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## Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America [Book Review]

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**Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America** Margaret Morganroth Gullette ISBN 13: 978-0-226-31073-2 ISBN 10: 0-226-31073-6 University of Chicago Press, 2011 cloth, US\$29.00, review by Marc Ouellette



<1> Not since an eager, combat-booted pair of massive biceps attached to a deconstructionist waterbug with a PhD buttonholed me and shoved a Cultural Studies reader into my trembling matchstick arms has a single text caused me to enact as many multiple readings and to apply as many simultaneous readings as Margaret Morganroth Gullette's *Agewise: Fight the New Ageism in America*. Honestly, I cannot offer a review of this text. It does not need one. I am only able to respond to it, and even then with the timidity, awe and respect imbued in the above-cited recollection. To put it simply—if that is even a credible goal—the author rightly recognizes the relationships between and among the (*north*) American ideology of progress, the current era of austerity and/or recession and the perception, perpetuation, propagation and proliferation of myths of

decline. Yet, there is so much more to the situation than that summation offers. To put it abstractly, aging, along with its effects, may well represent the singular best example of cognitive dissonance, its determinates and its denial. In this way, Morganroth Gullette argues that the current era's relation to aging reminds one of the "1980s in relation to HIV-AIDS, and not only in terms of scientific ignorance, rumors, bad jokes" (193). Victim blaming becomes the order of the day. Significantly, this insight reappears and plays a central, if unstated, role in forming the layered, over-arching discursive formation that characterizes the problem.

<2> When I read this—at every turn—I was reminded almost immediately of being at the negotiating table during the provincial consultations for the broader public sector in the province of Ontario. This was the government's exercise of stripping contracts and shifting the blame for the financial crisis from unregulated and specious lending practices onto the backs of public servants; always a popular target for "stakeholders." The government lead, at the prodding of the employer side—i.e., the universities—blankly looked at me and asked if I felt that contract faculty stood in the way of younger, more current graduate students and if the former had merely failed to pass the same hurdles as their tenured masters. I replied that the government, its funding and its policies were in the way, as was a cadre of university administrators who saw profit potential and sought that instead of education. While I had statistics and facts on my side, they had perception and the money.

<3> I mention all of this because I can relate to the arguments in *Agewise* on a personal and on a professional level. To put it in academic terms, I find myself thoroughly and ineluctably interpellated by the narrative. What, in its own fearful symmetry,

Agewise develops not only the failure of the popular progress myth *as it is currently constituted*, but demonstrates that the completion of that narrative is, in fact, the solution to the contemporary problem without a name. Said another way, according to the narrative of *Agewise*, the war on aging is actually the rupture of the progress narrative and not its completion. Indeed, what becomes clear, then, is that aging is a part of, not apart from, the progress narrative, so central to American mythos and myth-making. Make no mistake, as much as the deeply detailed research is there, this a carefully crafted narrative, one which follows the archetypal construction of such, whether one is a student of Frye or Bakhtin, Propp or Campbell. There is a descent and an ascent; the beginning is the daemonic parody of the end, with complete parallel reminders of victim blaming, especially in terms of a disaster—such as a financial crisis (cf 11, 13) or a hurricane (cf 62-74)—as an opportunity to divest of problems. Here again, I was reminded of those negotiations and the seemingly coincidental concurrent cancellations of Women's Studies and Gerontology Studies at my own university home and elsewhere in the province. I was also reminded of the meeting with the Ministry's pension expert, who added glibly, "and, well, darn it, people are living longer" as a further justification for her role in demolishing pensions.

<4> I mention the gender of the ministry functionary because this gives me pause in my reading of *Agewise*. In recalling my time at the negotiating table, I also recall quite clearly that the government lead for the province in our sector—and in most of the others—was female. Moreover, our employer counterparts, all vice-presidents or their equivalents, comprised four women and only one man. Indeed, this group answered mainly to women at their own institutions, including mine. This is intended neither to contradict the author's position nor her findings. Rather, I mention these anecdotes because of the cognitive dissonance they

produced in me at the time and continue to produce as I write this. Moreover, I feel drawn into including the personal as well as the political and the professional because of the book's own draw, with its own blend of (four generations of) the personal, the political and the professional.[1] Indeed, it encourages comparisons and demands readings at every one of these levels, especially and most notably the personal. As well, I will return to these thoughts as the book returns to its beginnings as it finds its conclusions.

