Serializing Age: Aging and Old Age in TV Series, edited by Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Anita Wohlmann. Aging Studies, Volume VII. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016. Pp 276. $45.00/€39.99 (paperback); €39.99 (electronic).
Reviewed by Anne Jerslev

Serializing Age is a well-edited, coherent, and inspiring volume, which scrutinizes the relationships among aging (or age), the television series/serial formats, temporality, and genre. As the editors write in their introduction, the overall question is "how the temporal construction of the narrative contributes to present alternative views of aging" (13). The hypothesis outlined in the introduction and discussed in many of the chapters is that seriality's play with flashbacks and flash-forwards, disruption of chronology, and linearity provide the framework to narratively "challenge established cultural and social parameters, as well as more fluid conceptualizations of the life course" (13). The volume's contributions then seek out alternative ways of representing old age through narratives that contest "chrono-normativity," as it is called in Eve Krainitzki's essay about *Orange is the New Black*. Chapters discuss narratives in which older people are acting against their age (episodes of *The Twilight Zone,* in Marta Miquel-Baldellou's chapter, for example, or *The Golden Girls* in Thomas Küpper's), or narratives "queering" age normativity (in Krainitzki's chapter). Other articles critically discuss examples of stereotyping (the cougar figure discussed by Anita Wohlmann and Julia Reichenpfader), structures of ageism (Sally Chivers on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), or single characters in otherwise celebrated series (Neal King's critical reading of the retiring Lester Fremon in *The Wire*).

In her article about queer temporality and aging characters in *Orange is the New Black,* Eva Krainitzki coins the term "hypervisibility paradox" (210). A bit the same could be said of this volume, which could give the impression that representations of aging and old age are everywhere. However, the volume comes across chiefly as an important contribution to the burgeoning interdisciplinary intersection of media studies with (cultural) gerontology. Whereas media studies has a long sociological

tradition of quantitatively measuring (the lack of) representations of older people in the media relative to their distribution in the general population, only recently have representations of older people in the media been studied. The present volume advances this field by discussing forms of visibility and invisibility in old age, questions of age-appropriateness and "looking one's age," and, not least, how representations of old age can defy common ideas about aging as a process of decline. Simultaneously, many of the volume's articles connect discussions about representations of aging with discussions of *genre framing*; how particular genres allow for some views of aging and disallow others. C. Lee Harrington, for example, asks in her excellent article "Time, Memory, and Aging on the Soaps," in which ways the soap opera's construction of prolonged time and frequent rewritings of its characters' pasts make possible a "disruptive (if not subversive) challenge to the normative understanding of time and its passage as linear, causal, and progressive" (37), and how some soaps' longevity provides viewers with a sense of witnessing characters' aging along with their own and the actors' aging processes, hence allowing a blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction.

Anita Wohlmann and Julia Reichenpfader, in contrast, discuss the sitcom's constraints when it comes to representations of the so-called cougar ("Serial Cougars: Representations of a Non-Normative Lifestyle in a Sitcom, an Episodic Serial, and a Soap Opera"). Taking issue with the volume's core question, the authors compare three different narrative structures and ask "whether the serial cougar perpetuates, challenges, or undermines stereotypes of age and aging" (161). Wohlmann and Reichenpfader argue that the sitcom's cyclicality and structure of repetition emphasize conventional values, traps the cougar (in *Cougar Town*) in the stereotype of age-inappropriate femininity, and is "unable to offer progressive or innovative trajectories of aging" (169), in contrast to the German soap *Verbotene Liebe (Forbidden Love)*, which offers a more nuanced reading of "female transgression" (176).

However Thomas Küpper, in his reading of the famous sitcom *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992), takes the opposite view on the genre: he argues that it makes possible a theatrics of aging, and hence a kind of defamiliarization of normative notions of age appropriateness in old age. The sitcom's short and repetitive structure, Küpper argues, makes way for exaggeration and, hence, for destabilizing conventional ideas of aging and the aging woman.

It seems to me, though, that the volume does not completely succeed in thinking through the broad question asked in the rather short introduction about genre, age(ing), temporality, and seriality. I am not quite convinced that the sitcom genre in itself has anything to do with *Cougar Town's* problematic portrayal of older women. Thinking about the sitcom *Grace and Frankie* (2015-present), for example, it seems to me that the sitcom genre, in particular, allows for the recurrent self-ironic thematizations of particularly bodily aging and also for the many subtle and ironic references to the two aging actresses' celebrity personae.

The volume's twelve articles each focus on one specific series or compare representations of age in similar series. Methodologically they all include close textual analyses, and this in itself provides great reading pleasures: revisiting series I followed some years ago and being offered a new view upon the narrative importance of well-known characters (for example Karen Mc Cluskey in *Desperate Housewives*), contemplating getting hold of series I haven't seen (like *Tango in Halifax*), or planning to re-watch series in the light of interesting new concepts. Here Justin Bradley Goltz's chapter, "Still *Looking*: Temporality and Gay Aging in US Television," deserves particular mention. The author outlines the changed portrayal of gay male characters during the past thirty years, from not being there or, alternatively, being tragic older men to being nuanced characters with a future. For example, Goltz outlines the ambiguous portrayal of gay characters in TV series in the 1980s: on the one hand gay characters were "walk-ons" (just a brief interlude in a series) or they became merely a "queer trace, a gesture to the space-off" (195) (that

which is implied but not seen). But on the other hand, the problem was not only one of invisibility, because "the longer a queer character lingered within the represented space of a series, it seemed, the less queer they became" (193).

I conclude my review of this thought-provoking edited volume with two remarks. One is that it calls for an additional volume about older *audiences'* meaning making of representations of aging and older people, be it on television or streaming services. Thomas Küpper refers an interview with a viewer of Golden Girls who praises the series for showing that "there's life after 50." Some of the series analyzed in *Serializing Age* may even show that there is life after sixty or seventy. I think we need much more empirical research about the thoughts and pleasures older people might get from watching series about or with older characters. In continuation of this, I would like to quote Lee Harrington's critical remark about the deep-rooted cultural idea that "TV is seen as a capitulation to the vagaries of aging" (38). Why is it, as Harrington contends, that the very idea that "*watching soap opera* might aid in mental agility would be considered laughable" (38, emphasis in original). Why is it that "successful aging" is never illustrated by a group of women binge-watching *Grace and Frankie* together?