her room instead of seeking interaction with others. She says in the interview: “Dus toen heb ik gekozen, nu zit ik heel veel op m’n kamer en dat vind ik ook fijn hoor.”⁸⁸ The distinction Francis makes leads her to be the only fit inhabitant within the elderly home—there are no other fit inhabitants to connect with, for none are able to reach her level intellectually and/or verbally. Francis’ distinction between fit and frail thus leads her to feel lonely. She says about that: “dan ben ik soms eenzaam.”⁸⁹ So contrary to what literature suggest, Francis’ distinction between fit and frail does not lead to an experience of social

⁸⁶ One of most important factors elderly people use to determine their status as ‘fit’ compared to ‘frail’ within the elderly home is the ability to be mobile (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Nelson, 2002).

⁸⁷ Well, I find it difficult that there are so very few people that I can just have a conversation with. Just on my own level. (...) [W]hat hurts me is the environment, the human environment. There is almost no one who is clear of mind. I find that very sad. (...) [And that is because they] have dementia or are very deaf, very deaf. Or on the border of dementia. (...) Then I think, oh, with that woman I can talk nicely, but then she suddenly asks for the sixth time what is your name, or where do you come from, or are you living here too, or something like that.

⁸⁸ So then I made a decision, [and] now I spend a lot of time in my room and I like that too.

⁸⁹ I have that, then I am lonely sometimes.

liveness, because she has no one to connect with. This lack of social connection becomes further emphasised by the way she talks about the nurses. In her own words: “[D]at zeggen de meisjes ook, dat ik nog wel een van de weinige bent die eh, maar goed daar praat ik maar niet teveel over, want daar word ik verdrietig van.”⁹⁰ She explains that the nurses agree with her that there are hardly any other inhabitants as mentally fit as she is. This makes her sad, and therefore, the negative impact of her distinction between fit and frail is again revealed. Interestingly, within the conversation she calls the nurses ‘girls’, referring to their youth in comparison to her own age. By doing so, she reveals, not only the disconnection between herself and other inhabitants who are deemed ‘not clear of mind’, but also between herself and others (in this case the nursing staff) who are ‘younger’. The combination of age and ability for her leads to an experience of loneliness, because everyone else is either frail or young, and this means she has no one to connect with socially. Therefore, she prefers spending her afternoons in her own room, where papers, puzzles and books offer her the challenge that she misses when engaging with other residents:

Iedereen heeft het moeilijk om hier te komen, maar nu heb ik me voorgenomen om gewoon hier [Francis’ kamer] veel te zitten [en] maar niet te veel te mengen met andere mensen. Wel gewoon praatjes maken op de gang (...) maar dat zijn hele oninteressante gesprekken. (...) Want ik heb ... wel direct gezegd ik neem een hoop boeken mee. Die zijn wel zo’n beetje, een beetje m’n gezelschap zo. (...) Ja, het is helemaal geen hoog niveau, maar zo eens over de krant kunnen praten of over een boek ofzo dat is *uitgesloten*. Ja het is niet een ideale toestand, maar zolang ik kan lezen, vind ik het prima hier [emphasis added].⁹¹

Francis’ lack of connection with the inhabitants is lessened by the books that she surrounds herself with. She calls them her company and they offer her the intellectual stimulation she lacks. When she cannot find engagement with other inhabitants, she finds engagement with her books, and thus her books animate her life beyond their normally considered ‘livingness’.

⁹⁰ The girls say that as well—that I am one of the only ones that eh, but okay, I won’t talk about that too much because it makes me sad.

⁹¹ Everyone finds it difficult to arrive here, but now I have decided for myself to just sit here [Francis’ room] a lot, but not mingle too much with other people. To have little talks in the hallway (...) but those conversations are very uninteresting. (...) Because I did ... immediately say I take a lot of books with me. Those are like, those are kind of my company. (...) Yes, it is not a particularly high level, but to every now and then talk about the paper or about a book or something, that is absolutely *impossible*. Yes, it is not an ideal situation, but as long as I can read, I think it is okay here [emphasis added].

