

Critical Humanities and Ageing: Forging Interdisciplinary Dialogues, edited by Marlene Goldman, Kate de Medeiros, and Thomas Cole. New York: Routledge, 2022. Pp. 342. \$128 (hardback); \$43.99 (paperback); \$43.99 (ebook).

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Critical Humanities and Ageing: Forging Interdisciplinary Dialogues is an edited volume that strives to promote collaboration between researchers who work in different academic disciplines but share an interest in age/ing. In their introduction the editors of the book declare that their intention is to encourage scholars to “cut across often fiercely guarded disciplinary boundaries” in order to have “much-needed conversations” (1). The book features fifteen essays written by humanities scholars; all but one of these essays is followed by a response paper written by a scholar in either the social or clinical sciences. The editors’ hope is that “the division between the humanists and the gerontologists” (3) can be overcome by them working to clearly “communicate their insights to each other” (4): each has something to learn from the other.

The twenty-nine contributions to the book are grouped into four sections. Part I considers a “deceptively simple question” (7): “What Does It Mean to Grow Old?” Historian Corinne T. Field reflects on the intersection of age, gender, and race in nineteenth-century America in her analysis of the writings of African American abolitionist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In her response to Field’s essay, the psychologist Tamara A. Baker considers how the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman has resulted in black women continuing to be neglected in medical settings. Next, Sari Edelstein also draws on the literature of slavery, considering how the writings of Mary Wilkins Freeman, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass “expose the deployment of age to shore up existing hierarchies” whilst simultaneously representing “powerful rejoinders to mainstream ideas about what it means to grow old” (41). Responding to Edelstein’s essay, sociologist Julia Twigg uses examples from her work on the cultural construction of fashion to attest that “multiple analytical approaches are required to grasp the power of categorisation” (8). In

the following essay bioethicist Bruce Jennings draws attention to disability as a key variable in what it means to grow old, emphasizing the essential fact that we must not lose sight of the personhood of anyone living with Alzheimer's disease. In his response, social theorist Chris Gilleard warns that we must not forget the personhood of caregivers either, recognizing that there are limits to what they can achieve with the distinctly limited resources and time that they have. The final essay in Part I shifts attention to the arts. Michael and Linda Hutcheon consider ideas about "continuing creativity" (80) and test the theories about "late style" developed by Kenneth Clark and Edward Said. They reach the sound conclusion that these theories are of limited use as they generalize massively about "the characteristics and shapes of later-life creativity" (87). In her response, humanistic aging studies scholar Aagje Swinnen considers how paradigms such as "successful aging," creativity as commodity, and the professional artist as an entrepreneur impact the experiences of contemporary aging artists.

Part II, "Aging: Old Age and Disability," begins with Elinor Fuchs exploring themes of estrangement and reflection in the later plays of Henrik Ibsen. In his brief response, sociologist Neal King draws parallels between his past work on positive depictions of aging in popular cinema and Fuchs's observations. In the next essay, Joel Michael Reynolds and Anna Landre assert that we cannot study age without reflecting on disability: this, they argue, "is not only because growing old invariably means becoming impaired [...] but also because the discriminations and stigmas involved in ageism are often rooted in and intersect with ableism" (118). Gerontologist Michelle Putnam concurs that ageism and ableism are inseparably entangled, considering how highly visible "successful agers" such as Nancy Pelosi (now 84) and Morgan Freeman (now 87) bolster the damaging idea that disability in old age is "abnormal," "an indication that you are not doing as well as your peers" (131). In the next essay, co-editor Marlene Goldman interviews Sally Chivers about her interdisciplinary research on care homes. In her response, medical anthropologist Janelle Taylor builds on Chivers' use of imaginative texts, concluding that care for older people with dementia will "only be improved through a critical analysis of both the literary

and biomedical texts that shape the treatment and social worlds of people living with dementia and those who care for them” (10). In the final essay of Part II, Linda M. Hess promotes the capacity of queer theory to challenge what passes for normal, arguing that adopting “a queer approach to aging” (171) can help the ongoing mission within age studies to expose existing narrow ways of imagining the life course as flawed. In his brilliantly honest response to Hess’ essay, David J. Ekerdt acknowledges that his own approach to the life course “has been incomplete” (174): as both a social scientist and an editor, he has pursued “crisp conclusions” (176) with the result that he has failed to engage with research which presents “a complex picture of the matter” (175) of aging. Ekerdt vows to widen his horizons going forward.

