

Aging, Embodiment, and the Somatic Turn

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EMBODIMENT VERSUS CORPOREALITY

In any approach toward the cultural representation of age and aging, the body figures as an important, even essential, point of reference. In recent times, the body has increasingly appeared as the subject of sociological studies, influenced by what writers such as Bryan Turner and Hervé Juvin have called the rise of somatic society and its turn to the body. Cultural studies introduced the terms “corporeality” and “embodiment” into writing about aging, but these terms are often used indiscriminately or interchangeably, not least in the new sociology of the body. We believe that being clear about the difference between these terms can help us to think through the aging body differently. This article aims first to elucidate this distinction and then to elaborate its consequences for thinking about aging through the prism of embodiment, in terms of embodied identities and their embodied practices. In doing so, we are drawing heavily upon our recently published work on the “new” aging and its realization in and through the body.¹

Donna Haraway’s distinction between the body as a *social actant* and as a vehicle of *social agency* is especially helpful. The body as social actant refers to the relatively unmediated materiality of the body and its material actions and reactions that are socially realized without recourse to concepts of agency or intent. The body as a social agent, by contrast, refers to its materiality being an inseparable element in the expression of personal and social identity. “Corporeality” is a term that can be used to signify the body as social actant, while “embodiment” is a term that signifies the body as a vehicle of social agency. Embodiment encompasses all those actions performed by the body or on the body which are inextricably oriented towards the social. It is subject to and made salient by the actions and interpretations of self and others and, in this sense, can be

thought of as an “epigenetic” property of the body emerging from the endless engagement of the corporeal with the social. The corporeality of aging—those relatively unmediated features of the body that change over the course of the individual’s lifetime—provides the context for age’s embodiment and all those practices and narratives that explicitly or implicitly are oriented toward the expression (or denial) of agedness.

Unlike corporeality, embodiment is inexorably contingent, its practices and narratives historically situated within both social and personal time. Performing or narrating age does not produce any universal metanarrative of aging, nor do the various performances and narratives of age reveal an intrinsic developmental pathway. The embodiment of age is enacted in different ways, at different times, and in differing settings when age becomes, or is made, personally and socially salient. Performances of age and aging can be likened to Bourdieu’s idea of *habitus*, which he described as dispositions laid down and fashioned from earlier, “historical” forms of embodied knowledge and practice. Thus framed, embodied habitus may arise either from the personal past of the individual agent or from the collectively shaped past, habitus that have accumulated over the generations.

Embodiment can be further divided in order to make a distinction between those processes of embodiment that are oriented toward “embodied identities” and processes of embodiment that are oriented toward the “embodied practices” of self-care. Embodying identity refers to the representational use of the body or parts of the body to support or express a distinct identity whose social realization is presaged upon some aspect—or layer—of corporeal difference. This may appear (or be treated) as an identity of passive ascription, markers for a community of docile bodies, but more often in contemporary society, it is realized through processes of active signification, achieved by what Foucault has called “agonism,” or struggle between social forces, practices, and relations (“The Subject and Power” 222-23).

In relation to age, this agonism exists most acutely between the forces that ascribe or attribute an identity of agedness to individual bodies and

the desires of the individual to realize or express his or her identity positioned against this “othering” of his or her body, an embodied identity that is not old and that is not framed by the attributions of aging and agedness. Such a struggle is one against differences that are framed by some other “body” that seeks to determine the terms and conditions for the separation between an “I” and a “them,” a struggle to be free to choose the masks one presents to the world. Such struggles have been represented by Foucault as part of the contemporary practices of freedom, expressed through the ethic of “care for the self,” or, more lightly, as “strategic games between liberties” (*The Ethic of Care* 19).

