

# Rereading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*

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I don't know, for example, how I will be when I am ninety years old. . . .  
—Simone de Beauvoir, sixty-six, quoted in the documentary film  
*Promenade au pays de la vieillesse* (1974)

Would I contribute to a forum on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (*La vieillesse*) in *Age, Culture, Humanities*? I hesitated, worrying that my “emploi du temps” today wouldn't permit it and, just as seriously, that I would have nothing new or interesting to say. But bolstered by nostalgia, I said yes, remembering the pleasure of being at the enchanting Camargo Foundation in Cassis with my husband and our two-year-old daughter in 1984. My subject for the Camargo fellowship was Beauvoir's work on aging. I distinctly recall the chunky Warner paperback of *The Coming of Age* I took with me to France. Then already a bit worn, its 800-plus pages now were held together with rubber bands. I will read my underlinings, I decided, and went to look for my copy—first among my books on aging, then my books on autobiography and, now a bit desperately, my books under “B.” Nothing. *The Coming of Age* was *nowhere to be found*. It took me a week to reconcile myself to the prospect of *rereading* this exceedingly long book and to order the large Norton paperback numbering 585 pages.

In retrospect I'm glad this was to be my fate. Unable to jump ahead to my underlinings and notes in the margins, I literally reread *The Coming of Age* without skipping entire swaths of it. I admire Simone de Beauvoir's book even more now than when I first read it. I also find it far more peculiar than I remembered.

Published in France in 1970, *The Coming of Age* is the inaugural and inimitable study of the scandalous treatment of aging and the elderly in

today's capitalist societies.<sup>1</sup> For *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's groundbreaking 1949 feminist study of the subordination of women under patriarchy, there was no established method or model. Similarly, there was no established method or model for the study of aging. Beauvoir had to invent a way to pursue this enormous subject. What did she do? She did not adopt a particular method, not even philosophically, although she does think through the lenses of phenomenology and existentialism as well as Marxist theory and psychoanalysis (she has been criticized for her lack of a consistent method, predominantly by philosophers). She surveyed and synthesized what she had found in multiple domains, including biology, anthropology, philosophy, and the historical and cultural record, drawing it all together to argue with no holds barred that the elderly are not only marginalized in contemporary capitalist societies, they are dehumanized.

In the early 1980s I was a relatively young academic and judged, somewhat impatiently, *The Coming of Age* as an undisciplined, additive, and often numbingly encyclopedic view of aging from too many perspectives. As an academic devoted to literary and cultural studies I also rued what read to me as overly long plot summaries of novels and of people's lives.<sup>2</sup> Today I regard in awe Beauvoir's clear-eyed understanding of the entanglements, to use Karen Barad's term, of the multiple factors that contribute to producing the *experience* of aging—economic, biological, social, statistical, historical, and cultural, among them, as well as gender and, importantly, personal temperament. As Beauvoir writes in the Preface, "The individual is conditioned by society's theoretical and

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<sup>1</sup> In her recently published book *Ending Ageism, Or How Not to Shoot Old People*, Margaret Gullette suggests that credit for first articulating crucial aspects of ageism should be attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Old Age" (xi).

<sup>2</sup> For Beauvoir, literature serves straightforwardly as historical evidence. For the contemporary period, however, she privileged what she called "documentary evidence," cuttingly dismissing literature as insignificant. "Because of the mass of documentary evidence that we have on the present state of the aged," she writes, "that provided by literature is only of minor interest; and in any case it does not amount to much" (210).

practical attitude towards him. An analytical description of the various aspects of old age is therefore not enough: each reacts upon all the others and is at the same time affected by them, and it is in the undefined flow of this circular process that old age must be understood. That is why a study of old age must try to be exhaustive” (9). And exhaustive it was! Today I understand the first half of *The Coming of Age*—aging as seen from “without”—as fundamentally in the service of the second half of her book—aging as “being-in-the world.”

