

OLD AGE: Cultural and Critical Perspectives

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KEY WORDS: old age, gerontology, generation, critical gerontology, aging

INTRODUCTION

Despite numerous review articles and programmatic essays surveying the social and cultural anthropology of old age (2, 13, 14, 41, 47, 53, 55, 79, 82, 99, 102, 103), a theme in many of them is the relative paucity of anthropological attention to the topic. In 1967 Clark made the classic observation that "if one is to judge from typical anthropological accounts, the span of years between the achievement of adult status and one's funerary rites is either an ethnographic vacuum or a vast monotonous plateau of invariable behavior" (13). Clark's criticism, opening anthropology's future while closing its past to old age, was soon routinized into a requisite lament preceding many essays on the anthropology of aging (79).

This gerontological lament did not, however, correlate with the writing of actual monographs. In 1980, after thirteen years and much productive research by many scholars, Fry could still begin her edited anthology by noting that "anthropology has a long history of being interested in age, but not in aging or the aged" (41). Similarly, in 1981 Amoss & Harrell offered an anthology to "help to remedy a massive neglect of old age by the discipline of anthropology" (2); and in 1984 Keith & Kertzer began their introduction to another anthology by again drawing attention to the need in anthropology to "pay more systematic attention to the role of age in human societies and cultural sys-

tems." What was at stake for the authors was perhaps summed up in the first sentence: "This book admittedly aims to proselytize" (58).

An abundance of writing about an apparent lack of writing presents an interesting contradiction, and it forces us to rethink what this writing—all these reviews that by their own accounts survey and signify an absence—might then be about. Why, it might be asked, were so many reviews and assessments produced that share the sense that there isn't much to review? In dwelling on the contradictions and paradoxes of this emergent discourse of geroanthropology¹ (84), I want to offer a heretical reading of its narrative claims of a salvatory future against a blighted past. Heresy seems to me a necessary response to the language of mission and conversion ubiquitous to the field, Kertzer & Keith's will to proselytize. Yet if the review article is itself somewhat of an instantiating genre within geroanthropology, legitimating in its frequent reiteration this enforced youth with its Golden Future and Leaden Past, then any new review must tread carefully if it would claim to do otherwise. Rather than reiterate the few oases in the imagined desert [classically, the work of Simmons (100)] or chronicle the important achievements of the new geroanthropology—which have been carefully documented in the review literature cited above—I want to frame another past and another present, both to focus on the kind of questions geroanthropology has not tended to ask and to reread the ethnographic vacuum taken by now as an unquestioned part of geroanthropological prehistory.

This review makes no claim to be a comprehensive review of all significant ethnographically or cross-culturally defined work in gerontology. The several published bibliographies of old age, anthropology, and ethnicity indicate that such work numbers in the thousands of articles, books, and films (40, 97). It eschews reproducing the standard categories of cross-cultural gerontology, such as life history, life span and life course, age stratification, grandparenthood, modernization and disengagement theories and challenges to them, caregiving, chronicity, and most recently, critical gerontology. Each of these perspectives and debates engages important questions, but their separation as independent areas of inquiry with reliable and clear-cut methodologies and boundaries may have more to do with the funding structure of much American gerontological work and its relationship to biomedical authority than with their stated objects. To borrow a phrase of Strathern, what is of concern here is the methodological rhetoric involved in "the manufacture of a subdiscipline" (108).

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Several disciplinary labels have appeared to describe the subdiscipline. *The anthropology of aging* is perhaps the most common, but it is less about aging from birth to death than about old age, and the euphemism is significant. *Gerontology and anthropology* is also common, perhaps because it leaves open whether the disciplinary commitment of the researcher is primarily to one or the other field or to both. I use *geroanthropology* because it is, quite blessedly, the shortest.

This second point is best illustrated by example. One of the characteristics of geroanthropology is its rapid alchemy of theoretical perspective into scientific and pseudo-operationalizable jargon. Even Luborsky & Sankar's critical geroanthropological essay (68), which parallels some of the concerns of this review, ironically conjoins a critical sociology of science to a far less critical mystification of the authors' method. Luborsky & Sankar claim to utilize Frankfurt School sociology to apply "critical theory" to gerontological research agendas. As anthropologists, they are concerned specifically with adding "culture" to what has become known as the Critical Gerontology perspective (3, 75). But their discussion of critical theory is vague and limited to the assertion that "scientific and philosophical constructs are enmeshed in and serve to recreate the wider socio-historical settings." The term *critical* is taken as a monolithic and unambiguous signifier of method. The text's referent is ultimately not the Continental tradition that it invokes yet never engages, but rather a simulacrum of that tradition used to mark subdisciplinary boundaries.

Luborsky & Sankar move immediately from the invocation of critique to the naturalization of their approach as CG (Critical Gerontology) and CG Studies. Culture, when added to CG, generates extended CG. Along with a scientific-sounding nomenclature, an operationalizable method is offered, promising "the systematic pursuit of a set of clearly articulated questions" through a quantifiable set of components. Over and over, the language of hard science and real results is proffered: the considerable irony and rapidity of this move from critical stance to positivist rhetoric goes unnoticed.

A related concern raised by the authors' invocation of critical theory is the seldom articulated relationship between sociological and anthropological theory in gerontological social science. The authors' appeal to a sociological framework for a critical theory and their mechanistic use of culture as something one can insert into an analysis recapitulate the institutional history of professional gerontology and its embeddedness in ideologies of applied sociology and social work. With such a dearth of anthropological theory in gerontological settings, the term *anthropology* becomes less an epistemological than a professional marker, and the term *culture*—elsewhere an increasingly treacherous foundation for the anthropologist's practice—is proudly displayed as disciplinary icon.