Embodied practices make salient particular identities or lifestyles at the same time as they ignore, deny, or mask others. They reflect the kinds of body work that writers such as Bauman, Beck, and Giddens consider constitute the modern self and that frame most public and private Self-Other relationships. Embodied practices, and particularly those oriented around “self-care,” serve to realize or repress, completely or selectively, particular embodied identities and their associated lifestyles or habitus. While this idea of “embodied practices” can be linked to Bourdieu’s concept of embodied habitus, the roots of such ideas can be traced further back in anthropology, to the work of Mauss and Merleau-Ponty and the concept of “body techniques” that realize social phenomena through the body (Crossley, *The Social Body*; “Researching Embodiment”). In and of themselves, there is nothing inherently “postmodern” about these embodied practices; they can be observed in every era and society. But in the cultural turn towards a more intensely “somatic” society—what Hervé Juvin has called the “coming of the body”—many contemporary expressions or practices of embodiment have oriented themselves particularly around contested identities and “self-care” lifestyles that are mediated through new social movements and further framed by their commodification in the market. It is this complex of counter-cultural movement and consumerism that most distinguishes contemporary practices of embodiment from the corporeal ethics and aesthetics of pre-modernity and the disciplines of the body of “first” or “classical”

modernity (Gilleard and Higgs 28-30).

SOCIETY'S SOMATIC TURN

The demise of first or classical modernity has been associated with the rise of a “somatic society,” with the re-emergence of the body as an important signifier of social distinction. Bryan Turner is credited with introducing the term “the somatic society” in the 1980s. He argued that “the prominence and pervasiveness of images of the body in popular and consumer culture . . . and . . . (t)he emphases on pleasure, desire, difference and playfulness . . . are part of a cultural environment . . . brought about by . . . post industrialism, post-Fordism and postmodernism” (2). Around the same time, Pasi Falk observed how in modern society “the signs surrounding the body act . . . as ways of expressing and/or creating the individual identity or self of the subject” (124). Similar ideas were also expressed by Mike Featherstone, when he wrote that “within consumer culture, the body is proclaimed as a vehicle for pleasure . . . and the closer the actual body approximates to the idealized images of youth, health, fitness and beauty, the higher its exchange value” (“The Body in Consumer Culture” 21).

Featherstone was the first sociologist to see how the body in postwar consumer culture ceased to serve as a solid, disciplined source of fixed meaning and behaved as if it were plastic, a kind of personal capital, capable, with appropriate body work, of increasing in value to the cultural and social credit of its owner. The writings of Bauman, Foucault, and other theorists were equally caught up with the exercise and fashioning of the body in “late,” “liquid,” “post-,” or “second” modernity. In this period of transformation, what most marks the change is the emergence of a mass consumer society, with “a higher standard of living, an abundance of goods and services, a cult of objects and leisure [and] a hedonistic and materialistic morality” (Lipovetsky 134). The expansion of the market and the media, the growth in personal affluence, the democratization of fashion, and the increasingly individualized opportunities for recreational leisure served to establish a “postmodern” culture in which the body served as a focus, a point of orientation, and a canvas

for expressing personal identity (Crane 207-08).

This preoccupation with the body—evident in the various discourses and practices concerning fashion and entertainment, sex and sexuality, leisure and lifestyles—first and foremost affected young people. A concern with the body permeated all social classes and crossed the divides of gender, “race,” and sexual identity. It halted, however, at the boundaries of age and generation. As the 1960s’ cultural “revolution” re-oriented individuals toward the body, various “repressed” sources of bodily distinction came to occupy the center ground. Within this ferment of culture and counter-culture, age—or aging—didn’t count. Age was either a negative, an absent presence foregrounding youth, or it was simply ignored. “Youth” and “youthfulness” defined the outline of the cultural revolution. Youth culture was both process and outcome. Realized in and through “appearance,” the new somatic cultures were oriented away from both the “old” and “old age”—an orientation exemplified in the iconic lines of the Who’s 1964 song, “My Generation,” when they sang “hope I die before I get old.” Only later, as the members of these bands themselves grew older, would the aging of youth culture become a more reflexive element in somatic society.

