

AGE: The Missing Category in Cultural Studies

Professor Kathleen Woodward
Department of English
Simpson Center for the Humanities
kw1@u.washington.edu

Winter 2008 Mondays and Wednesdays 1:30 pm – 3:20 pm
Parrington 206

Over the past three decades, much scholarly attention has focused on studies of difference, with an emphasis on gender, race, ethnicity, and class in particular. But one of the most salient markers of social difference—*age*—has gone largely unstudied and untheorized. Yet age is clearly also a relation of difference, one as hypervisible in everyday life as it is invisible in cultural studies. This should not be altogether surprising. Our culture is fixated on youth. It is also profoundly ageist.

Our culture has assigned different norms of behavior to different ages and has invented different terms for different “stages.” Op-Ed writer David Brooks, to take a recent example, opens his October 9, 2007 column in the *New York Times* this way:

There used to be four common life phases: childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. Now, there are at least six: childhood, adolescence, odyssey, adulthood, active retirement and old age. Of the new ones, the least understood is odyssey, the decade of wandering that frequently occurs between adolescence and adulthood.

Like other markers of social difference, age is in large part socially constructed; it is also palpably biological. Representations of the body in its many shapes are key. In addition age intersects powerfully with other markers of social difference. The front page of the October 9, 2007 issue of the *New York Times* in which Brooks’s op-ed appeared, for instance, features a story entitled “Aging and Gay, and Facing Prejudice in Twilight.”

Our disregard of age is all the more curious because age—in the sense of *older age*—is the one difference we are all likely to live into. Especially now. If in 1900 the average life expectancy in the U.S. was forty-seven years, by the turn of the 21st century average life expectancy had increased a full thirty years. This figure alone suggests a profound change in how people imagine and lead their individual lives. It also represents an enormous social change—what is called *population aging*—that is coming to be known as the longevity revolution; since 1900 the percentage of Americans who are sixty-five and older has tripled, increasing from 4.1 % in 1900 to 12.4% in 2004. Aging could also be said to be a women’s issue in the U.S. There is a double standard of aging, with women being “aged by culture” earlier than men. Ironically in light of that statistic, today women live on the average 5½ years longer than men. Half of all women seventy-five years and older live alone.

Age is a continuum and, in analogy with gender studies, we need to think in terms of age studies. In this course the focus will be on older age. But it will be framed by studies of youth subcultures, theories of the life course and life span, theories and histories of generations, and shifting meanings of middle age. The tension between discourses of age and the experience of age will be explored, with the multiple “definitions” of age clearly in mind: age can be understood in chronological, biological, cultural, psychological, social, and statistical terms, “definitions” that can be in contradiction. The effects of living in a visual culture will be underscored. Sections of the course will be devoted to the following:

✦ **Youth subcultures**

With reading drawn from Dick Hebdige's classic *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Angela McRobbie's *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991), and Lee Medovoi's *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (2005)

✦ **Theories of the life course and life span**

With reading drawn from historian Philippe Aries's *Centuries of Childhood* (1973), sociologist Stephen Katz's *Cultural Aging* (2005), psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's *The Life Cycle Completed* (1992), and cultural critic Mary Russo's essay "Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism" (1999)

✦ **Theories and histories of generations**

With reading drawn from Nancy Chodorow's *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989), Astrid Henry's *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (2004), essays from the edited collection *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue* (1997), lesbian activist Barbara MacDonald's *Look Me in the Eye* (1983), Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1986), and my essay "Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Literature" (1999)

✦ **Shifting representations and meanings of middle age**

With reading including Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Doris Lessing's novella *The Grandmothers* (2003), a chapter from Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), and Margaret Gullette's essay "The Other End of the Fashion Cycle" (1999)

✦ **The body, the psyche, and the youthful structure of the look**

With screenings and readings including John Cassavetes's *Opening Night* (1978), video artist Cecelia Condit's *Not a Jealous Bone* (1987), and a chapter from Virginia Blum's *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (2003)

✦ **Intersections: illness, dependency, and care**

With screenings and readings including the documentary film about AIDS entitled *Silverlake Life* (1993), Elinor Fuch's memoir *Making an Exit* (2005), anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff's film *Number Our Days* (1976), J-B Pontalis's prose poem "At the End of the Line," and a section from philosopher Eva Kittay's *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Harcourt, 1999)

There will be a course pack. Books to buy include:

- ✦ Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, 1990)
- ✦ Woodward, ed., *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999)
- ✦ Elinor Fuch's *Making an Exit: A Mother-Daughter Drama with Alzheimer's, Machine Tools, and Laughter* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005)
- ✦ Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1987)
- ✦ Erik Erikson's *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: Norton, 1998)

In addition to reading, screening, and discussion, assignments include:

- ✦ A short presentation on discourses of age in the mass media
- ✦ A 15-page paper; it may engage materials of any kind—literature, mass media, the arts, theory. . .

We may also participate in the collaborative project initiated by the new collection *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glen Hendler. See

<http://depts.washington.edu/keywords/>