The Luborsky & Sankar essay is state-of-the-art gerontological anthropology. I cite it at the beginning of this review to stress what is at stake in the debate I hope to engender. In short: Where is contemporary anthropological theory in the contemporary anthropology of old age? Why is it represented but seldom engaged? Is a genuinely critical gerontology possible within the parameters of the subfield? If we are to avoid, paraphrasing Clark, either a theoretical vacuum or a vast monotonous plateau of invariable "culture," how must we renegotiate a history?

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF GEROANTHROPOLOGY

In the 1980s, disciplinary lament slowly shifted to cries of victory: American geroanthropological narratives of mission among the unbelievers gave way to those of successful conversion. In 1981, Nydegger contrasted the dearth of work in the anthropological past with an emerging shift: "...interest is accelerating. Anthropological gerontology is shaping itself into a distinct speciality" (82). By 1990 Sokolovsky confirmed the strength of an "important new speciality" and offered several more names for it: comparative sociogerontology, ethnogerontology, and the anthropology of aging (102). Professional structures emerged: a coterie of leaders, including many of the editors of the anthologies cited above; an organization, the Association of Anthropology and Gerontology (AAGE); and a journal, the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*. Group rituals and narratives appeared, for example, centered around the scramble to attend the often conflicting meetings of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) and the American Anthropological Association (AAA). By 1992, Keith (54) could declare triumphantly, at the GSA meetings in Washington, DC, that the battle for the inclusion and serious consideration of old age within anthropology had been won. But the language of unending mission still dominated her remarks, through its inversion. Now that gerontology has conquered anthropology, Keith suggested, the new task is the spreading of the anthropological gospel within gerontology. No rest for the faithful.

There are two possible approaches to the pervasiveness of this explicit and apparently unceasing language of conversion in geroanthropology. One is a hermeneutic of generosity reading it as the necessary accompaniment of a paradigm shift in a passively but pervasively ageist discipline. The other is a hermeneutic of suspicion taking the sheer quantity and force of this language seriously in asking what else might be at stake for the architects of discourse, particularly in terms of their relationship to old persons, the disciplinary object.

Both approaches are necessary. Ageist language and potentially dehumanizing assumptions continue to influence anthropological work, often in very subtle ways. A recent anthology of feminist anthropology begins in the editor's acknowledgements with a reminder of gendered difference in the extraprofessional pressures placed upon academics: "This project was uniquely arduous, in part for a gendered reason. Most of the contributors (and I) are women in 'sandwich generation' positions...my thanks to contributors who made valiant efforts in hard times" (25). The authors' dilemma as women taking care of teenagers and elderly parents is quite real, and is inarguably gendered. But the sandwich generation as a construction of a middle aged and middle class authorial voice draws its irony not from the expected burden of college-aged children but from the other source of pressure—the inherently

difficult and here dangerously naturalized burden of older parents. The elaboration of middle-aged experience as a series of arduous and valiant efforts assumes an unquestioned sense of the burdensomeness of old people. Links and bridges to women older than the volume's contributors are effectively denied in this reduction of older persons to nameless pressures. That the reference is situated within a text otherwise carefully attentive to the politics of difference and their representation suggests the continued invisibility of the representational politics of generation and old age in anthropological writing. *

Yet the example of feminist anthropology is instructive in a second sense. Whereas this field is constituted in terms of questions of women both as authors and as subjects of anthropological discourse, geroanthropology is not primarily or even partially a movement generated by old anthropologists. Old persons remain distinctly the Other. Given the extent of geroanthropology's construction as an unrepentant heterology, I adopt the latter hermeneutic, of suspicion, in reviewing its claims to knowledge. Specifically, I challenge both geroanthropology's paradigmatic novelty and its anti-ageist self-construction, drawing on the critical approaches Luborsky & Sankar describe and in particular on Estes' now classic analyses (27-30).

Estes chronicles the paradox of gerontology as a growing service industry that dedicates itself to preserving and protecting the independence and normality of old persons yet requires their dependence and marginality to survive. I have elsewhere built upon her analysis in a critique of international gerontology (16). Estes' *The Aging Enterprise* is about the "programs, organizations, bureaucracies, interest groups, trade associations, providers, industries, and professionals that serve the aged in one capacity or another" (27). Both the book and Estes' follow-up article a decade and a half later (29) focus on the relationship between old age as service industry and the articulation of policy. In extending the critique to the sociology of knowledge, I foreground an anthropological concern with local epistemologies.

Like critical gerontology, Estes' own practice is an ironic site of gerontology as aging enterprise. "The Aging Enterprise Revisited" was delivered as the 1992 Kent Lecture at the GSA meetings in Washington, DC, the same meetings where Keith renewed the call to mission. In front of several thousand gerontologists, the aging enterprise incarnate, Estes invoked Maggie Kuhn and the Gray Panthers and other signifiers of an activist gerontology articulated by and for older persons. But the gap between the vision of the Gray Panthers and the constitution of the gerontological audience, who through Estes' powerful speech could erase all generational difference and envision themselves as fellow travelers, mirrored the gap between critical theory and CG studies: again, politics as representation.

Geroanthropology, like gerontology as a whole, fails to articulate an internal politics or hermeneutics of generational difference, and disguises this

activist
gerontology:
Kuhn
Gray Panthers

difference through the language of conversion and the trope of anger that underlies it (“no one here cares about old age”) and through the language of exploration (“old age is *terra incognita*, awaiting our discovery”). The language of conversion is ubiquitous in gerontological and geriatric writing. For the World Assembly on Aging in Vienna in 1982, the United States Department of State (110) produced a document summarizing the history of American gerontology, which from the outset is framed as a missionary speciality. Thus the report notes that in the 1950s an “Inter-University Council on Social Gerontology [met to] further professional training” through “two month-long indoctrination programs for 75 college and university faculty members who had developed an interest in aging.”