How does this help us to understand the changing cultural significance and social importance of aging and embodiment? What is perhaps least controversial is that sometime between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s, a cultural shift swept across much of the Western world, setting one generation against another. This was the rebirth of a “youth culture” that almost before existing had collapsed under the great depression of the 1930s and the subsequent World War. This culture of youth was reborn and grew alongside the transition that Michael Kammen has noted from popular to mass culture; the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society; and, for many, a revolution in personal life and way of living. Expressed at the time as the “swinging sixties,” it was a time of excitement and rising expectations, when there was a palpable sense across many groups and classes that things were “getting better.” What exactly the 1960s heralded is difficult to define, even with hindsight, but

for the purposes here, we shall focus upon this period primarily as a “cultural” revolution which created a profound, generational schism that set apart the “old” and the “new,” and, by analogy, the young and the aged. This schism set in motion a transformation in the way we think about, understand, represent, and even experience all aspects of personal life. This would eventually include aging and later life, but that was a change hardly evident during the 1960s.

AGE, CONSUMERISM AND THE “REBEL SELL”

During this period, most of the working-age population saw their standards of living rise, their homes become palpably richer, and their children’s education and health improve. Those exiting the labor market benefited little, if at all, from these changes. The sexual revolution; the democratization of fashion; the expanding array of self-care, cosmetic, and beauty products; and the desires for self-expression, authenticity, and personal liberation that variously privileged the body, depended heavily upon the experience of rising levels of discretionary income amongst young people. While the continuities of kinship and family maintained a sense of moral identity, if not authority, for many older people, this was itself gendered. The links between aging mothers and their adult daughters survived and even thrived, but men’s increasingly regimented retirement left them with little sense of purpose or identity. In the male breadwinner ethos of first modernity, men’s identities were conferred largely by their work. Their lifestyle was structured by their jobs and their wives. Freedom and self-expression were to be found, if anywhere, only in pubs and bars, their consumerism constrained to the consolations of their companions. Throughout the decades on either side of the 1960s, the aging body was of concern only to the various nationalized health care systems that were being consolidated in Europe and in North America, the latter secured for the old and the poor alone by the passage of the Medicare and Medicaid legislation that formed part of the 1965 Social Security Act. Unlike young bodies, aging bodies could only become salient as corporeal *objects*, assessed, examined, and judged for evidence of infirmity and illness, in the case of geriatrics, or of disablement and

need in the case of gerontology. There was no other market for the aging body and, without a market, no public expression—or recognition—of the aging body as in any way a desiring body. Outside the hospital and the nursing home, the invisibility of the aging body was as complete as the marginality of the older citizen to the wider economy. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, older people were marginalized by their unproductivity and, equally, by their inadequacies as consumers (Goldstein 67-68).

The influence of older people upon the new culture was limited to serving as representatives of everything it was not—not new, not young, not fashionable—just old. Throughout the early stages of second modernity, the body that mattered most, mattered principally to the market. The market witnessed its greatest expansion in the entertainment, media, retail, and self-care industries that were all oriented toward fashion, beauty, skin color, hairstyle, sexuality, dance, and music—in short, to the concerns of a newly affluent youth. Since the 1950s, makeup had become a universal element in teenage girls' lives; aftershave and hair cream entered the lives of teenage boys a little later. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, makeup and hair cream were largely unknown amongst people aged forty and over (Peiss 170). Likewise, for fashion: in the boutiques that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, the principal customers were young people with sufficient discretionary spending power to go shopping regularly. Men and women over fifty were neither seen nor welcome in these age-segregated settings of consumption; they were left to choose their clothes from prewar, traditional outlets such as the large department stores or the cheaper market stalls. People at or approaching retirement age in the 1960s were living and spending on the wrong side of the generational divide.

