

DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER OCCASIONAL PAPERS • 19

OLD AGE AS LIFESTYLE  
IN AN ACTIVE SOCIETY

STEPHEN KATZ



**Old Age as Lifestyle  
in an Active Society**

**Stephen Katz**

THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, lectures, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities, arts, and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History and Italian Studies. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

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OLD AGE AS LIFESTYLE IN AN ACTIVE SOCIETY is the text of a lecture given in February 1999 by sociologist Stephen Katz of Trent University in Canada. Professor Katz, an eminent scholar in the emerging field of Aging Studies, spoke as part of the Townsend Center's ongoing program "Humanities Perspectives on Aging." His lecture and the audience comments reproduced here constitute the fourth Townsend Center Occasional Paper to derive from the Aging program, which is supported in part by the Academic Geriatric Resource Program.

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# Preface

As Associate Director of the Townsend Center and coordinator of the Center's program "Humanities Perspectives on Aging," it was my pleasure to introduce sociologist Stephen Katz and to reminisce briefly about the history of the program. Begun in 1992, when historian Tom Cole, from the University of Texas Medical Center at Galveston, came to Berkeley to speak on "Aging, Reminiscence, and Mental Illness," "Humanities Perspectives on Aging" has continued, with the invaluable support of the Academic Geriatric Resource Program, to attract to this campus and to this community (which includes those both within and outside the University), outstanding scholars, artists, and practitioners who have shared with us their wisdom on aging.

"Humanities Perspectives on Aging" is an interdisciplinary program, posited on the conviction that aging is too large an issue and complex to be accommodated within any one discipline. Anthropologists, artists, historians, literary scholars, physicians, practitioners from public health and social welfare, and legal theorists have all spoken to such issues as "how old is old?" or "what do age categories really mean"? These are essentially humanistic issues that must be viewed through a number of disciplinary lenses; they are also issues that force us to look not only to our various interpretive strategies, but to ourselves and to those whose interests and well-being, wherever they may be, are part of us.

The initiation of the Center's Occasional Papers series in 1994 created the opportunity to bring to a broader public representative programs organized under the Aging program. A series of grants from the Walter and Elise Haas Foundation greatly enhanced this endeavor. In *Telling Stories* (Occasional Paper No. 9), literary scholar Kathleen Woodward considers life narratives; in *Painting from Memory* (No.7), Berkeley art historian T.J. Clark and two medical practitioners assess the late work of Willem de Kooning and the role of aging in artistic production; and *Deadly Disputes* (No. 4), includes the proceedings of two symposia dealing with cultural treatments of death and the ethics of physician assisted euthanasia.

In going through our program archives I found, interestingly enough, that Stephen Katz, from the Department of Sociology at Trent University in Canada, was the first sociologist to join our program. But even in making that disciplinary identification, I realized its inadequacy: for Professor Katz is an outstanding exemplar of the new and growing interdisciplinary field of Aging Studies. The titles and scope of just some of Professor Katz's published work over recent years bespeak the important place that he holds in this emerging field. Articles include "Fashioning Agehood: Lifestyle Imagery and the Commercial Spirit of Seniors Culture," "Foucault and Gerontological Knowledge: The Making of the Aged Body," and "Imagining the Lifespan: From Premodern Miracles to Postmodern Fantasies." Professor Katz's most recent book, entitled *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge*, was published in 1996.

Aging Studies, and Stephen Katz's work in particular, posits the notion of a "postmodern lifecourse," based on the "de-differentiation" of the rigidly chronological and generational boundaries that formerly demarcated childhood, middle age and old age. Considering the influence of consumer economies in this conceptual shift, however, Professor Katz asks whether senior citizens, even if empowered by the breakdown of old categories, may also be in danger of becoming the "creations of popular marketing demographics."

