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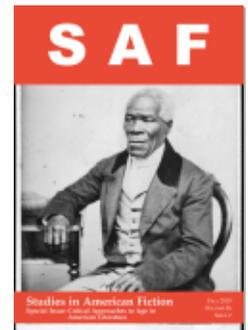
Afterword: Literary Antidotes to the Toxin That Is Ageism

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Afterword

Literary Antidotes to the Toxin That Is Ageism

Kathleen Woodward

At the enlivening multidisciplinary conference on aging held at Trent University in May 2019, the bracing cultural critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette, author of the important book *Aged by Culture* (2004), lamented in passing that the orbit of our inquiry was not larger and more ambitious—age studies rather than aging. With uncanny timing, a few days later I received a welcome email from Sari Edelstein about the special issue of *Studies in American Fiction* on critical approaches to age, from infancy to old age, that she and Melanie Dawson were editing. And here it is! Age studies. Thank you, Sari and Melanie, for this issue and for your strong and clear-sighted introduction to it!

As if with one powerful voice, these excellent essays speak to the prominent and insufficiently recognized ways in which age has been a key structuring element in American society across our history.¹ As Edelstein and Dawson stress, age is a fundamental category for understanding the distribution of power, vulnerability, and security. At work is the pervasive social logic of the American youth-age system in which youth is accorded positive value and old age negative value. How are these values distributed? By whom? Largely by those inhabiting the long age phase of adulthood. Taken together, these deeply researched and thoughtful contributions to *Studies in American Fiction* uncover, chart, and challenge the dominant discourses of age in the United States across the life course with a focus on age-related narratives of development and decline.

How might we build on the insights of these essays as well as ensure that the clarion call of its editors to address issues of age as matters of social justice is heard? More specifically, as scholars and teachers of American literature, how can we draw on our knowledge, learn more, and reach publics beyond our professional journals, including the space of the classroom? It is not obvious how to do so. I am mindful it was not so

many years ago that I developed a graduate seminar in age studies. The title was “Age: The Missing Category in Cultural Studies,” and I was proud of my syllabus. It included sections on youth subcultures, theories and histories of generations, conceptualizations of the life course, shifting representations and meanings of middle age, and the youthful structure of the look; the final section was devoted to illness, dependency, and care. Only three students signed up, and the course was summarily canceled. I suspect one of the reasons for the lack of interest is that demographically the student body at the University of Washington is young, and the ideological and existential issues of age seem to undergraduate and graduate students so much less compelling—and urgent—than other issues of social justice.

Along with this special issue, my experience this past summer of giving a lecture on ageism as part of a quarter-long lunchtime series on equity, diversity, and inclusion to the staff of the University of Washington’s continuing education division has prompted me to think afresh about what new directions we might take in literary studies as age studies. In my talk, titled, “Ageism: A Toxin Pervasive in Our Culture,” I offered multiple examples of ageism and the decline narrative of aging. They ranged from the all-important context of the first use of the term in the United States in 1969 (race and class as well as age were involved) and Susan Sontag’s 1972 essay on the double standard of aging (fifty years later it is still breaking news that in America women are typically understood as old at a younger age than men) to the 2002 feature film *About Schmidt* and a 2013 AARP study of age discrimination in the workplace.² There were some seventy-five people in attendance, representing a wide range of ages from twenty to sixty. Most stayed beyond the first hour for another thirty minutes of discussion. For many, the idea of ageism was new, even if the unwitting practice of it (a form of implicit bias) as well as the experience of it (including internalized ageism) were not. It struck me that few seemed to have a conceptual framework for understanding their own behavior and experiences—or the experiences and behavior of others. And that few seemed to have an acute awareness of how pervasive and complicated the discourses of age are in American culture. Consider the many modalities of age we routinely encounter, be they age as chronological, biological or functional, social, psychological, cultural, statistical, and legal, all of which may be decisively inflected by other social categories, including race, class, ethnicity, gender, and so forth. Analysis as critique can thus serve as a first step, and that is what I focused on in my talk.

But in the discussion period I had the opportunity to recommend novels and memoirs in response to questions and interventions. This gave me the enormous pleasure

of referring to literature I admire and even love, works that I hoped might be effective antidotes to the toxin that is ageism (for me, bibliography is one of the most precious of gifts). Virtually every book I mentioned was contemporary. I take the opportunity this afterword presents to also recommend texts that have captivated me and pushed my thinking about age, in particular, old age.

