

To Be Forever Young?

Towards Reframing Corporeal Subjectivity in Maturity

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the relationship between the body in midlife and subjectivity in contemporary western cultures, drawing on both social constructionist and psychoanalytic perspectives. Referring to recent theoretical accounts, I take the position that how we are aged by culture begins in midlife, and that this period is therefore critical in understanding how the body-subject in western consumer cultures is aged and gendered through culturally normative discourses and practices. I also address the gendering of ageing bodies, and argue that, like the 'feminine', ageing has been marked by ambiguity and lack. This ambiguity has presented a problem for dualistic age theories, in that it has been difficult to theorize the ageing body productively since the binary language used to theorize it already devalues old age both male and female based on cultural gender norms. Finally, I inquire whether alternative, non-dualistic perspectives might be developed that redress this problem, and disrupt the alignment of ageing with negative associations such as lack and loss, perspectives that, rather than associating gendered ageing with decline, loss or lack, associate it with the goal of living an abundant life into deep old age.

Keywords: gendered ageing, cultural norms, body-subject, midlife, mature subjectivity.

Introduction

In contemporary western consumer cultures, a plethora of industries has emerged that caters to the care of the body in order to preserve its youthfulness of appearance. The proliferation of so-called 'anti-ageing' skin-care products, cosmetic surgery to lift and tuck recalcitrant lines and folds, and the increase in popularity of exercise regimes such as gym and Pilates classes among the baby boomer generation are some examples of the increased focus on maintaining the youthfulness of the body's appearance in midlife in the presentation of the self in a social context.

At the same time, the medicalization of old age in Western societies and its association with disease and decline underpins the association of ageing with decline, a decline to be warded off in a culture that privileges optimal bodily competence in these areas. For example, Hareven (1995) notes that in late nineteenth-century American society, old age was no longer accepted as a natural process (with admiration for those who lived to a great old age) but became a time of "decline, weakness, and obsolescence." It also became increasingly medicalized, as Hareven (*ibid*:120) comments:

Advanced old age, which had earlier been regarded as a manifestation of the survival of the fittest, was now denigrated as a condition of dependence and deterioration ... Beginning in the 1860s, the popular magazines shifted their emphasis from attaining longevity to discussing the medical symptoms of senescence. By the beginning of the twentieth century geriatrics emerged as a branch of medicine.

Thus the ageing body-subject faces a dilemma when theorized in relation to this culture of conspicuous consumption. For, while some theorists have suggested that midlife presents new opportunities for prolific consumption, and a stage at which performance and presentation of self is focused on signifying youthfulness (e.g. Featherstone & Hepworth 1991a, 1991b; Turner 1994), this presents a problem for ageing body-subjects as the material body becomes increasingly unable to emulate (i.e. perform) youthfulness. Further, the ageing subject must negotiate cultural age- and gender-based norms, and, it has been argued, is never really 'free' to

choose or revise an identity at will (Biggs 1999; Mansfield 2000). Bearing this in mind, I will examine what possibilities there might be for embodiment of a coherent, 'authentic' subjectivity in later life, by drawing on both social constructionist and psychoanalytic perspectives on ageing, where the former emphasize the 'outer' self, the latter concentrating on the self's 'inner' aspects.

Constructing Ageing in Midlife: Recyclable Identities and Revisable Selves

The midlife period is significant inasmuch as it is one in which the body-subject's age status becomes ambiguous. Here 'midlife', previously known as 'middle age', is characterized as the life period between 30 and 60 years (Featherstone & Hepworth 1991b), a period during which the individual is culturally constituted as 'no longer young, and not yet old' (Gullette 1998). Midlife therefore represents an important transitional period, when the attitudes, comportment and practices that mark social identity in our youth and early adulthood are challenged, and where we become marked by our destiny of 'old age'.

In the 1980s and 1990s, several researchers, including Featherstone and Hepworth, began to consider the relationship between ageing and consumerism in western societies. Featherstone and Hepworth suggest that during midlife the 'spectre' of old age and decline haunts the lives of ageing people, compelling them to maintain their bodies in a perpetually youthful state, because western cultures valorize youth. As part of this research, Featherstone (1991) identifies a new type of subject, a 'performing self' that emerged at the beginning of consumer culture and roughly coincided with what Christopher Lasch describes as a culture of narcissism in the 1920s (Lasch 1979). This 'performing self' is driven by consumption and preoccupied with the body's appearance and presentation – the 'outer' aspects of the self.

The performing self therefore seeks to enhance her or his health and marketability by engaging in constant self-scrutiny for signs of 'failure' to ensure a youthful state. Featherstone (1991:189–190; 178) argues that:

Within consumer culture individuals are asked to become role players and self-consciously monitor their own performance.

Appearance, gesture and bodily demeanour become taken as expressions of self, with bodily imperfections and lack of attention carrying penalties in everyday interactions [...]The wrinkles, sagging flesh, tendency towards middle-age spread, hair loss, etc., which accompany ageing should be combated by energetic body maintenance on the part of the individual—with help from the cosmetic, beauty, fitness and leisure industries.

We witness this monitoring and disciplining of bodies in the numerous women's, and more recently, men's magazines. According to Featherstone and others, the individual's 'failure' to remain youthful is taken as a sign of moral laxity, leading to a culturally endemic paranoia of the signs of ageing.

Featherstone and Hepworth further suggest that, in western consumer cultures, using the term 'midlifestyle' is a discourse of *resistance* to this spectre, focused on defying ageing in midlife (Featherstone & Hepworth 1991b:201):

This new orientation towards the middle years represents the endorsement of a new style of life ... which suggests the middle years (30–60) are replete with opportunities to achieve new goals, fulfilment and personal growth ... Self-renewal therefore is accorded a central place within this lifestyle.

