

## Aging: A Feminist Issue

LENI MARSHALL

When Barbara Macdonald spoke on a plenary at the 1985 NWSA convention, she was *angry!* A pioneer in feminist aging studies, Macdonald described a four-year fight to get the topic of aging included in a plenary session. She took feminists to task when she asked, “Has it never occurred to those of you in Women’s Studies, as you ignore the meaning and the politics of the lives of women beyond our reproductive years, that this is male thinking? Has it never occurred to you as you build feminist theory that ageism is a central feminist issue?” (21).

Twenty years later, aging studies remains an emergent topic for scholars outside Women’s Studies. Within NWSA, the topic’s progress can be measured by two recent events. First, the NWSA governing council unanimously decided to focus an entire plenary on aging studies. Marilyn Hughes Gaston, Margaret Gullette, and Kathleen Woodward were selected to speak at the 2005 convention. Then, the *NWSA Journal* agreed to devote a special issue to aging studies. With these actions, the organizations’ leadership has acknowledged the importance of aging studies, and its centrality to Women’s Studies. As Women’s Studies develops, it occurs to more and more of us that aging and ageism are important feminist issues. This is good news not only for those of us working in the field of aging studies, but also for those of us who are aging—that is, all of us. Each of us has confronted, or will eventually have to confront, the physical, psychological, social, and other changes that happen with time; all of us who live will eventually belong to the “Othered” category that is old age.

Each day, more and more of us realize the eventuality of belonging to the “Othered” category that is old age. In the United States, 10,000 people turn 50 each day (Akers 2001). The U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA) data show that, in the year 2000, 12.4 percent of the U.S. population was over the age of 65. By 2030, the raw numbers will double, bringing the percentage to a projected 20 percent. People of color, who made up 17.2 percent of the over-65 population in 2002, are projected to be 26.4 percent of that population by 2030 (Administration on Aging 2003). The statistics can be overwhelming, but they are worth knowing. The AoA uses the term “elderly” to denote people over age 65; I could argue the term, but I co-opt it for the sake of brevity. Almost 17 percent of the elderly were near (6.4 percent) or below (10.4 percent) the poverty line: 8.3 percent of elderly whites, 23.8 percent of elderly blacks, and 21.4 percent of elderly Hispanics live below the poverty line (Administration on Aging 2003). That 10.4 percent is more than three and a half million people. Elderly people living alone are more likely to be poor than those living with families. Forty-one

percent of elderly women live alone (versus 18 percent for men). Elderly Hispanic women living alone had the highest poverty rate: 47.1 percent. More than half of the non-institutionalized elderly have some form of disability (Administration on Aging 2003). These data make it abundantly clear: aging is a feminist issue, one that women's studies scholars need to incorporate into their analyses.

In a country in which the demographic bulge of aging continues to expand, the limited size and influence of aging studies' academic repertoire frustrates scholars of aging as much as those texts' contents illuminate and inspire. Since the 1973 publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*, reviewers have greeted feminist books on aging with words that emphasize the importance of the topic—and that reflect the larger social amnesia. A few examples: *The Coming of Age* was hailed as a text that “confronts a subject of universal public anguish and universal public silence” (“Five Significant Books” 1972). The back cover of Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich's own text, *Look Me in the Eye: Women, Aging, and Ageism* (1983), shows that May Sarton welcomed it as “extremely rare,” while Robin Morgan called it “courageous.” The label of “pioneering” was bestowed upon Kathleen Woodward's 1991 *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* on its back cover. Margaret Gullette's 1997 analysis of middle-ageism, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, was described as “original,” a book that “establishes a new domain for research” (Woodward 1997). A reviewer saluted one of the most recent feminist texts on aging, Margaret Cruikshank's 2003 text *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging*, as “important” and “pioneering” (Gillispie 2003). Thirty years and we're still “pioneering.” This must be a rough country indeed! How many publications does it take to move groundbreaking to an official—ism?

In light of feminist advances in body theory, Women's Studies can bring numerous useful tools to examinations of ageism and old age. The deconstruction of dichotomies in genders and sexualities, feminist approaches to postmodern selfhood, analyses of the connections between power and economy, and the plethora of works on body-based identity categories: each of these ideas could be brought to bear on the performance and construction of aging.

However, feminist aging studies scholars often end up “reinventing the wheel.” Much popular feminist writing about aging contains serious theoretical flaws. When writers whose earlier work challenges other body-based, culturally constructed stereotypes attempt to challenge the current prescriptive and negative constructs of old age, they often not only do not deconstruct the current hegemonic, but validate some of the very social structures that they identify as problematic. For example, many suggest that revising the aging process means staying active—traveling, going back to school, becoming involved in their communities. Even over-

looking the potential classism inherent in these recommendations, such advice values *doing* over *being*. In those texts, social viability requires relatively high levels of activity. People no longer become “old” at 65, but they do become old when they are 85 or more, when they can no longer maintain this level of activity—or earlier, if they can not afford airfare or tuition. Thus, the concept of old is renumbered (we become “old” at 85 instead of 65), but there is little challenge to the negative valuations of advanced aging. This “act young, be young” approach generates volumes of writing about aging, relatively little of which is useful feminist aging studies theory.