In my recent writing I have been partial to autobiographical texts, wanting to learn how individuals express their experience of aging today—how they describe what it feels like to be old, what forms comfort and solace and faith take for them, what relationships of care (or not) exist for them, what they think constitutes meaningful contributions to society, what legacies they might be leaving behind. But taking this special issue as a cue, or more precisely, as an inspiration, I turn my attention to fiction that creates social worlds structured by different youth-age systems and that allows us to stretch our imaginations beyond what seems to be the natural course of things. If today I were to develop an undergraduate or graduate course on age, I would begin with contemporary fiction as a way of meeting people where they are, of drawing them into the immersive, multifaceted, and slow experience that is the reading of world-building novels. With a contemporary fictional text in hand about age as a critical dimension of ideology and identity, a turn to literature from other periods can take on so much more meaning for our students.

History is written from the perspective of the present; compelling current matters as well as curiosity about the past motivate it. Space requires that I offer only one example from the excellent essays in this special issue. Consider the superb essay on Charlotte Perkins Gilman by Corinne Field. It was astonishing to me to learn not only of Gilman's extensive forward-looking work over one hundred years ago on the important roles women could and should play after fifty (albeit only white women) but also about Gilman's prescient prediction—she drew on population statistics and believed in civilizational progress—of a huge increase in life expectancy. Amazing. As Field writes, Gilman “created a fictional social science of imagined age relations in order to intervene in very real debates about the significance of middle-aged and older women to human evolution.” Gilman's work is thus part and parcel of a literary history in the United States that imagines powerful connections between generations of women, connections that encourage respect for rather than suspicion or denunciation or rejection of older women. The desire for a longer life also has a history, as I mention in what follows.

Most of the fiction considered in this special issue exemplifies what I would expansively call the realist aesthetic of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novel,

although certainly not all. Taking contemporary fiction into account, I would include in my syllabus work that emerges from other aesthetic traditions, communities, and genres as well. In seeking alternative futures regarding age in contemporary fiction, what directions might we take? My inclination is to turn to Native American and indigenous fiction, speculative fiction, and posthuman fiction that allows us to inhabit other worlds with different youth-age value systems with the goal of returning to our own enlivened with deeper understanding and insight, renewed energy, and fresh perspectives on how to build our age world in meaningful and just ways.³ I briefly consider three examples, one from each of these broad areas. All three explore human temporality in relation to age from differing and at times converging perspectives: generational time and gender, human evolution and generational discontinuity, and age spans across species. I should confess that perhaps they do not so much signal new directions as represent what I take to be important contemporary interests in literary studies of American culture.

Consider Linda Hogan's beautiful novel *Solar Storms*, published in 1995. It is an inspiring antidote to the endemic ageism that pervades American society, especially with regard to women, given that in America women are aged by culture earlier than men and that older women are subject to ageism by younger women and by themselves in the form of internalized ageism. Set in the 1970s in northern Minnesota, *Solar Storms* is an interlocking story of five generations of Native American women in a single family, all of them living, who inhabit a world set apart from U.S. capitalist culture, a world in which old women are respected and the generations care for each other as best they can. How different this is from the dominant psychoanalytic model (it is Freudian) of generational identity for women, one that is woefully polarizing, limited as it is to two generations (mothers and daughters) and characterized by struggle.⁴ The novel also speaks eloquently to the catastrophically wasteful nature of American corporate and consumer culture, with its emphasis on getting, spending, and discarding, thus suggesting the co-constitution of a capitalist society and an ageist society.⁵

We learn that Dora-Rouge, the great-great-grandmother of the central character, was "a root and we were like a tree family, aspen or birch, connected to one another underground, the older trees feeding the young, sending off shoots, growing."⁶ (I will return to the subject of trees.) "The secrets of their longevity," we read, "were to shun the ways of the white world and remember to live each day with reverence for all that was around them" (141). At the end of their lives, they return to the land to which they are all powerfully connected, to die into it. *Solar Storms* provides a new—that is to say, *old*, multiple-centuries old—model of procreative bonds linking many generations,

bonds that connect them in ways that challenge the truncated model Freudian model of generational identity for women. The novel thus offers a model for the future, not solely one of the past. As the philosopher Samuel Scheffler has asserted recently, the dominant culture in the United States has become increasingly less interested in those who came before and will come after; this he calls temporal parochialism, an impoverishment of our sense of human time.⁷ *Solar Storms*, by contrast, represents what we might call the temporal capability to imagine both many generations of ancestors and many generations of descendants, an imaginative genealogy so vivid that it seems *alive*. Just as Gilman imagined a country for women of all ages in her 1915 utopian novel *Herland*, *Solar Storms* imagines a country for old women, for women of all ages.

In *Solar Storms* and in the fiction addressed in this special issue, individual lives as well as generations are represented as proceeding through time sequentially. We might call this a “realist” understanding of organic human time, with time accreting and accumulating at the same pace. Is it possible to imagine our embodiment in the quantitative dimension of time with its so-called arrow flying at different speeds or even in other directions? Essays in this special issue make reference to the fantastical literature of rejuvenation and time travel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. What might capture the attention of readers today in the domain of science fiction?