In this way, a blurring of animacy takes place in the way Francis refers to her books and puzzles as company. These objects take over the role of conversation with humans who are otherwise deemed less animate due to her own ableist distinction between who is fit and who is frail. Francis' experience of social death thus exhibits a renegotiation of agency by applying it to her books rather than humans, lessening her loneliness, but also reinforcing ableist discourses within the elderly home itself. However, this act simultaneously restores her feeling of social liveness—which she lost due to her fit/frail distinction—for she can engage with her books at any moment of her choosing. Her books are always there for her to interact with, and thus through her engagement in a human-object assembly (herself and her books) she is able to restore her sense of agency, whilst simultaneously applying agency to her books. In this way Francis creates a strategy of living that engages with objects rather than humans (witnessed through her withdrawal from the collective life in the elderly home). Additionally, Francis transforms her books into the company she craves.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on how elderly people deal with processes of mourning, loss of agency, social death, and how they (re)create social liveness. In order to answer this question, theoretical approaches on the human/object distinction from the perspective of OOO were connected with Sarah Ahmed's arguments on queering and orientation. Ahmed shows that orientations towards objects, and orientations from objects, are never neutral, but rather happen within a context in which power relations inevitably tension the interplay between entities. Furthermore, the appearance of the object itself often conceals the histories and discourses that shape this appearance in the first place. Queering these orientations therefore destabilises the properties of the object, opening up the discourses and scripts surrounding the object. This allows for a de-hierarchisation of the human and the object, by assigning new scripts to the object—scripts that might be meaningful within the processes of loss that elderly people face. I substantiated this by approaching agency differently from the view expressed via dominant Western discourses that considers agency to be a uniquely human trait. Feminist thinker Jane Bennet argues for a conceptualisation of agency as a trait that exists in both the human and the non-human, and more importantly, within human/non-human assemblages. I argued that this diversification of agency might lead to social liveness through an opening up of the hierarchies of animacy. By considering objects as capable of having agency, the liveliness of objects, and of those who are pushed into objecthood, changes.

These strategies of queering and the diversification of agency came to the fore within the analytical parts of this chapter. In the subsection on queering, I showed that Riet queers her table in two distinct ways. Firstly, in order to connect her past to her present so that her identity as a mother remains acknowledged. Secondly, she queers the script of her table from something at which she sat, to something that provides seating and comfort to visitors. Riet thus becomes an actant within the visitors' lives, re-establishing her sense of social liveness. Karel also queered the script of his table. However, he queered it in such a way that his table turned into the garden he had lost when moving to the elderly home. An inanimate object—a table—gained a sense of liveness by gaining a script that involved growth. In this way, Karel finds a positive mode of being with his table/garden.

Later, in the subsection on the diversification of agency, I showed how Johanna formed a human/non-human assemblage with her chair in order to connect with the staff of the elderly home—an act that provided her with a sense of social liveness. Furthermore, by letting the chair take over some of her bodily functions, she diversified agency into a trait that the chair possessed, for it became an active agent in her daily life. Finally, I examined the case of Francis, who by partly using an ableist narrative isolates herself, yet nonetheless manages to create social liveness by referring to her books as company, and by approaching them as her intellectual engagement. Francis' act of diversification was therefore based on her engagement with her books, letting them take up the role of the meaningful conversation that she lacked with the other residents of the elderly home. In this final chapter of the thesis, I have foregrounded two further strategies of living that elderly people displayed in order to deal with the losses they face. Within their engagements with objects, they find positive ways of being that allow them to regain a sense of self, agency, and social liveness.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I asked the question how elderly people in an elderly home within Dutch contemporary society deal with the loss of a partner and agency—events and processes that can leave an elderly person feeling worthless and an inactive participant within other people's lives or society in a wider sense. Via two sets of sub-questions, I aimed to answer this dilemma from a feminist intersectional perspective that argued for an ethical and accountable approach towards elderly people and objects.

In order to address the main question of this thesis, I set the stage for my overarching argumentation in the first chapter. I gave an analysis of what it means to become an elderly person within Dutch contemporary society, for it showed to be neither a fixed nor well-defined term. Furthermore, I showed that becoming an elderly person is a gendered, ageist and ableist process, resulting in the destabilisation of people's societal position, commonly accepted as tied to productiveness/productivity, abled-bodied-ness and social interactions. These discourses result in experiences of social death, especially with and after the move to an elderly home. The discourses of ageism, ableism and neoliberalism position elderly people – through a hierarchy of liveliness – towards 'lifelessness' or 'objecthood'. Through an analysis of Mel Chen's (2012) work on the hierarchies of animacy, I argued that elderly people are considered to be less animate and thus face social death as an effect of these hierarchies of animacy. Elderly people face loss of activity and agency, and the chapter ended with a (feminist) theorization on mourning processes that these elderly people may encounter.

As a response and continuation of this setting within the first chapter, the second and third chapter evolved around the question of how do elderly people mourn this loss of activity and agency and the role objects play within these ways of mourning. In other words, what strategies do elderly people utilise in order to deal with these layers of mourning, which can include mourning the loss of a partner, health, and agency? I distinguished four strategies – two in each chapter – that elderly people utilized to deal with layers of mourning. Within these processes, they transformed (and were transformed by) specific objects in order to deal with processes of loss and the transition to their new lives in the elderly home.

