

Age Becomes Us: Bodies and Gender in Time, by Leni Marshall.
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Leni Marshall, a founding member of the North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS), has written a book that may serve as a foundational text in age studies. It brings together age studies scholarship with an activist stance against ageism. It combines theoretical outlines of age studies methodologies with literary and cultural applications of these methodologies.

In the first chapter, “Constructing the Body of Age Studies,” Marshall provides a definition of age studies, which she compares to gender studies in its construction of the body and its activist orientation. She posits that “[a]ge studies scholars try to move beyond merely identifying social constructions, to instead reduce or eliminate unjust power differentials” (2). Furthermore, Marshall defines age as a category beyond chronology, claiming that it should be subjected to “intersectional analysis in literary and cultural studies” (4). She regards the effect of age studies analysis on the reader, optimistically, as provoking changes in readers’ understandings of aging and old age. Thus, the focus of the book is strongly activist. Making it very clear that her own scholarship is indebted to pioneers in the field, Marshall asks why age studies is still an apparently new subject to many literary scholars in spite of the work done since the 1970s by Simone de Beauvoir, Kathleen Woodward, and Margaret Morganroth Gullette, to name only a few of the pioneers Marshall mentions and draws on in her book. Marshall marvels at the difficulty of installing age studies on the institutional level of English departments, which have incorporated other identity categories, such as gender, ethnicity, and (dis-)ability. The reasons she gives for this situation include the “cultural amnesia” attached to the subject, the wide range of difference in age-defined groups, and the myths of old age “as a time of loneliness, depression, sickness, and death” (13). To change this situation is part of Marshall’s motivation for writing her book.

Chapter 2, “Deconstructing the Body through Age Studies,” considers the mind/body split in gender and age studies. Whereas feminist body theories resist the mind/body split, the situation in age studies is more complicated, since “the aging self experiences a heightened mind/body divide” (34). The concept of abjection provides a further layer “to understanding the diminished social power of senior bodies” (36). Against these negative normative aspects of aging as decline, Marshall posits an age studies perspective on the potential of the older body to go on becoming: “As a field of study, a theoretical framework, and an activist stance, age studies reintegrates agedness into the realm of the social” (39-40).

The third chapter, “Ambiguous Loss, Ambiguous Gain: Age Studies Analyses in Menopause and Beyond” looks at a number of misconceptions about menopause and tries to incorporate the correction of these into ways of “learning to be old” (43). The normative stance of Marshall’s writing comes to bear very strongly on this chapter. She analyzes a number of self-help books on menopause as well as age studies texts which move beyond self-help and into critical analyses (60). The chapter introduces the concept of “ambiguous loss,” developed by psychologist Pauline Boss, to “talk about that experience of letting go combined with holding on” (64). She transfers this concept to woman’s physical experience of aging in menopause, arguing that the “concept of ambiguous loss may allow for a broader, more open social recognition of the losses and possibilities inherent in menopause, aging, and old age” (65). Again, a developmental component and, with it, the possibility of gain rather than loss, is included in Marshall’s age studies perspective on aging.

The next three chapters of the book introduce literary texts, novels, and poetry by women authors from different cultural backgrounds, who share a complex vision of female aging and old age: Doris Lessing, Lucille Clifton, and Louise Erdrich. Marshall regards literature as a “tool for age studies, as a change agent” (69) and has selected texts that subscribe to the aim of changing ageist attitudes. Doris Lessing’s *The Diaries of Jane Somers* are regarded as persuasive for age studies, since they examine the “reasons and stereotypes that Other elders”;

they “confront, analyze, and successfully challenge ageism as a social problem; and they conform to the didactic novel” (71).

Lessing’s novels portray older women in exchange with a younger woman who becomes their companion and carer, thus investigating elder’s interactions across generations. Lessing, in these texts, shares the didactic commitment of Marshall, since they serve not only as meditations on age, but advocate “a transformation in readers’ ideas about age” (83).

The topic of the chapter on Lucille Clifton’s poetry on aging is the intersection of age and ethnicity, using Clifton’s writings to investigate African American concepts of aging. Clifton is chosen as an exemplary figure whose treatment of aging is connected to her fusion of present and past. Older women in black American woman’s writing offer positive connotations for old black women’s bodies and make explicit tropes such as “wisdom and cultural survival” (99). Marshall argues that the experience of resisting mainstream culture’s definitions of the self can be helpful also in resisting “negative social constructions of aging” (103). Lucille Clifton’s poetry offers multiple racial identities as well as a more positive attitude towards menopause and aging into old age. This is related to black American writers’ family and kinship networks, which provide positive role models.

In her chapter on Louise Erdrich’s *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Marshall turns to a Native American writer whose texts she regards as being able to serve as “textual elders”(119). Again, the drift of the argument is normative with Native American author’s texts filling in “the gap in others’ education” (119). These writers take over the traditional function of storytelling from Native American elders, and, in doing so, contribute to community building and to the preservation of traditional stories. Erdrich, unlike some other Native American writers, takes the presence of Caucasian American culture for granted and focuses on the friction between the two cultures. The stories about the Little No Horse reservation traverse this larger cultural context. They function to teach readers “about community and fluidity of the self” (133). Concerning its perspective on aging, the book confronts and resists “normative age labels [...], challenging readers’ notions of what it means to

embody age” (136-7). In Erdrich’s writing, the boundaries between Native American and Caucasian American cultures as well as those between life and death, dream and reality, are permeable (138).

In the three examples she chooses from different cultural contexts, Marshall illustrates how age-based critical analysis can encompass antiracist work. As she points out, age studies is challenged by “a general lack of awareness that it exists” (146). In her book, Marshall writes against this invisibility and her endeavor provides one more step into visibility for age studies.

Age Becomes Us provides a sound methodology of age studies in its first three chapters by introducing theoretical concepts concerning the (de-)construction of the body as well as ambiguous loss and gain. This first part of the book may serve as a textbook introduction to Age Studies. Marshall adds to these theoretically inclined chapters three concrete applications in her thoughtful readings of exemplary female writers. Marshall’s book is informed by a politically activist stance and dedication to anti-ageism and anti-racism. If the book has a weakness it is that the strong focus on activism may turn some of the readings into attempts to strongly guide readers didactically. This tendency, however, which can lead away from the specifics of literary analysis, is balanced by the innovative readings of women writers Marshall presents in *Age Becomes Us*.