It is gratifying to me that Beauvoir’s approach is profoundly humanistic, emphasizing *what aging feels like* to those who inhabit the temporality of old age, particularly in capitalist economies; deemed no longer productive and ejected from the labor market, they are stripped of status and the means to pursue a livelihood precisely at the moment they are experiencing what she straightforwardly identifies as biological decline. Beauvoir writes as a moral philosopher, relentlessly intent on exposing the precarity of aging. She underscores that “old age has become the object of a policy” (221), a point we might be more likely to associate with Foucault. The French policy of institutionalizing the elderly poor, she writes, “may be summed up in a few words—abandonment, segregation, decay, dementia, death” (256). I have often remarked that the translation of *La vieillesse* as *The Coming of Age* for the American edition was an index of the American dark phobia of aging, a way of concealing the very subject of the book. It occurs to me now that the double entendre in *The Coming of Age* is improbably appropriate, conveying the menace she believed that old age carries.

Significantly, Beauvoir writes using not only the philosophical “I” (the “I” in general) but also in her own voice. As a writer, she is embodied. I imagine her in the old Bibliothèque nationale de France on the rue de Richelieu in central Paris, sitting at a long wooden table, taking notes by hand, engaging in this far-reaching research from so many angles, reading and requesting more books, thinking and writing, and then writing more. I didn’t remember that as part of her research she had visited

state-sponsored institutions for the elderly in France and was impressed to (re)discover that she writes about it in outrage, telling her readers that it “wrung” her “heart to see the utter listlessness bred by life in an institution” (259).

As a woman and academic who lives in the anti-intellectual United States, I also find it inspiring that Beauvoir intended *The Coming of Age* for an educated public audience, not one strictly academic. As had no other woman before her, Beauvoir succeeded as a public intellectual, writer, and activist, devoting herself, on behalf of both women and the elderly, to the study of egregious unequal power relations and to advocacy. Hers is an immense achievement. Would that more of us today had such ambitions and the confidence as well as the encouragement and the means to undertake what some of us in the academy today call public-facing work. Would, too, that more people were aware of *The Coming of Age* and would take up the subject of old age.<sup>3</sup> For it remains the case today that aging, in comparison with research on sexual and racial difference, has been virtually ignored in the humanities. Age is still the missing category in cultural studies. I am reminded of Beauvoir’s exasperation in *The Coming of Age* that the same banal and contradictory stereotypes about aging and the elderly are repeated, *endlessly*, throughout the centuries even as the idea and lived experience of aging have become “richer over time” (211). It drives her crazy that “nobody pays any attention” to the fact that these clichés continue to circulate ubiquitously (211). I can imagine the frustration she would have felt seeing this single, benighted sentence about *The Coming*

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<sup>3</sup> On *The Coming of Age* see the excellent work of literary scholars Toril Moi and Bethany Ladimer and philosophers Penelope Deutscher and Silvia Stoller. In her introduction to *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Age: Gender, Ethics, and Time*, Stoller addresses directly the reasons for the neglect of Beauvoir’s work on aging. However, even with a renaissance in Simone de Beauvoir studies (largely thanks to the extraordinary work of the philosopher Margaret Simons), it remains the case that *The Coming of Age*, if mentioned at all, is virtually an afterthought. Consider, for example, that the Fullbrooks devote only the last eight pages of their book *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Introduction to The Coming of Age*.

*of Age* on the Wikipedia page devoted to her: “Her 1970 long essay *La Vieillesse (The Coming of Age)* is a rare instance of an intellectual meditation on the decline and solitude all humans experience if they do not die before about the age of 60.”<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, Beauvoir was supremely clear—I am proud that this is the case—that for an individual the meanings of social age, biological age, and psychological age rarely coincide. And for her as an individual, old age was not to be an experience of abject solitude.

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Thirty-five years ago I read *The Coming of Age*, along with Beauvoir’s novels and memoirs, predominantly in terms of her intensely dark personal view of aging as a dreaded decline and diminishment. I agreed with her fundamentally Marxist analysis of the precarious place of the elderly today.<sup>5</sup> But I was troubled by her flat-out pronouncement early in *The Coming of Age* that the biological face of old age, “in so far as it is summed up by the words decrepitude, ugliness and ill-health,” provokes “instant repulsion” (40). Why, if decline and precarity are to be our future, are we indifferent at best and cruel at worst to the fate of the elderly, a fate that we ourselves are destined to experience if we live into old age? Self-defense is the principal answer Beauvoir gives to this fundamental question. I agreed then, and I do now, that a protective reflex to shield ourselves from decline and death might contribute to producing an individual’s willful blindness toward their own aging as well as neglect

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<sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir. Wikipedia. Web 21 January 2017.