My second chapter began with a theorization on the human/object division, which simultaneously entails a life/death division. I showed this division to be problematic and used the work of various feminist thinkers (such as Karen Barad, Birgit Meyer and Donna Haraway) to make clear that human and object are in an ongoing intra-action with each other – neither apart nor together. These feminist thinkers do not collapse the human/object

division, but rather engage with it critically and argue for a de-hierarchisation of the division. Furthermore, I argued that within this shaping and reshaping of human and object, memory plays a crucial role, as past histories and knowledges influence the way humans and objects become. In the second part of the chapter, I focused on two strategies of living that the elderly people I interviewed showed. In the section on **Negotiating Properties**, parts of three interviews were analysed to show that Francis and Karel negotiate the properties of objects within their mourning process. For Francis' diary, it implied changes to the properties of the diary itself, whereas with the comparison between Joop's and Karel's practice of lighting a candle, the property change meant a change in the material of the candle. Karel's ritual also showed that mourning rituals do not exist outside of discourse and power. The negotiation of properties of objects within the mourning process takes place within the context of society. In the section on **Blurring Boundaries**, I continued with excerpts of Joop's interview to point out that the mourning rituals of elderly people blur the binary of presence/absence, as well as the divisions between life and death, and past and present. Through Joop's mourning ritual of napping in his wife's chair and lighting a candle near a picture of his wife, the chair gained a sense of livingness usually reserved for humans, and the life/death dichotomy got destabilized. Furthermore, Joop's blurring of these boundaries between binaries entailed a de-hierarchization of the human/object division. Within the conversation with Johanna about her daughters and the letters they had sent, I showed a blurring of boundaries between presence and absence: the letters and her daughters were no longer present, but they still had an immense impact on Johanna's life. Therefore, the conversation with Johanna showed that there was also an ongoing engagement with materiality that was not physically in the room. Lastly, I revealed how both Johanna and Francis gained a sense of identity from their engagement with objects within their mourning process. The second chapter of this thesis showed that elderly people find ways of being with objects within their mourning ritual that let them negotiate discourses of ageism, ableism and neoliberalism, find ways to keep loved ones close, and solidify a sense of self. Simultaneously, I showed that within these ways of being with objects, the hierarchy between human and object gets de-hierarchized.

In chapter three, I followed the complication of the commonly accepted human/object boundary (and life/death boundary) further through an analysis of Ahmed's work in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and Bennet's work in *Vibrant Matter* (2009). Ahmed's work on queering orientations towards objects in order to destabilize the properties of objects, and with this destabilization creating an opening up of the discourses surrounding the objects, formed a theoretical basis for the third strategy of living, that of **Queering Objects**. Riet and Karel

utilized the strategy of queering objects each in their own way. Riet queered her table in two ways. Firstly, she queered her table in order to connect her past to her present and with that to keep her identity as a mother acknowledged. Secondly, this queering allowed her to become an active agent in visitors' lives. Karel queered his table into the garden he had lost and thus let the object gain a sense of liveliness through a script that involved growth.

This queering of objects got substantiated by approaching agency differently from the dominant Western discourses on agency, which attribute agency solely to humans. Via an elaboration of Jane Bennet's work on agency, I showed that agency exists in both the human and the non-human and, more importantly, within human/non-human assemblages. In the analysis of interview parts of the conversations I held with Francis and with Johanna, I argued that the strategy of **Diversification of agency** might lead to social liveness through an opening up of the hierarchies of animacy. By considering objects as capable of having agency, the liveliness of objects, and of those who are pushed into objecthood, changes. I elaborated on Johanna's human/non-human assemblage with her chair in order to connect with the staff of the elderly home—an act that provided her with a sense of social liveness. Also, I examined how Francis managed to create social liveness by referring to her books as company and by approaching them as her intellectual engagement – something which she lacked within the elderly home itself. Therefore, in the final chapter of the thesis, I showed that elderly people, within their engagements with objects, find positive ways of being that allow them to regain a sense of self, agency, and social liveness. Finally, these strategies defy the hierarchy of liveliness that pushes them into a place of 'objecthood'.

All in all, this project has shown that these four strategies of living—that of negotiating properties, blurring boundaries, queering objects, and diversification of agency—show how elderly people transform, and are transformed, in a myriad of ways through their particular engagements with objects during times of loss.

