Framing Difference in Age and Generation in Africa: Introduction to the Special Issue

Joachim Knab
Institute for African Studies
University of Cologne
joachim.knab@uni-koeln.de
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8077-9537

Alice Mitchell
Institute for African Studies
University of Cologne
alice.mitchell@uni-koeln.de
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5643-4201

Sabrina Msangi
Institute for African Studies
University of Cologne
sabrina.msangi@uni-koeln.de

Thomas Widlok
Institute for African Studies
University of Cologne
thomas.widlok@uni-koeln.de
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4427-413X

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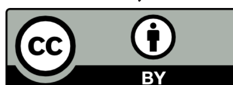

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Age, generation, and the climate crisis

This special issue on age, generation, and seniority in Africa proceeds from a workshop that took place in September 2023 at the Aga Khan Climate and Environmental Research Centre in Arusha, Tanzania, an institution devoted to dealing with issues of land degradation in the region. The workshop was funded by the German Research Council via the Collaborative Research Centre "Future Rural Africa", a project currently pursuing a comparative study of land use changes in Africa. It may come as a surprise that these two institutions, both with a research focus on environmental change, should take an interest in age, generation, and seniority. But there is growing evidence of a strong link between, on the one hand, the ways in which age, generation, and seniority are culturally construed, linguistically encoded, and socially organized and, on the other hand, current pressing issues of environmental degradation and crisis.

Pertinent evidence for this connection comes from experimental psychology. The way we see ourselves as part of a generational sequence seems to influence our environmental behaviour (Watkins and Goodwin 2020; see also Fisher 2023, 151). In a series of experiments people were asked what they would do with resources that were given to them as custodians. Strikingly, when they were asked beforehand how much they had benefited in their lives from what their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents had left them, respondents "were more likely to express a feeling of moral obligation to their descendants and future generations in regards to climate change" (Fisher 2023, 152).[1]

In other words, being primed to think of ourselves as belonging to a generational chain, as having been nurtured by those who went before us, seems to strengthen a sense of responsibility for the shared environment. (Below we discuss an alternative view of generational relations, where one generation is seen to replace the next.) A similar effect has been observed when people are prompted to reflect on their own ageing and the process of becoming an ancestor to others. When experimenters first primed people by asking them "how they would want to be remembered" and then asked further questions about environmental action, "they were subsequently more likely than others to express pro-environmental attitudes" (Zaval et al. 2015, 152). Thus, whether humans act with long-term environmental and social responsibility in mind seems to depend on whether they see themselves as inheriting from previous generations and as striving to become "good ancestors" themselves.

Evidence about the importance of age and generation for environmental futures also comes from political science and anthropology. Age and generation are a key part of the structures of power that determine how resources are used, how businesses are regulated, and even how environmental impact is assessed. In some parts of the world, seniority, as determined by age or generation, may grant individuals privileges and opportunities that allow them to resolve land-use conflicts (see, e.g., Lentz 2013, 220) or access and control access to environmental resources (Shitima 2018). A perceived power imbalance between generations in terms of action on climate has led to the mass mobilization of children and young people around the globe, embodied by figures such as Greta Thunberg and Vanessa Nakate. According to one prominent study (Hickman et al. 2021), more than 50% of young people across the world (aged 18–25; N=>100,000) feel powerless in the face of the climate emergency and many attribute responsibility for this feeling to older generations. Abebe (2020) discusses the protests of Oromo youth in Ethiopia against what are perceived as the land-grabbing policies of the Ethiopian state. Many of these protestors self-identify as members of a specific generation

[1] More likely than a control group who had been asked to reflect on their grandparents' fashion choices (see Watkins and Goodwin 2020).

(the *qubee* generation; Abebe 2020, 585) who feel that their future has been taken away from them. This phenomenon of generations self-identifying in political confrontations is more widely spread, as Stroeken's (2008) account of Tanzania's 'new generation' (*kizazi kipya*) testifies. Those who wield the power to make decisions that affect the environment may also draw on metaphors of age and generation to legitimize their actions: see Tanzanian journalist Sammy Awami's (2023) critique of Tanzanian politicians posturing as parents caring for their citizen-children.

