

The Ages of Life: Living and Aging in Conflict?, by Ulla Kriebner and Roberta Maierhofer. Bielefeld: Transcript. Aging Studies, 2013. Pp. 256. \$35.00 (paperback and electronic).

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The chapters in this excellent collection, which is the third volume in the Aging Studies series, features authors from several European countries and Canada. With the volume's subtitle, the editors draw attention to the fact that that youth has been extended to late life, "turning living and aging into apparently conflicting processes" (9). The editors further note that, in contrast to the idea of late life as a distinct location on the life course, many old people themselves emphasize continuity with their earlier selves. Although the authors assembled in *The Ages of Life* come from different disciplines, the editors believe they share the conviction that there is "a lack of understanding concerning cultural, social and political representations of age and aging" (10).

This collection illustrates a point made by Chris Gilleard in the first issue of *Age, Culture, Humanities*: "The cultural turn" views human aging as "a phenomenon that is inextricably caught up in and realized through social and cultural practices, much in the same way that such embodied entities as gender, race, disability, or sexuality are." These social and cultural practices are illuminated in the three sections of *The Ages of Life*: Methods and Approaches, Representations in Media and Art, and Representations in Literature. The first three essays set the tone: a critique of positive/successful aging by Martin Formosa, a discussion of cultural studies and aging by Karin Lövgren, and a commentary on disability and aging by Sharon-Dale Stone.

Like Martha Holstein and Stephen Katz, Formosa finds significant flaws in the prescriptions for positive aging. One is economic: the assumption that older people should increasingly continue to work, a view the author decries as "strongly North American culture-bound" (27). Another is conflating positive aging with the white middle class, so that vulnerable and frail old people are overlooked. Citizens should not be expected to solve on their own the problems arising from globalization and late capitalism. And Formosa

makes another excellent point: attempts to create better health for old people must begin in programs to improve the health of children and adults.

Lövgren points out that age can be thought of as something to be achieved, “done in relation to expectations and norms—and also as something that is institutionalized” (40). Her study focuses on images of aging in popular Swedish magazines geared to older women. Producers of the magazines, eager to exploit the previously overlooked gray market, convey the message that old people are actually still young and are “as consumers, as good as anyone. Aging is in fact denied [and] norms of agelessness” emphasized (43). Looking as young as you feel requires effort but must appear effortless. Magazine readers are aware that women’s bodies are portrayed as perpetually needing improvement. Youthfulness and actual youth are not the same, according to Lövgren, who identifies youthfulness as “a cultural quality that conveys societal value” (45)—a point amplified in the essays on media, art, and literature.

Stone challenges the notion that aging and disability are inextricably linked and observes that impairment and disability exist across the life course. This idea is reinforced in an essay on Austrian law and aging, by Jürgen Pirker and Nora Melzer-Azodanloo, who note that if parliament is dissolved and the president unable to perform his or her duties, its oldest member becomes president. Yet, as the essay notes, the laws are not uniform when it comes to aging. Another age-related law is that public financing of in vitro fertilization is restricted to women under forty and men younger than fifty.

The section on media and art opens with “The Journey into the Land of Forgetfulness: Metaphors of Aging and Dementia in Media,” by Heinrich Grebe, Welf-Gerrit Otto, and Harm-Peer Zimmermann, based on an analysis of German books and magazines. The authors note that dementia is likened to regression to childhood, to sinking and falling, to a state of darkness, and to a thief. They call for representations that show, instead, “the breadth of experience of people living with dementia” (11-12) without reinforcing the cultural norm that denies value to their lives. The section continues with an essay based on media in German-speaking countries by Julian Wangler, who

argues that media reinforce a cult of youth, so that old people are expected to mask their age. The author points to a shift from seeing old people as needy and fragile to seeing them as parasites (stereotypes as evident in North America as in Germany).