<5> So, this indicates a need to step outside the narrative—or at least away from it—to consider how this came to be the case, despite the overwhelming evidence, and what are the effects. It is not enough for me to observe that the truest, most convincing evidence of a patriarchal structure is one in which those most disadvantaged do the bidding of the patriarch on his behalf, nor is it anywhere near enough to offer a schoolyard rejoinder that always sounds like, “yeah, so.” What becomes clear is that undoubtedly, *Agewise* is a feminist book about aging. Indeed, this is its greatest and most convincing strength. Yet, I also find myself wondering at many points if it is also part one of a multi-part series because men and masculinity feel like the strangers one meets along the way in a Proppian tale, who happen to also fall under the rubric of the “new ageism,” which keeps its “victims undifferentiated, neutered, other” (31). To think otherwise would be to underestimate the scope and the breadth of the issue. To divide the dilemma into categories runs the risk of falling into the particular and predictable trap of individualizing and pathologizing the problem in order to obfuscate the systemic, institutionalized and historical dimensions that not only produce but also profit from the very problem they decry. Here, the ongoing dispute between the National Football League and its retired players offers a high profile example. The league profits massively from the violence that is its product. However, by suspending or by

fining individual players for excessive violence, the league avoids responsibility for the violence and instead hangs it on the player whose behaviour *subjectively* crosses a boundary. Where the book comes close to such a statement appears fairly early on, with regard to illness and suicide, both of which can be similarly individualized and pathologized (49). And so, in keeping with the thematic and the narrative structure, this thought returns as the book closes, in a series of discussions of Alzheimer's and memory loss. What is to be commended, though, is the book's *and the author's* commitment to that symmetry, to that progression, in observing, "The way backward is forward" (181). In other words, aging is itself the answer to the problem of aging.

<7> While the narrative never actually mentions cognitive dissonance by name, it eventually hit upon me that this is actually the problem that has no name. Time and again, Morganroth Gullette offers aging as a form of progress and as a means of resolving, or at least countering, several long-standing cultural concerns and critical commonplaces. Indeed, this is the bulk of the middle of the book. Moreover, these discussions comprise the book's own progression through youth, middle-age and into the perceived years of decline. Admittedly, saying this borrows too much, offers too little and infers too reconditely. In concrete terms, *Agewise* stands as a thoroughly comprehensive study, one which meets all of its claims and does so tenaciously and with a rigour that reflects the depth of both. In the latter case, the dual figurations of feminist thought and narratological analysis respectively inform and shape the course of the book. As the author notes, this is at least in part because "aging is a narrative" (5). Thus, the study is shaped first and foremost by its attention to narrative, its study of one narrative and its shape as a narrative. This is best exemplified by the treatment of the question of the so-called "beauty myth" and the medicalization of the female body,

particularly the creation of menopause in the 1980s (87). [2] However, the U-shaped narrative requires themes of ascent, as well. In this regard, *Agewise* shows remarkable commitment to its purpose and to its form. Indeed, form echoes and becomes content as the succeeding chapters offer aging as a corrective and as a locus and a source of hope (cf 107). The most important section, and probably the boldest for some, for developing these themes likely is the section on sexuality and aging (cf 138). In doing so, though, *Agewise* very clearly subscribes—indeed, I am tempted to write “reinscribes”—the progress narrative, even as it hopes to redirect it. If there is a single thing about the book that I admire the most and yet which gives me an uneasy, unsure feeling, it is this steadfast, earnest, forthright desire for the progress narrative.

<8> These misgivings appear for a number of reasons. First, I could argue that aging does not exist. This is no mere post-modern or post-structuralist trickery or word play. Rather we only have stories about aging. Tying aging to the progress narrative begets some strange and unwelcome bedfellows while leaving others behind. Even so, the book seems to anticipate this step, which is itself part of the story. As Morganroth Gullette explains, via a declaration that is simultaneously admonition and challenge, women means, “as it too often does in feminist writing, younger women” (77). This was a reference to Hurricane Katrina, which becomes a case study of the structural, systemic, and institutional discourses and practices that promote and perpetuate the kinds of ageism Morganroth Gullette examines in the book. This reveals a particular myopia—on the part of the electorate, elected officials, as well as scholars and activists alike—that prevails and pervades North American culture and which results in short term focus instead of long term planning. This kind of myopia becomes most pronounced and most pernicious when disaster or crisis—both real and perceived—occur. In this regard, however, I cannot help but

wonder aloud whether the timing and the focus of this book heads down the very same path.

