

CHAPTER 1

Constructing the Body of Age Studies

“The great thing about getting older,” said Madeleine L’Engle, “is that you don’t lose all the other ages you’ve been.”¹ Perhaps you remember being an age when sleight-of-hand tricks delighted you, when you first held an infant, when you found your first gray hair, when you had your first kiss, when you received your first paycheck or your last one, or when you moved out of a childhood home. Who you are now includes all of those ages. To reach adulthood and then elderhood, the chronological ages through which each person lives are the same—age twelve, age thirty-nine, age eighty-seven . . . The person who experienced those ages and the resulting self who now reads these pages is unique for each individual.

You do not lose the other ages that you have been, but practically, they are inaccessible to people who meet you after those years are behind you. You have become a person who presents an individual sense of self and who looks a particular way. The people who meet you now know you as this person of a certain age. Your sense of self includes all those other ages, but a new acquaintance’s sense of you does not. This discrepancy highlights three important concepts. First, self-perceptions about who a person is—that is, self-identity—includes age as well as gender, race, bodily ability, and many other categories of identity.² Second, each person has a relationship with her or his younger selves as well as with the now-self. Third, a person’s interior sense of self, particularly the individual’s experience of embodied age, is not necessarily the same as the visible age of the external self to which others react.

The ways in which individuals and groups of people think about and respond to their own ages and the ages of others, critically

examined, form the basis of this field of study. The debate about whether to call the field *aging studies* or *age studies*³ is much like the debate about *women's studies* versus *gender studies*. *Aging studies* and *women's studies* draw attention to a group that traditionally has been underprivileged, focusing on previously ignored or understudied topics; *age studies* and *gender studies* avoid creating a dichotomy—in particular, *age studies* explicitly acknowledges aging as a continual process throughout life—but both of those terms risk reinscribing the invisibility of a traditionally devalued group of people.⁴ Age studies is the analysis of the meanings of age across the lifespan, within specific cultural and historical contexts. Like gender studies, it recognizes that a difference in value requires more than one category; if there were no *male* gender category, the category of *female* would not make sense, and a critical exploration of *old* and *older* can happen only when contrasted with the normative categories of *younger* and *young*. As with gender and culture, age and culture are mutually constitutive. That is, in the biological experience and the social constructions of aging, each element influences the other's structure and development (cf. Brennan).⁵ Thus, the binaries are not natural categories, but are cultural constructs that create a hierarchy. Like gender studies, age studies tends to have an activist orientation. Age studies scholars try to move beyond merely identifying social constructions, to instead reduce or eliminate unjust power differentials.

Recognizing the importance of focusing on old age while simultaneously acknowledging that ideas about aging accumulate throughout life, this book concentrates on *age relations* of aging and old age. Age relations, a category of age studies, explores what people of one age range think about people in other age ranges.⁶ This book focuses on how and what people of all ages think about aging and old age.

In particular, this text explores the cultural contexts of aging and old age: the performances, visual markers, emotions, regulatory mechanisms, and conceptual understandings that create normative and nonnormative age, and the effects of aging in a particular societal environment. As variable a category as it is, nonetheless, *age*—like gender, bodily ability, gender identity, and ethnicity—is an identity category in literature and in culture, a factor in each

individual's self-concept and in the ways in which individuals interact with each other. Researchers can study the cultural vehicles that convey this information, such as the media, fashion, and stage performances, and can "read" them to develop critical, scholarly systems of analysis. In turn, those systems can structure additional scholarly inquiries, and activists can use those structures to develop means of resistance. Because literature can mirror culture, reinforce it, resist it, or do a combination of those things, it provides a laboratory for close examinations of some concepts and testing hypotheses about the effects of resistance. As the complexities of the input and the resulting responses suggest, a comprehensive approach needs to be inclusively broad and multidisciplinary. *Age Becomes Us: Bodies and Gender in Time* investigates the information that North American and British majority and minority individuals and groups acquire about what it means to age and be old. Because this information affects popular and scholarly perceptions of, experiences of, and responses to advancing age and later life. It explores what can happen when the input or understandings change. Critical explorations of ideas about age, aging, old age, ageism, and performances of age lead to greater awareness and appreciations of the myriad factors that influence beliefs and actions.

