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## **GENERATIONS: WOMEN, AGE, AND DIFFERENCE**

Initially, this project took the form of a conference we organized in 2000 at the University of Northumbria. The conference invited delegates to think beyond the crude and limited oppositions distinguishing “second-wave” from “third-wave” feminism. More specifically, we were troubled by media representations of second-wave feminism as being worn out, effete. The term effete seemed particularly appropriate given its etymology, one that refers back to the non-reproductive body. The media’s portrayal of the second wave as being politically unfashionable at best, irrelevant at worst was implicitly linked to the image of an aging female body, a reductive and essentializing strategy that collapsed the politics of the second wave into the bodies of second-wave feminists. In contrast to this aging and decrepit body was the vigorous and rather youthful body of what was described by Natasha Walters in her book of that name as the New Feminism. Walters in Britain and Naomi Wolf in the United States embodied a media friendly feminism that offered a glamorous and glossy image of feminism for the new millennium.<sup>1</sup>

This was the point at which discussions about generations and the difference of age began to emerge anticipating, as we now realize, a debate within feminism that has since broadened and gained critical attention. The seven intervening years between the conference and this volume of *The Studies in the Literary Imagination* have seen a whole range of publications attempting to define feminism as new, third-wave, or post.<sup>2</sup> What emerged out of the debates hosted at the Northumbria conference, however, was less a concern with defining something new and more a concern with the old: feminism’s histories and the relation between age and gender.

It was the idea of generational difference that encouraged us to think about the ageism embedded within feminism itself. In the first instance, the difference of age seemed to separate us as feminists; some of us are second wave and some of us are third wave. We wondered what difference that difference made to our theoretical and political perspectives. Simply looking at the constitution of our small research group and discussing in a very anecdotal fashion the nature of our experiences as women in the late twentieth century was, in second-wave argot, a consciousness-raising



exercise. We felt a frustration with the ironic, knowing stance the third wave seemed to take on many key social issues. Its relation to our experiences as women and academics seemed distant and overly theoretical. It seemed as if the turn away from reductive, essentialist models defining woman had effectively erased women as subjects from a feminist politics. The areas of postcolonial studies and queer theory offered more vital and meaningful ways of engaging with feminist issues.

This led us to think about the significance of age as a difference that has not yet received the critical attention it deserves. As with the categories of gender, race, and ethnicity, age appears to be self-evident, written on the body of the subject in lines that become increasingly visible as that subject ages. Yet the ways in which the signs of age are codified and interpreted are culturally determined. Age seems to be the last difference, the unspoken but inevitable site of a difference not only *between* subjects but also a difference *within* subjects as they are exiled from their younger selves. Kathleen Woodward's work on the subject has established the importance of this area for the humanities. Her groundbreaking *Memory and Desire: Aging—Literature—Psychoanalysis* was a seminal study of literary examinations of the process of aging. However, the more recent edited collection, *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, identifies gender more explicitly in relation to a number of visual and verbal media. As Woodward points out in her introduction, age has been the one difference that has remained unavailable for critique:

Along with race, gender and age are the most salient markers of social difference. Recent research in cultural studies has been virtually dominated by studies of difference. We have invented courses in colleges and universities that study gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class. But not age. Yet age is clearly a relation of difference. (x)

It is the gendered aspects of age that particularly concerns our own collection of essays. The discursive boundaries of the reproductive body are unclear in an age of reproductive technology. Media hysteria concerning older or geriatric mothers reveals the ways in which these new technologies expose the underlying cultural assumptions circumscribing the relation between the body and age. In particular, the female body has become the site upon which many cultural anxieties are played out. It is the age of mothers not the age of fathers that is the focus for debate and discussion. It is not only in cutting edge areas such as human fertilization, embryology,



and genomic sequencing but also in the more commonplace technologies of hip replacement and HRT that we see how modern technology makes interventions upon the body. The physical limitations of an aging body are less severe for affluent Westerners who have access to these new technologies. It is not, however, that new technologies have transformed cultural attitudes to old age; they have merely highlighted the discrepancies that exist between the experience of old age and the perception of old age.