A considerable amount of research is needed to find the body of quality work in this arena. Despite the writing of current intellectuals on aging studies—Cruikshank, Gullette, and Woodward being some of the most prominent—and feminist activist organizations such as The Old Women’s Project, OLOC (Old Lesbians Organized for Change), and OWL (Old Women’s League), those people who go looking for sound feminist analyses of aging and old age tend to find the same short list of names. Yet on an aging studies scholars’ listserv begun less than four years ago, we have more than 100 people.<sup>1</sup> People do the work; the challenge is finding a publishing venue in which the articles will be of use—for people’s careers and for other scholars. Many aging studies scholars consider this to be part of the ageism inherent in academia and society. Without useful theory and increased communication, the development of this topic continues to be stymied.

Publications like this issue of the *NWSA Journal* work as more than just repositories for recent scholarship. They build community, serve as reference texts, and highlight the breadth of scholarship—and its gaps. In doing so, I hope that this volume also functions as impetus to readers interested in contributing to aging studies. I am grateful that the *NWSA Journal* is willing to devote an entire issue to reminding us that age can make a difference, and that the *difference* of age is itself a construction. Aging studies pioneer Margaret Cruikshank reminds readers that “aging is like the Chinese ideogram that means both danger and opportunity” (2003, x). The writers in this issue prepare readers for both of these aspects of old age and offer suggestions on how to turn many of the dangers into opportunities.

In the 1980s, my scholarship on the evolution of themes in Marge Piercy’s poems brought me to aging studies for the first time. Piercy’s work—addressing everything from abortion to zucchini, on through the liberation of women and suggestions for the repair of the world—has been an inspiration for multiple generations of feminists. I am deeply honored that she offered a new poem on aging to be included in this issue of the *NWSA Journal*. With it, she asks the reader to meditate on the consequences of the invisibility of gendered aging, consequences that the

authors of articles in this issue strive to transform. As Piercy has said, that which we do not love, we must be ready to make anew (1999).

For the twenty years that it has taken NWSA to extend a welcome to aging studies, activist Cynthia Rich has been working to make anew people's ideas about aging. As Valerie Lipscomb's interview details, Rich draws instructive parallels between the history of awareness and activism for other marginalized groups and for aging studies issues. For example, people often refer to older women, even public figures, in terms of their family relationships, just as was done for most women not that many decades ago. Rich encourages feminist teachers to bring anti-ageist exercises into the classroom, and even offers a PowerPoint presentation to anyone who wants it. The Old Women's Project, a group that Rich co-founded, works to build connections among women of all ages, to show the conjunction of old women's issues and young women's issues, such as wages, housing, and incarceration rates. She strongly believes in the need for a larger feminist theoretical context surrounding age, and looks to Women's Studies to create it.

The next article echoes Rich's ideas, albeit in a more academic vein. In their essay, Toni Calasanti, Kathleen Slevin, and Neal King suggest that feminists who merely add *age* to the *raceclassgender* list do themselves and aging studies a disservice, because doing so suggests that old age is already a theorized arena. Also, they note that most of the feminist analyses of aging focus on aging and late middle age, rather than on old people. Most interested in age relations, these authors explore how age as an organizing principle of identity and power intersects with itself and other power relations. Linking these ideas to the available studies of care work and current feminists' focus, Calasanti et al. argue that aging studies must become relevant to feminist work, and vice versa.

Employing these ideas, Heather Dillaway demonstrates what feminist aging studies scholarship can look like, and the material benefits of such work. While it frustrates many aging studies scholars that the word *old* can be used to identify a span covering 30 to 50 years of a woman's life, it is nonetheless commonly accepted that menopause serves to mark a turning point in women's aging. Dillaway returns to this often-examined experience with a study of 61 women. She shows that the uncertainties of the onset and duration of menopause, along with a propensity of doctors and the media, including feminist media, to link pre-, peri-, and post-menopause to age and time delimiters, creates a situation in which women's experiences and uncertainties give them cause to mistrust themselves, literature about all stages of reproductive aging, and their doctors. Such mistrust contains the potential to negatively affect their health for the rest of their lives.

Of course, the ideal is using a feminist approach to aging and old age long before menopause. Elaine Norris and Barbara Barnett discuss how

they bring aging studies into the classroom. Elaine Norris works with literature students in an upper-level service-learning class at a Catholic college. In a literature and gender class, Norris had her students read feminist theory, accounts of being older, and love stories. With this foundation, they made weekly visits to a retirement home to discuss what a love story is. A main course goal: indeterminacy. And they achieve it. In the class's project, aged bodies work in surprising ways, bringing high-level feminist theory to life in the bodies and minds of undergraduate students. The students and the teacher in this class learned about bodies that matter.