Professionals inside and outside of academia can use these ideas to expand their knowledge base and their practices, because aging affects everyone. In the 1960s, gerontologist Robert Butler coined the term *ageism*, which he described as a form of bigotry and prejudice. According to cultural critic and age studies maven Margaret Gullette, "ageism is to the twenty-first century what sexism, racism, homophobia, and ableism were earlier in the twentieth—entrenched and implicit systems of discrimination, without adequate movements of resistance to oppose them" (*Agewise* 15). In the United States, ten thousand people turn fifty each day, and it is likely that the majority of people born after 2000 will live to be one hundred years old (Akers; Loe). Census data show that in 2010, 13 percent of U.S. residents were over the age of sixty-five. By 2030, the raw numbers are projected to double, bringing the percentage to 20 percent. People of color, who made up 17.2 percent of the number of residents over age sixty-five in 2002, are projected to be 26.4 percent of that group by 2030 (U.S. Census).⁷ Analyses of beliefs

and experiences of aging and old age—fictional and factual—must take into account the pressures of the majority culture and the intersections of age with other identity categories. Literary works, self-help books, theory, and practice offer applications for these ideas and data. Most of the ideas in this book fall into one or more of these three categories: analysis, advocacy, and inquiry. These approaches are offered in an effort to expand the reach and depth of age studies, add to the ongoing discussions about these topics, and involve people from a broad range of fields in thinking about, talking about, and working on age, aging, and old age.

Analytical Use

Age, like any other bodily based identity, should be a category of intersectional analysis in literary and cultural studies, and the limitations of using chronological age as a category need to be better understood. Considerations of age, aging, and old age can be critically useful in many fields, including literature, public policy, architecture, sociology, design, and cultural studies. Each field needs to find ways to establish age as a category of analysis despite the instability of the category. *Age*, an often-invisible type of difference in which each of us lives, needs to become more than just an addition to a list of identity categories (Woodward Telephone). A significant factor in personal and national identity, age needs to be more visible because of its centrality to theoretical positions, pedagogy, and research about what it means to be human.

In keeping with Ulla Kribernegg's methodologies for what she calls *biogerontological texts*, this book uses the concepts of gerontology as the basis for literary critique and the ideas from literary criticism to critique gerontological texts.⁸ A deconstruction of fictional and nonfiction texts can further understandings of how aging and old age are created, and provide examples of what a reconstruction of aging and old age might mean, both in literature and in society.⁹ Although advancing through the years does not necessarily lead to insight or resolution (cf. Woodward, *Statistical Panic* 62), "aging can be a psychic cure for youth's prospective terrors of the life course" (Gullette, *Agewise* 218). Analyses and literary texts may vicariously inoculate readers against such terror, helping them

appreciate the ways in which the critical concepts of age studies are applicable to their own experiences and scholarship.

Age studies distinguishes itself from literary gerontology specifically because age studies does not isolate its focus on old characters or old authors. Applying age studies to film, for example, scholars might notice that the triumph of Katniss and Peeta in *Catching Fire* (2013) reinforces ageist conventions, as the actors playing those roles were the youngest of the named competitors in the arena; that *Kung Fu Panda* (2010) bolsters stereotypes connecting wisdom and old age;¹⁰ and that in *Argo* (2012) and *Captain Phillips* (2013), the treatment of age difference supports an ideology of Caucasian American cultural superiority.

In literature, consider how readers might be inclined to change their analyses of Chinua Achebe's character Ogonkwo if he were sixteen, rather than an experienced, and therefore more aged, chief. People who enjoyed Dickens during their college years might read his depiction of Miss Havisham differently when they, like her, are in their mid-fifties.¹¹ Until 2012, the only known image of Emily Dickinson was made when she was sixteen;¹² the mystique of her work might be altered if the representative visage was of Dickinson in her fifties, Amherst's reclusive grande dame rather than its maiden belle. Could Huck Finn have been seventy-five and still embodied the spirit of America? Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999) focuses attention on age starting with the book's opening words: "For a man of his age, fifty-two . . ." However, until Kay Heath's conference presentation eight years after the book's publication, critics had not considered how age functions within Coetzee's novel. Literary and cultural textual analyses are enriched when scholars consider differences of age, as well as of race, class, gender, and other elements of identity. Encouragingly, many scholars are "discovering" the use of age-based analyses; an engagement with the framework of age studies can bring additional depth to their work.