Part III, “Aging, Old Age, and Activism,” starts with Paul Higgs’ standalone genealogy of the term “ageism.” Next, Kathleen Woodward uses Margaret Drabble’s *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) to consider aging in the Anthropocene, a topic that is understudied despite being a “pressing subject” (199). In his response, Daniel Hoornweg identifies “increased intergenerational cooperation” (211) as essential if we are to tackle “the long emergency of climate change” (209). In the next essay co-editor May Chazan interviews Tasha Beeds and Jenn Cole: their perspectives productively “contest colonial-normativity within aging studies by revealing and destabilizing implicit and taken-for-granted colonial assumptions, privileges, and knowledge systems while offering insights toward ongoing efforts to unsettle aging discourses and concepts” (214–15). In her response, Sandy Grande draws upon the work of various Indigenous scholars and references the later life of her own father in order to expand on the trio’s conversation about aging as a privilege.

Part IV, “Old Age and Humanistic Approaches to Care,” considers relationships of, and fears surrounding, care. First, Rüdiger Kunow explores how care for older people is represented in public discourse, paying particular attention to the lacunae in these conversations. Geriatrician Des O’Neill responds by challenging readers to confront the negative stereotype of “care-as-burden.” Next, Amanda Ciafone situates the current care crisis in the longer history of care work, emphasizing the fact that this history is characterized by

the “exploitation of a racialized and gendered workforce” (263). In his response sociologist Christopher Phillipson considers how both care workers and older people receiving care share certain vulnerabilities and can suffer from neglect and exploitation. In the next essay Amelia DeFalco explores the rather uncanny idea of “posthuman care” (283), looking to fictional speculations such as the 2017 film *Marjorie Prime* to consider how it might operate. Neuropsychologist Stephen Sabat responds by arguing that “only persons can provide person-centred care” (293); he contends that there would be an absence of mutual respect, trust, and spontaneity which is essential if a relationship of care is to be considered successful. In the final essay in the book, Kate de Medeiros and Anne Basting consider how arts interventions in care homes introduce “a type of risk akin to daring or adventure that can lead to transformative “meaningful human experiences” (303). This in turn helps to challenge the stereotype of care homes as “negative places where people go to die, not as places to flourish or to engage in meaningful pursuits” (301). In her response, sociologist Pia Kontos emphasizes the benefits of supporting creativity in long-term care homes.

As a whole, *Critical Humanities and Ageing: Forging Interdisciplinary Dialogues* shows that cutting across “fiercely guarded disciplinary boundaries” (1) is a productive thing to do. At their best, the responses either consolidate or productively challenge the contents of the essays. Some of the responses undeniably do prioritize the author’s research interests over the key point(s) of the essay, something that is mildly disappointing but also perhaps inevitable. If there were to be another volume in this now four-part series of guides to humanistic age studies, it might be interesting if this experiment of collaboration was advanced further and chapters were co-authored by humanists and gerontologists. Such a thing could have the potential to show irrefutably that combining the approaches and methodologies of humanists and gerontologists is essential if we are to continue to advance the study and understanding of age/ing productively. As an art historian, I would also be keen to see more critical attention given to visual representations of age/ing, both historic and contemporary. What aspects of older bodies artists prioritize, what

parts they disregard, how these visual representations are received and read by contemporary and subsequent audiences, and why artists take old age as their subject matter to begin with are all fascinating questions. Age is as much a construction in the visual arts as it is in literature and yet the intersection of old age and art remains distinctly understudied to date.

Overall, the contents of *Critical Humanities and Ageing: Forging Interdisciplinary Dialogues* generate questions rather than providing definitive answers, something that is to be admired in academia where “crisp conclusions” (176) are so often prioritized above extended engagement with open-ended questions and nebulous concepts. *Critical Humanities and Ageing: Forging Interdisciplinary Dialogues* will prove highly productive reading for anyone studying the intersection of the humanities and aging for the first time. There is also plenty within its contents that will interest and, hopefully, inspire those already engaged with age studies, the medical humanities, and social and cultural gerontology.