
Reviewed by Rachael McLennan, University of East Anglia

Age matters. It is notable that this still needs to be emphasized. Consider, for example, that age is so often left out of the (rightful, necessary) entreaties to pay attention to gender, race, and class and their intersections relating to various cultural issues and/or other objects of study. Perhaps age is left out because we think we know about age in US culture (the valorization of youth, the presence of ageism, and the problem of the US’s ageing population). Or we think violences in relation to age fall short of those done in relation to race/gender/class. There is so much more to say about age, as experience and theoretical category, yet its study lags behind work on the other categories. But things are changing. It is exciting to see the increased attention being given to the study of age in US and other literatures and cultures (see Margaret Gullette’s work on middle age, and on ageism and the pandemic, for example, or the recent *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*, edited by Aria S. Halliday). Sari Edelstein’s excellent study makes an important contribution to this tradition. The “unmaking” in the title presumably speaks to a desire to question that sense that age can be taken as read. In a series of accomplished readings of canonical nineteenth-century fictions, Edelstein illustrates that there is still much more to be done to understand how we read age in literature and beyond. Indeed, she puts the term itself under scrutiny, offering compelling new insights about some of its different manifestations.

If scholarship on ageing in the US typically focuses primarily on youth and (less so) on old age, it is likely to focus on one category only. One of Edelstein’s distinctive contributions, then, comes simply from her putting different categories together; her chapters concentrate variously on young womanhood, old age, and adulthood (and, deliberately, not in linear developmental order). It’s true that her monograph could possibly go even further by giving a comparative reading of different age categories in a single chapter (the fifth chapter on Henry James comes closest, but Edelstein’s argument is largely concerned with deconstructing the association of adulthood with dependence). This, however, is perhaps asking the book to do too much, and it is undoubtedly a great achievement as it stands. Two of Edelstein’s most powerful contentions are her claim, firstly, that “age itself is a political instrument, though seldom recognized as such, which is intrinsic to how other social hierarchies operate and to the distribution of power more broadly” (1); and, secondly, that “age operates in conjunction with discourses of power to naturalize other hierarchies” (2). Both claims are linked by her superb formulation that her analyses of age in the writings of canonical figures “indicate that age has been hiding
in plain sight, an unacknowledged but integral site of meaning in even the most familiar works” (14). I agree and hope these claims will prompt exciting new readings of more and less familiar texts. Yet they trouble me a little, too.

The first claim draws attention to the peculiar conundrum of reading age. As noted, age is too often rendered invisible in studies of identity and its intersections. And yet, when age is recognized, too often it is read superficially via a focus on what is visible (in terms of the body, in terms of what we can see) at the expense of other factors. I’m thinking of the frequent disjunction people report both in fiction and outside between the story their body may tell about their age (or how their body allows others to read their age), in comparison to their own self-perception. This condition is reminiscent of Mike Hepworth and Mike Featherstone’s “mask of ageing” theory, in which the ageing face, viewed in a mirror, is experienced more like a mask than as reflecting the “truth” of identity.

Edelstein’s second claim rightly emphasizes the importance of thinking about age intersectionally; her claim may even imply that age cannot but be thought about intersectionally. Again, I agree, and Edelstein is entirely convincing in showing how age works with gender in particular to underscore conventional narratives about development and how difficult it can be to revise them (see her first and third chapters on Melville and Alcott). But this contingency also produces a problem for age studies. The notion that age works “to naturalize other hierarchies” risks suggesting that age primarily works to bolster narratives about other identities (like gender, race, and class) rather than deserving attention in its own right. I’m reminded of Nancy Miller’s claim that Roland Barthes’s notion that the author is dead might be premature for women writers, who were not always granted the same relationship to identity, power and authority. Is it too hasty to insist on (only?) reading age intersectionally when its own features have not yet been fully explored?

Some difficulties of reading age intersectionally are illustrated in Edelstein’s chapter on the literature of slavery (in some respects the most exciting, innovative, and important in the book). Here Edelstein does some of the most decisive work of analyzing the concept of age itself, alongside showing how it perpetuates the traumas and violences of slavery via “age theft”: “the literature of slavery acknowledged that enslaved people were forced to relinquish the individualizing aspect of age, to give up their right to use age as a measure of life” (45). Later in the chapter, Edelstein considers Frederick Law Olmsted’s experience of encountering an enslaved man who claims to be 40 but looks 70. She claims that Olmsted’s observations raise

...the intriguing possibility that enslaved people could occupy multiple points on the life span, inhabiting a world in which numerical age held no definite or stable meaning. While this resignification of age is the result of the oppressive age theft
I have been describing, I will be turning later in this chapter to a consideration of the subversive potential that such resignification sometimes offered. (47) I find Edelstein’s idea of “age theft” productive and wonder how useful it would be to consider it in relation to undocumented individuals and victims of other cultural traumas in the US today. But then I also wonder whether Edelstein intends “age theft” to be extrapolated more widely, and if I should do so. And I wonder about the appropriateness of using the condition of slavery to generate the possibility for “subversive potential” and “resignification of age.” In fairness, Edelstein is discussing such potential for the formerly enslaved only, but these insights may well be designed to have wider application. Moreover, the theorizing of age here raises questions about whether it is appropriate to borrow from one category (constructions of race) to elucidate another (age). This happens elsewhere in the book, as when Edelstein makes a close comparison between (old) age and queer identities (103). And I have perhaps done it myself above, in using Miller’s comments on gender to think about age.

Along with the chapter on slavery, I was most excited by the chapter on regionalism, since it opens up a number of valuable avenues for considering old age in contemporary American fiction. It’s not surprising that the most innovative chapters are the ones tackling aspects of age less frequently explored; studies of any age category continue to focus primarily on, or have to work against, dominant assumptions based on white experience, and there is a longstanding tendency to prioritize youthful male experience. That’s probably why the chapters on Melville and Alcott, while expertly argued, can feel as if they tread slightly more familiar ground, even when reading Melville as offering anticanonical developmental trajectories, or examining how the subtle ways that age and gender work together in texts by Alcott may not be so obviously associated with age.

Overall, I’d like to see more extended readings of some of the literary texts discussed. On occasion, Edelstein has a tendency to overexplain, or paraphrase, excerpted comments which don’t really require it and where I think readers would prefer more extended analysis of the ideas (see 56, for example). The introduction overstates its claim to explore “a diverse array of nineteenth-century writers, thinkers and artists” (1) insofar as the book is really primarily focused on analyzing representation of age in fiction—and canonical fiction too. I’m not entirely sure that the Coda’s efforts to map Edelstein’s findings onto the contemporary US are entirely successful, mainly because I wanted to hear more when there was no scope for it. Even so, Adulthood and Other Fictions is groundbreaking, ambitious, and likely to be very influential. It was a pleasure to read, and I believe that we will be continuing to assess and explore its ideas for a long time to come.