However, some theorists have argued that the constitution and production of the midlife body has become a historically specific site of conflict between a youthful inner self and an ageist society, which does not value older adults (Featherstone 1991; Turner 1984, 1994). Featherstone and Hepworth represent this dualistic tension between the 'inner self' and the 'outer body' as the 'mask of ageing'.¹ They suggest that the ageing body is conceived as an increasingly inflexible 'mask' which progressively prevents social participation through prolific consumption. That is, the

¹ Note that the notion of an 'external' versus 'inner' self in ageing has recently been challenged (de Medeiros 2005). Instead de Medeiros proposes an alternative framework in which the 'externally presented' self coexists with the 'complementary self', but that the latter is largely unarticulated if it risks the violation of cultural norms.

physical changes that accompany and mark bodies as they become old, such as wrinkles, sagging skin, osteoarthritis, and so on, prevent people from engaging in the lifestyle of consumption that characterized their youth and early adulthood.

Like Featherstone and Hepworth, sociologist Bryan Turner (1994) also argues that the midlife phenomenon in postmodern consumer societies that followed post-industrialism has triggered a 'proliferation' of possible lifestyles and identities. Turner contends that identities have become 'recyclable' and selves 'revisable', rather than roles being well defined by the life course. As Turner (1994:110) notes:

Even the concept of the life-course is a somewhat rigid notion of a coherent progress through life. Postmodernity suggests rather that we live in a situation of contingent life trajectories. This idea of contingency in life projects better expresses the uncertainties, ambiguities and diversity of post-modern life styles.

Turner situates the potential conflict in self versus social identities clearly (ibid:111). He notes that:

The central issue in ... the postmodernisation of ageing is the question of identity. In a society where social roles are highly structured and where rites of passage are clearly known, identity follows status without any ambiguity. In postmodern societies these status transitions within the life-cycle have been fractured and rendered ambiguous. The maintenance of identity is further complicated by an emphasis on the body beautiful. With the inevitable ageing of the body, the continuity of self and identity is exposed ... If post-modernisation means the reversible body, it also implies a revisable self. From this complex of relationships there emerges the idea of a multiplicity of projects for the body and the self.

Turner and others (e.g., Biggs 1997, 1999) thus argue that postmodern social identities have become more fluid in response to the lack of social role structuring; the life-course is no longer seen as 'linear', and social roles and relations are no longer clearly defined. This poses a challenge for maintaining a continuous, coherent subjectivity in older age, as the coherence and continuity of the self becomes compromised when there are no defined guidelines for an age-appropriate identity or lifestyle.

Radical social constructionist theorist Margaret Morganroth Gullette also perceives the midlife period as a site of conflict between a youthful subjectivity, a lifestyle of consumption and the apparently limitless revisibility of the self (Gullette 1998). Her model of discursive ageing focuses on the discourses that produce what she argues is a culturally endemic fear and dread of ageing, which takes the form of a self-vigilant paranoid concern with the body's visible signs of ageing. This paranoid self-vigilance is precocious (that is, it occurs earlier than expected, as one anticipates being marked as aged when those marks are not yet visible), hence the fear of ageing precedes the onset of what we understand as the visible signs of ageing (ibid:17):

In the United States in the twentieth century [ageing] no longer means a geriatric physical process, and it can begin long before marked events like retirement or the last of the children leaving home. Although widely shared, its core is a private emotion: fear of being not-young. In other words, it is a culturally cultivated chronic disease with an adolescent exposure and a no-later-than-midlife onset.

Gullette contends that we age discursively, via the midlife 'decline narrative', which she argues is culturally taught through feelings and 'lore' from puberty onwards. This, and her claim that the 'natural' midlife transition is portrayed to be as inevitable as, and as indistinguishable from, biological ageing, is based on the argument that everything underlying the construct 'midlife decline' is learned, and that "our very feelings depend on culture" (ibid:9). She further argues that the social construction of feelings of agedness in contemporary US culture is discursively mediated, has become naturalized and unquestioned, and is subject to historical-cultural influences.²

It is important to note that these perspectives on ageing are underpinned by a mind-body split, a split that has been present in the history of western thought since Descartes. However, traditional modes of understanding the body-subject were disrupted when western post

² It is worth while noting, though, that in her argument she universalizes a fairly distinct group, rather than a population: American middle-class women, like herself.

structuralist theories of the body in the second half of the twentieth century replaced the mind-as-subject and body-as-object duality with the notion of the 'corporeal subject'. As corporeality and subjectivity became increasingly interlinked and the body-mind duality loosened, the problematic question of how 'the body' and 'the mind' might interconnect in achieving a 'mindful corporeality' has therefore arisen, and we can see a tension in some theories of the ageing body, such as the mask of ageing theory.

The question of the nature of the mind-body relationship impacts not only on gender, which has been a key focus of feminist research in sociology and philosophy, but also in how bodily ageing is understood (and feminized) in western cultures. Because the splitting of the mind from the body, and of 'inner' from 'outer' aspects of the self underlies ageing theories, the 'inner, youthful self' is accordingly seen as in binary opposition to the 'outer, ageing body', presumably resulting in a splitting of subjectivity in midlife. Therefore, if, as theorists such as Featherstone and Hepworth have suggested, the lifecourse is no longer predictable through fixed milestones and the distinctions between age cohorts have become blurred, these binary distinctions between 'young' and 'old' underlie the discursive delineation of bodies as aged in western cultures.

For social constructionist theorists the ageing body therefore becomes a site of conflict in the search for a coherent corporeal subjectivity in maturity - however limitless the choice of identities appears, it demonstrates a progressive inability to emulate a lifestyle of prolific consumption that requires a youthful body. A major problem for these theories is that the body-self has become progressively split in maturity due to the body's visible changes, a phenomenon itself attributable to a pervasive underlying dualism. Perhaps theories that place more emphasis on the inner, psychic self than on the (bodily) performing self, in cultures where performance must signify youth to be valued, might then be more useful. I therefore turn to psychoanalytic approaches to subjectivity in midlife, to ascertain whether they hold more promise for developing a more productive corporeal subjectivity in later life.