Teaching mass communication classes, Barbara Barnett shows how educators who bring ideas of aging into the classroom increase students' awareness, analytical abilities, and advocacy skills to counter the barrage of ageist stereotypes and inequities in the media. Her article first examines and critiques the visual images of aging found in advertising and on television. She then explains how she incorporates those themes into the classroom and the effect such projects have on her students. Barnett's hope is that she is training the next generation of media workers to be less ageist, and she offers suggestions on how the lessons from her syllabus can translate into classroom exercises in other disciplines. In closing, she explains how hers is a feminist project.

Far beyond classrooms, international relief organizations bring another form of age-related discipline to bear on real bodies. Caroline van Dullemen's report observes that, in nonWestern countries, changing age demographics intersect with gender and the consequences of migration, employment, Westernization, and AIDS patterns, creating needs to which current international aid organizations are often not yet prepared to respond.

Deciding how to respond, and with what tools, involves both pragmatics and theory. Sylvia Henneberg takes us from the academic examination of the writing and the lives of Adrienne Rich and May Sarton into aging theory useful beyond the discipline of literary studies, and beyond the academy. The two authors' works may seem to have little in common.

Sarton's writing highlights aging and old age, whereas Rich only occasionally focuses on time or generations. Henneberg found the conjunction of their work valuable in that Sarton's work led Henneberg to consider age as a category of analysis in Rich's, and Rich's led Henneberg to consider the politics of aging and old age. That is, only by consciously recognizing that, as she quotes Sarton saying, "there are as many ways of growing old as of being young" (1977, 193) will aging studies scholars be able to fully theorize about people who are, in Rich's words, "practiced in life" (1999, 13).

Aging studies and disability studies share constructive similarities: aged bodies and disabled bodies are assumed to have underlying biological realities that override the social constructions of bodies' meaning; ableism and ageism work similarly. As Christine Overall's article suggests,

the conceptual and material “reality” of the biological underpinnings are constructed as well. Based on their similarities, she encourages readers to recognize the possibilities that both categories hold for liberation.

Biology, sociology, psychology, history, film, global studies, economics, mass communication: truly transdisciplinary, aging studies incorporates aspects of these and other realms of thought. Cynthia Port combines history, journalism, economics, politics, and literary studies in an article that explores British concepts of gendered aging and old age in the time between the World Wars. She recounts that ideas about the positive aspects of aging retreated just at the time when women gained the possibility of achieving social capital via their personal and professional development. In doing so, the energy that women could have used to affect their lower social status and their dependence on men was rechanneled into worries about aging—worries for which the consumer economy offered remedies, such as make-up, surgery, and fashion literature. Port’s article remarks on the longevity of the link between consumerism and ageism, a conjunction that continues into the twenty-first century.

Kathleen Woodward’s work can be described as gerontological psychological cultural theory, although her degrees are in economics and literature. Her article is a longer version of her plenary speech. In it, Woodward—one of the foremothers and one of the most significant current scholars in aging studies—focuses her analytical gaze on the performance of gendered old age in film, photography, and performance art. “The spectacle of gender and age structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops” (163). With these loops, says Woodward, the “youthful structure of the look” disempowers the chronologically gifted. Using the movie *About Schmidt*, Woodward illustrates how this gaze works. She then argues that we can learn other ways of looking by emptying the stage of other ages and other genders, just as Louise Bourgeois, Rachel Rosenthal, and Nettie Harris do. In their performances, the “normative youth-old age system and sex-gender system do not frame their work” (166). Woodward shows the near invisibility of aged women, and then offers examples and analyses of what can happen when such bodies become visible. In the process, she reminds readers of exactly why aging is a feminist issue.

The ages of authors whose work appears in this issue range across approximately 40 years, from those still in school to those who are officially “retired.” As feminists and scholars, we write what we know—what we learn from our lives, the lives of those around us, and the texts we encounter. If these essays elide or distort things—key concepts or nuances of understanding—I hope readers will use that as an opportunity to write back. Think back. Dance back. Scholarship is a conversation. Let’s talk.

**Leni Marshall's** research focuses on literature about aging, literary theory, and the social constructions of age; her teaching interests include multicultural and minority literatures. Her current project, *All Over: The Identity of Old Age*, explores aging and its categorization in literary and cultural studies. An active member of NWSA since 2001, Marshall chairs the Association's Aging and Ageism Caucus and is on the Governing Council. Send correspondence to mars0264@umn.edu.

## Note

1. Anyone interested in being added to the Aging Studies listserv can e-mail me: mars0264@umn.edu.

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