

Aging Experiments: Futures and Fantasies of Old Age, edited by João Paulo Guimarães. Bielefeld: transcript, 2023. Pp. 226. €39 (paperback); open access (ebook).

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The core thesis of this edited collection could not be clearer: “experimental writing, science-fiction and fantasy (henceforth SFF) ‘denature’ aging, proposing strange images of the body, the self and the lifespan that configure nonstandard, but nonetheless normal, modes of embodiment” (10). As a whole, the volume confirms this argument, and then some. The contributors’ attention to literature is manifest across its eleven chapters with pieces on Doris Lessing’s *The Grandmothers*; *The Buried Giant*, a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro compared to J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*; poetry by Robert Duncan; plays by Samuel Beckett such as *Krapp’s Last Tape*; and surrealist fiction by Leonora Carrington. Several of its best essays also extend beyond literature to attend to performances by choreographer Merce Cunningham and guitarist Keith Rowe, “San Junipero” (a truly, truly spectacular episode in the television series *Black Mirror*), and the self-staging of Finnish experimental artist Tuuli Helkky Helle. All told, *Aging Experiments* gathers a rich interdisciplinary mix to consider its chosen task at hand. It does so quite well.

Let me highlight three standouts. Michael Davidson’s essay “how to dance/sitting down,” subtitled “Aging, Innovation and the Graying of Disability,” does a superb job walking its reader through a series of modern/ist productions that flout decline ideologies. Building off Davidson’s previous scholarship in *Invalid Modernism: Disability and the Missing Body of the Aesthetic*, this chapter “reminds us that in speaking of an artist’s late style, we forget that their innovations were often the result of a disability” (81). That claim is proven by elegant readings of several case studies, but none more so than a rehearsal of how Henry James’s rheumatism facilitated his breakthroughs with narrative form in his middle years. Likewise, Jade Elizabeth French’s close reading of Carrington’s *The Hearing Trumpet* does a fine job of delineating how that surrealist text produces wild depictions of care environments and later-life

material cultures by “making visible an older woman with altered abilities” (159). Similarly, Heunjung Lee’s welcome take on the neglected Finnish artist Tuuli Helkky Helle conclusively illustrates “that Tuuli had reclaimed ‘dependency’ in a positive term, and had visualized the beauty and power of the interconnected, interrelated, and caring relationships in her arts and life” (100).

Along the way *Aging Experiments* becomes a fellow traveler in queer age studies—less in terms of its emphasis on older LGBTQ+ persons in this volume and more in terms of extending influential theories of queer time launched by Jack Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and other US-based queer theorists. Queer temporality is, in fact, central to Guimarães’ opening moves when framing the volume. In a cut-to-the-chase introduction, Guimarães states that “like queer subjects, older people often put conventional ideas of progress to the test, either because they require vital but unproductive forms of care or are ‘preternaturally’ active and creative. Queer Theory might also allow us to harness the creativity of SFF for the purposes of Aging Studies” (12). A few other pieces, notably Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Sarah Falcus’ closing chapter on speculative narratives, advance this insight. Despite its considerable work on childhood, there is still more to be done in queer and trans studies about old age and aging—about life expectancies, about the possibilities and pitfalls of cross-generational communitarianism, about aging and transition—that this piece read quite fresh to me.

Even more importantly, the collection works hard to suture a divide between critical age studies and disability studies. A leading disability theorist such as Alison Kafer asks us to remember that aging, “compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness,” and queer persons and populations should not be disentangled as we work against what Lee cites as “the ‘curative imaginary’” (98), or what Kafer defines as “an understanding of disability that not only *expects* and *assumes* intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention” (27). Lee adopts this term “curative imaginary” in their overview of Tuuli Helkky Helle’s productions as the artist protested Finland’s draconian policies of “remov[ing] the rights to personal assistance for people older than 75 years old” (117). The chapter’s readings of

Tuuli Helkky Helle's photographs convincingly show that "although the policies of disabilities and older adults vary in different countries, this is an obvious example that reveals the complexity surrounding aging and disability and indicates the socio-political frame that tries to demarcate and contrast *aging into disability* from *aging with disability*" (117). Put otherwise: Lee argues that Tuuli Helkky Helle was a queer age and disability theorist whose avant-garde corporeal theses have yet to be fully recognized.

Any quibbles with this volume are minor. Though its global reach features case studies from the United Kingdom, Finland, Brazil, and elsewhere, its admirable commitment to puncturing decline narratives can sometimes flatten the geopolitical specifics of this concept. Here and there across these pages, a firm embrace of critical age theory can occasionally universalize the idea of ageism even as the chapters effectively blunt this prejudice. A dash more historicism might be in order, though I understand the difficulty of that task given the volume's desired focus on genres that often exceed periodization and the modern nation-state. In all *Aging Experiments* goes above and beyond its stated intent "to find and scrutinize SFF (science fiction and fantasy) texts that focus on aging and old age, as well as, whenever pertinent, the adjacent topics of life-extension, rejuvenation, immortality, body enhancement and time travel" (13). All chapters realize "that focus," but in a volume expressly interested in anti-realism, it is remarkable to me how humane and humanized these essays manage to be when it comes to its smart thinking about experimental aging. As Davidson puts it much better than I ever could: "what formalists call 'experimentation' or 'innovation' might be another word for capability—ways of living in the body we have, instead of the body we wish were better" (91).

WORKS CITED

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.