Negotiating a Mature Subjectivity in an Age-Hostile Culture: Persona and Masquerade

Neo-Jungian analytic psychologists take a radically different approach to midlife from that of theorists such as Featherstone and Hepworth, Turner and Gullette. They perceive the period of the second half of life as one involving a re-evaluation of one's life rather than one characterized by a frustrated desire to continue to define the self through prolific consumption.

Simon Biggs, in his book *The Mature Imagination*, examines how some form of coherence, continuity and authenticity of a mature identity might be maintained (Biggs 1999). He is among those who are critical of approaches to ageing that stress the notion of a 'reversible' or 'revisable' self, and of a multiplicity of identities that, in an environment of prolific consumption, can be changed virtually 'at will'. Rather, he is among those who argue that it involves a tension between the 'reversible' self's compunction to select from a multiplicity of 'ageless' identities, and the increasing inflexibility of the ageing physical body, one that makes it more difficult to continue participation in this process of identity selection. Those who succumb to the demand to maintain a youthful body and a socially acceptable identity rely on the social 'mask' or 'persona' to conceal ageing and protect the self from social stigmatization and humiliation within an ageist society. In doing this they reflect the fact that ageing in western consumer-driven cultures is not an opportunity to 'reinvent' one's self at liberty; rather, it represents a conflict between the desire for social recognition and value and the negotiation of culturally normative imperatives that devalue ageing.

Developing a coherent mature subjectivity thus becomes increasingly difficult as, while the 'ageing' body-self seeks youthful identities for as long as possible through various body projects, with time the mask becomes more inflexible. As Biggs (1999:62) argues:

Even though the postmodern 'self' is characterized as being capable of infinite expression, the ageing body needs to be progressively managed if this possibility is not to be lost. Old age increases this contradiction to a point at which participation in consumer lifestyles is significantly compromised. As ageing gathers pace, it is

increasingly difficult to 'recycle' the body and it becomes a cage, which both entraps and denies access to that world of choice.

Biggs poses vital questions about possibilities for developing a coherent, 'authentic' subjectivity in maturity (Biggs 1997, 1999), a theme that social constructionist theorists have generally neglected. He draws on the concept of 'masque', which incorporates both that of masquerade and the Jungian derived concept of the persona,³ defining 'persona' as "an essentially social phenomenon which encompasses the roles we play and the compromises we make for the sake of 'fitting in' ... a device through which an active self looks out at and negotiates with the world, to protect the self and to deceive others" (Biggs 1999:76). According to a psychoanalytic framework, persona or masque is a means of social accommodation, of protecting the self and others from unacceptable parts of one's personality. It also provides a means of social conformity in order to achieve social acceptability in an age-hostile social environment.

For theorists such as Biggs midlife therefore becomes a productive period in which to develop a mature subjectivity. He draws on Jung's framework to contend that the second half of life promises a re-evaluation of subjectivity in that it involves shedding self-preconceptions that are now 'false' wrappings of the self: "it is a necessity for older persons in this second half of life 'to devote serious attention' to themselves as psychologically distinct, developed and spiritual beings, which itself requires that the Self is divested of the 'false wrappings' of the persona" (Biggs 1993:30). In postmodern culture this becomes more prominent because the self's potentially unlimited freedom in 'inventing' an identity, and any increased opportunities for psychological development of the mature self, become compromised by the 'increasingly marginal and restrictive social roles' available to older people. As Biggs suggests, "the advent of

³ 'Masquerade' as a concept was first used by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere in "Womanliness as a Masquerade" within a feminist context, in which masquerade operated as a display, or performance, of normative femininity to defend against perceived retribution by (father-figure) men (Riviere 1929). The ability to disguise was particularly important in instances where women occupied 'masculine' (e.g., intellectual) positions.

postmodern conditions has made a plethora of identities available. However, these appear to be drained of significance and easily become a means of avoiding an encounter with existential questions of ageing" (Biggs 1999:80).

'Persona' reflects a strategic attempt to overcome this dilemma in an ageist social climate that threatens to marginalize the ageing person's social presence and value and to restore a degree of individual agency in negotiating a coherent, mature body-self as people age. The issue, as Biggs sees it, is to "allow engagement with social expectation, whether multiple or restrictive, and ... protect personal coherence and continuing personal development". He argues that ageing offers an 'experiential sophistication' in an individual's later years, which allows a flexible and contingent identity to adapt itself to the nature of contemporary society: "According to this viewpoint ... maturity gives rise to an expanded capacity for self-experience" (ibid:81). The ability to negotiate a multiplicity of social situations and simultaneously retain a sense of personal cohesion and continuity are seen by Biggs and others to be the strengths of ageing, comprising an increased capacity for greater self-knowledge coupled with a greater flexibility in negotiating social norms. Biggs also connects masquerade with hegemonic (patriarchal) social codes, according to which ambiguity of age status is not acceptable, ageing is a 'difference' to be erased, and youthfulness is the desired, valued outcome (ibid:75):

In the deployment of the masque, youth becomes a normative state to which the body has to be restored. Age becomes a process of dispossession and the cover-up, an exercise teetering on the brink of the grotesque. Through this intrinsic ambiguity, masquerade again becomes a process of submission to dominant social codes and resistance to them ... It is a thing that is played with, which while obscuring signs of ageing is also drawing attention to the fact that a deceit is taking place.

In her book *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and other fictions*, Kathleen Woodward applies Riviere's concept of masquerade to old age. Masquerade for Woodward is "a coverup through which old age nonetheless speaks ... As pretense, masquerade is a form of self-representation ... A mask may *express* rather than hide a truth. The mask *itself* may be one of

the multiple truths" (Woodward 1991:148). She explains masquerade as follows:

In a culture which so devalues age, masquerade with respect to the aging body is first and foremost a denial of age, an effort to erase or efface age and to put on youth. Masquerade entails several strategies, among them: the addition of desired body parts (teeth, hair); the removal or covering up of unwanted parts of the body (growths, gray hair, "age spots"); the "lifting" of the face and other body parts in an effort to deny the weight of gravity; the molding of the body's shape (exercise, clothing).