The implications for research on the current environmental crisis are potentially far reaching: the environmental future of rural Africa (and the planet as a whole) needs to be seen through the lens of age and generation. Decisions about land use practices may appear to be restricted to a narrow time window, but we need to recognize the importance of social relationships in these decisions, and the ways in which people see themselves and others as ageing beings whose lives are intertwined with those who have gone before them and those who will walk the planet after them. 'For future generations' and 'for our children's children' are common refrains in conservation and environmental discourse (see Widlok and Nakanyete 2022). Yet, despite the fact that 'age' is a standard parameter routinely recorded by social scientists, along with other 'basics' such as gender, the actual processes by which people understand and construct differences in age, seniority, and generation are undertheorized and understudied.

Age differentiation and generation as blind spots in African Studies

In the anthropology of Africa, generation and age initially received attention primarily in the context of analysing kinship structures. Kinship structures (and 'culture' more generally) appeared to be something stable and fixed, suitable for describing the 'backbone' of social life:

> Anthropologists working in Africa saw the significance of generation early on, in part because of their focus on reciprocity and process in kinship and social structure (Whyte et al. 2008, 1)

Equally, the significance of age in Africa has long been recognized in Western scholarship, with Driberg (1936, 9) positioning age as "perhaps the most important criterion of classification to be found in African societies". Highly prominent in this regard are the institutionalized systems of age classification, namely age sets, which formed the focus of a large branch of twentieth century anthropology (Evans-Pritchard 1936 on Nuer; Brantley 1978 on Giriama; Bernardi 1985 for a comparative overview; see also the contributions by Maghimbi and Msangi in this special issue). Despite this recognition of the social centrality of age and generation, these concepts have never been subjected to the same analytical scrutiny as social constructs such as gender, ethnicity, and class. Regarding generation, Lamb (2015, 853) noted:

> Despite the enormous explanatory power given to generational change by both local people themselves and in classic social science texts, the concept of generation has never taken center stage in anthropological ethnography or theory.

Meanwhile, age as a subject of enquiry in African Studies typically zones in on particular stages of the life course, especially old age (Aguilar 1998; Makoni and Stroeken 2002), rather than on the differentiation and negotiation of these stages (but see Meiu 2015). Age is often treated as a biological given, though recent work in other fields of anthropology

has argued that age is a sociocultural construct just like any other category (Berman 2019). We think the relative neglect of age has partly to do with the complex nature of ageing as a lifelong, dynamic process. While humans only rarely and under rather specific conditions change their gender, ethnicity, or class, all of us age continuously and all the time. As Abbott (2016, 194) has pointed out, our assessment of what life is or should be like at a certain age is decidedly influenced by the fact that we have lived through earlier stages in life and expect to live through later stages. This makes it much more intricate to discuss issues of justice or equality between age groups than between social groupings defined by gender, ethnicity, or class. If a group of young men can reasonably expect to become rich and established power holders at a later point in their lives, this will affect their own perceptions of age groups and should therefore be reflected in social analysis. If age has these dynamic and intricate properties, we cannot treat it simply as just another social identification box to be ticked. This is why we want to turn our scholarly attention to age and generation as social constructs and to the ways they are mobilized and contested. These constructs are not only equally as important as gender, ethnicity, or class in terms of how societies are 'generated'; they also demand special attention given their dynamicity. The contributions in this special issue can only start to fill this research gap; more comprehensive and comparative work is needed.

The cultural and linguistic framing of age and seniority

The goal of this special issue is to address the blind spots sketched above by presenting detailed case studies from across Africa of how different communities negotiate sameness and difference in age and generation. Each contributor has in-depth linguistic and ethnographic experience in the case that they report on and each has taken on the challenge of documenting and analysing various ways in which age-based and generational categories are present in interaction and communication. We allow authors to define the keywords 'age' and 'generation' themselves rather than to dwell on definitions in our introduction. Fine-grained case studies such as those we present here may, eventually, allow us to understand how distinct ways of differentiating age and generation nudge people into different ways of caring for each other and for the resources and the environment they interact with.