Stephen Katz does not offer us an easy answer to this dilemma. He looks to popular images of aging, seeking to explore the "fashioning of postmodern aging"

and the political implications of that process; but agency remains an open question. We are left with the image with which his paper ends: the aging African drum whose second skin, underneath that which has worn away, will continue to produce “different looks and textures” and to resound, as it ages further, with “evolving rhythms.”

—Christina Gillis  
Associate Director  
The Townsend Center for the Humanities

# Old Age as Lifestyle in an Active Society

## Stephen Katz

### PART ONE

The term “gerontology” was coined by Elie Metchnikoff (1845-1916), the celebrated and popular scientist who worked at the Pasteur Institute in Paris from 1888 until his death in 1916. He wrote two influential books on the subject of aging: *The Nature of Man* (1903) and *The Prolongation of Life* (1907), respectively subtitled “Studies in Optimistic Philosophy” and “Optimistic Studies.” Thus Metchnikoff helped to launch gerontology not only as a science of aging, but one inspired by a discourse of optimism—in particular, an optimism that the pathological ravages of the aging process could be contested, and even eliminated.

Over half a century later, in 1968 in the United States, Robert N. Butler introduced the term “ageism” during a housing dispute while he was Chair of the District of Columbia Advising Committee on Aging (Butler 1969, 1990). Butler went on to become the first director of the American National Institute on Aging in 1976 and remains a pioneer in the gerontological field, and the term “ageism” has become a valuable way of putting a name to the widespread bigotry faced by older persons. Today, ageism joins racism and sexism as terms that identify prevailing forms of injustice and inequality in Western societies.

From Metchnikoff’s optimistic gerontology to the legacy of Butler’s critical ageism, researchers and practitioners in aging studies have attacked negative medical,



cultural and political characterizations of old age as a time of illness, decline, poverty and unproductivity. In place of these characterizations, gerontologists have promoted a new perspective on later life in an era wherein changing demographic patterns are set to transform social relations amongst all age groups. This perspective includes, on the one hand, the empowerment of “gray” political movements, through which retiree organizations lobby to reform pension policies and social security provisions; and, on the other hand, the promotion of positive images that resignify aging in terms of activity, independence, resourcefulness and well-being. Thus, gerontologists and their associates, and communities of elderly citizens and groups, are together challenging both representational politics and the politics of representation.

However, it is the politics of representation and the call for positive images of aging which I address here, with the help of visual illustrations from popular culture. Before proceeding, let me add that not all gerontologists are uniformly sanguine about their profession’s positive turn. Indeed, some gerontologists have castigated overly positive frameworks for constraining the freedom of older individuals by imposing unrealistic expectations on them. For example, David Ekerdt sees the construction of an active “busy ethic” in retirement to be a form of moral regulation akin to the work ethic. He writes: “It is not the actual pace of activity but the preoccupation with activity and the affirmation of its desirability that matters” (1986, 243). Likewise, Harry Moody criticizes the professions for sometimes ignoring the material realities of aging that include poverty, loneliness and poor health. The “frenzy of activity” in old age can actually mask, rather than diminish, the emptiness of meaning (1988, 238). Martha Holstein points out the sexist implications of new models of *productive* aging (1992). Most important, as historian Thomas R. Cole concludes, is the probability that positive attacks on ageist perspectives tend to reproduce, rather than overturn, the intolerance and disrespect generated by such perspectives (1986, 129; 1992, 227-233). In other words, *positive* is not necessarily or naturally the opposite of *negative*, but rather part of a continuum of images that differentiates old age and culturally configures the lifecourse.

While this internal critique begins to contest the positive construction of aging and draws our attention to the vacuousness of much popular anti-aging

literature, it doesn't fully elucidate how positive images enable the radical impulses of gerontologists and gray politics to intersect with the growing consumer industries around old age. One way to understand such intersection is to borrow from sociologist Arlie Hochschild's insightful examination of the commercial spirit of feminism in women's advice literature (1994). According to Max Weber, the historical commercial "spirit of capitalism" drew on the revolutionary wellsprings of Protestantism; likewise, says Hochschild, a commercial "spirit" of domestic life in the late twentieth century is drawing on the revolutionary wellsprings of feminism. Thus, according to Hochschild's focal analogy, "feminism is to the commercial spirit of intimate life as Protestantism is to the spirit of capitalism" (12). And perhaps what is occurring in our case is similar: the political energies that overflow the gray movement are dispersed and redeployed in the service of a commercial spirit of seniors culture.