Woodward argues that being confronted with ourselves as 'aged' is a form of "return of the repressed", in psychoanalytic terms. She posits a 'mirror stage' of old age, as a kind of reverse scenario of the Lacanian 'mirror stage' of infancy. In the mirror stage of infancy, the sight of the body as a cohesive unity experienced by the infant is in contradiction with his or her experienced lack of bodily control as a condition of ontological immaturity, and the child feels joy at perceiving her or his image as a harmonious whole. Woodward suggests that, on the other hand, in old age the mirror reflects an image which the viewer rejects, and which, if encountered unexpectedly, evokes an experience of 'the uncanny' (*das Unheimliche*) in the face of what Woodward argues is the familiarity of the repressed – old age.⁴

Woodward (1991, 1999) recommends that, while the social realities of fear, denial and attempted defiance of ageing still exist, they should be seen from the perspective of the psychic significance of the ageing body in a social context. Importantly, Woodward (1991) is concerned with the nexus between gender and ageing, and applies the notion of 'masquerade' to gendered ageing, which she conceptualizes as an outcome of the development of the psyche in response to the social world, a mode of self-presentation by concealment. She refers to two functions of masquerade: "as *submission* to dominant social codes and as *resistance* to them"

⁴ One of Woodward's (1991) arguments is that Freud could not come to terms with his own ageing and this influenced his lack of concern with older people in therapy.

(ibid:153). By contrast, in advanced old age masquerade instead functions as a 'bridge to the past', to a momentary (and private) reconnection with past selves, in an attempt to secure coherence and unity of identity (ibid:157). Significantly, Woodward suggests that it is the *body* which has become fragmented (into parts which manifest progressive biological decline) and which the (youthful, unified) self experiences as a threat to its integrity, to the internalized 'ideal body'. In relation to the body, the mirror stage as a site of subject formation is therefore countered by another mirror stage later in life, a site of subject destruction.

The body, Woodward argues, has thus become the 'other' alienated from the experienced, 'inner' self, and perhaps also alienated from a mythical 'other' body, the much cherished cultural fantasy of the idealized, *whole* body image of ourselves, what feminist philosopher Moira Gatens calls the 'imaginary body' (Gatens 1996). Gatens' concept of the 'imaginary body', a notion developed from psychoanalytic studies of hysterics, is a body that is "developed, learnt, connected to the body image of others, and is not static" (ibid:12). It is a culturally constructed *ideal* self-image that conforms to predominant cultural norms, a psychical image of the body-self or what Lacan and Freud call a libidinous and narcissistic relation to one's body (ibid:12):

The imaginary body is socially and historically specific in that it is constructed by: a shared language; the shared psychical significance and privileging of various zones of the body (for example, the mouth, the anus, the genitals); and common institutional practices and discourses (for example, medical, juridical and educational) which act on and through the body.

The imaginary body thus reflects culturally normative and intersubjectively shared phantasies and modes of thinking.

In summary, as in the sociologically informed 'mask of ageing' theory, psychoanalytic frameworks theorize the self as striving to retain temporal continuity (i.e. agelessness), and is in tension with the increasingly inflexible ageing body. However, it is significant that, unlike the 'mask of ageing' account, psychoanalytic perspectives on ageing such as those of Biggs and Woodward attempt to portray the second half of life in constructive terms, as a form of psychic productivity (re-evaluation of the self) rather than in terms of a progressive failure at consumption.

They do this by taking into consideration the cultural and social constraints which the ageing body-subject negotiates in its quest for a mature subjectivity that is both socially and personally valued.

Gendered Ageing

My discussion so far, with the exception of Woodward's argument on masquerade, has addressed the ageing body-subject in a gender-neutral way. However, gerontologist Sarah Harper (Harper 1997) is among those who argue that the social construction and experience of ageing is inextricably gendered and that it is therefore meaningless to treat age and gender as discrete categories in age theory. For example, gender relations appear to function to disadvantage women in later life in terms of their reduced capacity to represent culturally normative attributes of their gender, and it is to a consideration of gendered ageing that I now turn.

It has been shown that representations of ageing in forms of mass media in western cultures, such as in films, markedly differ for men and women, to the social disadvantage of women (Markson & Taylor 2003). Film theorist Patricia Mellencamp describes a discursive practice she terms "age-tagging" that works to age-grade men and women, and one that is perpetuated in the mass media (Mellencamp 1992). From a philosophical perspective, Esposito links women more than men with the social perception of 'obsolescence', due to their lack of social status relative to men (Esposito 1987:129). He suggests that:

In societies that continually measure status ... the struggle to maintain or acquire status continues as individuals age. And insofar as women have been marked traditionally for attractiveness and men for authority, the aging process has had a greater impact on women. Older women become obsolete as women, whereas men acquire greater stature with age.

Sociologist Mike Bury concurs with this view, noting that the late twentieth-century western youth culture of consumption tends to mask the gendered inequity of remaining youthful (Bury 1995:27). Bury contends that:

As a dominant form of 'youthful' middle-aged ... culture holds sway, the message seems to be that we are all capable of being

young now. This process may be particularly disadvantageous to older women, as youthful glamorous looks and sexuality are emphasized as positive attributes of this youthful culture. The implication remains that women's value is still strongly influenced by sexual attractiveness, and youthful appearance, in contrast to older men.