Not only were they on the wrong side of the generation gap, they were also on the wrong side of the material divide separating prewar impoverishment from postwar affluence. Many European accounts written in the 1950s and 1960s emphasize the poverty, isolation, and unhappiness of old people. Writing of the situation in France, Simone de Beauvoir stated, "It is common knowledge that the condition of old

people today is scandalous.” She went on to catalogue their near starvation (270), their dying through hunger (271), their loneliness (281), their poor housing (279), and their sense of sheer uselessness, condemned, as she saw it, to “a half-life that amounts to no more than a waiting for death” (308). Similar comments about the hardship faced by French pensioners in the 1950s and 1960s can be found in John Ardagh’s book *The New France: A Society in Transition, 1945-1973*, in which he notes how “those who live on their pensions alone can rarely afford meat or new clothes or proper heating or any kind of entertainment” (430). These sentiments were echoed in contemporary English accounts. In his book *The Family Life of Old People*, Peter Townsend wrote about how “so many men talked of retirement as a tragedy. They were forced to recognize that it was not their working life which was over, it was their life . . . their life became a rather desperate search for pastimes or a gloomy contemplation of their own helplessness” (169). For Townsend, writing of life in the 1950s in London’s East End, the only real bastion sustaining the well-being of old people, or at least of old women, seemed to be the three-generation family “generally distributed over two or more households near to one another” and the ties of kith and kin (227). Other than this, aging and old age had nothing to sell.

FROM DIVISION TO DIFFERENCE: THE ECLIPSE OF OLD AGING

Those patterns of kinship Townsend was writing about were already beginning to disappear even as he was writing. New-build housing offered a way up the social hierarchy. Many of the old, close-knit neighborhoods of first modernity were falling apart, a process that a host of British community studies documented throughout the 1950s and 1960s. A decade later, not just the communities but community studies, as an academic pursuit, would be pronounced outmoded (Bell and Newby 54-81; Macfarlane 632-33). Life had moved on, and the position of older people was beginning to shift, though it would take more than a decade before aging moved from being framed through its material neediness and corporeal dysfunction to become a site of contestation over embodiment and identity. For that to happen, further change was needed.

As classical modernity gave way to late modernity, those individuals whose identities and lifestyles had been most inflected by the cultural revolution of the 1960s found themselves growing older. Their youth was fast becoming a view in the rear mirror of their journey through life. The turn to the body and the cult of the new that had once exercised such an energizing, liberating effect was beginning to pose new problems, through a different kind of “difference.” Some of the pre-modern preoccupation with aging and the appearance of the aged body began to re-emerge, but in a different social, cultural, and material form. Looking old and being old were becoming personal problems for those whose sense of identity had been fashioned in the plasticity of 1960s youth subcultures. It was time to give aging another look.

RETHINKING THE AGING BODY

From the 1980s, a reorientation in attitudes toward aging and the body can be discerned. Fashion, cosmetics, and even advertising imagery began to address the prospects, not of creating, but of sustaining the image of “youth” amongst those no longer young. Bodily aging re-entered popular culture in a distinctly different way, through the rhetoric of mass rejuvenation. The experiences, particularly of those cohorts who were born in the 1940s and later, of contacts and engagement with bodies both different from and similar to their own, of personal discovery and do it yourself lifestyles, of enhanced self-care and reflexive self-regard, served to create the conditions under which the old chronological habitus of corporeal age could be challenged. Mixed with the old fears about old age were new hopes for aging differently, for not having to become old or, at least, not becoming old on other people’s terms.

If youth was the first, later life represented the second identity crisis of the post-Second World War period. Experienced by members of a particular cohort who were becoming middle-aged, it was a midlife crisis quite unlike that of first modernity (Heath). Age, it was increasingly said, “ain’t nothing but a number,” just like race was nothing but a color and gender, just a matter of how one looked. Earlier promises of remaining “forever feminine” competed with even newer promises of remaining

“forever functional” (Marshall and Katz). Along with smart looks and effective self-care, a healthy sex life was becoming an essential part of “successful” aging (Goodson 544).