This research project aims at closing the gap of research on elderly people in Dutch society. In a time where elderly people's societal position is lacking and where they are treated in morally wrong ways, it is important to research and understand why and how this is happening. Therefore, this project is important from a feminist perspective, as it gives voice to elderly people who are predominantly invisible and voiceless within Dutch society. However, in this thesis, my most central concern lied in wondering how elderly people manage to negotiate the systems of oppression (of ageism, ableism and neoliberalism) and find ways of showing resilience against the different disposessions they experience from this side of society. Furthermore, this thesis forms an opening up of the hierarchy of animacy and

critically reflects on human/object boundary, showing that human and object are neither together, nor apart. It argues for a de-hierarchization of human and object, as well as an ethical rethinking of the dichotomies of human/object, life/death and past/present through an unpacking of ‘seemingly natural’ concepts (such as being elderly, and the object as intrinsic and bound to utility). By doing so, I reveal how objects are crucial to elderly people during a time where they experience a push into ‘objecthood’. This thesis carried at its core the need to inquire into marginalized lives to bring about social change and to add to the debate of what is considered a livable life for elderly people within Dutch society.

This thesis is exploratory in nature and thus by no means should be generalized over a wider population. However, I hope it is a beginning into a wider range of research on the topic of what is considered a livable life for elderly people. Yet, because this thesis has been bound to a certain time, space, and to me as a researcher, it has its unavoidable limitations. As I focused on elderly people from an intersectional perspective that included axes of age, gender, and disability, the limited scope of this project did not allow for taking in other axes of oppression, such as ethnicity or sexuality. The elderly people I interviewed were quite a homogenous group. They all lived in the same elderly home, were white, heterosexual and none of them had a migration background. As sexuality and ethnicity are commonly recognized axes of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), I have no doubt that inquiring into elderly peoples’ experiences who suffer from these axes of oppression will give a rich and important insight into the marginalization – and the resistance to these forces of marginalization – of elderly people. Therefore, in further research, it is important and fruitful to deepen the topic and to explore how other axes of suppression might influence elderly people’s lives and their ways of being with objects. I understand this thesis to be a small addition on thinking about accountable and ethical ways of treating elderly people in elderly homes within society and to de-hierarchize the highly policed borders between human and object, within the wide and multilayered field of feminist research. This thesis has the cautious hope of showing the resilience of elderly people in an elderly home who face the loss of their partner and/or agency in the wider social environment, in order to inspire change in how the society at large treats the heterogeneous group of elderly people.

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Appendix - Profiles of the Interviewees

Riet: 83, female. Riet is a very gentle woman. She often talks with other inhabitants and enjoys participating in group activities. Although her husband, who was in the Navy, has died a long time ago, she does not feel alone, but she thinks her room is a bit small. Together with her husband, she collected a baroque closet full of small Delfts-blue statues and plates. She has two daughters who visit her around once a week. She misses travelling most, especially to Indonesia.

Karel: 73, male. Karel has been living at the elderly home for over 7 years. He used to be a volunteer at the kitchen of the home, which is why he is very familiar with the environment. He owns a collection of over 200 lighteners and likes to listen to the radio. He does not get visitors often, but he calls his granddaughter every Friday around 10:30 am. He also brings the paper to the different inhabitants each morning. Together with his 15 minute walk around the neighborhood when it is sunny, these are the ways he tries to stay fit.

Francis: 87, female. Francis is a lively and chatty woman who has been living almost a year at the home. At first, she had a hard time getting used to the home, but now she is quite content being surrounded by her books and diaries. Sometimes she feels lonely, but as she says herself: five out of seven days, family and friends visit her, and she has an iPad to send e-mails 'all over the world.' She misses depth in her conversations with the other inhabitants, so she spends her meals often in her room instead of the general dining area. Francis has been rheumatic since her 20's, but she can still hold a pen, which allows for her favourite pastime apart from listening to the radio: puzzling.

Joop: 83, male. Joop's wife has recently passed away. She suffered from dementia and lived at the elderly home, where he visited her every day. Joop is a photographer and often looks at photographs of his life and family. Every day, he sleeps in the chair that his wife used to sit in. He has dinner with the elderly home's other inhabitants, who he still stays in contact with. Although he has just turned 83, he was not ready to celebrate yet; he misses his 'Petertje' (a

nickname for his wife) too much. Joop has two sons and a daughter, as well as a great-granddaughter of five years old who he thinks is adorable.

Johanna: 92, female. Johanna has always practiced Roman Catholicism and prays her rosary every day. Once every two weeks, one of her six children visits her. She has contact with her three sons, but is no longer in touch with her three daughters. Johanna feels alone very often and thinks her room is too small. She is bound to a wheelchair, but she sometimes gets to sit in her armchair if a nurse helps her. Then, she watches TV. Johanna often wishes God would let her pass away.