<sup>5</sup> If Beauvoir were writing from the vantage point of neoliberal nation-states and global capital today, she would want to extend her Marxian analysis to underscore this contradiction: capitalism rejects the elderly as unproductive but relies on a population that both “produces” savings for retirement that are hence available for investment and, when old, constitutes a large market for all manner of things, including perhaps most prominently healthcare, in particular medications. See Kaushik Sander Rajan’s *Pharmocracy* which, although it does not address the case of an aging population, focuses on the hegemony of global biomedicine, in particular the power of global pharmaceutical companies. See also Joseph Dumit’s *Drugs for Life*; he develops the concept of surplus health in analogy to Marx’s concept of surplus labor.”

on the part of society as a whole. But certainly, I thought, this totalizing argument of “repulsion”—of deep-seated aversion—had something strange and extreme about it.

I was puzzled by the continual crises of her own aging that punctuate Beauvoir’s four memoirs—beginning in her late twenties (!). She tells us, over and over, that she was aging, she had crossed the line, she was old. What accounted for such a punishing view of her own aging? Was there a connection between her conviction that old age in others produces “instant repulsion” and her own depressive certitude at multiple points in her life that she had definitively aged? I undertook to read Beauvoir’s work symptomatically—psychologically and psychoanalytically (the literary critic Rita Felski might say that I was reading her “diagnostically”). My argument in “Simone de Beauvoir: Aging and Its Discontents,” published in 1988, was that Beauvoir had a deep-seated abhorrence of bodily transformation in general and lived in perpetual anxiety of abandonment, in particular in fear of the loss of Sartre. I argued that her writing—that is to say, drawing on her vocabulary, her *projects*—provided her with a way of wrestling with prospective melancholia. I concluded that Beauvoir had an especially virulent view of aging and old age in great part for complex personal reasons.

That her personal and profoundly pessimistic dread of aging may have provided her with the insight to see the appalling conditions of the elderly in the France of her day and the energy to study aging throughout history hadn’t occurred to me.

In addition, I found *myself* reassured—even relieved—that ultimately Beauvoir’s own experience in her last years rescued her from what she had feared. After Sartre’s death in 1980 (Beauvoir was seventy-two at the time), she drew close to the philosopher Sylvie le Bon, whom she adopted. Later Beauvoir confided that she was certain—she was *secure*—that for the rest of her life she would “never be alone” (Schwartz 21; translation mine). Her own life proved, as it were, that aging and old age were not necessarily to be

a wretched trial. I was able to read the story of her life as having a happy ending.<sup>6</sup>

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When I reread *The Coming of Age*, I found myself relating to the second half of the book—aging as “being-in-the world”—quite differently. It’s not that I disagree with what I have previously written and wish to disavow the essays that engage with Beauvoir’s views of aging.<sup>7</sup> It’s that I read this section less as a person who studies the representation of aging and more as a person who is now ten-plus years older than Beauvoir was when *The Coming of Age* was published in 1970. I wanted to know more about Beauvoir’s actual experience of aging after the appearance of *The Coming of Age* when, by her own account, she was in radiant health. I was especially interested in the years after Sartre’s death in 1980. If before I had focused on Beauvoir’s insistence as an existentialist that it is dedication to new projects that propel people into a future with meaning, rereading *The Coming of Age* I was gratified to see that she emphasizes *emotional connections* as well as intellectual interests as crucial for a vital old age. I am reminded of Freud’s wisdom that our two great tasks in life are to find people to love and work that is of importance to us. In this respect Beauvoir offers Lou Andreas-Salomé as a model, possessing both “intellectual and emotional interests that will stand up to the weight of the years” (518). More generally Beauvoir insists that aging is more difficult for men than it is for women, in great part because the identity of men is perforce bound up with the world of work which, in an urban society, they are forced to leave, whereas women maintain their emotional ties.

