



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

Book Review

Aging, Corporeality and Embodiment. Chris Gilleard, and Paul Higgs. Anthem Press. 2013. ISBN 978 0 85 728329 0. 228 pp. \$99.00 (Hardcover)

Arantza Begueria

Open University of Catalonia

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 36, No 2 (2015), pp.216-217

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2015.113



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.

This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Book Review

Aging, Corporeality and Embodiment. Chris Gilleard, and Paul Higgs. Anthem Press. 2013. ISBN 978 0 85 728329 0. 228 pp. \$99.00 (Hardcover)

Arantza Begueria
Open University of Catalonia.

When one thinks about aging, many commonplaces come to mind: loneliness, social exclusion, poverty or ill-health. Likewise, the idea of the aging body resonates with notions of decline, frailty, impairment and disability. The present book addresses the complex and controversial issue of the aging body by offering a more positive perspective that moves away from those notions and develops the paradigm of the “new aging” (Gergen and Gergen 2000). Taking as a standpoint what Bryan Turner (1984) has called the “somatic turn” in the social sciences, this book draws on the notions of performative identity, agency and self-care to describe an embodied aging that has to do with autonomy, self-expression, pleasure and lifestyle choices in consumer society.

The book can be read in three sections. The first one deals with the theoretical grounds of the text and offers the historical background for its arguments. It describes the history of the body in Western societies throughout pre-modernity, modernity and second modernity, and focuses, mainly, on the generational schism lived by the Baby Boomers of the sixties in the US. According to Gilleard and Higgs, this particular historical period signals the birth of many contemporary conceptions of the body. During the sixties, several binary oppositions such as male-female, black-white, heterosexual-homosexual and able-bodied-disabled were called into question by a young generation who began to perform their (new) embodied identities proudly. By the time that generation grew old, they wished to perform their previous identities as well as their age in a new way of “not becoming old”. Thus, the culturally established opposition of young versus old required a new approach. The aim of this book is to fill this gap and develop this new approach.

The text constantly seeks a balance between the paradigms of “positive aging”, “successful aging”, “anti-aging”, “natural aging” and “anti-anti-aging” by offering a postmodern poststructuralist standpoint that tries to go beyond those paradigms and develop “a different understanding of aging as a site of embodied and contested difference” (p.22). Such an approach would acknowledge the vulnerabilities of age but also see the individual as a desiring subject. Following authors like Foucault, Butler or Deleuze and Guattari, the book works throughout its chapters on the notions of personal subjectivity, agentic performance, embodied identity and the technologies of self.

The second section of the book takes a cultural studies approach to analyze the bodily identities of gender (chapter 3), race (chapter 4), functional diversity (chapter 5) and sexuality (chapter 6). Following Gilleard and Higgs, several social liberation movements that emerged during the 20th century such as feminism, Black Power, disability and queer movements helped create a more positive social sensibility toward some renewed embodied identities. Again, the authors encourage the idea of using the cultural background of those subaltern identities to think

about the possibility of performing age as if it was any other agentic identity. The text seem to imply that nowadays all those movements have been embraced by the mainstream consumerist society, so any identity performance, including the aging one, would take the form of a consciously chosen lifestyle.

The third section of the book turns from embodied identities to embodied practises. The authors argue that many older people are performing those chosen lifestyles through activities such as active sex in later life (chapter 7), the use of cosmetics, clothing and fashion to promote a youthful look and enhance beauty (chapter 8), the practise of body work and fitness to stay healthy and fit (chapter 9) and the use of self-care techniques related to aspirational medicine and cosmetic surgery (chapter 10).

This section of the book is highly interesting because it engages with many stimulating issues. First of all, the activities described in this section, which are focused on the notions of “not looking old” and “not becoming old”, are very useful ideas to reflect on the plasticity of the boundaries of human corporeality. Furthermore, those activities call into question the concept of what is “natural” aging and what is not. Surprisingly, the authors do not discuss the ideas by which health and well-being are culturally equated with youth and beauty, thus leaving this equation implicit. Nevertheless, they do address some exciting contradictions in this section. First, the paradox between the desire not to become old and the conscious choice of performing age as a particular embodied identity. Furthermore, the tension between a point of view that perceives those activities as practises of resistance and freedom, and a more structural approach, that understands them as a neoliberal alienation aimed at transferring the responsibility for the public good from the institutions of the state to the individual citizens. Clearly, the authors seem to be aligned with the former.

Although the book is more descriptive than analytical, it provides a sociological and historical account of the aging body in Western societies. A cultural anthropology reader would expect some cultural comparisons and ethnographic examples of aging in other societies and cultures, but the authors focus mainly on the US culture. Undoubtedly, the major strength of the book is the topic itself, the aging body, which is a subject too often eluded by gerontologists, social anthropologists and sociologists. The authors offer a very specific way of thinking about the body and their point of view can serve to broaden and sharpen a debate that was already raised in this journal (Danely 2013) about how to interpret the ageing body.

Bibliography:

Danely, Jason, ed

2013 The body. Special Issue, *Anthropology & Aging Quarterly* 34(3).

Gergen, Kenneth J., and Gergen, Mary M.

2000 The New Aging: Self Construction and Social Values. In *The Evolution of the Aging Self: The Societal Impact on the Aging Process*. Richard W. Schaie and Jo Hendricks, eds. Pp 281–306. New York: Springer

Turner, Bryan S.

1984 *The Body and Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.