An experience that Atwood scholars have had when considering age without the benefit of age studies may be instructive. The 2005 Modern Language Association convention included a panel on age in Margaret Atwood's writing. To an audience of about seventy-five people, four respected scholars from across North America and

Europe gave insightful, close readings of Atwood's poems, essays, novels, and short stories. One presentation explored depictions of wisdom in Atwood's aged characters. In 2002, *Cultural Critique* published Kathleen Woodward's excellent article, "Against Wisdom," which explores the powerful potential of anger,¹³ and one can find additional critiques of the connections between aging and wisdom at least as far back as 1983, in Macdonald and Rich's *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging, and Ageism*. Another presentation considered how Atwood's portrayals of characters had changed as the author aged. Scholarship from Amir Cohen-Shalev, David Gutmann, Robert Kastenbaum, Gisela Labouvie-Vief, Edward Said, Mary Winkler, and Anne Wyatt-Brown could have provided a context through which to consider the differences. Yet another presentation focused on the ways in which senior female characters in Atwood's work resist ageist assumptions. Atwood's characters use the same techniques as age studies scholars have found in the characters of authors such as May Sarton, Doris Lessing, Margaret Lawrence, and Toni Morrison, so it would have been useful to reference the age-based critical scholarship that had been done about those authors' characters. For more than two decades, literary and feminist scholarship has included scholarly and activist considerations of the speakers' topics. All of those citations were absent.

If that panel had been about Atwood and gender, or Atwood and bodily ability, and the panelists had not referenced earlier critical work on those topics, then as insightful as the presentations were, they still would have been considered irresponsible at best—but no one on the panel or in the audience seemed to know that age studies existed as a scholarly field. Scholars whose work may seem only tangentially relevant nonetheless can benefit from and contribute to the depth of scholarship in their own academic specialties as well as to the breadth of age studies research. In a society that prizes youth over experience, quick thinking over insight, and speed over resilience, it is crucial to develop analytical models and critical theories that inform how the lens of age difference influences the experiences and evaluations of human life. Considerations of literary and nonfiction texts demonstrate many ways in which, even when the author does not posit the association directly, age studies critical work can enrich a text's impact.

Think of the potential of a critical methodology—age studies—with which a researcher can produce an innovative understanding of a Shakespearian text (cf. Hill and Lipscomb), which in turn creates a new range of analytical possibilities in the fields of literature, history, cultural studies, gender studies, economics, and politics. Scholars whose work only tangentially connects with age studies nonetheless can supplement the depth of scholarship in their own fields as well as the breadth of age studies scholarship. Understanding age as, in part, a product of culture creates fresh insights within a range of humanities fields (e.g., Biggs; Hazan; Featherstone and Hepworth). For example, literary history scholars Drs. Christopher Martin, Devoney Looser, and Kay Heath made valuable contributions to early-modern, eighteenth-century, and nineteenth-century studies, respectively, by considering the cultural implications of age in markedly different ways. Martin reads texts from pastoral poetry to *King Lear* in the context of generational tensions during the later years of Elizabeth's reign; Looser reveals misconceptions about literary periodization that resulted from previous scholars' erasure of the later lives and works of women writers (*Women*); and Heath considers the role of middle age in Victorian fiction and advertisements. Studies such as these allow for new interpretations of the texts and historical periods and reveal the continuing resonance of those constructions of age into the twenty-first century.

Analyses of biological concepts through the lens of age studies can be equally productive. For example, consider texts about menopause. Most North Americans think of menopause as a biological phenomenon. As Gullette suggests, cultural discourse frames this event as a tragedy, an end of the so-called natural female state of monthly hormone fluctuation,¹⁴ mainly ignoring the reality that for more than half of their lives, most women are not in that state, thanks to phenomena such as youth, pregnancy, menopause, birth control hormones, other medications, surgery, and the like. Moreover, most medical personnel are taught to connect the changes of menopause to a particular chronological range, around age fifty. Heather Dillaway's research suggests that women in their early forties who visit a medical practitioner because they are experiencing symptoms indicative of menopause may not receive appropriate

medical treatment because doctors assume that the woman is too young for menopause, whereas women in their early fifties who have physical symptoms that may indicate disease rather than menopause tend to be undertreated for their conditions because their symptoms are read as menopausal (see also Gullette, *Agewise* 51–3). That scholarship demonstrates material dangers that stem from age-based assumptions. Again, age studies offers a useful lens through which to critique and reconceive such cultural assumptions.

Fifty years ago, the ideas of gender studies, disability studies, queer studies, and ethnic studies were alien to most literary and cultural scholars. People now know what can happen when scholars apply those kinds of analyses to literary and cultural texts, as well as the benefits of collaborations across the sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. The positive, wide-reaching, and on multiple levels, critically significant impact of those critiques explains why many universities now house entire departments on those topics. One might wonder why there are not more research projects, courses, and departments similarly focused on age.

Researchers in the biological and social sciences generate most of the scholarship about aging and old age. Geriatricians consider the medical aspects of old age, whereas gerontologists research the sociological and social policy aspects of aging and old age. If one mapped that divide onto gender, one would conclude that studying gynecology and social work offered researchers a complete understanding of how gender works within society—clearly a fallacious inference. Women's and gender studies have been working to fill the gaps in awareness of how cultural constructions of gendered bodies affect individuals' and groups' experiences. Age studies and aging studies are positioned to fill similar gaps of knowledge about aging and old age.