Eva Klein's essay, "Age Images in Advertising: An Art-Historical Analysis of Advertisement Images in the Austrian Province of Styria," demonstrates the value of a highly specific study. Klein notes the importance of "critically facing youth fixation" (130), a stirring phrase. "Of Mimicry and Age: Fashion Ambivalences of the Young-Old," by Thomas Küpper, notes the use of "ageless fashion" that allows marketers to avoid excluding potential consumers. While erasing age differences, this strategy "conceals age by idealizing youth" (138). Küpper offers a novel take on the concept of "mutton dressed as lamb," people looking silly because they wear age-inappropriate clothing; this "transgression" of "age limits" (140) can potentially be a subversive act of defiance.

The literature section of *The Ages of Life* includes stimulating essays by Emma Dominguez-Rué on Ellen Glasgow, Helen Chupin on Anne Tyler and Umberto Eco, and Katharina Zilles on J. M. Coetzee. In her essay, Zilles examines an intriguing notion: "the concept of the body as the Other of the Self" (223). Cynthia Skenazi considers the ironic deployment of stereotypes in a poem by the French author Etienne Pasquier (who was eighty-one when the poem was published in 1610); Marta Miquel-Baldellou contrasts depictions of age in British and American texts of the Victorian period; and Dana Bădulescu explores Salman Rushdie's depiction of a strong middle-aged woman in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*.

In a *New York Times* article, "Alzheimers, a Neglected Epidemic," Ginia Bellafante observes that "we have changed from a society that expressed its ageism rather explicitly to one that masks its bias by celebrating those who age in ways that seem to defy physical reality." A study of aging's superstars and the fakery involved in appearing to defy physical reality would be illuminating. The contributions to *The Ages of Life* demonstrate that both implicit and explicit ageism remain fairly common. They illustrate that the editors' goal of

subverting normative age concepts has been well met. One normative age concept is that “old” is a fixed category, not fluid and changing. However, the essays reveal that context and circumstance determine whether chronological age is relatively meaningful, meaningless, or poised to go in either direction.

For this very diverse collection, Karen Lövgren’s essay offers a good overview: Old people are often spoken for, rather than being speakers themselves, a situation that leads to asymmetrical power relationships. “Who has so far been given the opportunity to report from ‘deep old age?’” (51), Lövgren asks. Examples that come to mind are few—English women writers of autobiography, mostly, such as Diana Athill and Penelope Lively, and the American novelist and essayist Doris Grumbach, who recently turned ninety-seven.

Reading *The Ages of Life* makes me wonder if age prejudice will ever be as effectively challenged as sexism, racism, or homophobia. Those three social ills are still with us, of course, but at least widespread understanding of and resistance to them now exists. The same cannot be said of ageism. With books like *The Ages of Life*, however, the daunting struggle against deeply entrenched prejudice and oppression goes forward. Indeed, this collection prompts me to ask another question: can the identity box of *old* ever be opened up, allowing more nuanced understandings of late life to permeate mainstream society? A first step would be successfully challenging the young/old binary which makes “old” seem as fixed as the seasons. “Young” is allowed multiple meanings and contingencies, and the same could be true of “old.” Even though the latter term carries some negative connotations, these can be recognized as partial, particular, and malleable rather than universal. More books by humanities scholars and like-minded social scientists will be needed to illustrate that “old” is not an identity that transcends all others; rather, *age* is but part of one’s self definition.

Wondering if and how the perceptions of critical gerontologists and humanists, such as the contributors to *The Ages of Life*, could strongly influence mainstream aging attitudes, I was heartened to find in a mainstream publication an article on the economics of aging that dismantles the

assumption that population aging will bring economic disaster. Lincoln Caplan demonstrates that the economic models used to arrive at this dire prediction are wrong, and he concludes that although baby boomers will impose significant costs on society, they will also confer economic benefits on later generations (29). Without Caplan's elaborate economic calculations, gerontologists such as Gloria Gutman and Ellen Gee, in *The Overselling of Population aging*, have reached the same conclusion as I do in *Learning to be Old*: ageist assumptions serve as unhealthy blinders to understandings of the complex relationships among gender, culture, and aging. But policy makers seem wedded to the "tsunami of aging" mantra, a fallacy that demonstrates the need for more books like *The Ages of Life* providing valuable perspectives from critical gerontology.

WORKS CITED

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