Beyond fashions of clothing and bodily adornment, and the physiological indexes over which we have limited control, one key resource for evaluating age difference or sameness is language and communicative interaction more broadly. Talking differently, like dressing differently, can be associated with age and cohort differences (see Eckert 2017 for an overview of quantitative sociolinguistic work with a North American focus). Sociolectal differences aside, people also construct age difference/sameness through their interactional choices. How we choose to address and refer to others (person reference) is highly sensitive to distinctions of age-based and generational seniority, as countless single-language studies have shown. In an important contribution to pragmatic typology, Fleming and Slotta (2018) present a cross-linguistic survey showing that kin terms tend to be used to address members of senior generations and names to address members of junior generations, and never the other way around. See Alphonce (this volume) for a study of address practices among the Iraqw people of Tanzania. In Swahili, turn-taking in greeting exchanges, as well as the greeting formulae themselves, depend on the relative age of interlocutors. In many societies, age is bound up with expertise and thus negotiation over epistemic rights in interaction can index age differences (see, e.g., Sidnell (2000) on storytelling and status differentiation in Guyana). Further, language gives us category

labels that allow us to explicitly refer to concepts of age and seniority and stages of the life course. These concepts cannot be predicted or presupposed but have to be carefully described because they are community specific. A comparison of these descriptions can then allow us to see the range of possibilities and this in turn can lead us to ask why a specific selection of a repertoire is being realized in a particular setting or situation. Several of the papers in this special issue focus on the linguistic negotiation of age and generational difference at the fine-grained scale of everyday interaction (Alphonce, Mitchell, Mekamgoum). Others look to the more crystallized linguistic products of historical interactions, considering junior/senior distinctions in kinship relations (Agwuele, Takada, Widlok) and in professional training (Wummel, Kimani and Lindner), age in relation to class, power, and gender (Maghimbi, Msangi, Stroeken), and the use of life-stage terminology (Alphonce, Msangi).

On generational succession and on succeeding in coping with environmental crises

What do specific case studies like those presented here add to the larger picture? They not only provide more linguistic and ethnographic detail but, seen (and read) together as a special issue, they also have the potential to call into question a frequent bifurcation of the world into 'modern' and 'pre-modern' ways of relating to the environment through the frames of age and generation. By investigating the construction of difference in age and generation, our research taps into fundamental ontological and epistemological questions of how humans use social frames to perceive their environment, as well as how scholars tend to describe these modes of perception. In a recent intervention, Tim Ingold (2024) has rephrased a fundamental link between concepts of age and generation and the apparent ineptitude of present-day societies in dealing with challenges of planetary environmental change. He contrasts 'generation' with 'generations' to identify two contrasting cultural ontologies. One is predicated on humans procreating and living together over time, while the other is based on the arresting of time to create separate generations. For Ingold, the separation of humans into generations is one of the major building blocks of modernity. In the modern condition, humans no longer consider themselves to be following their ancestors (and their traditions) as they build their lives. The pre-modern sense of 'generation' is one that invokes an image of those who are alive today joining a queue of human predecessors, facing the backs of their ancestors, who are walking in front of them, and following their precedent.[2] These ancestors are conceived of as preparing the ground for those who follow. But in modernity, humans can be likened to a person who turns around in the queue and thereby faces the 'next generation' coming up against them. In fact, these two perspectives on time—with either the ancestors or the descendants in front of the line—were already a topic in the anthropology of time in Africa when they were first discussed by Mbiti (1969) in the 1960s. But the implications for how we deal with the current environmental situation are far reaching, as Ingold points out, and go beyond arcane philosophical arguments about temporal cognition.

In the so-called pre-modern perspective of life being generated over time (generation), for which Ingold uses the metaphor of a rope, people see their own coming of age as generated by what has been done by those walking before them and at the same time generating what follows them, so that their eventual personal demise becomes unproblematic, as life continues. They follow their ancestors while facing the continuation of ongoing life. By contrast, a generation in the modernist

[2] Consider the German *Vorfahren* 'ancestors', from *vor* 'in front; before' and *fahren* 'go; drive'.

scheme has its back to the ancestors (or those who have gone before them)—Ingold's metaphor is a stack—and as a consequence is driven by an ideology to undo the mistakes and imperfections of the past, to improve what has been done by the previous generation. It longs for continuous innovations to deal with an unknown future. Not surprisingly, the key words of the modernist generations are 'projects' and 'targets'; they project a future which in turn is deemed insufficient by the next generation, which projects a new future and sets new targets, which the next generation finds questionable, and so on. 'Generation now' in modernity across the globe, Ingold claims, acts in exactly this way. They face a new generation who are not yet deemed to be in the position to contribute to social life, who have to be trained, but who eventually also have to be feared, as they will want to replace the older ones as the next generation now. The generation now also turns their back towards the older people, who are no longer considered to be in charge, but rather a burden, their past solutions denigrated to 'heritage' or nostalgia.