Comparative studies demonstrate the effectiveness of some responses to ageism, as well as their limitations. The medical model of aging, which frames aging as disease that leads to a process of decline (e.g., Angus and Reeve; Robinson, Briggs, and O'Neill), posits aging as a problem rather than an experience, and thus is a key purveyor of negative attitudes toward aging. Gerontologists' research tends to focus on data-driven experiments that measure emotional and biological health, with a goal of encouraging

“successful aging”; in that framework, the arts and humanities supply useful interventions, but not methodologies (cf. Gerdner and Schoenfelder; Haight and Webster; and Rybarczyk).¹⁵ Age studies scholars can contribute to the field of gerontology by employing feminist methodologies in parallel with more positivist approaches, and gerontology can advance women’s and gender studies via data-driven explorations of the storied power structures in gerontological and geriatric care (Waxman, “Literary” 87). Age studies, “in partnership with feminism, can contribute, in important ways, to understanding the ‘tension between personal and structural identity and the strategies people use to continue to live and develop in circumstances not of their own choosing’” (Holstein 325, quoting Simon Biggs). Age studies can help alleviate the panic, pessimism, and self-abnegation instigated by ignorance and ageism (Barrett and Cantwell; Blunk and Williams; see also Gullette, Rowles), impelling reconsiderations of the meanings of aging and old age.

Those new methods can help improve self-perception, social status, quality of life, and length of lifespan (Adler “Ageism”; M. Beck; Levy; and Levy et al.; see also Meisner). When younger people Other elders, then live for a few more decades, the distance and disregard for elderhood turns into self-disregard. A cohesive analysis can generate change in readers’ understandings of aging and old age, and the concepts of age studies can expand understandings of and resistance to additional forms of Othering. When “some of the deadlocks of antiracist efforts are linked to . . . preoccupations with mortality and self” (Woodward, *Statistical Panic* 56, quoting Srivastava), age studies analyses can advance social justice in multiple ways. With a greater awareness of the harmful and depressing constructions of aging and old age come more, and more effective, paths of resistance.

Barriers and Words

The levels of sophistication developed in theories of other identity categories, however, may hamper critical considerations of age. In the fields of women’s and gender studies, handicapped and bodily ability studies, and race and ethnic studies, for example, several generations of theory evolved before those disciplines grappled extensively with

the critical impact and the essentialism of the monikers. Terms that once were acceptable—*half-blood*, *retarded person*, *AIDS victim*—are now discredited, as are essentializing definitions of *woman* or a *person of color*, for example. With an awareness of those critical developments, age studies scholars may agree about the problematic value of suggesting life as a linear progression from one age class to another (e.g., youth, young adulthood, middle age, old age).¹⁶ Dividing people using indicators of social significance, such as the age of retirement, or of biological origin, such as the onset of menopause, is critically unsound. Uncomplicated alternatives in this field, as in others, remain elusive.

Terms such as *old*, *aging*, *advanced age*, *later life*, and *aged* are considered acceptable, but their definitions still are problematic.¹⁷ Most Western cultures calculate aging as beginning at birth. One might wonder how long the aging process needs to proceed before a person could be called *aged*. Such questions have been critiqued as being positivist (Gullette, “Age” 223), yet there is a strong compulsion to quantify how much time it takes to get old, as if the developmental milestones of the early years of life, such as learning to walk and cutting a first tooth, should have similarly well-defined and predictable parallels at the other end of life. An identity of agedness does not necessarily reflect some inherent self within that person, but scholars of aging tend to denote multiple social performative axes of aging.¹⁸ Arber and Ginn talk about three types of age: chronological, physiological, and social (5–12). Calasanti and Slevin use four divisions:

1. Chronological: a quantitative measure of how long an individual has been alive
2. Subjective: how old an individual appears to be in relation to the individual’s age peers and other people in the immediate environs
3. Occupational: how old an individual is in comparison to other people who have similar vocations or avocations
4. Functional: how much an individual can do or does compared to others, or stereotypes of others, of the same chronological age; and the age or stereotype of age of people who participate in the kinds of physical or intellectual activities the individual does (*Age Matters* 17)

The distinction between old and not-old for any one of those age vectors, however, remains imprecise. Recognizing that aging is a process, in *Agewise* and in other venues, Margaret Gullette suggests that the generic term *aging* should be inflected using phrases such as “aging beyond youth,” “aging into the middle years,” and “aging into old age,” but the question of how to define *youth*, *middle years*, and *old age* remains.

