

## Reviews

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Leni Marshall, *Age Becomes US: Bodies and Gender in Time*, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, 2015, 202 pp., hbk US \$75.00, ISBN 13: 978-1-4384-5697-3.

Leni Marshall's truly scholarly book wishes to 'shake up' gerontological methodologies in order to argue for a more inter-disciplinary approach to age studies. She argues scholars must come out of their 'comfort zones' to bring new and *different* methodologies to the study of age (p. 149). Her suggestion is that these new approaches need to value the role that humanities can bring to age studies. She suggests that Cultural Gerontologists such as the notable Calasanti and King already argue that ageing bodies are 'a matter of culture' (2015: 198) and are doing work that embraces these notions despite general trends in gerontology that remain narrow in their approaches.

It should be noted that although the title of the book suggests it is about ageing bodies and gender, broadly this book focuses on female bodies and representations of female ageing. Marshall presents literature throughout the book, developing concepts and ideas from the writings as she progresses and begins by showing the reader how culturally pervasive biological markers of ageing are in non-fiction texts. She uses menopause as an example because it is a topic about which many women seek understanding and information. She shows how various self-help texts about menopause present it as a biological experience and do not take into account cultural and social experiences. Marshall moves on to depict the strong link between feminist critique and the humanities, showing how feminist writings have challenged the hegemonic ageing culture and biomedical representations of ageing. The preceding chapters explore how women's bodies and interior worlds are represented in various literature starting with Doris Lessings' 'Diaries' which characterise contrasting experiences of ageing in illness, health and across ages. In this chapter, the idea that 'Age Becomes Us' is explored. Marshall's point is to challenge the idea of age as only a chronological maker and to show the role that the humanities have in exploring ageing as a cultural process as well as a biological process. Through 'Age Becomes Us', Marshall reveals that we embody *all* the ages we have been. This theme continues throughout the following chapters, exploring how age is culturally inscribed on bodies and how bodies are perceived varies due to other categories of identity, but importantly she states 'age, an identity category, that every living person embodies in time' (p. 116).

A key tenet of the work presented by Marshall is her argument for age studies to take an intersectional approach which understands age as one aspect of identity which crosses with many others. Marshall's book explores

age and bodies in North American culture and she does this by presenting diverse perspectives. The acknowledgement and understanding that the ageing process is intersected by other aspects of identity such as gender, race, ethnicity, (dis)ability and sexuality is vital to the work. Marshall brings writing to our attention which provide rich examples of older women; it makes fascinating and engaging reading. In Chapter 6 she explores African American poet Lucille Clifton's work which offers a resistance to negative representations of old age through positive examples of ageing female bodies. Marshall argues these texts have an important role to play across races and cultures in order to challenge the pervading negative western viewpoint of old age.

A key concept, 'permeability of boundaries', is explored in Chapter 7 through an examination of Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, and this enables us to understand how complex and fluid intersections of identity are. These writings allow us to think beyond binary identity points as ageing scholar Sandberg argues in her work exploring sexuality in ageing heterosexual men in Sweden. She shows similarly how boundaries are permeable when Nore experiences his own changing body which has taken on a new feminised shape because of hormone treatment for cancer. This causes him to grow breasts and challenges his previous masculine self, whilst opening up opportunities for new sexual encounters at this stage in his life, thus showing how both gender and sexuality are permeable (Sandberg 2013). Marshall's book shows how these ideas have long been explored in literature and directs us to the important contribution that the humanities can bring to age studies.

Another interesting concept for me is 'othereldering' which is conceptualised in a number of texts and focuses on the idea of resistance within the literature to mainstream and pervasive views of ageing. Marshall presents a convincing account of why the humanities have an important role to play in considering encounters of ageing and identity, particularly because of its ability to access literary devices that can explore beyond what can be seen and can include what is imagined through the interior and exterior worlds of its protagonists. This book should be useful reading for students or scholars who wish to bring innovation and creative approaches to their work on age studies.

## References

- Calasanti, T. and King, N. 2015. *Intersectionality and Age*. In Twigg, J. and Martin, W. (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*. Taylor & Francis, Oxford, 193–200.
- Sandberg, L. 2013. Just feeling a naked body close to you. Men, sexuality and intimacy in later life. *Sexualities*, 16, 3–4, 261–82.

University of Manchester, UK

SARAH CAMPBELL