A continuous regeneration of life (both human and non-human) is hampered by this thinking, argues Ingold. Acting as if generations are stacked on top of one another implies facing one another in competition. The 'game of generations' is not only a power play of who is allowed to be part of the generation now that has the say and that takes it all, but it also prevents the people in the middle age range from seeing themselves as joining forces with those before and after them in the overarching process of generating life over time. In Ingold's view this is the tragedy of modernity: the interests of generations but also the lives of humans and non-humans will always and necessarily be at loggerheads with one another. With every generation taking power to establish what the planet should look like and how its resources should be divided, overexploitation will continue and regeneration in the sense of perdurance will be difficult; environmental justice will never be achieved.

To the extent that African politics and societies are also in the grip of modernist ideas and practices, much of our discussion about 'generations in Africa' can be expected to mirror the dilemmas and conflicts that Ingold outlines. There is evidence for a clash of 'generation' vs. 'generations' perspectives in Africa, too. As Devisch et al. (2002, 278) noted, "modern institutions, and the policymakers they tend to produce, appear to continuously seek legitimacy for their existence and thus to seize any opportunity to announce the year one of a new era, in which they are depicted as indispensable". But instead of seeing this as a monumental and one-off divide between the modern and the premodern, the evidence presented in this special issue suggests that both perspectives form part of the larger repertoires from which agents construct the notions of age and generation that are effective in their lives. At first glance, many of the articles seem to support the so-called 'pre-modern' perspective of *generation* of social life by presenting a particular community in terms of interconnected junior and senior positions that constitute one another and through which people move as they age. In other papers, a *generations* perspective comes to the fore, where age-based cohorts are distinctive units, each one replacing the previous. However, many of the cases that we have compiled in this special issue suggest that what is happening may be more complex than Ingold's depiction of a one-off irreconcilable change from pre-modernity to modernity. Instead of a singular transformation from *generation* to *generations* we may rather be dealing with changes in perspective as people routinely alternate between these frames of reference in their everyday negotiations of age and generation.

To begin with, the two perspectives are present in the way in which scholars present differences in age and generation. On the one hand, our authors portray age and generation

symbolically in tables and 'modernist' genealogical charts. In these formats, the process of ageing is turned into a succession of generations that form points, fixed timeless entities, that have no movement. From the perspective of the points on a genealogical chart, any intergenerational interaction appears to be a transgenerational exchange across existing slots of time. But, on the other hand, in ethnographic field research, we (and others; see Makoni and Stroeken 2002) also describe *generating* practices, thus young and old sharing their entangled lives over time in the everyday, in what Whyte and Whyte (2004), in their study of grandchildren and grandparents, term 'intersubjective time'. In the ethnography of age and generation in Africa, we often find that there is the possible alliance between the young and the old against those currently in charge, sometimes institutionalized in generation sets or in joking relations between grandchildren and grandparents (see Sangree 1974; Cattell 1994). In studying the everyday realities of these alliances (see especially the papers by Takada and Alphonce), we step outside of our anthropological kinship diagrams for a moment.

Turning to the papers themselves, Kipacha's paper on Swahili proverbs perhaps provides the clearest example of generations opposing each other, with proverbs portraying conflicts between old and young. The generation 'now' in gerontocratic societies is that of the old, and many of the proverbs that Kipacha discusses prop up an oppositional discourse of the 'young' versus the 'old' that has echoes across cultures and back into antiquity, with proverbs portraying the old as bearers of knowledge and virtue. One wonders here about the sociopolitical dynamics of proverb use and whether proverbs, in invoking the authority of 'tradition', particularly serve the interests of the older generation. But Kipacha also identifies proverbs that position highly mobile youth as superior to their static elders, showing that age is not the only route to high social status. Tragically, Ahmad Kipacha died as a result of an accident before being able to complete his contribution. We are indebted to his colleague Said Omar for cautiously editing his text.

Staying in Tanzania, Stroeken, in his structuralist analysis of cultural frames among Sukuma, describes a 'gerontocratic decline' which was caused by colonializing forces that 'simplicated' medicine. Elders lost aspects of their seniority and authority because they could no longer derive it from their medicinal knowledge (deemed problematic by the colonizer). On the face of it, this supports the view of a shift to modernist forms of generational power, where the category of elders becomes irrelevant or at least weakened. However, Stroeken's case also shows how longstanding frames of reference for determining generational position through practices of healing are still very much alive and active in the background of national and international discourses.