Some gerontologists use chronology to further subdivide these categories, discussing the young-old, middle-old, and old-old. Ironically, attempts to quantify the stages of aging highlight the impossibility of taking such a positivist approach. Depending on the experiment, a category such as old-old might start at age seventy-five, eighty, or eighty-five. Outside the field of gerontology, the number of years that put a body into the *old* range varies even more widely. For example, a study of voting habits reports, “Election day turnout averages about 69 percent for older adults, and 39 percent for younger Americans”; the 69 percent includes everyone over the ripe old age of thirty (Pattock). Erin Gentry Lamb, a medical humanist, surveys her undergraduate students, asking when they think old age begins. Students’ answers range from thirty to eighty (“Polyester”). Contrast that survey with a 2005 study in which “boomers defined ‘old age’ as starting [at age eighty,] three years after the average American was dead” (Adler “Turning”). These data suggest that a person’s middle age spans years thirty-one through seventy-nine and that most people will die before they exit middle age. Connecting a fixed chronological range to a particular age category is inherently arbitrary.

Scholars in this field resist establishing a particular chronological delineation of the end of *young* and the beginning of *old* because establishing a nonarbitrary connection is quite a challenge, and for a few other reasons.¹⁹ One is this: age, aging, old age, and ageism are simultaneously culturally and biologically constituted. Beliefs about old age and about how old people behave differ from group to group and individual to individual. Also, ideas about old and young tend to be based on bodily ability and performance. Factors that influence physical ability include, but are not limited to, calendar age.²⁰ Third, a person’s age is situationally relative. That is, a fifty-something person might be deemed—and feel—*old* at an elementary school in the morning and *young* at a senior center later that same

day. The variability of the categories of age makes their definitions fluid, at best.

The words for people-of-advanced-age are similarly problematic. For instance, *citizen* can be paired with *senior* to yield *senior citizen*, but that reinforces the normativity of youth—*citizen* as the normative term, whereas those outside the norm are too young for citizenship or too old: *senior* citizens. Using *senior* by itself has the advantage of pairing well with *junior*, but few use the word *junior* frequently. Also, any dichotomous pair (senior/junior, old/young), leaves little room for situational and other nonlinear oscillations or for middle ground between the two opposites. Groups such as the Old Women's Project and the Old Lesbians Organized for Change reclaim the term *old*, asserting that "as long as it is humiliating to be *called* old, it will be humiliating to *be* old" (Garza, Keaffaber, and Rich, emphasis added). I tend to use *elder*, a term I consider imbued with respect for those who have at least a generation of life experience more than I have. However, some reject *elder* as "too churchy" (Graham). Quantitative studies in 1975 and 1985 reported *mature Americans* as the favored term (Stock). A recent anecdotal poll suggests that older people prefer the term *older people*; some respondents proposed alternates such as *vintager*, *AARPeggios*, and *seasoned citizens* (Graham).²¹ Neither the temporarily young nor the chronologically gifted agree on what would be a consistently respectful and critically sound term. These debates are unlikely to be resolved in the near future, and this book uses the terms differently depending on the context. The logic of incorporating such variability may be explained best using a cosmetological analogy.

From an age studies critical perspective, youth-enizing treatments such as hair dye and cosmetic surgery are not intrinsically condemned or condoned.²² When people consider those kinds of treatments and procedures, usually they take into account the financial costs and health risks involved. Age studies underscores the importance of deliberating on the social risks and cultural costs of those practices as well.²³ In addition to involving the exchange of money, and thus reinforcing class-based power difference, such procedures also include a trade in social capital.²⁴ That is, when such a large percentage of people invest time and money in procedures that equate looking younger with looking better, once those

procedures fail to hide one's agedness, one rapidly exhausts whatever social power one had that came from looking young.

The procedures do not change the devaluation of *old*; the attempt to act young and look young "maintains the invisibility of old age" (Swinnen "'One'"; see also Woodward *Statistical* 79). Instead of becoming the Other at fifty or sixty, people without visible disabilities and with sufficient disposable incomes can pass as full members of an ageist society until their bodies reveal how fully Other they have become.²⁵ Only when people understand these hidden costs can they make fully informed decisions. Similarly, the use of words such as *old*, *aging*, *senior*, and *elder* needs to involve an understanding of the problematic nature and challenges of those concepts. No adequate set of alternatives yet exists. Just as feminist scholars continue both to challenge and to use *woman* and *man*, age studies scholars employ the terms relevant to the field even as they problematize and deconstruct the language.²⁶