These technological interventions compel us to think critically about the meaning of age as it is socially inscribed on the body. While the passage of time undoubtedly takes its toll on the human body, recent research in gerontology has suggested that it is social and cultural constructions of the aging body that are most debilitating. In *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*, Sarah Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker cite gerontologist George Maddox to make this point:

The more you study the actual behavior and health of older people, the more you see that aging is a social and not just a biological phenomenon. These terrible things you see happening to some people in age are not the inevitable ticking of the biological time clock. Age is not a time bomb. Even the new emphasis on age as a crisis, the midlife crises, etc. is misleading. When you come to one of these life crises or transitions that are supposed to be so traumatic, the people who cope, grow. (3–4)

As Woodward points out, the signs of age are just that, cultural signs:

Our culture has assigned different norms of behavior to different ages and has invented terms for different “stages.” Like other markers of social difference, age is, in large part, socially constructed. Meanings are attached to the figures of age and aging based on society’s evaluation of aging. (x)

Thus this collection of essays is less concerned with age as a description of physiological change but more concerned with age as a difference that is produced via a network of discursive formations. The difference of age, like the differences of social class, gender, sexuality, and race, functions to police or regulate social behavior by constructing boundaries, categories, and definitions. In this collection, we are inviting contributors to think of the ways in which contemporary culture actively produces the difference of women’s age via film, literature, fashion, and popular writing.



Moreover, we are concerned with the ways in which those debilitating cultural norms concerning the difference of age are embedded within feminism itself in the generational model of feminist history. In other words, this collection not only looks at the representations of the aging female body but also, more fundamentally, at the mechanisms used to understand and historicize the body of feminism itself as it ages. The conjunction between age and history is one that is central to this study. A resistance to the generational model of history, to the wave metaphor itself is also, implicitly, a resistance to the assumption that the political agenda of the second wave has run its course. It is also a resistance to the progressive model of history that reinforces a Eurocentric agenda. It is time, as Mridula Nath Chakraborty points out, for Western feminism to acknowledge the limitations of its own account of feminism's histories:

Instead of perpetuating the wave metaphor, in which each successive wave signifies a further "evolution" in the progressive narrative of feminist history, hegemonic feminism needs to attend to ... the "differential consciousness" of other feminisms present through their "oppositional ideology." (101)

Finally, regeneration is a synonym for revitalization (a term, coincidentally, often used to promote the beneficial properties of anti-wrinkle creams). We believe that there is still not enough published material offering a critique of the multiplicity of images and icons fetishizing youth at the expense of age. We also believe the culture we live in is in need of replenishing critiques. The essays in this volume compel us to look again not only at images of women in contemporary culture but also at the ways in which our own critical practices as feminists operate to reinforce and/or subvert the difference of age as it is culturally produced and consumed.

The first two essays focus on film, more specifically contemporary French cinema. In her essay on "Femininity as Old Age in Contemporary French Cinema," Martine Beugnet presents an overview of representations of elderly women in French film, noting that such figures have often been silenced by the exigencies of a cinema dominated by consumer culture. Where the imperative is to produce—and reproduce—a femininity that is definable, marketable, and consumable, old women are invisible:

In the context of a late capitalist culture old age is a disease, equivalent to the categories of low consumer value and low productivity;



a social stigma that is acutely reflected in its status in terms of representation. (Beugnet 4)