Take the thought-provoking 2012 short story “The Waves” by the multitalented Ken Liu, who was born in China and moved to the United States when he was eleven. A combination of myth, fantasy, and science fiction about the birth and evolution of the human species, “The Waves” asks us to reflect on what would happen to the balance within and between generations if the “natural” order of time were skewed by a technological discovery allowing people to choose either immortality by arresting their age at the moment of choice or to continue as before—to live on, grow old, and die. It’s complicated, and this is only one of the thought experiments presented in “The Waves” (please do read this magical story).

Contemplate the potential confusion. Liu introduces us to a small nuclear family composed of two young siblings and their parents. The son chooses to remain ten years old forever, while the daughter elects to grow up, grow old, and die. In the course of due time the two siblings no longer belong to the same generation, a situation further complicated by the fact that their parents have made similar choices, the father deciding to grow old and die, the mother to embrace immortality at the age of thirty-five. Thus when the mother is four hundred years old in chronological time, she remains perpetually thirty-five years old in biological time and continues to have a ten-year-old son; centuries

before, she lost her daughter, who had grown up, married, had children, aged, and died, decades older biologically than her mother but younger in terms of chronology. Who is old? Who is older? No wonder there is “a great deal of tension and conflict” about what roles the family members “should play.”⁸ Normative generational temporality has been definitively disrupted, so much so that it is hard for me to wrap my mind around the potential social and psychic instability, not to say chaos, that being able to choose immortality or not could bring. As much as age differentiates us, it establishes social and psychic order of enormous proportions, as the essays in this special issue demonstrate.

In addition to *Solar Storms* and “The Waves,” I would recommend that anyone interested in age studies read the magnificent 2018 novel *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. It portrays a sprawling and interconnected posthuman world where trees collectively serve as protectors of humankind even as they are at terrible risk of mutilation and murder, subject to clear-cutting for so-called economic development. *The Overstory* invites us to reflect on the relationality of age, an integral dimension of age that Sarah Wadsworth stresses in her essay on Henry James’s *The Awkward Age*. But in *The Overstory* the relationality of age is explored predominantly in terms not of the age of human beings in relation to each other but rather in terms of different species, presenting us with a palpable sense of a long time—of “forest time”—through the lives of trees, some many centuries old.⁹ It offers a kind of multispecies ethnography of age across species. There are chestnuts, redwoods, lindens, banyans, oaks, and maples. Sycamores, poplars, cedars, aspens, dogwoods, and mulberries. The novel’s banyan tree is more than three centuries old. The Douglas firs of the Pacific Northwest are six centuries old. Recent research has identified a Bosnian pine in Greece that is 1075 years old. I just learned that in Sweden there is a spruce more than 9,500 years old.¹⁰ In comparison, the span of human life shrinks, and in the novel an awareness of the brevity of human life encourages the growth of awe in those who honor the life of trees.¹¹ The characters in *The Overstory* grow up and grow old in relation to the social organisms that are trees; they can provide a canopy of care if they are allowed to thrive. Trees are more than companions; they can be designated as kin. What, we might ask, are the literary and cultural histories of multispecies temporality in terms of age?¹²

What is my personal history in relation to this question? I offer two very short personal-professional stories. My first book, published in 1980, was about the late style of the gifted American poets T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. When the book arrived, I saw the cover for the first time (I wasn’t consulted about it and didn’t have the wit to ask).¹³ I was appalled. On the dispiriting matte

brown-and-beige cover was a photograph of redwoods. I associated the image with an easy sentimentality and thought it was a serious mistake to choose a single image—necessarily reductive—to represent a complex subject. What do we find on the beguiling dustjacket of *The Overstory*? Stunning giant redwoods in glossy warm browns and golds, a Tiepolo-blue sky behind, and infinitesimally small humans—and horses—below. The cover glows! Not only do I have a new appreciation for that 1980 cover but I am proud of it. I also realize that my vocabulary is shifting. Before I avoided the word “elder,” perhaps mostly because for me it signaled the mistake of awarding wisdom to people on the basis of their chronological age.¹⁴ In great part thanks to novels such as *Solar Storms* and indigenous studies in general as well as recent work in gerontology intended for a public audience such as Louise Aronson’s *Elderhood*, I now find myself embracing the term “elder” because I have come to understand it as connoting first and foremost an essential and deep respect.¹⁵

Trees. Is there a natural history of the relationship between trees and humans that can be written in terms of age? In her memoir *Coming of Age: My Journey to the Eighties*, Madeleine May Kunin, former governor of Vermont and a talented writer, notes on the very first page of her foreword that she spends more time now admiring trees.¹⁶ The late British writer and literary editor Diana Athill writes in her memoir *Somewhere Towards the End* that for her gardening is deeply refreshing. “Getting one’s hands into the earth, spreading roots, making a plant comfortable,” she explains, “is a totally absorbing occupation, like painting or writing, so that you become what you are doing.”¹⁷ I love the phrasing “making a plant comfortable.” In the 1980s in *The Overstory*, one of the characters makes a pilgrimage to magisterial old-growth forests in the western United States; in gratitude, she thanks these trees “for all these gifts that you have given” (135). She has made studying the green world her life’s work.