By a trope of anger, I mean that writing in gerontology and geriatrics frequently takes the narrative form: “Old people are neglected. No one appears to realize this unpleasant fact. I [the author] do; I hope to convince you. Together we can make old age a good age.” Nascher, the New York physician who coined the term *geriatrics* in 1909, in later life offered a classic conversion narrative (quoted in 109) explaining his founding of the field. Early in his medical training in the 1880s, Nascher was struck by the frequency with which physicians used the rationale of “it’s just old age” to avoid disentangling the complex medical problems of elderly patients. Nascher retells the birth of geriatrics as an epiphany: visiting a slum workhouse with mostly elderly inhabitants, young Nascher and his medical preceptor are accosted by an old woman complaining of her pain. “It’s just old age,” Nascher is told. Suddenly he realizes that it is not just old age, but rather disease. In the declaration of old age’s normality and the refusal of others to see, Nascher has the vision of geriatrics. He composes a monumental text, *Geriatrics* (81), drawing on contemporary debate on the line between the normal and the pathological in medicine (9, 10) both to assert the normality of old age and to declare that in old age, the distinction between normal and pathological is lost. The contradiction in this foundational text continues to suffuse geriatric and gerontological practice and theory. A discipline is articulated to demonstrate the normality of old age by segregating its study and treatment from that of young and middle adulthood.

De Beauvoir’s 1970 *La Vieillesse* (*The Coming of Age*) (24) is rooted in this trope of anger, as are other classic works of the 1970s. The titles of Butler’s *Why Survive? Being Old in America* (8), Curtin’s *Nobody Ever Died of Old Age: In Praise of Old People, In Outrage at their Loneliness* (22), and in anthropology, Kayser-Jones’ *Old, Alone, and Neglected: Care of the Aged in the United States and Scotland* (52) convey a sense of old age as a state of misery and offer gerontology and politically engaged fieldwork as responses.

* The generational location of the author is seldom taken as relevant to these politics, save when, like young Nascher, youth sees through the denials of

middle age to the truths of the old, De Beauvoir (24) likewise concludes: "The young man dreads this machine that is about to seize hold of him, and sometimes he tries to defend himself by throwing half-bricks; the old man, rejected by it, exhausted and naked, has nothing left but his eyes to weep with. Between youth and age there turns the machine."

The language of exploration similarly maintains a distinction between the young or ageless author and the old subject. Kaufman begins her important study, *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Late Life* (51), with an appeal to demographic urgency—"how to cope with an aging population"—and follows with an appeal to exploring "meaning" in old age:

- The research upon which this book is based grew out of my awareness of this gap [between the added years of life and our knowledge of how best to spend them], the uncharted territory in which we find ourselves both as aging individuals and as an aging nation. In order to improve the quality of life experience for those in their later years, we must understand what it means to be old.... For only by first knowing how the elderly view themselves, their lives, and the nature of old age can we hope to fashion a meaningful present and future for them and for those who follow (p. 4).

Katz (50) has called attention to such uses of alarmist demography, and from the beginning old age is framed in a split fashion in *The Ageless Self*, as the aged Other presenting a threat and the aging Self who is threatened. The latter is the explorer, adrift in "uncharted territory," the heart of darkness of old age where we encounter the natives in classic anthropological fashion: "for only by first knowing how the elderly view themselves, their lives, and the nature of old age can we hope to fashion a meaningful present and future for them and for those who follow." We fashion for them, and what is exchanged in this colonial encounter is meaning. We lack it, and search among them for "what it means to be old"; then we extract this meaning like Indian cotton to Manchester mills and refashion it, for both them and, ultimately, us. Meaning circulates within the exploratory text much as politics circulate within the gerontological polemic.

THE TROPE OF AMBIGUITY

There is a third form of circulating argument in gerontology and geroanthropology, which I call a trope of ambiguity. For Minois, ambiguity is a phenomenological universal of old age, a time both of maximal experience and of maximal debility, simultaneously vaunted and evaded. Minois looks for and finds this ambiguity "throughout the whole of history" (74:18); the fairly exhaustive text proceeds from period to period over millennia, evaluating whether old age was more gerontophobic or gerontophilic in each.

Minois' history deals in the murky currency of "attitudes" toward old age; history for him is a cyclical narrative of their oscillation. The book is a response both to aging and modernization theory accounts that posit a law of the diminishing status of old persons with industrialization (20, 21) and to revisionist accounts that place the decline prior (32) or subsequent (1) to industrialization or that challenge the possibility of a decline (62, 88). Minois suggests that the image of old age has always shifted around the fundamental ambiguity at its core.

Cole's *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* provides a far more nuanced history (18), yet the ambiguity of aging remains the central insight offered. For Cole, ambiguity is not the slightly ironic fact that it appears to be for Minois, but a lost truth about aging that "postmodern culture" can help us recover:

We need to revive existentially nourishing views of aging that address its paradoxical nature. Aging, like illness and death, reveals the most fundamental conflict of the human condition: the tension between infinite ambitions, dreams, and desires on the one hand, and vulnerable, limited, decaying physical existence on the other—the tragic and ineradicable conflict between spirit and body. This paradox cannot be eradicated by the wonders of modern medicine or by positive attitudes toward growing old. Hence the wisdom of traditions that consider old age both a blessing and a curse (p. 239).