The relationship between seniority and medicinal expertise is also thematized in Kimani and Lindner's paper, which describes from a historical perspective the colonial effort of introducing Western medical concepts to Tanzania. In this case, the colonial import of knowledge and practices affected traditional midwifery and with it local notions of women's seniority. Precolonially, being a midwife and the medical knowledge and skills that this status entailed was a source of seniority for women which modernity then undermined. However, as Kimani and Lindner show, Western models were often resisted and far from frictionless, and so-called traditional elements of midwifery remained and were even incorporated into the state health system.

In another profession-focused case study from East Africa, Wummel follows Kenyans who receive professional training in Iceland and who then return to Kenya as experts in geothermal energy generation. Independently of biographical age, there is a strong sense of

seniority in this context, as well as a sense of forming a 'generation' of peers who experience their training as a cohort. It is interesting to note that although this may be considered a genuinely modern context of a 'new generation' of experts in an innovative technology ready to replace 'older generations' of experts (e.g., in carbon-based technology), there are also continuities here: in terms of following and appreciating previous cohorts of experts who have gone through the same training in geothermal energy, and of allegiance and assistance (rather than competition) across nationality and age groups.

In Agwuele's case on Yoruba (in Nigeria), birth sequence (or more generally 'being the first on the scene') is the key distinction that permeates almost all aspects of social life. This includes clashes between those being born first and those being born later in the sequence even *within* a generation and not only between generations, including metaphorical extensions of the first-born trope. Moreover, in Yoruba cosmology, every king is tied into a generational rope, with the founding figures marking the beginning of the rope. Yoruba society continues to be stratified according to principles of seniority without resembling Ingold's depiction of a stuttering movement that isolates opposing generations. Instead, constant negotiations create complex (hierarchical) relationships between people rather than cutting them off. Agwuele's example also shows that many aspects of the conflicts and the fixation of sequence that Ingold describes for modernity also feature in Yoruba practices that are deemed 'traditional'.

Also set in western Africa, Mekamgoum's contribution on age concepts and their negotiation among Ngəmba people is an in-depth example of how individuals can situationally invert age categories that are taken for granted. In this rich study of both the pragmatics and metapragmatics of age categorization, Mekamgoum identifies how seniority differences are normatively embodied in acts such as greeting or receiving gifts. In Ingold's model, we might invoke the rope metaphor to describe these orderly interactions between different age classes as juniors give deference to seniors. But Mekamgoum also deftly shows how people actively negotiate membership of age categories depending on situational differences in knowledge and other dimensions of social status. Competent children may be temporarily cast as adults, for instance, while those who give advice to their equals use communicative strategies to counteract the overtones of seniority that arise from the act of advising.

Mitchell's study of how age differences are socialized and understood by Datooga children living in northern Tanzania suggests considerable in-group diversity: conceptualizations of age vary within the society not along a modern/non-modern axis but in terms of life stage. She notes that it is often size rather than generational sequence or birth order that is invoked by children. The linguistic expression of seniority and age concepts very often draws metaphorically on the physical domain of size: *big brothers* in English, *watu wakubwa* 'adults', literally 'big people' or 'people with authority' in Swahili. She shows that while adults invoke size-based seniority contrasts to control children's behaviour, young children were not observed using size terms to negotiate seniority in their interactions with peers, despite their preoccupation with physical size.

Knowing the sequence of birth, Widlok argues, is a very versatile mode of orienting yourself when there are few or no bureaucratic markers of age (such as known dates of birth). Even within egalitarian societies like the Hai‖om of Namibia, kinship terms routinely distinguish junior from senior relatives (not only siblings but also cousins, uncles, and aunts). However, there is no automatism that translates knowledge of seniority into practices of superiority. In the Hai‖om system, preventing distinctions of age and generation from being converted into personal dependency and age discrimination is achieved by

cultivating a number of levelling devices encoded in language and interaction (e.g., the use of reciprocals and cross-gender naming) and through avoiding practices that foster seniority as a principle of superiority (e.g., praise songs, linear kinship).

Takada's case study of the !Xun (another San group in Namibia) shows that here the distinction between generations is discursively emphasized in the kinship system but that this is matched with a strong (largely non-linguistic) expectation that generational distance goes with 'joking relationships', while being of the same generation (as between spouses) goes with mutual care and respect. In other words, here is a case not of 'following the ancestors' but of facing one another within the same generation and between age groups without the sense of hostile opposition. There is therefore, it seems, more than one way of preventing age groups from being at loggerheads with one another apart from the model of ancestry.

