

Black Age: Oceanic Lifespans and the Time of Black Life, by Habiba Ibrahim. New York: NYU Press, 2021. Pp. 261. \$30.00 (paperback); \$89.00 (hardback); \$30.00 (ebook).

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In her introduction to *Black Age: Oceanic Lifespans and the Time of Black Life*, Habiba Ibrahim notes that while age is a key component of black embodiment and lived experiences, it has remained largely absent in Black Literary Studies. Although her book was written with this target audience in mind, it also contributes to Aging Studies and, specifically, to Literary Gerontology. It seeks to complement recent contributions made to literature (and visual culture and film) anthologies which aim to address the dearth of literary analyses about older black bodies in Western discourses within the field. For example, Elizabeth Barry takes an interdisciplinary approach to the works of Audre Lorde in her chapter “Audre Lorde, Black Writing, and Intersectional Aging.” Barry notes that, of the multi-layered concepts of aging in Lorde’s works, a predominant theme is the untimely aging of black people, especially black women, due to the detrimental effects of inequity. However, Ibrahim uses age as an analytical framework to show how black bodies of *any age* have been manipulated and controlled according to and for white (male) desires, which render them untimely. Additionally, she highlights how black bodies form liberatory responses to concepts of childhood, adulthood, and older age using examples from US literature and history to clarify her points. Her book would certainly be of interest to scholars invested in the deconstruction of liberal humanist ways of understanding life stages and seeking spaces within literature to resist progressive, linear narratives of aging in the US.

As Ibrahim notes, due to the transatlantic slave trade, “black age became contingent, malleable, and suited for the needs of enslavement...Black age is construable as anything because black subjects have been alienated from the time of their own bodies” (4). Not surprisingly, she includes examples from slavery, such as specific “slave narratives,” as well as from present-day social

movements, like #BLM. Thus, she does not solely focus on older age and deconstructing ageist norms in Western societies, but she includes all life stages—or lack thereof, as she notes—in her analysis of black bodies in the US. As such, she starts her introduction with a discussion of black childhood and the 1955 photograph of Emmitt Till. She highlights the absence of black childhood within US society using this example. Ibrahim then compares Till's lynching to the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in 2012, explaining how both young men failed to qualify as children and so were not protected by the rights that defend that demographic. Additionally, they were also not considered adults and thus did not have access to rights and privileges that would have prevented such crimes from occurring. In this manner, Ibrahim effectively clarifies how the black male body is rendered as untimely, neither a child nor an adult, thus negating liberal concepts of black humanity and highlighting the need for an analytical framework like black age.

Expanding upon Hortense Spillers' work, Ibrahim also forms her definition of the term “oceanic lifespans” in her introduction, whereby the “Oceanic marks an alternatively human temporality” (12) for black bodies. According to her, “The Oceanic makes clear that part of what is inscribed within what Spillers calls the ‘hieroglyphics of the flesh’ is fluid time; it is a temporality comprised not of ‘natural’ development, but of being made and remade” (Ibrahim 12). Thus, she notes how time for black bodies in the US is not marked by “natural,” progress-based Western developmental stages, like childhood, young adulthood, etc., but rather by the fact of “being made and remade” as commodities established during the transatlantic slave trade (12). Furthermore, she draws parallels between her work and Woodward's *Aging and Its Discontents*. Ibrahim notes that Woodward's analyses reveal how society eliminates the life stage of older age from what is considered human. For Ibrahim, the erasure or “undoing” of older age is like the untimeliness of black bodies and highlights the artificial process of aging to clarify that childhood, like adulthood and older age, is also artificial (13). Thus, starting from childhood, Ibrahim maps how linear, normative constructions of life stages/spans in Western discourses have rendered black bodies “unknowable” and thus “unseen, unwritten and

unspoken” (37). Additionally, she explains that using black age as an analytical framework “for discerning how the past relates to the present” (5) can foreground resistance and emancipatory interpretations of the past as it still affects and impacts the present and the lived experiences of black people.