A second and related way of analyzing the positive economy of aging is advanced by cultural theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman, Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, (the late) Glenda Laws, Bryan Turner and Kathleen Woodward, who, in different ways, note that the foundational characteristic of what they term "the postmodern lifecourse" is the de-differentiation of modernist life stages. Rigidly chronological and generational boundaries that formerly demarcated childhood, middle age and old age are eroding under pressure from cultural directions that have accompanied profound changes in labor, retirement and the welfare state, and the globalization of Western consumer economies and lifestyles.

Increasingly within the postmodern lifecourse, or postmodern lifecourse regime, marketing strategists raise the profile of so-called "ageless" consumers, as real estate, bodycare, financial and recreational industries target new retiree segments in anticipation of extracting the "gold in gray," a phrase that Meredith Minkler pioneered into a critique of corporate practices (1991). Hence, the meanings of the lives of senior citizenry are shifting from strictly professional and policy realms to include commercial ones as well. This has created an interesting collision between seniors cultures as empowering political and social forces and seniors cultures as "imagineered"—to use a suggestive term by Glenda Laws (1995, 276)—creations of popular marketing demographics. New mostly American consulting and marketing organizations with names such as AgeWave, Primelife,

Lifespan Communications and Lifestage Matrix Marketing are growing. There is even a website industry called AFTERLIFE that offers, for a fee, to update your webpage after you've died.

My purpose here is not to question the optimism of those images that attempt to rescue aging bodies, identities and memories from their social ostracism at the edge of life and restore them to the world of the living, but to question the expanding consumerist spaces where, in the commercial spirit of seniors culture, such images circulate, acquire representational validity and obscure our view of the material realities—both positive and negative—around living, aging and dying.



*Figure 1.*

## PART TWO

### I. Lifestyling the Lifecourse and Postmodern Timelessness

Wheel of life motifs are numerous in medieval literature; they figure the lifecourse as mobile and spiritually rich with numerous beginning points. As Mary Dove states in her fascinating study *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (1986), the concept of “the perfect age” in medieval literary and artistic representations referred not to a stage of life, but to a state of it, a point of contact between the time of the body and the timelessness of the soul. In these prominent “wheel of life” figures, the

perfect age is often associated with the King. Dove says that “the perfect age is given kingly status because it is not an age in the way in which the other ages are ages: it turns the sequence of the ages into a wheel, and changes our understanding of the movement of time” (1986, 98). As Thomas R. Cole emphasizes, “Ultimately, all time belonged to God. It was, therefore, not for sale, nor was it precisely divided into linear segments” (1992, 14). *Figure 1.*

Similarly, death and dying were depicted in medieval society not as an ending of the lifecourse, but as a process intrinsic to it, communally symbolized



*Figure 2.*

and universally harmonized (see Philippe Ariès, 1981; Norbert Elias, 1985). This perspective is evident in the medieval practice of the *Ars Moriendi* or the “art of dying” that required the dying person to participate in a ritualized series of steps—last rites, confession and visits from members of the public—in order to die properly and with dignity.