<10> Concurrently, though, I fear that my own apprehension might derive from a similar, learned tendency. That is to say, the encyclopaedic bulk of the book hammers home—beyond any shadow of any doubt—that there is a vast, reified ideological construction of aging and those who are most acutely experiencing the aging processes, but this focus proceeds from two critical assumptions that rest on equally systemic and culturally produced principles. Quite simply, I spent most of the time reading the book feeling incredibly moved and yet uneasy because of my understanding of the reified cultural construction of baby boomers and the similar cultural production of feminism and/or gender. Yet, I also wonder whether my questioning of the baby boomers stems as much from my own position as a member of the statistically insignificant group between boomers and so-called gen-X. Thus, I have to question both the book and my own premises when wondering how the ageism is also self-fulfilling given the overwhelming tendency of baby boomers to be undeniably myopic, even to the point of generational solipsism, when it comes to their mass cultural and social concerns. In studying and teaching these movements, especially sub and/or countercultures, it becomes quite apparent that their preoccupations *at a given moment* define the focus of the topic. Similarly, I feel the current pattern Morganroth Gullette highlights regarding this very tendency also appears in feminism and elsewhere. In education, for example, it has been argued that the norms in elementary and secondary schools reflect a white, middle-class, suburban female perspective. It is no mistake that I received the annual survey from the Ontario College of Teachers to show me that nearly 70% of the members are female, most of these are under forty-five and white. Bargaining surveys my spouse obtained show that family benefits and maternity/paternity benefits

now stand as a principle concern for the group but retirement packages and even wages lag behind. In the last round, wages stood first. These reflect the group self-interest of the dominant demographic. However, their statistical dominance should never place under erasure the constructed dominance and privilege that inhere consequently.

<11> There is almost a circularity to the book, one which mirrors and mimics its own theoretical underpinnings in narratology. Its beginning is its end and the progression is wonderfully symmetrical, uniform and measured. No detail remains without return or recapitulation, including the reference to Conan O'Brien's joke about the AARP installment of the 2008 U.S. presidential debates (36, 195). What strikes me, then, is not that this becomes a self-fulfilling examination, even if it does match the progress step-by-step. Rather, I am struck by the overwhelming conviction and commitment to the very narrative the book eviscerates in its course. It took me several readings of the book to realize and to recognize fully the depth of this inculcation in an ineluctably American mythopoetics of progress. In defining the particular version to which she subscribes, the author offers a simple synonym, "growth" (151). That said, the bulk of the surrounding description more clearly paints the sense that each generation might achieve more than the previous one. Still more specifically, these achievements point to the quality of life and emphasize equality and opportunity (147-50). At the moment of discovery, I recognized immediately the ways in which I could describe it, if not determine its roots and references. First and foremost, is the moment of interpellation. This term never appears in the study. And yet, it helps me understand the simultaneous clinging to the idea of progress, dissatisfaction with its outcomes and inability to break the cycle and break out of the narrative. Indeed, the author suggests that every child should have access to this version

of the progress story (151-2). In this moment, I also recognize my own misgivings about any study that has any sympathy for the baby boomers. I cannot and do not answer their hailing call quite so easily, especially because progress is simultaneously a loaded and an empty descriptor, a rationale and an outcome, one that is affixed almost permanently to the discourse of lifestyle marketing and of conspicuous consumption. Indeed, the triumph of that genre is its demographic focus, its instrumental rationality. It says, like all progress narratives, "fit in or be left behind;" like all discourses, it defines most clearly those who do not belong rather than those who do. This is important because, quite frankly, it brings me to my one conclusion and, hopefully, to a symmetrical end to my own narrative of descent and ascent as I read and write about what is itself a hopeful book.

<12> Indeed, the final, epiphanic reading of *Agewise* also pointed me to the fact that the progress narrative of aging really is what I have called elsewhere a "dissociative discourse." Those deploying such discourses have two basic assumptions, "I could never be like that and that could never happen to me," which become axiomatic and programmatic. At every turn, this is the message of ageism. It is a message of blanket cultural denial (185); hence the cognitive dissonance produced by the inescapable fact of aging, especially among practitioners of ageism (157-8). The recurring image Morganroth Gullette offers is that of the proverbial "Eskimo on an ice floe" (21-31, 221-2). This apocryphal figure stands as testimony to the dissociations involved in ageism. It speaks not to an individual foregoing life so as to avoid becoming a burden. Instead it defines a cultural belief that others should do this. The very contingency of proclaiming and/or championing the preference to head for an ice floe is the ruling assumption that the speaker would never be confronted with the reality of decline. After reading *Agewise*—many, many times—I am only more certain than

ever of the fact that the structural, systemic and institutionalized dimensions of the problem are far greater than any one critical approach can lay bare.

