
REVIEWS

Kathleen Woodward, ed. *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*
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Jeannette E. Riley
Kent State University, Stark Campus

As I read *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, I began to wonder about the influence of aging in my own life and family. After all, I was just turning thirty-two, and I found myself thinking more about my parents and what they must think of growing older. So, while visiting during the Christmas break, I asked my mother, who recently turned sixty-two, "what do you think of aging and age?" At first she looked surprised at the question, and then she laughed. "I don't," she responded, "I simply don't feel old and I just keep moving forward." I wasn't surprised; my mother never seems to slow down to think about such things. Looking for more feedback, I turned to my father and asked him what he considered to be "old." Without hesitation he stated: "anyone 10 to 15 years older than me." And then he went on to say age was something he tries not to think about very often for it isn't something that he can "control."

Most people, unlike my parents, do think about age a great deal, which is not surprising with the continuing growth of what many refer to as the "graying of America." At this time, we have a significant generation of older adults who continue to play an active role in our society. Age no longer necessarily means illness and a withdrawal from public life. Yet, interestingly enough, unlike gender and race and other social constructs that affect our identities, age has been often overlooked as a subject of study. In doing so, we have disregarded how our culture has assigned various behaviors to different ages, and we have avoided examining how age is portrayed in our culture and how, in particular, women are aged by culture. However, in recent years, many have turned their attention to what is called Age Studies, an area "concerned with understanding how differences are produced by discursive formations, social practices, and material conditions" (x). This attention has resulted in the collected essays found in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*.

Edited by Kathleen Woodward, the Director of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies and a Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, *Figuring Age* contains twenty-two essays, which are separated into five cat-

egories: “Opening the Subject,” “Historicizing Age,” “Psychoanalytic Theory and Aging,” “Visualizing Age, Performing Age,” and “Family Portraits.” As Woodward suggests in her introduction, she hopes that these essays will create an “arena of visibility” around women and aging. Furthermore, Woodward explains that the term “figuring age” is meant to not only “invoke the calculations of age, both the omnipresent numerical discourse on aging (is fifty old? sixty? sixty-five? and why?),” but it is also supposed to indicate the “virtually relentless social practice of trying to figure out someone’s age (just how old is she? is she passing for a younger age? does she look older than she is? and what would that mean?)” (x). Simultaneously, “figuring age” also “refers to the representation and self-representation of older women as well as to the figures that they present on the social stage” (x).

Just from the definition for “figuring age,” you can tell that this book covers a great deal of ground. What you can’t tell, if you haven’t yet read the book, is that in covering this ground it provides a variety of interesting, rigorous discussions, that merge both personal experiences and voices with objective studies and discussions, to reveal the depth of ideas and considerations that the field of Age Studies creates. Many issues arise in this volume, among them the representation of older women; our culture’s obsession with youth; the use of psychoanalysis, rejuvenation therapies, and cosmetic surgery to maintain youth; and aging as a traumatic process. In discussing these issues, the various articles ask important questions, such as why are women, in particular, isolated and moved to the periphery of society as they age? How do we understand and categorize age in relation to our bodies and our interpersonal relationships with family and other people? Offering a range of contributions from performance theory, art history, literary and cultural studies, as well as film and television studies, and psychoanalysis, *Figuring Age* fills a much overlooked gap in cultural studies.

Furthermore, in delving into such issues and questions, the articles examine how women are affected by their social contexts as they age, how women are subjected to what Woodward calls “double aging” or “multiple aging” — the fact that women “in mainstream culture in the United States today are struck by beliefs about age as it is defined by our culture far earlier than men” due to the symbolic date associated with aging called menopause (xiii). In addition, the writers included in the volume, among them Nancy K. Miller, E. Ann Kaplan, Elinor Fuchs, and Mary Russo, explore how our culture associates attractiveness with youth, an association which has help to foster the isolation of women as they grow older. As Anca Cristofovici points out in her article “Touching Surfaces: Photography, Aging, and an Aesthetics of Change,” we tend to think of aging as “a separation over

time — from youth and its attributes” (269). Or, as Cristofovici continues on to explain, we think of ourselves as being split “between a younger self and another self, a stranger, new self, yet a self that is always getting older” (269).

What is most interesting about this sense of splitting and our ongoing negotiation with the new stranger self, is that “on the inner screen of aging, these shadows — memories of younger selves, anticipations of older selves — meet, conflict, interact. Separation and continuity are the source of a tension that helps us accommodate change. Incorporating previous states, we become the sum of what we have been. It is, paradoxically, a permanently inchoate process” (Cristofovici 269). Each contribution, like Cristofovici’s discussion, explores the aging process and how culture influences that process. Along the way, the articles reveal the conflicts inherent in aging itself, foremost among those conflicts the way in which we see ourselves and the way in which we are seen by the outside world. And, in the end, the articles explain how we do indeed become, as Cristofovici suggests, “the sum of what we have been,” and, I would add, the sum of what we have been perceived to be. The process of aging is always a new experience as we form and reform ourselves in response to our own ideas about aging and to our culture’s ideas at the same time. In the end, *Figuring Age* identifies and explains the multitude of “cultural discourses and social practices that construct the meaning of aging for us” (xvi). As such, Woodward’s edited collection brings added life and illumination to the field of Age Studies for all of us. ✨