Ibrahim divides her book into four chapters, each of them revolving around key figures (historical and fictional) that allow her analyses to perform two functions: displaying alternative humanism (exhibiting something other or differently human) and providing historical mediation (“reboot[ing] the way we interpret the historical past”) (38). She organizes these figures (sometimes drawn from myths) into pairs to deconstruct normalized categories surrounding lifespans and criticize Western binary thinking. Additionally, she also uses these paired figures to envision new strategies for the protection and liberation of black bodies and their lived experiences, which operate beyond the often-used analytical tool of gender. For example, in her first chapter, Ibrahim uses the figures of shapeshifting (characters moving between different life stages) and bodysnatching to show the hypervisibility and simultaneous invisibility of black bodies. She deploys a broad range of examples, including Harry from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and the protagonist from Jordan Peele’s film *Get Out* (2017). Using these examples, among others, the chapter identifies the ways in which certain aspects of black boyhood have been rendered hypervisible while so many other aspects remain unseen and disavowed. Specifically, her analysis of the relationship between Harry and his mother Eliza in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and her reading of Peele’s film using the framework of age and oceanic lifespans show how mother-son relationships are rendered untimely and invisible. Thus, she effectively points out how generational hierarchies (in this case, that of the mother and the son) dissolve in US discourses as black bodies remain solely visible in society as commodities (be it historically as enslaved people or in the present as objects of white desires and fantasies).

In her second chapter, Ibrahim mobilizes the figures of the vampire and the relic to demonstrate why it is useful to employ black age as an analytical tool in Black Literary (and Aging Studies). She also explains the role of older figures in

exemplifying the untimeliness of black bodies to then visualize non-hegemonic versions of living history. Using Jewel Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991) and Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005), among other examples, Ibrahim argues that vampirism, as envisioned by these two authors, denaturalizes Western, liberal concepts of aging and imagines a future for black women while simultaneously highlighting the embodiment of historical time. She then utilizes the figure of the relic via the fictional character of Jane in Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) to highlight how that character brings historical voices to the present. For Ibrahim, this is particularly important as archival data from the Middle Passage and the slavery era in the US is limited or does not exist to represent those varied experiences. She also continuously brings in the Oceanic to remind readers that the concept of time as applied to white (male) bodies does not apply to black bodies in the same manner. This is due to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the risks that emerge if black age is not used as an analytical tool for black bodies.

While chapter three focuses on older men and the possibility to create alternate spaces for subjectivity and visibility for black people in the US via their (fictional) contributions, Ibrahim turns to the figure of the ghost for its similar possibilities in chapter four, predominantly focusing on Olaudah Equiano's 1789 "slave narrative," *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa*, among others. While her concept of oceanic lifespans is not consistently applied to all her examples, making her application and use of the term sometimes hard to follow, her book does an admirable job of analyzing black lives and life experiences through all of the life stages, providing insights to the ways in which black people have been excluded from white concepts of childhood, adulthood, and older life, historically to present. In her chapter "Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism," Mary Russo argues that for women "[n]ot acting one's age, for instance, is not only inappropriate but dangerous, exposing the female subject, especially, to ridicule, contempt, pity, and scorn—the scandal of anachronism [against time]" (21). However, to risk anachronism, so to resist the normalization and progressive narratives of time and aging (or life stages) is considered necessary and a "sign of life" by Russo (21). Similarly,

Ibrahim clearly shows the untimeliness (perhaps also anachronisms) of black bodies and the risks involved in not using black age and the Oceanic as tools for analysis: the continued invisibility and hypervisibility of only partial aspects of the lived experiences of black people in the US. Additionally, she highlights strategies for creating spaces and methods to resist their exclusion and commodification. She seeks to re-claim alternate forms of humanity for black people, and, in particular, to imagine new, non-linear relationships that can be liberatory for non-white, non-hetero, and non-male (gendered) individuals.

WORKS CITED

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