I was thus excited to learn in a collection of essays edited by Margaret Simons and dedicated to Beauvoir’s political writings that when Beauvoir was sixty-six she made a documentary film based on *La vieillesse*. Directed

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<sup>6</sup> This is also the animating impulse of my essay “Simone de Beauvoir: Prospects for the Future of Older Women.”

<sup>7</sup> See also Woodward, “Instant Repulsion: Decrepitude, the Mirror Stage, and the Literary Imagination” and “Reminiscence, Identity, Sentimentality: Simone de Beauvoir and the Life Review.”

by the Swedish filmmaker Marianne Arhne, *Promenade au pays de la vieillesse* (*A Walk through the Land of Old Age*) focuses primarily on the experience of aging and the elderly in post-War France. After Sartre's death, Beauvoir thus involved herself in a completely new kind of project, a venture in collaborative work in a new medium that had an activist agenda. Bravo! She had not only forged new and strong emotional ties, she had also responded to the invitation to invent a new way of working in the world.

I have not seen the film; unfortunately it is not readily accessible. A few clips, however, are available on the web and a complete transcript of *Promenade* in English, provided by Oliver Davis, is included in *Simone de Beauvoir: Political Writings*. It is intriguing to me that Beauvoir says, "I don't know, for example, how I will be when I am ninety years old," thereby giving voice not only to the radical contingency and variability of the experience of aging and being old but also to the psychic possibility that she might very well have a long life ahead of her.<sup>8</sup> It is in addition fascinating to me—this is the first time I have seen Beauvoir on screen—that she is so resolutely definitive. I should have expected so but still, I was taken by a certain surprise. It seems as if every sentence Beauvoir utters in the clip from *Promenade* is declarative. Her absolute intellectual certitude, supreme clarity, and rapidity of speech and thought are striking on the screen, at least in what I have seen. For me she is also lacking a certain warmth, as if she were reciting what today we call talking points.

Thus it came as a shock to learn in the final pages of Deirdre Bair's *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography that Beauvoir*—why hadn't I read this book before?—was in poor health for two years after Sartre died and that

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<sup>8</sup> Oliver Davis 363. Davis argues in his introduction to *A Walk through the Land of Old Age* that the film provides us with the opportunity to see Simone de Beauvoir presenting herself as an older woman well aware of her immense privilege. A DVD of *Promenade* can be found in the Bibliothèque nationale de France; it is listed as being edited and distributed by the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris in 2014. For a brief clip from *Promenade* see <http://base.centre-simone-de-beauvoir.com/DIAZ-510-750-0-0.html>. A long interview of Simone de Beauvoir by Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber in 1975 can be found on YouTube.



toward the end of her life her adopted daughter and close friends struggled to keep her from drinking, watering down the scotch. I had never thought of Beauvoir as a heavy drinker. But there it was. A kind of ruination of her body. And she did not seem aware of it. Bair tells us:

By the end of 1985, the years of heavy drinking had exacerbated her cirrhotic condition: her belly was so distended that she could not stand up straight. She was so jaundiced that the whites of her eyes were now yellow, turning her cornflower-blue irises into a watery green that sometimes startled people who had not seen her for a while. Even simple tasks such as walking the few steps from her sofa to the refrigerator were agony for her. Horrified guests sat glued to their chairs, wondering whether to get up and help her or pretend that nothing was amiss. She behaved, however, as if nothing were wrong, and insisted on following her usual routine. (612)

Blessedly, Bair also tells us that Beauvoir was possessed of a sharp mind and curiosity about the world until she died.

In *On Rereading* literary critic Patricia Spacks points out that the experience we bring to a text a second time around changes what we find. Spacks focuses on the novel, making a distinction between recreational rereading and professional rereading, the latter being more purposeful, with an emphasis on developing or refining a line of thought, a fresh interpretation. My rereading of *The Coming of Age* provided both less and more than a new interpretation of the book. In fact “interpretation” isn’t the right word. I would say that today I am framing *The Coming of Age* differently. I would also say that I’m not reading Beauvoir “against” herself as I had earlier. Rather I am reading *with* her. I am reading autobiographically, as a woman a decade older than was Beauvoir when her book was published, testing my experience against her writing—and life. And from this point of view it is clear to me that while Beauvoir develops a theory of the experience of aging in *The Coming of Age* she does not write as an older woman—or really as a woman at all. She writes from the perspective of a confident and authoritative intellectual who is middle-aged, one who has a

melancholy vision of what lies before her. “Generally speaking,” she writes, “the old have no refuge from the emptiness of their lives” (459). They are marked by “indifference” (472).