Theorists such as Woodward and Gullette have also suggested that the experience of ageing for women is more difficult than for men, and that its onset is perceived to occur earlier. Woodward argues that the combination of being a woman and being older exacerbates the experience of ageing for women, and draws on Susan Sontag's observation of women and ageing to suggest that: "Women are also subject to what I call 'double aging' or 'multiple aging.' Unlike men, women in mainstream culture in the United States today are struck by aging as it is defined by our culture far earlier than men" (Woodward 1999:xiii). Some of those feminist theorists who have addressed ageing, such as Woodward, Mellencamp, and Gullette, have therefore contended that the construction of older bodies is gendered, and that this binary construction of 'older' + 'woman' serves to further marginalize women.⁵

However, some theorists also contend that bodily ageing can also be a difficult issue for men, and as different for men than for women. For example, sociologist Jeff Hearn contends that the category of 'old men' involves the loss of two forms of empowerment: the organizational power of the middle-aged and the physical strength and virility of the young, and he locates the ageing of men in what he calls a 'disruption of intergenerational relations': "In this construction older men are gradually diverted from the centre of youth and the heterosexual family; they become the *other* of this centre, as they approach death" (Hearn 1995:112). The category of 'older men' is linked with gender: "It connects oldness to

⁵ While it has been a traditionally neglected concern of feminists, more recently feminist gerontologists have focused on gendered ageing. See, for example, the papers by Biggs, Twigg, McMullin & Cairney, Ray and others in the *Journal of Aging Studies* special issue, *New Directions in Feminist Gerontology* (*Journal of Aging Studies* (2004), 18(1): 1-121), also Barrett (2005), Calasanti (2005, 2004, 1999) and Ray (1999, 1996).

gender, to men, and to men's social power". Hearn also suggests that the category of 'older men' may contradict dominant constructions of men and masculinities, such constructions being linked with youth, physical strength, and another marker of sexuality, that of virility.⁶ It therefore becomes possible to contend that, if older men become 'other', ageing male bodies are 'feminized' in western cultures in which masculinity is equated with bodily control, social power, and youthfulness. At the same time, they become subject to the 'ambiguity' of ageing bodies.

The two notions of 'ambiguity' and 'control' are useful in theorizing how women and men are aged within contemporary western cultures. Therefore, the remainder of this section is devoted to exploring the concept of ambiguity, in the ways in which older people perform cultural norms through self-presentation, followed by a consideration of the function of bodily control in relation to gendered ageing.

One way in which ambiguity is discouraged in the bodily signification of age and gender norms in western cultures is through the common practice of age-tagging referred to earlier. Age-tagging is a discursive practice that, together with gender identification, grades individuals into a chronological age cohort, which is conflated with other, naturalized characteristics, including those referring to social power and bodily control. In western cultures, through our everyday practices, we unselfconsciously classify or 'tag' others, the strangers we meet or whose images we encounter in the media, effectively 'interpellating' the other (as the middle-aged, middle-class, female, or as the elderly, working-class male). Because it constitutes a culturally normative 'reading' of visible physical attributes with chronological age, age-tagging is therefore a means of unambiguously identifying bodies as belonging into particular age groups.

The way in which 'old' bodies are perceived in contemporary western cultures suggests that the materiality of the older body can pose a challenge to the concept of a continuous, unified and coherent subjectivity. In her discussion of age-tagging, Patricia Mellencamp contrasts the

⁶ Ramsay Burt has also linked the representations of the male dancer with contradictory constructions of masculinity (Burt 1995).

classical body, which she defines as “monumental, static, closed, sleek and quiet” against another type of body: the grotesque, carnivalesque body (Mellencamp (1992:279). “The classical body is young, the grotesque body is old”, she writes. She contends that older bodies are characterized by lack, but here this lack or loss is not primarily the loss of physical capital, if by that one refers to ‘what the body can do’. Rather, Mellencamp suggests that older bodies disturb us because they lack the ‘monumentality’ and unity of form inherent in young (classical) bodies. That is, they are characterized by *ambiguity* and are not easily ‘read’ or classifiable. For norms require that the ways an older person performs her or his social self, whether through comportment, body shape, dress, and other practices, must also be internally consistent, in order to allow others to identify him or her unambiguously as aged and therefore ‘uphold the norm’. In other words, ambiguity in body performance of self is not normative, and therefore not within the bounds of what is considered ‘normal’ within western cultures (see Diprose 1994).

To illustrate this further, I refer to poststructural queer theorist Judith Butler’s notion of performativity of gender and extend it to ageing and ambiguity of self-performance. According to Butler’s theory of gendered subjectivity as performative, what we understand by gender is a performance of the modes of dress, behaviors, speech, and all the other ways gender-specific norms are discursively and behaviorally enacted in order to successfully fabricate the cultural myth of a gendered (i.e., masculine or feminine) subjectivity (Butler 1990, 1993). These normative enactments of gender become normal within a culture. However, for Butler, reiteration of one’s gender can be used subversively, by “working the weakness in the norm” (Butler 1993). For example, we can change the norms that prescribe one’s gender by performing them ‘imperfectly’, by undermining our masculine or feminine modes of dress, behaviors or speech through the subtle inclusion of gender-inconsistent elements – for norms as cultural constructs exist precariously and require correct reiteration to reify and perpetuate them, and for them to become naturalized, embodied and lived. Therefore, this very ambiguity can potentially be used to disrupt the normative category of ‘age’, for bodies that do not (or cannot) normatively perform their age weaken the category of age by

the ambiguity inherent in their performance, and I will further address this point later in this paper.

The second concept crucial to ageing is that of 'control', and its relationship with ambiguity and abjection in relation to the permeability of the body's boundaries. Earlier I briefly referred to the notion of control, specifically bodily control, as an attribute that has become allied with the performance of both masculinity and youthfulness. Bodily self-control, the ability to control the body's comportment, movements, and emissions, has been an important concept in defining social status in western cultures. For example, anthropologist Mary Douglas in her book *Natural Symbols* linked the notion of two bodies – the social body and the physical body – to bodily control. She argued that "the physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society". Douglas then makes the link between bodily control and social control, arguing that bodily control is an expression of social control (Douglas 1973:93). Bodily control therefore carries important social meanings that become disrupted as both men's and women's bodies enter older age.