<13> Here, I cannot help but feel that *Agewise's* strength is also a limitation. What I mean by this is that some might, have and will refer to the situation I faced at that bargaining table as a sign of progress, just as Ariel Levy and others were faced with the "progress" of the rise of so-called "raunch culture." [3] Indeed, so-called post-feminism is more than a decade old. Roughly contemporaneous with that rise was the recognition popularly heralded by figures such as Susan Faludi, in *Stiffed* (Harper, 1999), that men were no longer simply the makers of culture but were, in fact, subjects of it. As well, Susan Bordo's *The Male Body* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), an equally personal, political and professional feminist book, explored this progress from an equally hopeful perspective. Though it did not deal specifically with aging, Bordo writes of her father and the recognition that men must be moving targets who are beset by the double standard of being aware of always being watched, always measuring up to a standard of masculinity and yet never acknowledging that such a standard exists. While researching a story about men's increased emphasis on appearance, James Deacon complained to a "representative from one of the cosmetics companies that her firm was selling to men the way it had always snared women—by telling them they have a problem that they didn't know they had and then offering the products to fix it" (32). The response was "Yeah? So?" (qtd. in Deacon 32). The opening of this new market was seen as part of the progress of late-capitalism. My doctoral defence panel included a female marketing professor, whose specialty was advertising for *men's* cosmetics. These references are all more than a decade old. Much has happened since.

<14> As a hopeful book, *Agewise* manages to take an almost elegiac route to dealing with the dissonance produced. This, however, requires an apotheosis and an anagnorisis. The former is always easy to find, but the latter, in this case believing that aging is actually the solution to the problem of aging, is never easy because it usually means unlearning and finding hope where there is despair (219). So, my hope is that Margaret Morganroth Gullette again will take pen in hand to write a supplementary study, one which offers similar hope and a study of masculinity and aging. My sense is that such a study requires someone skilful, talented, patient and wise. My conviction is that it will be illuminating in terms of revealing even more about the impacts of what R.W. Connell calls the "patriarchal dividend" (82). I know that this still exists, most notably in issues of health, health care and the body.[4] The very division of the medicalization of aging bodies into active male (Viagra, testosterone) and passive female (synthetic thyroid and estogren) attests to the patterns. At the same time, dying earlier and missing the end of aging shouldn't be counted as being among the dividends; neither should women have to endure aging alone. This also reminds me that gender studies has (hopefully) moved beyond the study of roles and so we now must turn ourselves to the prospects of aging and GLBTQ concepts and concerns. Indeed, as much as Morganroth Gullette hopes to illustrate the completion of a narrative, I am convinced that like most good narratives, hers will lead to succeeding ones.

### **Works Cited**

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### **Notes**

[1] Here, I cannot help but recall that one of the dominant tropes in Canadian fiction is the three-generation family. This usually helps concretize the idea of immigrants, a transitional generation and the first-generation of Canadian born and raised children.

[2] For a terrific and accessible discussion of the narrativization of medicine, which surprises my gender studies students almost as much the similar and roughly concurrent creation of PMS, see Nancy Bonvillain's *Women and Men: Cultural Constructs of Gender* (Pearson, 2006).

[3] In *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (Simon & Schuster, 2005) Levy explores the topic for a popular audience. However, Germain Greer's *The Whole Woman* (Transworld, 1999) does so not only earlier, but less sensationally.

[4] Here, I cannot help but think of my own four-generation family. There's the little girl who finally, safely-well, almost safely if twenty-plus stitches on that baby's not-quite proverbial bottom, counts—arrived after three miscarriages and years of obscenely offensive yet subtly, often implied, social and cultural pressure to reproduce because my wife (her chosen term, because of and despite the preference for partner, which sounds too managerial, in the commonwealth) is a teacher in a Catholic school. Try as I might, and even with a doctorate in a relevant field, I could only do a tiny bit of the cultural work of displacing that pressure. I think of my grandmother living alone on a farm because my grandfather died of massive heart attack after years of demolishing his body through brutal, physical labour. She's my real-life counter to the insipid characters in Carol Shields' equally insipid novels. And then there's my mother, the toughest person I've ever met. The inconceivable admixture of terminal and cancerous diseases

leaves her implausibly without any wrinkles as she approaches her seventieth birthday. Even some of the ones who should know better tell her she should think of this as a consolation.

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