In addition to age studies's challenges arising from having had a later start in academia than many other identity-related disciplines, a certain amount of cultural amnesia hinders the advancement of the subject and limits the development of additional critical work. Although researchers in this area have had decades of ongoing exchanges of ideas and appreciation for how the field has developed, that progress seems nearly invisible in the larger academic arena. In 1973, the *New York Times* hailed Simone de Beauvoir's examination of women and aging, *The Coming of Age*, as a text that "confronts a subject of universal public anguish and universal public silence" ("Five"). The back cover of Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich's 1983 *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging, and Ageism*, shows that May Sarton welcomed it as "extremely rare," and Robin Morgan called it "courageous." Calyx Books's 1986 "ground-breaking" anthology of art, fiction, and nonfiction, *Women and Aging: An Anthology by Women*, collected works from unknown and known artists including Baba Copper, Elizabeth Layton, Meridel Le Sueur, Ursula K. LeGuin, Barbara Macdonald, and Marge Piercy. On the back of Kathleen Woodward's 1993 gerontological psychological literary theory text, *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, the book is saluted as "pioneering." Betty Friedan's 1993 bestseller, *The Fountain of Age*, which she wrote in response to her

own menopause, was seen as “groundbreaking.” In 1997, Margaret Gullette’s analysis of middle-ageism, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of Midlife*, was called “original,” a book that “establishes a new domain for research” (Woodward, “Reviews”). In a quotation on the back cover of *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, a 1999 anthology of feminist gerontology edited by Woodward, Marianne Hirsch praises the “amazing feat” accomplished in making older women visible. Margaret Cruikshank’s impressive *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* (2003), was saluted as “important” and “pioneering” (Gillispie). *Publisher’s Weekly* wrote that Margaret Gullette’s wide-ranging 2004 *Aged by Culture* “begins to lay out the groundwork” for age studies, and her 2011 *Agewise* is deemed an “eye opening . . . call to arms.” With Valerie Lipscomb, I edited *Staging Age: Performances of Age and Aging in Theatre, Dance, Film, and Advertising*. In 2010, when I saw the publisher’s promotional materials declaring the book to be “groundbreaking,” a few moments of weak laughter followed. Forty years of scholarship and still we are just breaking ground—what rough territory this is! The ruggedness of this terrain and its feminist foundation form a decided contrast to the smooth topography and heteronormative aesthetics of youth-oriented ageism. The power generated by accepting young adulthood as the social norm both reflects and creates age-based discrimination. Also hindering this field are the variability of individuals’ abilities at different ages; the myths of old age as a time of loneliness, depression, sickness, and death (Barrett and Cantwell; Blunk and Williams; Gutheil, Chernesky, and Sherratt; Joyner and DeHope; Lamb, “20”; Palmore 89); the relative lack of visibility for those who resist (e.g., Gullette, *Agewise* 108–11); and the money to be made by the so-called anti-aging cosmetic industry and the medical-industrial complex (Estes; see also Marshall and Katz; Gullette *Agewise* 103–23).²⁷ The other side of the anti-aging industry’s largesse: the relative dearth of financial rewards for critical explorations of that work. Those economics restrict the research possibilities and entice scholars in many fields, from geriatrics to the humanities, to focus their energies somewhere other than on age studies. Moreover, the sheer volume of anti-aging messages dilutes the impact of whatever critiques appear. As the Atwood presentations suggest, the shortage of scholars’ awareness of critical considerations, applied theory, and

prototype analyses forms an additional barrier to the field's development within academia. Hence, the importance of more visible models.

Analysis, Advocacy, and Activism

Age Becomes Us: Bodies and Gender in Time considers the cultural messages that individuals and groups receive about age, what they do with those ideas, and how responses to the cultural messages affect experience. An investigation of how old people are positioned and depicted, and the psychological and physical effects of a variety of cultural venues created specifically for those who are in later life, can lead to a greater depth of analysis and to considerations of opportunities for change—that is, to advocacy and activism. Expanding the range of literary and cultural scholarship has the potential to create a counterdiscourse among primary texts, authors, and readers. In her essay, “The Emergence of the Aging Female Protagonist in Literature,” Evelyn Pezzulich suggests that *reifungsromane*—novels of ripening—bring readers to ideas of aging and old age with a mind-set of “self-acceptance rather than self-hatred” (7).²⁸ When Barbara Frey Waxman coined the term *reifungsroman*, she explicitly connected it to an “endorsement of Frank Lentricchia’s view of literary critics as social critics, to foster social change regarding old age” (*From* 2). Many age studies scholars have similar goals.²⁹ As I have argued elsewhere, an improved awareness of these elements creates the possibility of *conscious aging*—that is, of “aging with an awareness of age studies concepts and an activist response to ageism, with an understanding of one’s self-identity and social identity as variable, and with an appreciation for the possibility that the self can remain undamaged even as those identities develop” (Marshall “Ageility”).³⁰ As with other aspects of identity, these concepts are relevant in academic considerations and in each person’s life.