Beugnet argues that films such as Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*) respond to this crisis in representation, in this case employing the filmmaker's own body as a means of commenting on aging. Varda gleans footage from figures at the margins of consumer culture, thus giving space to the liminal and unspoken. Beugnet notes, however, that such examples of significant roles for old women are still relatively rare, as the aged woman is more conventionally employed as a silent trope, representing something other than herself. Where old age is performed as forceful characterization, however, it can rise above the symbolic, as in Cédric Klapisch's comedy, *Chacun Cherche son Chat* (*When the Cat's Away*). In this film a group of old women are symbolically aligned with the demolition of Paris's suburbs or *banlieu* and the decline of traditional communities. Such a simple view is, however, confounded by the film's depiction of the community that mobilizes around the isolated young woman who has lost her cat, and the performance of Renée LeCalm as Madame Renée. Madame Renée is a central protagonist and the ringleader of the old women who organize the search. LeCalm's performance confounds any simple reading of the old woman as a figure symbolizing urban decay: "a non-professional actress, [she] establishes a forceful character, determined and alluring, who, in spite of her short stature, often dominates the frame, and whose humorous remarks sprinkle the film like an ongoing commentary" (Beugnet 14).

*Chacun Cherche son Chat* represents a literal link between Beugnet's essay and the piece by Sarah Leahy, as the latter examines George Granier-Deferre's *Le Chat* (*The Cat*), to which the former's title makes reference. The essays are also thematically linked in their scrutiny of French cinema and its representations of aging and elderly women. Sarah Leahy follows Beugnet's overview with a detailed examination of the star persona of Simone Signoret, focusing on two of her later films, *Le Chat* and *La Veuve Couderc* (*The Widow Couderc*). Leahy argues that through her refusal to conform to norms of feminine performance—and thus her challenge to stereotypes of aging women—Simone Signoret disrupts normative visual codes regarding agency and the gaze. Employing evidence from interviews and Signoret's own writings, Leahy shows how the aging actress self-consciously deployed her appearance as a means of performing different forms of femininity, becoming a *monstre sacré* in the process. While this would appear to define Signoret as either the "monstrous feminine"



or to masculinize her, she was able to deploy this public perception of her persona both in her career and in her performances: “In Signoret’s case, the term applies not just to the longevity of her career but also to a perceived authenticity, relating to her ability to step back from her star status and privilege her character” (Leahy 24). Most significantly, in *La Veuve Couderc*, Signoret performs the aging woman (the widow Couderc of the title) as a desiring subject: a figure who vies for the affections of Jean (Alain Delon) with a younger woman, Félicie (Ottavia Piccolo). In her account of the film’s visual strategies—which reveal Couderc’s desire but not her body and juxtapose this with the fecund (and scopophilic) femininity of Félicie—Leahy notes the eroticization of the male body as the camera lingers on Jean’s physique, allowing the viewer a desiring gaze aligned with that of the widow. In this way Leahy investigates the gender crossings of the film as a whole and Signoret’s performance in particular, arguing that Signoret’s portrayal of transgressive older women in *Le Chat* and *La Veuve Couderc* allow the characters to move beyond the passive invisibility usually assigned to the older woman in cinema.

The following three essays deal specifically with the ways in which contemporary women’s writing represents old age via intergenerational relations. All three essays problematize the mother/daughter relation implicitly interrogating the assumption that the daughter necessarily identifies with the mother figure. Diana Wallace’s “‘Women’s Time’: Women, Age, and Intergenerational Relations in Doris Lessing’s *The Diaries of Jane Somers*” examines the representation of what Simone de Beauvoir described as the “forbidden subject,” the subject of old age. In Lessing’s representation of a relationship between a middle-aged woman (Janna, the narrator) and Maudie, a woman in her nineties, dying slowly of cancer, she explores what might be described as the “problem with no name” for the twenty-first century. Lessing’s desire to make visible the old woman, to force the reader to confront the reality of old age, is a savage indictment of an uncaring, uncivilized society. Yet it is also, as Wallace demonstrates, an analysis of the complexities of the aging process in relation to female subjectivity particularly as it re-encounters the m(other). Feminist psychoanalytical theory, with its focus on the “reproduction of mothering,” has constructed a two-generation model that inevitably excludes and denies the presence of a third generation. Lessing’s novel, argues Wallace, not only represents the third generation but also raises questions about society’s treatment of the maternal body as it ages, a body that might be described in terms of abjection. Maudie’s incontinence is the sign of a body incapable of containing and controlling what is within. It is a body that



transgresses certain boundaries, a body that is impure, unclean, and therefore disturbing and disruptive to the social body. Yet this transgressive body, as Wallace shows, is capable of offering Janna the possibility of constructing an identity based on relation rather than separation. The blurring of boundaries and the crossing of borders is developed throughout the novel as Janna establishes connections with others from different age, class, and gender zones.