Cole here notes the ironic ageism of gerontological ideology in its denial of old age as a time of inevitable suffering, but he is specific in placing the blame far earlier, with the Victorians. *The Journey of Life* is ultimately an appeal to an awkwardly romanticized and thinly contextualized Puritan ideology. Cole closes by invoking a Lyotardian postmodernism as metaphor for a return to an invented tradition of gerontological ambiguity.

Cole's argument, that "the wisdom of traditions" successfully negotiates the ambiguity of old age by accepting it, is a key theme of Myerhoff's classic ethnography *Number Our Days* (77) and the genre it spawned. Myerhoff's brilliantly constructed work on Jewish members of a senior center in Venice Beach, Los Angeles, came more than any other to define the potential for an anthropology of old age, as Kaminsky (49) and others have noted. Myerhoff utilized Turner's processual and performative analyses of social systems and developed a sophisticated interpretive methodology, transforming the ethnography of communal and institutional old age in the United States from the more static and skeletal accounts that preceded her work (44, 46, 48).

Like the aging and modernization literature of the 1960s and 1970s, with its normative focus on whether old age is better now or then, here or there (83), Myerhoff's work centers on sets of fundamentally moral oppositions: success or failure, joy or pain, independence or dependency, and continuity or disruption. But whereas in the aging and modernization paradigm the central ques-

tion is in which society or period is old age better, for Myerhoff the poignancy of old age lies in its comprehending both poles of each of these oppositional frames. The power of the work lies in its reconstruction of informants' lives as momentous struggles for dignity, survival, autonomy, continuity, and joy within such an oppositional universe. Like the Huichol Indians on pilgrimage in Myerhoff's earlier work, the old people of Venice Beach are liminal figures, here not the ritually created liminality of the pilgrimage but the existential condition of old age. Ritual, in the senior center, is articulated by the elders to maintain a sense of continuity and *communitas*, binding together the oppositions that frame their old age against a dissolution into meaninglessness. Culture—the center's rituals, the heretic Shmuel's wisdom, the fashioning of everyday life—manages ambiguity.

A danger in this approach is its use of culture and ritual as inherently holistic. Myerhoff's romanticization of Yiddishkeit as authentic culture healing the Eriksonian crises of late life has been taken to task by Kaminsky in an introduction (49) to his edited collection of Myerhoff's essays (78). Kaminsky points out Myerhoff's deemphasis of the class location and the cohort experience of the Venice Beach elders in the labor movement, her insistence on culture as a totalizing construct, and her unacknowledged reworking of the biographies of the book's *dramatis personae* to achieve her desired effects. The closing of analysis to other axes of social difference and the emphasis on culture as a response to existential ambiguity are not limited to Myerhoff but characterize the genre of institutional and community studies that build on her text. Kugelmass chronicles the life of a synagogue and its elderly members in the South Bronx (59); like Myerhoff's work, his ethnography offers a powerful narrative of survival and a testimony to the healing miracles of ritual and myth. Shield examines "daily life in an American nursing home," using a similar focus on liminality and culture (98). The nursing home Shield studies is the inverse of Myerhoff's senior center, a total institution represented as lacking ritual and culture and thus lacking the possibility of a response to generational and institutional ambiguity. Each of these ethnographies examines complex questions of class and racial boundaries and the relation of everyday experience to the state and the aging enterprise; but in each, Turnerian tools of liminality, ritual process, and social drama are used to construct what Vesperi criticizes as an "ethnographic present" (111) in which the everyday relevance of the macrosocial world is sidelined to give way to the morality play of old age, in triumph and in pathos.

The liminality of old age may often be more rooted in generational politics than existential conditions; the trope of ambiguity tends to obscure this difference. Vesperi's study of old age, local communities, and the state in St. Petersburg, Florida (111) marks a radical break from the trope. *City of Green Benches* weaves together macrosocial issues—national advertising campaigns,

local and state business interests, representations by gerontologists—with a complex ethnography that resists situating old persons within a single institution, includes gerontological professionals as ethnographic subjects, and draws on the lifelong and ongoing construction of race and class in the constitution of old age. Culture and ritual do not serve as the totalizing constructs that they do in the Myerhoff genre of ethnography; local knowledge is often distorted within the politics of social interaction. Like other anthropologists of aging who focus on class (6, 15, 48, 104, 105), Vesperi relies primarily on interactionist—sociological and social psychological—frameworks of analysis, but here they are thickened through a more sophisticated use of ethnographic and macrosocial data.

Neither interactionist nor Turnerian studies attempt an integration of their respective foci on class and culture; concurrent and subsequent debates on practice theory, on *habitus*, and on hegemony, ideology, and culture seem far removed from most geroanthropological concerns. The subdiscipline crystallizes around an academic aging enterprise and its associated incitements to speak of old age in moral, oppositional terms: it is as much about a fantasized uncharted territory of Old Age as about the everyday lives of older persons. Through the mobilization of anger and ambiguity, a disciplinary ethos emerges that envisions itself as mission practice against an empty past and writes itself through a mix of applied sociology and romanticized narrative. To reintroduce anthropological theory into and to write against the geroanthropological enterprise, it may be time to reappropriate an anthropological past.

lack of practice base theory in gero anthropology, in favor of a morally weighted discourse about 'uncharted territory' or 'not neglected elderly' - need anthrop theory

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FRAZER AND THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF GENERATION

re appropriate part in order to bring in theory

A cultural anthropology of old age might begin its genealogy with Frazer's repudiated classic, *The Golden Bough* (39), organized around the figure of the hunted, killed, and regenerated king or god. Frazer is read in at least three ways; I suggest a fourth. Within anthropology's own narrative of its emergence into cultural particularism, Frazer is represented as the archetypical armchair anthropologist brandishing a theory of primitive error, here that of sympathetic magic. A Freudian appropriation takes the deep meaning of the violence as Oedipal conflict, and neglects Frazer's focus on magic as socially constituted reality. A reading that draws on Joseph Conrad centers on the social (particularly the colonial and gendered) constitution of the text's regicidal violence but downplays the generational specificity of *The Golden Bough*.