Douglas' perspective is arguably essentialist, in that the relationship between bodily control can be generalized to affect all members of a culture. However, it also suggests that control over one's body, like all forms of knowledge and experience in western cultures, has traditionally been defined (and valorized) through male experience, a position also argued by feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and others who drew on the work of poststructural feminist Luce Irigaray (Irigaray 1985a, 1985b). The defense of this notion of 'control' as masculine finds expression in statements such as that women cannot control menstruation, whereas men can control ejaculation (Douglas 1966), and from the traditional concept of women's biological enslavement to their bodies ('anatomy is destiny'). However, Irigaray and her followers have argued that a binary distinction is fundamental to patriarchal cultures and mediated through the very structure of language, according to which bodily control is associated with men and masculinity (in terms of unity and stability), whereas 'lack of control' (and therefore lack of bodily agency) has been traditionally associated with women and femininity (in terms of plurality and fluidity).

Psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva draws upon Douglas' argument in her analysis of male representations of female bodies as 'leaking' and 'draining' and therefore as abject (Kristeva 1982). She has defined such representations as a key cultural concept behind patriarchal control. Further, both the issue of bodily control, and the concept of the body's (real or imagined) boundaries, have been used to theorize women's bodies as posing a threat to a masculine culture. Bodily control and the permeability of the body's boundaries have been linked, according to Douglas and Kristeva. That is, unlike men's bodies, women's bodies' boundaries are not configurable as 'closed' and definitive of 'inside' versus 'outside' (and therefore they signify ambiguity in relation to these boundaries). Some have argued that this permeability of the female body's boundaries is feared by men and incites abjection in them (e.g., Theweleit 1987).

Abjection here is a response to an ambiguous form of signification, a signification that does not refer to culturally accepted gender norms, but that through its very ambiguity of performance throws these culturally cherished norms into question. Abjection is dangerous because it is always ambiguous, and is therefore seen as (merely) transitional. According to Kristeva (1982), the abject is that which threatens the *corps propre* (translated as the 'clean' and 'proper' body), the body that is knowable and predictable, the body with clearly defined boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside', and the body as both a subject of institutional control and as subject to self-control.

The concept of 'abject masculinity' subverts the notion that masculinity is an unproblematic, unambiguous category. Klaus Theweleit (1987) and others have argued that western heterosexual masculinity is structured by oppressive (oedipal) boundaries. According to this framework, women through the ambiguity of their signification of clear boundaries and bodily control pose a threat to men, the threat of being engulfed in a boundaryless pre-Oedipal state of polymorphous perversity. The concept of masculinity in western cultures has therefore been theorized as vulnerable and in constant need of reification through 'cor

rect' performance and bodily control (see e.g., Burt 1995; Connell 1983, 1995).⁷

This notion of ambiguity eliciting abjection through the threat posed to the 'clean and proper' (clearly bounded, masculine) body is important in relation to gendered ageing, as the relationship between social power, bodily control and masculinity breaks down when essential control over bodily emissions starts to fail in men as they age. Some have argued that the ageing body, whether male or female, finds itself progressively unable to express itself in the conventional, normative gender codes, the successful performance of which marks our gender in everyday life (see Harper 1997). One might then be able to theorize that the ageing of men is aligned with femininity through 'lack' of bodily control, that men become 'the other', joining the non-privileged half of the gender binary that women have (always, already) been subsumed under. Where absolute control of the body, as defined through male experience, constitutes the overarching marker of (masculine) adulthood, the concept of lack of bodily control associated with advanced old age (in both women *and* men) therefore becomes stigmatized. As they age, men can no longer emulate the bodily control and competence of their youth, within in an androcentric culture that prizes and discursively perpetuates bodily control and fixity and stability of boundaries as normative attributes of the *corps propre*.

Men therefore must find the experience of their bodies ageing as difficult as women, albeit in different ways, and feminist gerontology has recently begun to acknowledge this (see Calasanti 2004).⁸ If, as Harper argues, it is only "through acknowledging the embodiment of male sexed

7 For example, Robert Connell connects the construction of masculinity with 'the social power structure of patriarchy', through qualities that represent the body as a whole: "What it means to be masculine is, quite literally, to embody force, to embody competence" (Connell, 1983:27).

8 Some feminist gerontologists also address the ageing of men. Toni Calasanti here argues that the perception that feminist gerontology is only concerned with women to the exclusion of old men is incorrect, as "even if women are the focus of research, their positions are intrinsically tied to those of men, and vice versa" (Calasanti 2004).

knowledge as the dominant paradigm within which the ageing body is interpreted, [that] the relationship between knowledge, control of the body and lived experience can be further understood" (Harper 1997:161), the experience of old age in men is one that, unlike women, they have not been adequately prepared for in their youth. In this sense they are disadvantaged in relation to women, who have not been socialized into the importance of high bodily control in defining gendered subjectivity. As noted earlier, developing a culturally valued subjectivity would therefore be difficult for *both* older men and older women, due to the differential ways in which gender and ageing have been constituted and understood in western cultures.

To sum up, I have contended that both ageing female *and* male bodies can be construed as a potential threat to the phallic order, as anathematical to it, and therefore as abject. For, as Mansfield (2000:71) argues:

The idea that anything may have a dynamically changing or inconsistent identity, or have contradiction as its very essence or animating principle, is defined as monstrous and abominable to a phallic culture that can tolerate only the homogeneous, the defined, knowable and consistent.

It can further be argued that, while both male and female bodies are marginalized as 'feminine' as they age, the ageing female body is doubly marginalized; first by virtue of feminine lack, and secondly by virtue of the loss of youth, a youth that has been defined in masculine terms of power (including sexual power) and bodily control. If, as I suggest, ageing, like femininity, disrupts the masculine order through this very ambiguity and fluxus of subjectivity, how can ageing subjectivities be more productively delineated? How can an increase in ambiguity of signifying the *corps propre*, and a concomitant decrease in bodily control, produce a mature subjectivity that evades the abject? How can old age be anything but as a threat to the very notion of gendered personhood? This will be my concern in the final section of this paper.