Sarah Gamble's essay, "Growing Up Single: The Postfeminist Novel" examines the relation between the popular literary phenomenon known as "chick lit" and the politics of postfeminism. Gamble argues that this genre both constructs and reflects a post-feminist consciousness—one that is unsure whether to reclaim the agenda of second-wave feminism, to revise it, or to abandon it. This political hesitancy is reproduced in the narrative structures of each of the novels she examines. Beginning with the most well-known and influential example, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Gamble goes on to explore Isabel Wolff's *The Trials of Tiffany Trott*, another novel by a British writer, and concludes with an example of American chick lit with Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed*. Gamble suggests that this last novel pushes against the newly established conventions of chick lit that see the heroine forever trapped in romantic indecisiveness. Instead, the central character experiences the epiphany of motherhood enabling her to overcome her narcissism and her father fixation. The adoption of the role of mother rather than daughter is a sign that, perhaps, postfeminism is growing up. Referring to the last chapter of Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood*, Gamble points to the shifting concerns of postfeminism as it is forced to confront the realities of the aging body.

In "Identity-in-Difference: Re-Generating Debate about Intergenerational Relationships in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," Bella Adams conceives of regeneration as a kind of critical recovery. Here Adams recovers a text that is dismissed by other critics as popular, sentimental, and therefore of little cultural value. Adams argues, however, that Tan's text is more complex than critics have previously suggested. Rather than reinforcing the idea of intergenerational identification, the text offers a critique of the mother/daughter relationship as it has been traditionally conceived and textually represented. While Tan's text essentializes, while it "risks the charge of neo-conservatism, neo-Orientalism, and neo-racism" at the same time, the text foregrounds its own embeddedness in the ideological frames reinforcing limited and limiting stereotypes of the other (Adams 86). It refuses to offer the reader the possibility of intergenerational and



intercultural reconciliation because it recognizes how such strategies tend to collapse self into other, effacing and denying difference.

Adams's interpretive strategies raise questions about the usefulness of the generational model for an understanding of women's history as do the last three essays in this collection. In "Fashioning the Second Wave: Issues Across Generations," Hilary Fawcett looks at the cultures and geographies attached to fashion for young women in the 1960s and the ways in which the look of the sixties has been appropriated in contemporary fashion cultures. Ironically, although the aging body of the second-wave feminist may have been rejected, it is the historical, fashionable, and youthful body of the sixties that has become a definitive fashionable identity for young women in contemporary culture. While the fashion mores of the 1960s were a trigger for a trenchant feminist critique of the politics of appearance for women in the late 1960s and 1970s, the specific fashion identities which second-wave feminists found problematic are part of a generic and dominant identity for young women of today. In unpicking the cultural and social significance of fashion for women in the period 1963 to 1970 and 2000 to the present, Fawcett questions the changing significance of fashion for young women and the continuation of the inherent and massive problems for young women in the ways in which their appearance is commodified in high capitalism. Thus rather than reading women's history as an inexorable march towards equality and freedom, Fawcett's argument suggests that the progress made for women since second-wave feminism has been limited in terms of the politics of appearance.