Beauvoir’s foundational argument—it is phenomenological, it is existential, it is dialectical—is that we are made aware of the adverse condition of aging and being old by the Other, or what I have in another essay called the youthful structure of the look.<sup>9</sup> It is a stigmatizing social judgment, made worse by our internalization of it. In 1983 at the very first academic conference on aging I ever organized, the intrepid literary and cultural critic Leslie Fiedler made this point in his inimitable style. In his simultaneously hilarious and trenchant way, he pointed to the direct mail he was receiving—he was then sixty-six—that offered ways to increase sexual potency (it was a bit of a hook, one that took us to a meditation on aging and erotic desire, a subject that was of great interest to Beauvoir as well). Thirteen years later at another conference on aging I organized (this one focused on women and aging), the irrepressible, brilliant film and television critic Patricia Mellencamp opened her presentation with a personal story about suddenly becoming an old woman in the eyes of others. A fall on the ice while she was walking in the park knocked her unconscious and, carrying no identification, she was, as she later learned, literally labeled “elderly” by her rescuers; she was fifty-five at the time! By her own admission, after her recovery she turned back into a middle-aged woman. Both are examples of what Margaret Gullette has wonderfully called “age autobiography,” self-reflective stories of the experience we have of being aged by culture, by the Other.

What autobiographical age stories do I have to tell? It makes me smile—it is a wry ironic smile—to realize that I too, like virtually everyone else who is older, insist that I don’t *feel* old, although I detest the bromide that we are only as old as we feel. Not so! Like Fiedler, I receive direct mail

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<sup>9</sup> See Woodward, “Performing Age, Performing Gender.”

brochures that are aging related, but mine are for retirement communities; frankly, they haven't had the effect of psychologically "aging" me, at least not to my knowledge, although they may work by the slow drip method to erode one's confidence. Unlike Pat Mellencamp I don't have a dramatic story of being aged into old age instantly. In fact, weirdly, I've had the opposite experience. Two of my friends have literally said to me in a strange tone, "You don't age." *That* worries me. First, I know it's not true. But second, I also wonder what they are thinking and perceiving. Whatever it is, it doesn't seem good.

What I do feel with force is a distinct difference with regard to temporality. One of Beauvoir's major points in *The Coming of Age* is that our relationship to time changes fundamentally as we grow older. I didn't at all concern myself with this when I read her book some thirty-five years ago. Now I find myself thinking about my relationship to potential incapacities and to death *in terms of years*. Beauvoir is right. Time feels—it is—much shorter now. For me it is not so much a matter of projects (although anyone who knows me would say I am wedded to my work at the University of Washington). Rather for me—at least right now—it is a question of responsibility to my small immediate family. My daughter is a medical resident and a single mother, and she and her eighteenth-month-old daughter have lived with me since Eloise was born. Together we three form a small three-generational family, a situation of immense commitment (and laughter), one not without its complexities. I constantly wonder what would happen if I'm not here to help. What if in the near future I present a burden rather than offering sustenance and support? (A *burden!* Here I am voicing a stereotypical concern of older people, a concern age studies scholars have called into critical question.<sup>10</sup>) Perhaps I am being overly dramatic and self-important (I may not be as

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Gullette, for example, astutely points out in mainstream media in the U.S. a worrisome shift in the meaning of "burden" "from hard caregiving work to the person for whom the work is done" (forthcoming).

indispensable as I think). But I am anxious about my foreshortened future—primarily on their account.

At the same time, it is a source of some astonishment to me that like Beauvoir after the death of Sartre, after the death of my husband four years ago, I formed a new and surprising attachment—in my case, to little Eloise. When before I had vaguely imagined grandchildren, they always lived somewhere else; I would visit them and they would visit me. It was never in my vision of the future that I would be a kind of co-parent as a grandmother. But there is it: *the unexpected*. I take the *unexpected* in aging to be Beauvoir's ultimate legacy, with her *experience* complementing and commenting on her theoretical views. *The unexpected*. It can be grim (I have personally witnessed this in my husband's experience with cancer and death). It can also be an opening onto something—unexpected!