It is horrifying to me that this past July Oregon State University’s School of Forestry cut down a 420-year-old Douglas fir.

Another one of the characters in *The Overstory* remarks, “‘It’s a great idea, trees. So great that evolution keeps inventing it, again and again’” (114). For the past year I have quoted this short passage at every possible opportunity, often pairing it with this single sentence from the first page of the novel, a sentiment communicated “*in words before words*” by a tree: “A good answer must be reinvented many times, from scratch” (3). I take these wise observations as literally as I can and as metaphors for scholarship and writing in the still emerging field of age studies. It is an excellent idea, age studies. It is a public good. And good scholarship needs to be invented, again and again. We need more essays, more books in age studies. More special issues. Like this one.

Notes

My warm thanks to Sari Edelstein and Melanie Dawson and to my colleagues Tom Foster and Dian Million.

1. In her essay in this issue, Lucia Hodgson refers to historian Howard Chudacoff's argument in his book *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989) that it was not until the American mid-nineteenth century that the category of age emerged as an important organizing principle.
2. Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging," *Saturday Review*, September 23, 1972, 29–38. In "Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry," published in *The Gerontologist* in 1969, Robert N. Butler, the first director of the National Institute on Aging, refers to ageism by analogy to sexism and racism, articulating ageism as a prejudice of one age group toward another and drawing on stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of age; his focus was on old age. Sparking his seminal reflections were the objections of people in the affluent community of Chevy Chase, Maryland, to the proposed use of a high-rise apartment building for the elderly poor, a situation in which class and race as well as age discrimination figured. Butler thus provided an analysis that today we would call intersectional.
3. I would also include the graphic memoir, close to the graphic novel, but I don't have space to consider it here. Two books about adult children caring for their aged parents—Roz Chast's *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) and Joyce Farmer's *Special Exits* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2010) come to mind—both of which are narrated, it is important to note, from the point of view of the adult child, not the parent.
4. See my essay "Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature," in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), 149–68.
5. Obsolescence of commodities is built into a capitalistic economy as is the obsolescence of workers. See Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Norton, 1970), in which she indicts capitalist societies for their scandalous treatment of aging and the elderly.
6. Linda Hogan, *Solar Storms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 48.
7. Samuel Scheffler, *Why Worry about Future Generations?* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018).
8. Ken Liu, "The Waves" (2012), in his *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* (New York: Saga Press, 2016), 218.
9. Richard Powers, *The Overstory: A Novel* (New York: Norton, 2018), 255.
10. See Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*, trans. Jane Billinghurst (Vancouver, CA: Greystone Books, 2016).
11. In my essay "Aging in the Anthropocene: The View from Margaret Drabble's *The Dark Flood Rises*," forthcoming in *Ageing in Literature*, a volume edited by Elizabeth Barry in the annual series *Essays and Studies* published by Boydell and Brewer, I consider the question of time in terms of geological time and human time.

12. To life span as a measure of age (life span denotes a limit beyond which members of a species cannot live), I would add the time of evolution (it is a process and does not have a limit, although of course species can become extinct) as a measure of age. Take the fascinating case of viruses, perhaps the outer limit case in terms of both long and short periods of time. See science writer David Quammen's *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic* (New York: Norton, 2012); he conveys a palpable sense of the long span of evolutionary viral time while simultaneously observing that in our era, viral time also moves at molecular speed, with viruses mutating seemingly instantaneously, and RNA viruses (such as the bird flu virus H5N1) mutating "quicker than perhaps any other class of organism on Earth" (271). These two vastly different scales of time provide a much larger context within which to situate the human species, whose temporality appears even more insignificant in relation to viruses than it does in relation to trees.
13. Kathleen Woodward, *At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing: The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1980).
14. See my essay "Against Wisdom: The Social Politics of Anger and Aging," *Cultural Critique* 51, no. 1 (2002): 186–218.
15. Louise Aronson, *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).
16. Madeleine May Kunin, *Coming of Age: My Journey to the Eighties* (Brattleboro, VT: Green Writers Press, 2018), 3.
17. Diana Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End: A Novel* (London: Granta, 2008), 101.