While Fawcett's focus was the 1960s, Victoria Bazin's "[Not] Talking 'bout my Generation': Historicizing Feminisms in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*" examines the early eighties, Thatcher's Britain, and feminism's engagement with the new free-enterprise culture. The contradictions of feminism are explored in this dramatization of the conflict between two sisters, Marlene and Joyce, and the possible future(s) of feminism are embodied in the Janus-faced figure of the daughter, Angie. The Marxist influences evident in the play's use of Brechtian alienation devices and the covert reference to Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" signal Churchill's willingness to disrupt the generational model of history. The historical and mythical "top girls" of the first act—who sit down to dinner in honor of Marlene's promotion—operate like quotations, fragments from other sources that interrupt and undermine Marlene's own interpretation of women's achievements and successes. For Churchill, progress is a double-edged sword. Marlene, like the top girls she dines with in the opening scene, has had to make a number of personal sacrifices in order



to succeed. In doing so, she has exploited her sister(s) and abandoned her daughter. At a time when Great Britain had just elected its first woman prime minister, *Top Girls* dared to question the values of liberal feminism not by simply taking sides against Marlene but by rejecting an account of history that saw each successive generation of women as necessarily more empowered, more equal, and therefore more fulfilled.

The final essay in this collection also raises questions about the progressive narratives of women's history that are embedded in feminism's own accounts of its past. Rachel Carroll's "Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in Neo-Victorian Feminist Fiction" examines Sarah Walter's novel *Affinity* in order to "suggest the ways in which a non-generational historiography might allow for an encounter with the past other than as origin or legacy" (Carroll 135). This interrogation of the generational model of history rests on the assumption that history itself is always constructed, mediated, and contingent. Carroll argues that Walter's novel acknowledges its debt to the past in both its attention to historical detail and its appropriation of the sensibilities associated with the sensation novel. In doing so, however, it foregrounds not only a particular historical moment but also the ways in which that moment has already been discursively produced. The tracing of sexual identity back to its origins, of finding the source of a modern queer sexual identity is radically undermined. As Carroll suggests in her concluding remarks, "the novel withholds a singular 'truth' about identity just as its narrative conventions promise to disclose it; more specifically, the possibility of a single and determining sexual origin capable of resolving the question of identity is denied" (Carroll 145).

The two strands that emerge from this collection, one focusing on the representations of old or aging women, the other analyzing and interrogating feminist historiography, suggest the challenges for feminism in the millennium. Not only do feminist writers, film makers, historians, and cultural critics have to address the limiting and limited cultural assumptions circumscribing age and gender but they also have to remain alert to the dangers of constructing alternative truths or sites of knowledge that privilege certain kinds of experiences. To return then to the idea of origins as discussed in Rachel Carroll's contribution, just as the truth of a sexed identity is withheld in *Affinity* so, we argue, the truth of an aged identity is always contingent and provisional. Subject as it is to the passage of time, the truth of old age for women is multiple, varied, and by its very nature constantly changing and shifting. Likewise, feminism's past as embodied in the idea of the second wave suggests a moment of political awakening,



the birth of a modern female subjectivity that has evolved and developed over a generation. Implicitly embedded in this historical narrative is the assumption that contemporary feminisms, post- or third-wave, have built on the stable foundations of a coherent and unified political movement and have been able to address the issues raised by their second-wave predecessors. By challenging the generational model of feminist historiography, it becomes possible to see more clearly an image of the present as it seeks to construct the past. An unnatural parturition scene emerges as the second-wave mother is created by her third-wave daughter to reinforce her own rather unstable and provisional identity as a modern feminist in a postmodern world.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In 2000 *Feminist Review* invited responses from contributors on “the futures of feminism” in the twenty-first century. In the introduction the editorial collective identified concerns both within and outside the academy about the new feminism:

The discomfort stems from a sense that the “new” feminist debates are perhaps too little reflective of the differences at work between and within women; that they are perhaps too narrowly addressed from and to the relatively privileged and affluent, to women who are not at the sharp end of daily brutalities such as racism, poverty, or homophobia; that they are perhaps a little too complacent about the gains they suppose women to have made since the second wave. (113).

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Baumgardner and Richards; Braithwaite; Dicker and Piepmeier; Fixmer and Wood; Freedman; Gillis and Munford; Gillis, Howe, and Munford; Hawkesworth; Henry; Hernandez and Rehman, eds.; Heywood; Hogeland; Kavka; Kinser; Labaton and Martin, eds.; Lotz; Nurka; Purvis; Reger; Springer; Zack.

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