As a social experience, aging slowly changes how others perceive and respond to an individual. Those differences may be experienced as positive transformations, as tricky adjustments, as unpleasant disparities, or as some combination of constructive, challenging, and unwelcome. When an individual is not aware of the variations he or she may encounter in aging and old age, or declares those

differences unacceptable, the change can become even more difficult. Individuals who have lived longer are more experienced, but not necessarily wiser—and not necessarily not wiser. These many factors multiply the understandings and misunderstandings about aging and old age.

Too many individuals find that with aging and old age, they encounter yet another “problem that has no name” (Rubenstein 3). This is not the same nameless problem as Betty Friedan’s, or as Mary Pipher’s, although they are analogous. As with adolescent girls (Pipher) and young women (Friedan), women and men may experience the changes of age as personal failures. The experience can feel isolating and can result in withdrawal from social participation. As Woodward suggested (*Statistical* 50), Alison Jaggar’s description of a response to such nameless problems illuminates one possibility for activism: being fueled by a “feminist anger” that begins when “the perception that the persistent importuning endured by one woman is a single instance of a widespread pattern” (160; see also Gullette *Agewise* 61). Jaggar focused on sexism and racism, but her point applies equally well to ageism.

As individual a process as aging is, nonetheless, people frequently encounter similar aging-related phenomena, yet often individuals feel as if their own circumstances are anomalous, outside the normal processes of aging. For those who know that the features of their situation are part of a widespread pattern, aging can be a shared experience. More conscious response equates to greater potential for change. The materials in this book advocate for critically based change, encouraging readers to be more educated about and more involved in the processes of aging and in a reconceptualization of old age—for themselves, for the people they love, and for the people they educate. The expectation (the hope!) is that such involvement spills over into readers’ research and regular interactions with people across the age spectrum.

Inquiry

Aging is an experience in variability. Undergraduates may take classes on aging “to learn about my mother’s menopause” (Mangum Telephone), but whatever happens with a forty-something or fifty-something body

is literally half a lifetime away from the experiences of a centenarian. Some critical concepts vary across that spectrum of years, whereas other ideas can be usefully applied to the full range of ages. Some equate changes that happen to the young and the old, such as the experiences of menarche and menopause, whereas others question the value of such parallels.

Most of the researchers doing age studies analyses of literary and filmic texts focus on the age or relative ages of the characters rather than on the life stage of their creators. Some scholars, such as those mentioned in the discussion about Atwood, have addressed how authors' creative works change over the course of a lifetime, but this arena remains undertheorized.³¹ Of the three key authors whose work this book explores, Clifton embodied the subject position of the age about which she wrote; Erdrich and Lessing did not. Younger authors trying to imagine elders' roles succeed in doing so to varying degrees; the amount of success partly depends on the assumptions that the writers make about their readers. This area also would benefit from additional academic inquiry. As chapter 6 demonstrates, in addition to considering how people of a certain age act and are treated and what people's thoughts are about that stage of aging and old age, the *roles* assumed to be enacted by elders—what they are expected to do and suggestions of other ways that those goals can be accomplished—is another arena ripe for consideration. There are gender-based differences in aging experiences. The majority of this book focuses on women's aging. Statistically, the majority of old people are women. Many theories about gendered bodies map usefully onto critical concepts of aging bodies. Woodward suggests that “in our profoundly ageist society, gender and age structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops” (*Statistical* 79). However, as detailed in chapter 2, gender boundaries may blur, reverse, or collapse in cultural and physical constructions of age.

Considerations of intersectional identity are enriched with the addition of age, because with more critical apparatuses, researchers can explore texts more “deeply and closely, increasing the power and reach of the texts' impact” (Waxman “Literary” 103). The literary texts in *Age Becomes Us: Bodies and Gender in Time* do not portray the past as better than the present, and their characters of all ages

are unquestionably flawed. As with gender studies, age studies does not make a clear distinction between biological aspects of aging and those aspects that are socially constructed. For example, many women in North America consider menopausal hot flashes to be biological phenomena, but most women in Japan do not have hot flashes (Lock). Having “senior moments” is a culturally accepted part of aging in North America, but studies of other societies demonstrate that such moments are a cultural response to aging (Savishinsky). Loneliness and isolation are not natural outcomes of old age, but reflections of the social state, stemming in part from geographic mobility and an emphasis on the nuclear family. Cultural and biological, historical and visionary: the factors that create, replicate, and have the potential to transform ideas about age difference are complex and impossible to fully differentiate. Nonetheless, as many age studies and aging studies scholars have pointed out, individuals are held responsible for their own signs of aging, as if gray hair, wrinkles, changing eyesight, and even the socioeconomically influenced potential of ill health are the result of personal choice rather than a combination of social, genetic, and environmental factors.³²

Broadly speaking, the individual and the society in which the individual lives are mutually constitutive. Aging and old age are a complex series of gendered experiences, reciprocally created and reflected in and by the individual and the larger society; neither the individual nor society holds sole responsibility for the vagaries of age. The multiplicities of aging and old age lead to many possibilities for critical concepts and responses.