Bodily Agency and Age Performance in Later Life

In order to explore how ambiguity of body-performance and bodily control might be productively theorized in old age, I explore two frame

works. The first framework suggests potential for the harnessing of ambiguity in subverting culturally normative and marginalized age-gender performance by a development of Butler's concept of performativity, and the second, contrasting framework presents a radical valuing of old age as a prime stage of attainment of caring for oneself, which is found in the later writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Earlier in this paper I referred to Butler's performativity theory in relation to performing gender and ageing. Shannon Sullivan takes up Butler's model and the notion of 'working the weakness in the norm' in arguing that, as habits can be embodied and performed differently, slight variations ('imperfect' reiterations) are possible that displace and, over time, gradually lead to change in cultural norms (Sullivan 2000). As Sullivan notes, "we can reconfigure our culture in and through the ways we embody it. We alter, however slightly, the grooves engrained in our selves when we re-trace and re-groove them through our habitual actions" (ibid:33). That is, the subject is conceived as subject(ed) to cultural norms that are in turn subjected to individual variations in their performance by (aged, gendered, classed) bodies. Therefore, any ambiguity inherent in the reiteration of norms, whether in performing one's gender or one's age, can be used to undermine and question the status of these norms, and gradually lead to a change in the cultural perceptions and valorization of older body-subjects through strategically subversive bodily performance. Therefore, according to Sullivan's model, ageist perceptions of older people *can* be changed over time by the ways in which people perform age, although this cultural change is very gradual.

A contrasting perspective occurs in the later work of Foucault, in which he concerned himself with the issue of self-care and how one might turn oneself into a subject. Foucault's historically situated references to the ageing self, although not a primary concern in his writings, suggest that the cultural devalorization of older age is historically contingent and therefore mutable. Although his concern with ageing is tangential, in a remarkable analogy to the Jungian concept of the second half of life as a period of reevaluation of, and introspection on the self, his later writings depart from his earlier emphasis on the impact of cultural power on individuals whose subjectivities are constituted exclusively through this power. Instead, he moves towards a position that attributes some

thing approaching individual agency towards a self that one 'cares' for and nurtures throughout one's life to the very end.

According to Foucault's earlier writings (Foucault 1972, 1980), subjectivity as a 'stable', interior truth is an illusion, a construct, a cultural fabrication. Rather, the corporeal subject is constituted through techniques of the body that reflect institutional regimes of power that are imposed on, perpetuated by, and fully constitute that subject through the 'correct' performance of norms. However, in *Technologies of the Self* (Foucault, 1988) and *The Care of the Self* (Foucault, 1990), Foucault's writings show a radical departure from his earlier emphasis on subjectivity as a product of historically contingent forms of institutional power, by focusing on a genealogy of the concept of 'self care' throughout the history of western thought on the development of modes of being for the self, between the care of oneself and the quest for self-knowledge (Foucault, 1988, 1990).

Foucault's concern here is with how one might "take care of oneself", how "a human being turns him- or herself into a subject", through practices through which individuals "acted on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being in order to transform themselves and attain a certain state of perfection or happiness, or to become a sage or immortal" (Foucault, 1988:3-4).⁹ He demonstrates that the principle of self-knowledge (*gnothi seauton*) has historically evolved to take precedence over that of self-care (*epimeleia heautou*). For example, self-knowledge became defined under Christian moral principles of self-renunciation in order to attain salvation in a future (after)life, whereas in Greco-Roman culture self-knowledge was a *product* of the practice of self-care, rather than something that was achieved through an ascetic practice of self-renunciation.¹⁰

⁹ It would be interesting to compare this perspective with the Jungian concept of the second half of life as a period in which to devote serious attention to the self (Biggs, 1993), which I discussed earlier, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ Foucault, in 'Friendship as a Way of Life', distinguishes between asceticism and askesis: "Asceticism as the renunciation of pleasure has bad

Most significantly for ageing, at certain historical junctures care of the self was not confined to youth but practiced throughout one's life by means of a range of 'techniques', such as introspection, vigilance, care of the body and soul, and writing as a practice of narrating the self. This perspective does not deal with changing ageist cultural perceptions over time; rather, it enables a view of older age as inherently productive rather than degenerative. It suggests an embodied lifelong ethos: to 'live well' – not in the sense of conspicuous hedonistic consumption in a culture that valorizes youthfulness, but to live an 'abundant life' into deep old age. Thus even extreme old age offers the potential for completing a self, as Foucault (1988:31) points out:

Since we have to take care throughout life, the objective is no longer to get prepared for adult life, or for another life, but to get prepared for a certain complete achievement of life. This achievement is complete at the moment just prior to death. This notion of a happy proximity to death – of old age as completion – is an inversion of the traditional Greek values on youth.

Foucault addresses the relationship between old age and care of the self most directly in his lectures at the Collège de France in the early 1980s (Foucault 2005), where he explores the notion that the highest form of care of the self occurs when one is old. Old age thus becomes a positive goal of existence, in the face of having lost the capacity and desire for physical pleasures or ambition (*ibid*:109).¹¹ Referring to a letter by Seneca, he notes that Seneca does not believe that living one's life should conform to one's age; rather, life should be lived running away from the 'enemies' pursuing one: desire for pleasure, power, money, etc. Here,

connotations. But the *askesis* is something else: it's the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the self appear that happily one never attains" (Foucault 1989:206).

¹¹ Note of course that Foucault refers to the ageing of men, and refers to old age as a stage where "an old man delights in nothing but himself" (*ibid*:109). 'Old age' in the period of antiquity with which he is concerned was also defined as 60 years of age, a life stage defined in contemporary western culture as 'young-old'.

Foucault importantly states that “Old age no longer appears as the ambiguous end of life, but rather as a focal point of life, a positive focal point towards which we should strive... We should live to be old, for in old age we will find tranquility, shelter, and enjoyment of the self” (ibid:110), and that “we should place ourselves in a condition such that we live it as if it is already over” (ibid.).