The reduction of Frazer to a theory of primitive error is premature. Like Robertson Smith (101), Frazer grapples with Christianity and prefigures a much later celebration of anthropology as cultural critique (70). The implicit

and ultimate referent of the dying god is Christ, and the scope of sympathetic irrationality implicitly encompasses contemporary European civilization. Errors of sympathetic magic for Frazer raise the question of the social construction of reality for both primitives and moderns. Magic, which in this extended sense encompasses most of civilization, is what a subsequent anthropology would call the symbolic. In asking how generations magically reconstitute themselves, Frazer is concerned primarily with the symbolic reproduction of the body in time.

Kings and human representatives of the divine are put to death, Frazer argues in his introduction to the third volume of the work, "to arrest the forces of decomposition in nature by retrenching with ruthless hand the first ominous symptoms of decay" (39:v-vi). Sickness and particularly old age are signs of enfeeblement and of death, and are perceived as challenges to the body not only of the individual but of the community and the state. The continuity of the social body is challenged by the potential degeneration of each successive generation. Symbolically, continuity is maintained by preventing the degeneration of charismatic authority vested in the king or god, through the circulation of charisma in a series of youthful bodies. Generations must replicate themselves: "no amount of care and precaution will prevent the man-god from growing old and feeble" (p. 9). Aging is a challenge not only to individual lives but to the possibility of social meaning, to culture. The hegemonic location of dominant bodies in society is achieved by and through their identification with the social body; Frazer recognizes aging in later life as a challenge to the seamless constitution of the hegemonic.

At stake is not only the particular interests of age groups—a reduction of Frazer by Radcliffe-Brown, maintained in most subsequent work on generation—but the very possibility of hegemony in itself. Thus the patriarchal body in decline central to the text presents a problem in signification: it forces the question of the continuity of the Symbolic—in Lacanian terms the Law of the Father—in a world full of ruptures in lived experience, a world where fathers and mothers and other embodiments of the hegemonic grow old and die. By reading a violent act at the core of culture, Frazer does not just open the way for psychodynamic hearts of darkness, but grounds a symbolic theory of generational difference and particularly of the construction of old age within a crisis of meaning. *The Golden Bough* concerns itself at length not only with questions of the politics of debility (When do societies mark the powerful body as senescent?) and of the means of destruction (How do societies disassociate the individual from the social body?), but with the semiotics of exchange (How is a new body seamlessly enabled to become the social body?).

Frazer's emphasis on the integrity of violence and culture differentiates the position of intergenerational conflict in *The Golden Bough* from the less meaning-centered and more social structural analyses of generational conflict



Frontiers and Boundaries in Archaeological Perspective

Kent G. Lightfoot; Antoinette Martinez

Annual Review of Anthropology, Volume 24 (1995), 471-492.

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of Radcliffe-Brown and his successors, of the French structural Marxists, of the theorists of the domestic cycle, and of the age stratification theorists in sociology and their anthropological proponents. Central for Frazer is the relationship between debility and the impossibility of magical, or symbolic, representation, reframing Clark's question of why anthropology has erased the period between marriage and funerary rites. Instead, we are pushed to asked what is it about local constructions of middle and late adulthood that may or may not resist certain modes of representation. Geroanthropology, born of the bureaucratic construction of old age and its particular moral imperative, cannot see crises of meaning in such absences. It must, endlessly, produce the requisite old body to be simultaneously romanticized and fixed, like the realist aesthetic of the old bodies that each month adorn the cover of *The Gerontologist*.

The main question: MEANING? and how/why? create anthropology? Parts to answer or even approach it. Frazer is important w/ symbols w/ elements action

Work on generation from Radcliffe-Brown through the domestic cycle literature fails to take up the symbolic dimension of Frazer's work; yet, this literature is still more relevant to a contemporary anthropology of old age than geroanthropology is sometimes willing to consider. Radcliffe-Brown's famous essays on joking relationships present a second moment in a provisional genealogy (90, 91). Like de Beauvoir, Radcliffe-Brown shifts a two-generational model of the politics of aging, the old being replaced by their children, into a three-generational model, the old and young in conjunctive joking alliance with each other and in an asymmetric disciplinary relationship with the intermediate generation. Intergenerational joking relationships, for Radcliffe-Brown, are again structural responses to the predicament of social and cultural reproduction: "The social tradition is handed down from one generation to the next. For the tradition to be maintained it must have authority behind it. The authority is therefore normally recognized as possessed by members of the preceding generation and it is they who exercise discipline." In contrast, "grandparents and their grandchildren are grouped together in the social structure in opposition to their children and parents. An important clue to the understanding of the subject is the fact that in the flow of social life through time, in which men are born, become mature and die, the grandchildren replace their grandparents" (90).