A Roadmap

Age is a useful and necessary category of literary and cultural investigation—a location ripe for activism, service learning, and participant-observer research, and a rich avenue of future inquiry. *Age Becomes Us: Bodies and Gender in Time* explores the constructions of the aged body. Advancing age and later life are treated in literature and in nonfiction texts that take seemingly oppositional stances to cultural norms, and approaches for response, resistance, and social change. The messages that societies present about age

can—and should—affect the scholarship and vocational practices in almost every field, from architecture to archeology, business to social work, engineering to psychology, literature to public policy, theater to design, and of course, gerontology.

Demonstrating how broadly useful age studies scholarship can be, *Age Becomes Us: Bodies and Gender in Time* examines writing from members of several ethnic and racial groups, including African Americans, Native Americans, AngloBritish, and European Americans; nonfiction, fiction, and poetry texts; literary, feminist, and cultural criticism; and methodologies from diverse disciplines. In all stages of life, people encounter a great range of experiences of aging and old age, which makes selecting a particularly representative text or author quite challenging—a challenge that this book does not aim to meet. Rather, this book considers works that depict aging and old age as a theme or trope; it uses age studies criticism to explore how the texts' and the authors' standpoints on those topics suggest points of adherence and resistance to normative conceptions of aging and old age; and it demonstrates a range of concepts for which age studies explorations are relevant. Through literature, readers connect with collective histories, and by extension, with shared futures, a potential that can create in the reader a vital and empowering obligation.

The second chapter serves as a basic primer of age studies theory. It explains how and why those who are not yet aged nonetheless are involved in age studies. The ideas in this chapter establish age as an interpretive category that locates each individual in a particular intersectional social position, demonstrating some of the ways in which agedness gets constructed as “not only a *biomedical* but also a *biopolitical* category” (Kunow 31, emphasis in the original). The chapter examines contemporary intersectional cultural and social contexts of aging, specifically focusing on age in relationship to other embodied categories, the aged body as a socially constructed body, and the intersection of those two topics in the production of a gendered, aged body. The differences of age arrive via two matrices: self-perception and social perception. The construction of age in relationship to the mind/body split, the inscription of time on the performative aging body, the way subjects are constructed in European American cultures, and the regulatory aspects of choice:

these phenomena function in a multitude of ways to limit agency as people age, thereby impeding their ability to participate in normative human activities. Adding to the uncertainties of age are the challenges—some would say the impossibilities—of performing agedness and gender simultaneously. Age studies can transform the performative possibilities.

The third chapter explores how age studies methodologies apply in a broader cultural context, focusing on popular culture self-help and age studies texts, and on the cultural texts of menopause and ambiguous loss. Menopause is billed as a universal female experience, but individual women experience menopause in dramatically different ways (Dillaway; Lock). The popular texts about menopause treat the variety in women's menopausal experiences with little enough depth that many women believe their experience of menopause is outside the norm (Claman). Deviance from the so-called norm may lead to silence. Social messages about menopause are erratic, contradictory, and very much dependent on the specifics of a person's community and the source to which a person turns for information. The physiology and the psychology of menopause are thoroughly intertwined, which makes problematic the ascription of symptoms either to the body or to the mind, rather than to the complex interdependence of both. This chapter explores many of the social messages that offer negative constructions of aging and how they do so, remaining mindful of the artificiality of the division between nurture and nature.

Those who seek guidance about menopause and other aspects of aging-into-old-age may encounter some purportedly feminist texts that inadvertently validate or recreate the ageist social structures they find problematic. In such books, readers may find ways to change the age at which they are labeled *old*, but little to help them challenge or change negative stereotypes of elderhood. Other texts, based in feminist age studies, re-vision and revalue aging and old age, exploring the social marginalization of age, the intersectionality of identity categories, and the impact of *de jure* and *de facto* regulation of aging processes. These texts also form the foundation for humanities-based age studies. The concept of *ambiguous loss* explains some of the trepidation that accompanies the uncertainty of aging-into-old-age, a process that forecloses some possibilities yet opens new potentials for self-development.