Old age thus becomes productive rather than merely a senescent stage restricted to a generativity necessitated through physical decline; it is “an old age we produce... which we practice” (ibid.). Further, he suggests that old age is a point at which (through a long practice of the self) the self “finally arrives at itself, at which one returns to one’s self, and at which one has a perfect and complete relationship to the self of both mastery and satisfaction” (ibid:109). Significantly, here Foucault not only directly concerns himself with old age, a condition that he notes is surrounded by a “tradition of ambiguity and limited value”, but also delineates old age as a life stage offering the highest capacity for self-realization, in arguing that old age can be a highly productive state for self-care, a pinnacle of experiencing and practicing *epimeleia heautou*.

Prima facie, such a framework holds promise for age theories as it credits the body-subject, even in advanced old age, even in the face of drastically limited bodily competence, with a remarkable agency as yet unavailable to the young and physically fit, and in this way establishes the ‘final’ stage of existence as inherently (self-) productive, as significant in the potential it offers for personal agency through the practice of self-care. However, while it represents a counter-narrative to the traditional contemporary western narratives of decline and obsolescence, it presents obvious problems.

Firstly, it implies an abstinence and disengagement from participation in social life in old age by retreating into the self, a stage at which the individual no longer actively participates within her or his community and contributes to social cohesion and improved quality of life. It is a version of disengagement theory that has been abandoned by gerontology in favor of more ‘active ageing’ approaches. Secondly, I am uncomfortable with the term ‘mastery’, because it suggests a ‘masculine’ way of

ageing, of transcending increasing physical frailty, not by coming to terms with it, but by a process of disembodiment.¹² The notion of 'mastery' in old age is still linked to 'control': not bodily control which has diminished, but a form of meta-control that is nonetheless a derivative of 'control' as being a defining characteristic of youthful masculinity. Finally, the utopian prospect of experiencing mastery and satisfaction in old age obviously does not apply to those aged body-subjects who live in abject poverty and/or who might experience their immobility, pain and sensory impairment as a considerable burden to their ability to enjoy life and find very little meaning in their bodily 'decline'.

In theorizing the corporeal subject in old age, this framework as it stands has some serious shortcomings. However, it attempts to offer a useful counter-narrative to the medicalization of age as a period of decline, and therefore has value in allowing us to theorize old age in more positive terms. It resonates well with Biggs' (1993) model of the persona and the shedding of the false wrappings of the self in older age, but it requires a critical consideration of the cultural marginalization and devaluation of old age, not a submission to it, and this may be one productive path for further research.

Conclusion

In this article I have suggested that the deep-seated cultural valorization of youth and bodily control and culturally ingrained intolerance of ambiguity in body performance marks (and perhaps masks) a historically contingent, ageist perspective on older age, one that is informed by the same patriarchal value system that privileges the masculine over the

¹² Certainly Foucault has been subject to feminist critique, largely on the grounds that his account of the corporeal subject lacks sexed specificity (see e.g., Butler (1990), Grosz (1994). Grosz, for example, argues that Foucault "rarely ... talks about the issue of sexual difference or specifies that the objects of his investigation are implicitly male bodies and subjectivities, men's practices and modes of social organization" (Grosz 1994:156). Therefore, she contends that Foucault's framework needs to be reworked by feminists.

feminine. It is a perspective that can be linked to a culturally-based devaluing and feminization of both female *and* male older bodies, one that can be argued to be an outcome of contemporary western cultures' understanding and differential valorization of masculinity and femininity, and one that is fundamental to dualistic accounts of ageing and gender. Further, in perpetuating this status quo those of us who are 'not yet old' risk our own future by devaluing and marginalizing old age. As Woodward (1999:x) points out, "Our disregard of age is all the more curious because age—in the sense of *older* age—is the one difference we are all likely to live into".

Therefore, we need to find ways to transcend dualistic perspectives of ageing, to value ambiguity and flux over stability and fixity of boundaries, and to draw on the strategies used by poststructural feminists in order to develop age theories of difference rather than of loss (of equality). Secondly, we need to adopt a critical position by constructive questioning (or 'queering' in the broadest sense of the term) of normativity in relation to gendered ageing, by situating 'normativity' within the historical context and the specific social and historical conditions that engendered this particular matrix of cultural norms. It is possible to do so not only through developing critical genealogies but also – and importantly – through practice. For if we can theorize the ambiguity of body performance in maturity productively – as *different* from the stability and unity of the classically masculine subjectivity, rather than as falling short of it – it might then become possible to avoid the cultural loading of the binary positioning of 'age' with 'decline', and perhaps begin to develop more ethical understandings of gendered ageing and mature subjectivity in western cultures.

Finally, and most importantly, the issues explored in this paper suggest that further empirical research is needed to develop frameworks that are mindful of the issues and pitfalls outlined, and that productively theorize body-subjects in advanced old age, body-subjects in the face of whose reduced bodily competence embodied agency takes on a new meaning. In my PhD thesis I targeted western theatrical dancers as a focus of study as theirs is a body-based discipline – as is that of elite athletes – and they therefore face the challenges of the acceptance of bodily changes over time much earlier than those in other professions that place

less emphasis on the body, and may therefore be more accommodating of their bodies ageing (Schwaiger 2005b).¹³ Further research is needed to generalize from this group to more 'representative' groups in western cultures in order to answer questions such as how the meanings of bodily control and competence in relation to the ageing self might be more productively reconfigured within their historical and cultural contexts.

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¹³ In the case of dancers, I argue that age-attributed 'decline' in bodily competence ('what the body can do') as an elite performer is not the only consideration in their relatively early retirement from performing, but contend that a more hidden category – that of culturally perceived decline in 'sexual capital' (a gendered concept, 'how the body should look') is significant although masked by the cultural discourse surrounding bodily competence in explaining why dancers retire so early (in their 20s and 30s) and so few continue to perform in later life (Schwaiger 2005b). Of course, there are other considerations not associated with the loss of normative physical or gender-signifying competence with age, considerations that impact on midlife dancers who also often have to negotiate different lifestyle demands to those of young dancers.

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