Radcliffe-Brown's 3-generational model: old - young - middle

The Frazerian concern with symbolic action has given way to a functionalism that foreshadows future gerontological analysis. Yet Radcliffe-Brown merits closer attention. Social reproduction is twofold: parents hand down tradition to children; grandparents are replaced by grandchildren. Two processes are detailed: an asymmetrical and contractual gifting of culture and a symmetrical and informal circulation of bodies and roles. Both are explained, in the contemporary fashion of the discipline, as responses to the problem of social reproduction. The old attempt to discipline and are marginalized by their children, like Frazer's dying king. For the successive generation of grandchild-

dren, however, grandparents are not a threatening body of decrepitude but a source of support and alliance and meaning in their own agonal struggles with parents. Multiple threats and threatening bodies emerge, as do multiple constructions of old age, middle age, and youth. The political landscape of generational analysis thickens, if not its symbolic terrain.

Two avenues of contemporary geroanthropological interest draw upon these responses to questions of social reproduction: the study of formalized age groups and age stratification theory. The first of these subfields never became central to geroanthropological self-construction. Rooted in a sense of its connectedness to social anthropology and resistant to the incitement to name and isolate old age central to the subdiscipline, age set research shares few of the epistemological concerns detailed above. The field therefore does not share geroanthropology's amnesic tendencies but constructs a genealogy for itself. In Bernardi's literature review (5) "the first interpretive scheme for the cultural and social significance of age" is Schurtz's (96) 1902 *Alterklassen und Männerbünde*. For Schurtz, men's age-specific groups are formed as secret societies to wrest societal control from the primeval matriarchy. Bernardi passes on quickly to Webster's 1932 study of postpubertal male institutions (112) and the work of Radcliffe-Brown (89), Lowie (66), and Evans-Pritchard (31), but despite Schurtz's specific emphasis on the destruction of the matriarchy, he offers an early argument for the close relationship of the politics of gender and generation, an idea later elaborated by Meillassoux (73).

2 research strands:
age set research
age stratification theory

There are two types of traditional anthropological work on age sets or age classes: 1. monographs concerned with their particularities as social institutions and 2. those concerned with the integrated analysis of age sets and other forms of age grades and age stratification. The former include classic ethnographies—e.g. Spencer's work on gerontocracy among the Samburu (106), Wilson's work on Nyakyusa age-villages (113), Maybury-Lewis' study of Shavante age sets (71), and Legesse's (63) work on the Boran *gada*—as well as attempts like Bernardi's to construct broader theories and typologies of age sets (4, 56, 67, 72, 107). The latter, like Radcliffe-Brown, see formal age sets and age grades on a continuum of social organization, and take as their focus either the totality of the system or the dynamics between age groups. Systemic approaches stress either functional or symbolic integrity. Eisenstadt offers a Parsonian typology of age groups (26). Maybury-Lewis, in a comparison of Brazilian and African age group systems, develops a meaning-centered alternative that sees the essence of age group structure not in the utility of its social functions but in age as both ideology and principal of organization (72). He suggests applying a meaning-centered analysis of age as category not only to the East African ethnography but to studies of age set, grade, and generation worldwide. The Frazerian concern with the symbolic construction of age groups is revived, though not Frazer's emphasis on the violence—symbolic or

ethnographies of age sets

enacted—of intergroup relations and thus his concern with the breakdown of signification.

Rey v.
Meillassoux

Rey (92–94) raises the question of age groups as social classes in a structural Marxist framework, a point contested by Meillassoux in a well-known debate (73). Meillassoux's argument again centers on social reproduction: within the domestic mode of production, junior men become senior men and "recover the product of their productive agricultural labour" (p. 79), but the cycling of male bodies through systems of age stratification only intensifies sex stratification. Meillassoux develops the theme enunciated far earlier by Schurtz through a lineal rather than affinal interpretation of Levi-Strauss' celebrated figure of the circulation of women. Male intergenerational struggle becomes patriarchal *entente cordiale*.

Geroanthropological readings of these literatures misrepresent them as theoretically impoverished, maintaining the sense of mission. N. Foner's (34) anthropological interpretation of Riley's (95) and A. Foner's (33) age stratification theory begins with the requisite denial of a past: "there has been no systematic attempt in anthropology to build a model of age inequality—or for that matter, of age and aging" (34:xi). The French structural Marxists are begrudgingly mentioned but soon dismissed: "But the French...are so worried about whether or not elder-junior distinctions are class divisions that they overlook many critical features of inequalities between old and young"; thus, they ignore issues beyond male gerontocracy, such as the prevalence of disadvantaged and exploited elders and age inequalities between older and younger women.

age &
gender
linked

Age stratification theory as adapted by N. Foner addresses these critical concerns. But the dismissal of an anthropological past is premature. Meillassoux does not closely examine age inequalities between women, but he does link the possibility of age inequalities between men to sexual stratification more generally, refusing to separate analyses of age from sexual inequality (73); the point is central to his critique of Rey. Foner ignores it, constructing a straw man in Meillassoux and offering in his stead a functionalist account (34:253–254), which neglects the economic questions he poses and articulates an adoptive lineage through American sociological theory. Foner's text is important in its consideration of gender-specific age inequalities, but it does not take up Maybury-Lewis' challenge to develop a symbolic anthropology of age (72). Nor is the work of Fortes (101), Goody (43), and Mandelbaum (69) on domestic cycles and the processual analysis of age stratification, offering another critical moment in the construction of a geroanthropological lineage, seen as relevant. Foner offers a neofunctionalist and highly tautological account of gerontocratic and gerontophobic roles of old women and old men, ultimately making few theoretical advances except for an iterated reminder

N. Foner - age
stratification
theory

- functionalist
- 'highly
tautological'

that nonindustrial societies are often gerontophobic and not just gerontocratic: the invocation, again, of ambiguity.