The coming of the body ushered in by the cultural revolution of the 1960s has now reached later life. This “return to the body” has contributed positively to the de-institutionalization and de-standardization of aging, at the same time creating new uncertainties about the cultural and social location of age and particularly of old age. The traditional view that linked the social and biological organization of aging to old age has been challenged. Alternative embodied identities have continued to assert their presence within the lives of those who are chronologically no longer young. The resilience of these alternatively “embodied identities,” such as those oriented toward ethnicity, gender, fitness, and sexuality, render more contingent both the nature and the naturalness of aging. As chronological age has ceased to exercise its monopoly over the organization and control of resources directed toward aging, the fears and confusion surrounding its “identity” have rendered age a more unstable and contested system of social categorization and individual distinction.

Other competing sources of identity and other forms of bodily distinction now intrude into later life, while the body has become subject to a range of “body technologies” whose point of reference has outgrown the “commoditization” of the 1960s’ counter-cultures. These technologies and practices are no longer so carefully policed and bounded as they first were by age. Various expressed as “appearance management” (Cahill; Goffman), “body maintenance” (Featherstone), “body work” (Gimlin; Twigg and Atkin) and “body sense” (Coleman), the fashioning and refashioning of the body has become a lifelong enterprise and a lifelong chore. The deeper these technologies and practices penetrate everyday life, the more they undermine the stability that was previously attached to identities embodied as “foundationalist” social forms. The result is greater individualization of the body, rendering it subject to the processes of “lifestyle” rather than “life stage” fashioning (Lipovetsky 5). Treating one’s body as a “lifestyle” project, always subject to change

and betterment, has become an ageless motif in contemporary consumer culture. The possibilities of alternative embodiments once only intended for youth have broken the boundaries of age. As bodies of difference, we are defined, at all times, as forever desiring subjects.

CORPOREALITY AND THE EMBODIMENT OF AGING

Bodily aging—whether in its corporeality or in its embodiment—has long been contested. There is something distinctive, however, in the way contemporary contestations have transformed how aging is interpreted, experienced, and understood by a new generation of older people. Chronology and corporeality have become disconnected. The relationship between age's corporeality and its embodiment is more fluid than ever before. As sources of social identity, aging and agedness have become less easily read off the body. Chronological age has become less acceptable and less adequate in representing people as “aged,” “elderly,” or “old.” The “new aging” that has emerged in the last couple of decades is more invested in and yet more ambivalent about age's fleshy corporeality. Corporeality is seen as creating multiple “layerings” of meaning for age, within and outside the aging body. Aging well is no longer a matter of transcending the materiality of the body by attributing to age a particular spiritual or civic virtue, such as was attempted in the patriarchal past, or more recently by advocates of a renewable “gerotranscendence” (Tornstram). Nor is it feasible to return to the issues of first modernity and reify age within the “moral economy” of the life course (Hendricks; Minkler and Cole). The new aging seeks a continuing engagement with the body, but under different terms of engagement. These include negotiating a wider performative space for aging and developing a richer choice of narratives through which aging can be experienced, interpreted, represented, and understood.

Within the new aging, the corporeality of old age, once a central pillar in the construction of a universalized model of aging, has been revealed as both less solid and more contingent. Its embodiment—the way people “act” or “show” their age—varies more widely than before. As newer cohorts of “over sixties” replace older cohorts, changes have

become embodied in what Bourdieu might have called the habitus of later life, through increased levels of discretionary spending, greater levels of physical activity, more attention to diet and fitness regimes, more frequent recourse to cosmetic and rejuvenative technologies, and the rise of what Kenneth and Mary Gergen have called “sybaritic lifestyles” in later life (283). Age’s “mattering,” to slightly misuse Cheah’s term, is expressed through the social and the contingent. Its essentialism as real “old age” has become an increasingly “imaginary” presence that no longer rests upon the simple corporeal foundations of grey hair and wrinkled skin. Conceived within a matrix of corporeality and embodiment, bodily aging is contested and negotiated through the social—whether this contestation is over the terms of the body’s objectification or over the potential subjectivities that desiring persons still seek, in later life, to express, both in and through their bodies.