Maghimbi's case study of Maasai revisits a classic case of age-sets in the scholarly literature. At the same time his re-study is a cautionary tale against the tendency of anthropologists to uncritically embrace the narratives of people they encounter in their field research. Maasai society, Maghimbi claims, is analytically more appropriately characterized by distinctions of class and personal status than by membership in age-sets. In the context of our comparative discussion this reminds us that narratives about seniority and age differences are not to be confused with the pragmatics of instrumentalizing seniority and age relevant in everyday contexts that may be structured by other social differences, in this case class and gender.

Msangi also deals with Maasai, but with a focus on women's age grades and the linguistic concepts used to navigate the female life course. Though the formalized age-set system is restricted to men, this system serves as a frame of reference for positioning women within their own age grade system. An analysis of biographical conversations with Maasai women reveals that women may seem not to hold a structural position as part of an age set but that their age grades are still relevant for the practical roles that they play in the contemporary society. Insofar as women are (invisibly) part of what has traditionally been described as a male Maasai age-set system, this would indeed tie in with Ingold's description of rope-like intergenerational linking. On the other hand, it shows how the generation of social life is necessarily gendered, thus calling to mind two ropes that are also somehow entangled with one another.

Another East African society in which gerontocratic principles play an important role is the Iraqw case discussed by Alphonce. Here, age grades and generational categories reveal themselves both in life-stage terminology and in address practices. The strong normative dimension of these usage patterns is foregrounded. At the same time, this case study also shows that the system had undergone changes even before 'modernization', such as through the breaking of the links between generations that comes about with the acquisition of seniority via wealth, for instance. In the Iraqw case, sibling address terms used to be distinguished by age, but these terms have been abandoned in favour of the Swahili sibling terms, which do not make a junior/senior distinction. Nonetheless, the Iraqw distinction lives on in the way the Swahili sibling terms are used: the linguistic form changes but the pattern stays the same. Rather than a radical change in outlook or practice, this indicates piecemeal change and tinkering with the system, which may be characteristic of many ethnographic cases.

In sum, our case studies provide many examples of a strong sense of respectful, 'orderly' intergenerational relations, of 'following the ancestors', which many see as the key ingredient in a pan-African philosophy. At the same time there is also a sense of the importance of the now, the *kairotic* element of culture, if you

will (Onyeocha 2010), which is not simply a copy of the past but which makes demands of those living now. The people we have encountered and joined in their everyday settings appear not so much as captives of their cultural ontology, from which they cannot escape, as individuals and communities actively forging the distinctions they live by. In this process they reproduce some of the distinctions but also challenge and change others, if only in a small and piecemeal manner. Moreover, they always juggle more than one distinction as they are dealing with what could be characterized as 'traditional' and 'modernist' settings and demands.

We believe that there is added value not only in each individual case study but also in the way in which reading them in parallel or close sequence can foster a comparative perspective and comparative insights. The contributions to this special issue do not just introduce a diversity of cultural schemes for how to count generations, how to establish degrees of seniority, how to indicate an addressee's senior or junior status and so forth. They are also case studies of humans struggling with what is the genuine positionality of ourselves as humans (Plessner 2011[1928]). Unlike animals we are not simply following the flow of precedent. We are also stepping back, turning around, as Ingold would have it, to step out of that flow for a moment. While ethnographers have occasionally considered this 'stepping out' as a tragedy that they would like to see undone, one could argue that this would deny what makes us specifically human: our ability to keep turning and to keep moving at the same time. For as the case studies in this collection show, we are not turning our backs on our predecessors once and for all, but we do it intermittently; for better or worse, this is how human culture works. There is no reason why this should be detrimental to our relationship with the environment. The case studies discussed in this issue suggest that these cultural ways of generating life as we age while also being able to establish generations as a social construct have allowed us to live and change alongside changing environments. As the case studies testify beyond doubt, this process is not without friction and conflict. But we suggest that knowing these frictions, knowing how others have dealt with intended breaking points in the processes of continual growth and generation, is part and parcel of keeping one eye on the ancestors that precede us without losing sight of the peculiar new set of circumstances in which human agents now find themselves.

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