Like other theorists of generation and the domestic cycle, Fortes (38) covers related terrain without the amnesia, noting that "the way [age and aging] are incorporated into tribal forms of social structure or invested with cultural value and significance is a topic of central relevance for anthropological theory." His review of a lifetime of his and others' work is read inversely by Kertzer & Keith as "an important first step." Fortes summarizes much work in West Africa and elsewhere on the processual relationship between biological, social, and cultural aging with a set of observations: 1. Intergenerational relations are characterized both by the continuity and the struggle inherent in generational reproduction. Fortes defines the latter in Oedipal terms. 2. Aging is an individual process positioned "between two poles of social structure," the domestic and juridical domains. Thus, the "recognition and consideration of chronological age as opposed to maturation and generation depend on the differentiation between the politicojural and the domestic domains of social life."

But the politicojural and the domestic—anthropological categories often rooted in colonial constructions of public and private domains—are not made objects of inquiry in themselves. Their respective logics are constructed through a universalizing sociological rationality. The symbolic, for Fortes, remains external to processual dynamics, as an "investment" of the interplay of biological (individual) and social (domestic and civic) structures with meaning. Radcliffe-Brown's legacy in Fortes is marked (35, 36); Frazer's legacy is limited to an acknowledgment of the struggle between generations, but here read solely in Oedipal terms. Age, generation, and time present social structural challenges rather than crises in meaning; intergenerational conflict is splayed between social and intrapsychic causes. The first step imagined by Kertzer & Keith, though demonstrating geroanthropology's rootedness in British structural functionalism, sidesteps most interpretive and symbolic disciplinary concerns, let alone the possibility of a poststructural inquiry.

AGING RELOCATED: PHENOMENOLOGIES, RATIONALITIES, AND HERMENEUTICS

A critical gerontology, of which this essay forms a part, is an inadequate response to geroanthropological amnesia if, like the Luborsky & Sankar review, it does little more than validate recent paradigms. I suggest three directions in which anthropologists have critically engaged the study of old age beyond current subdisciplinary isolation: a phenomenological focus on experience, embodiment, and identity; a critical focus on the rationalities and hegemonies through which aging is experienced and represented; and an inter-

3 general directions of recent theory: phenomenological focus on experience; critique of rationalizing hegemonies; interpretive focus on relation of ethnography to knowledge produced

pretive focus on examining the relevance of the ethnographer's age to the forms of knowledge produced.

Phenomenologies

In *The Ageless Self*, Kaufman (51) challenges the professional search for the meaning of old age, suggesting that her old informants do not perceive being old as central to the experienced self. According to Kaufman, in looking for meaning in old age by assuming that old age is at the core of the meaningful, gerontologists often reify a political and bureaucratic identity as phenomenological universal. Against the moralism of the usual tropes of anger and ambiguity, Kaufman refuses to paint her subjects as *a priori* caricatures of wrenching pathos or gritty survivorship, and the result is a far subtler ethnographic texture. Kaufman's introduction is cited above as emblematic of the failure of geroanthropological authors to locate themselves generationally within a sustained hermeneutic; and yet against the language of mission inciting us to name Old Age, Kaufman problematizes the easy availability of the term as meaningful ethnographic construct.

The limits of Kaufman's project mark directions for further work building on her insights. The old persons in *The Ageless Self* experience the assaults of bodily aging as distinct from their sense of continuity in self; against an aging body and externally imposed labeling, individuals report experiencing an ageless self. In taking these reports of continuity as lived experience, Kaufman may neglect political and psychodynamic questions of denial and resistance in interpreting her subjects' construction of self against body. The text does not locate the specifics of cultural and more particularly class histories upon which the Cartesian embodiment of its subjects is predicated. The possibility that the experience of the body—and thus of the relationship between an aging body and an aging self—may be differentially constituted across class and cultural and other axes of social difference needs to be explored in the move toward a political phenomenology of age.

limitations

Rationalities

Work that links the study of old age to a critical focus on ideologies, nationalisms, modernities, and gender constructions, in various settings is emerging (16, 17, 61, 64, 65). In the Netherlands and in India, a group of South Asian scholars working under the auspices of the Indo-Dutch Programme for Alternatives in Development (IDPAD) have placed questions of modernity, post-coloniality, and the application of the social theory of Elias, Foucault, and Bakhtin at the center of a gerontological project (11, 12, 23, 87). The IDPAD is one of the few attempts to reverse the flow of anthropological knowledge production as well as to decenter international gerontology's Euro-American bias.

Much of this emergent work is characterized by attention to the complexities of symbolic structure and cultural politics. In *Encounters with Aging: Mythologies of Menopause in Japan and North America*, Lock (65) traces the replication of hegemonic constructions of the aging person within research and clinical practice, focusing on menopause and gendered aging. The text combines personal narrative, quantitative and comparative data, a critical but serious attention to biomedical discourse, and a historicized discussion of the politics of menopausal knowledge. Japanese scholarly literature on aging is engaged closely, against the usual Eurocentricism. Like Plath's (86) set of life histories of older Japanese, the cultural specificity of aging is closely examined, but here the invocation of cultural difference does not obscure the political dimensions of signification.

attends to generations

Lamb's (61) study of aging in a Bengali village engages multiple debates in the anthropology of South Asia on the nature of interpersonal transactions and the construction of persons and genders. Old age is central to the text, yet as in Kaufman's and Lock's work it resists becoming an end in itself. Processual attention to generation is central to Lamb's analysis, as in the work of Fortes, but the structural logics of practice are not presumed to be precultural but are rooted in local constructions of action and substance. Yet even as the experience of age is carefully located within the Bengali construction of the person, this construction is located within the phenomenology of aging. Lamb challenges static conceptions of personhood by tracing across the life cycle the meanings of and challenges to being a person in a Bengali village. The lesson of geroanthropology—that age is critical to the study of culture—is acknowledged without subdisciplinary impoverishment.