Even as bodily aging is represented by the new aging and the narratives and performances of still-desiring subjects, agedness remains cast within the old discourses and dividing practices of an earlier modernity. Within contemporary social institutions and policy, old age was and still is “fraild” (Higgs and Gilleard). Biomedical, social, and behavioral gerontology persist in representing the aging body as an object of health needs and social “oppression.” Only rarely do these disciplines represent it as a site where individuals engage in what Foucault called the “agonisms” and “freedom practices” that constitute modern subjectivity (222). At the heart of the new aging lies a resistance to these no-longer-modern gerontological scripts, “a declining to decline,” as Margaret Gullette has so succinctly put it, and a refusal not so much to age as to become old on other people’s terms.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Three developments seem central in understanding the changing role of the body and its significance for representing the new aging. The first has been the emergence of an identity politics concerned with “embodied difference” and the social and personal concerns that have accompanied this; the second has been the somatic turn that postwar

mass consumer society has helped shape and support; and third has been the influence of a generational consciousness framed by the 1960s generational schism, which has incorporated and retained the cultural turn within its lifestyles, and in the process of growing up and growing older, has changed expectations about aging. Each of these developments has created the conditions for alternative embodiments of age, different narratives about the aging body, and different forms of bodily practice throughout much of later life. Many of these developments began by privileging youth as the body through which change comes, excluding or marginalizing age, or treating it as symbolic of that which must be overcome. With time, the processes of re-constructing, re-segmenting, and re-visioning the body have seen “a return of the repressed,” as the issues of aging and the construction of later life have re-emerged within the context of a more personalized politics and a more extensively commodified society.

As Seidman has pointed out, since the 1960s “differences in race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and ableness have been reconfigured from personal matters to public concerns . . . and differences which were once considered private are now viewed as matters of collective life” (255). The centrality of the body as a site of these distinctions or differences preoccupied 1960s youth. These preoccupations have continued to be important to many members of this cohort as they have grown older, just as they continue to be important in the lives and lifestyles of subsequent generations. One effect of these continuing somatic preoccupations amongst members of these postwar cohorts has been to create a desire for a different way of aging, of ceasing to be young without the necessity of becoming old.

Much of the emphasis in the texts about the new aging has been about what people in later life can do, the roles they can perform—their productive “potential,” realized as citizens and selves more than as desiring, performing, and resisting bodies. Only in the subdiscipline of *cultural gerontology* has there been an attempt to deal more directly with the embodiment of the new aging and its constant provocation with “the corporeal

inevitability of aging . . . [as] . . . permanent reality” (Blaikie 107). Refusing to adjudicate between the natural, the normal, and the normative framing of aging’s embodiment (Jones and Higgs), writers working within this cultural gerontology or aging studies framework have begun to draw upon other intellectual traditions, including critical race theory, disability theory, feminism, and queer theory to develop alternative understandings of the role of the body in shaping later life narratives and realizing later life performances (Calasanti; Conway-Turner; Oldman; Sandberg). While we are not uncritical of much poststructuralist theorizing, especially its tendency to drift into “disembodied” textual analysis, there is much to be gained, for cultural gerontology and for gerontology as a whole, from actively engaging with the theorization of contingently embodied identities and their accompanying embodied practices associated with issues of gender, racialization, disability, sexuality, and the body. The ideas and methods explored in these studies may prove particularly useful in illuminating other ways of thinking about aging, through the body, differently.

NOTES

¹This article is based upon chapters from Gilleard and Higgs, *Ageing, Corporeality and Embodiment* (2012).

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