It is an understatement to remark that in *The Coming of Age* Beauvoir does not much touch on family as a sustaining force when one is old (nor does she discuss the power of faith or the strength of communities of fictive kin). When Beauvoir does reflect on the family, it is primarily in psychoanalytic terms, offering simplistic generalizations, with ambivalence at the fore. Consider, for example, the three paragraphs she devotes in the huge book that is *The Coming of Age* to the subject of grandparenthood, an area in which I am proud to say I now have some experience. On the one hand, Beauvoir introduces the subject with this assertion, “The warmest and happiest feelings that old people experience are those which have to do with their grandchildren” (474). On the other hand, she immediately contradicts this uncharacteristic ode to happiness, explaining that nonetheless a “grandmother's attitude often begins by being markedly ambivalent. If she is hostile to her daughter she is also hostile to the children through whom her daughter asserts herself and escapes from her” (474). What does Beauvoir assert can be expected of these fraught emotional ties? Vexation, rivalry, jealousy, bitterness. Does this resonate with my experience? Absolutely not! Struggles over the division of labor, yes!

Beauvoir's theoretical insights and foundational arguments about aging are profound and illuminating. She correctly insisted that *The Coming of Age* was "revolutionary" because "old age is a problem on which all of the failures of society converge. And that is why it is so carefully hidden."<sup>11</sup> But her one-dimensional generalizations about the experience of aging and old age are dismaying and dispiriting. She writes, "all old people's neuroses have their source in childhood or adolescence" (372). "The old person, for his part, knows that his life is accomplished and that he will never refashion it" (377). Old age "deadens emotion" (400). "Generally speaking the old have no refuge from the emptiness of their lives" (459). "Most old people sink into gloom" (463). We must reject these generalizations. They border on the stereotypes Beauvoir abhorred. At the same time, we must applaud her conviction that we must attend closely to the stories of the experiences that individuals have as they age into old age.

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Should our students read *The Coming of Age*? Would I include *The Coming of Age* on a syllabus today? I looked back. I've been saying that I read *The Coming of Age* thirty-five years ago, but in fact I read it soon after it was published in translation in 1972. Five years later I included the entire book in several courses I had offered on aging for first-year undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. I can hardly believe it: one week was devoted to the first half of the book; another to the second half. In addition, in one of the courses I required a five-page critical review essay of *The Coming of Age*. Today I wouldn't even begin to consider the book required reading for undergraduates for many reasons, some of which I have already suggested. In addition, it is way too long.

Several years ago I designed an interdisciplinary seminar for doctoral students under the title "Age: The Missing Category in Cultural Studies."

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<sup>11</sup> Qtd. in Bair 540.

My purpose was to call attention to the emerging field of age studies; my strategy was to draw people to the study of aging and old age under the Trojan-horse cover of adolescence and middle age. I was proud of my syllabus. There were units devoted to youth subcultures, theories of the life course and life span, theories and histories of generations, shifting representations and meanings of middle age, the body and the youthful structure of the look, and intersections: illness, dependency, and care. It didn't occur to me to include *The Coming of Age*, which had by now come to assume the status of an historical document for me. The upshot of the course? It was cancelled because not enough graduate students at the University of Washington signed up. Age continues to be the missing category in cultural studies.

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A remark made in passing by the late Robert Butler, a towering and beloved figure in the field of aging in the U.S., has hovered in the back of my mind since I began thinking about *The Coming of Age* for this forum in *Age, Culture, Humanities*. He had invited close colleagues to a two-day meeting on public policy and aging at the International Longevity Center in New York and encouraged them all—gently insisted, really—to meet off-site beforehand to discuss their personal thoughts and feelings about aging into old age. We don't talk enough—or even at all—about our own sentiments about aging and death, he said, and yet we task ourselves with recommending policy. We need to be as self-aware as possible, he said, we need to talk with each other.

A refrain has run through these pages. I was younger then, I am older now. Butler—he was a generation older—mentioned this to me some fifteen years ago. I was a bit uncomfortable with the idea then. I am seriously entertaining it now.

Seattle, Washington  
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