The politicization of the old body

Modernity and the postcolony have become critical foci in some of this work in a different sense than in the aging and modernization literature of the 1970s. Questions of the constitution of the old person as subject are foregrounded through emphases on feminist theory, critical medical anthropology, and Gramsci. Cohen (17) situates Indian debates on senility within a universe of discourse in which the old body becomes a powerful sign both of the state and of imagined core values in Indian culture and their perceived disappearance. The politicization of the old body is juxtaposed with the experience of old persons across class and gender. Attention to local phenomenologies and hegemonies articulating the experience of the aging body is combined with a focus on the impact of shifting religious and state ideologies.

In Chatterji's work (11), the subjectivity of the older person is framed in terms of institutional practice in the context of the ongoing medicalization of old age. The old age home as a total institution is not just an impediment to personal integration as in Shield's work and the trope of anger literature but becomes the site of new forms of subjectivity. For example, Chatterji discusses the file self, the old person known through medical and professional

the 'file self' - the person as 'known through medical and professional records' that organizes the self's experience

records that increasingly determine the socially meaningful organization of his or her subjective experience. Like Lamb, Chatterji looks at the construction of the person in time, but here the construction of time itself is at stake. Like Ostör (85), who suggests that geroanthropology needs to locate not only age and generation but time in local practice and knowledge, Chatterji offers a subtle analysis of the construction of temporality within the intersecting forms of rationality of the multiply located institution. The file self of the medicalized old body presents the problem of a cyborg anthropology, after Haraway (45), the need to examine the constitution of aging within the implosion of ever more encompassing technologies, markets, and media representations.

Hermeneutics

Interpretive inquiries in which the age of the anthropologist is critical to the construction of gerontological knowledge are few. Myerhoff (77) was perhaps the first to explore the hermeneutics specific to generational difference, from arguably teaching herself to walk like an older woman to inserting herself centrally into her ethnography long before such a move became fashionable. Kaminsky (49) has pointed out the limits to Myerhoff's self-location, but his concern is less with the specific interpretive politics of generational difference than with more general questions of ethnographic representation.

The concerned younger gerontologist as angry spokesperson for the disenfranchised elderly is a stock character in gerontological writing, but such reflexivity—echoing Nascher's epiphany in the New York poorhouse—seldom extends to an interrogation of ethnographic practice. Two works that open up the interpretive politics of old age are by anthropologists writing not as old age professionals but as older persons. Colson (19) muses on the shifts in what anthropologists take as ethnographically relevant both as they age and as the persons with whom they work and from whom they learn age. As Moore (76) and Lamb articulate in their work, a processual attention to individual and group practice over the course of a lifetime is critical to the analysis of social or symbolic structures at any moment in time. Colson applies a similar insight to the life of the anthropologist herself.

At age 78 the anthropologist Laird found herself ensconced in a Phoenix nursing home with no means, as she puts it, of escape. *Limbo* is her chronicle of the better part of a year at the pseudonymous Golden Mesa nursing home, written with often painful clarity and irony: "Recently a friend sent me a newspaper clipping telling of a senile patient in a Southern California nursing home who was found drowned in a therapy pool, still strapped in her wheelchair. Such an event would have been impossible at Golden Mesa; it had no therapy pool" (60:1). Anger here is powerful but nuanced. Laird's institutionalization is presented at the intersection of personal, kin, institutional, and state realities. The violence conveyed in the opening anecdote about the therapy

pool is not, in her account of everyday life at Golden Mesa, the story of gross abandonment and abuse but rather of the ongoing banality, infantilization, and denial of personhood within the institution through the most minute, and damning, of gestures. Central to this denial, for Laird, is the grouping together of residents by physical functioning rather than social and cognitive awareness: the false mirror of demented roommates and hallmates. Ambiguity, the shifting meaning of old age, here as simultaneously wise and demented, is constructed, Laird suggests, through the social spaces mandating the institution. *Limbo* resists the easy romance of gerontological narratives of old age pathos and triumph. Laird had great difficulty finding a publisher; Buffington-Jennings (7) notes in an epilogue to the book that one prospective editor had written: "Maybe I'm a monster, but it doesn't move me."

The politics of catharsis in the construction of geroanthropological narratives are particularly critical. The unquestioned importance of the aging enterprise ("we must know") and more generally reified differences between generations as interpretive communities ("they can't understand") are at stake in geroanthropology's resistance to taking seriously the hermeneutics and politics of its appropriation of old persons' experience as a fundamental dimension of practice. The bulk of gerontological practice remains the transformation of critical agendas into routinized scientific jargon abetting the biomedicalization of and control over old persons. Without a sustained effort at change, the concerns of the field will remain in subdisciplinary limbo.

'generations as interpretive communities'

Must not abet biomedicalization of and control over old persons!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to my mentors in gerontological activism and critique, Jerry Avorn, at Harvard Medical School, and Edith Stein, formerly of Action for Boston Community Development. Discussions with my students in a 1992 seminar on Old Age and Anthropological Theory at the University of California, Berkeley, were very helpful, particularly with Cheryl Theis. So were talks with Sarah Lamb, Robert LeVine, Elizabeth Colson, Sharon Kaufman, and Andrew Achenbaum. Veena Das started me thinking about the importance of Frazer to a theory of signification and time. It has been my good fortune to be affiliated with anthropologists at the University of California, San Francisco, where much work on geroanthropology is being pursued.

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