An example of a stages-of-life model, of life as a *course*, is the *Life and Stages of Man’s and Woman’s Lives from the Cradle to the Grave* lithograph by Nathaniel Currier (1850). This image gives us an obviously modern conception of progress and health, with a peak in early middle-age followed by a long period of decline. *Figure 2.*

If premodern lives were spun through spiritualized wheels that orbited gracefully in accordance with the ritualized arts of living and dying, and modern lives were marched up and down preset stages of development configured by industrial models of productivity, then postmodern lives unfold according to consumer categories of successful and timeless aging. But postmodern consumer timelessness shares little with premodern spiritual eternity. As Zygmunt Bauman says, in contrast to “traditional ways of dabbling with timelessness” the “postmodern strategy of survival “does not allow the finality of time to worry the living—by slicing time (all of it, exhaustively, without residue) into short-lived, evanescent



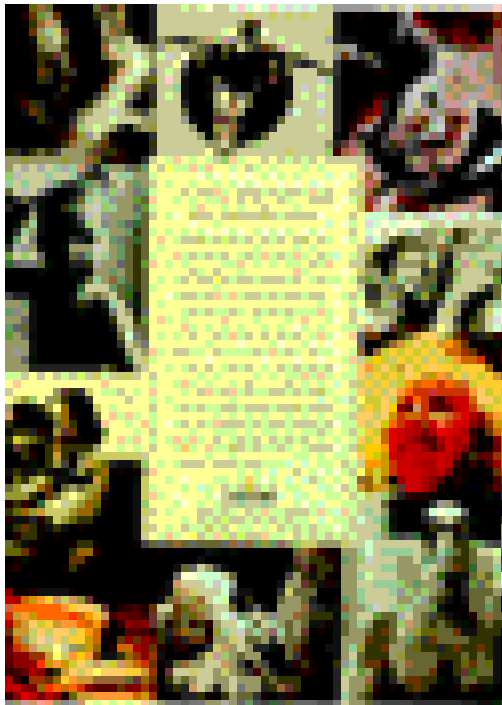
Figure 3.

episodes. It rehearses mortality, so to speak, by practicing it day by day” (1992a, 29).

For example, an advertisement from *Mirabella* magazine shows how “growing up” is a fashioned and fashionable enterprise. “Everyone is born. Everyone dies. All the rest is aging.” And the copy goes on. But what stays constant throughout the lifecourse here is the commodity-form (in this case, a red dress). *Figure 3*. Thus commodities restrict individual growth and development to the fashioned realm of activity, control, beauty and mobility. In turn, commodities reshape the sequencing of the lifecourse itself within the confines of this realm. The steps through which one develops become linked to the fashioned world of activity, control, beauty and mobility, through the commodities of our time that, in turn, reshape time itself around them. A Becel advertisement showing the various “phases” of life articulated by margarine illustrates this perfectly. *Figure 4*.

## II. Marketing Maturity

Bauman's earlier statement is also a comment on the marketing literature behind the images. To convince the corporate world that marketing to seniors is a booming industry, this literature has invented new lifecourse vocabularies that make time and aging indeterminate or even invisible. One important reason for this, as marketing professors Dale A. Lunsford and Melissa S. Burnett report in a paper on "self image," is that the "new age elderly" have a "cognitive age younger than their chronological age" (1992, 56); hence appeal to a younger self-image can bring about an increase in the purchase of new products, or a switching of



*Figure 4.*

brands. In other words, new age elderly consumers are not attracted to products specifically marketed to "older people," even though marketing surveys have shown that traditional values based on thrift, honesty and hard work overdetermine the attraction to "the new" or "the latest." These authors conclude that "the challenge for marketers is to develop products that meet the unique needs of the elderly without becoming a visible emblem of age that others can see" (58).

Thus, masking age becomes a key strategy in developing what has become the “mature market,” with the term “maturity” being used with increasing frequency because of its chronological neutrality—it is endlessly available as a sign for positive images and lifestyles. Yet choosing what kinds of images and lifestyles should be used in the media for mature advertising—if age is to be masked—is also a challenge (see Katz 1998, Sawchuk 1995), as is differentiating the mature market from older and younger markets. For example, a study of American insurance trends (Coco 1995) announces that insurers are starting to use the term “longevity market” and are creating “longevity products” to signal

| <b>Aged to Perfection</b>   |                                   |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Middle-aged and older consumers respond to more personalized messages.</i> |                                   |
| (characteristics of older and young-adult consumers)                          |                                   |
| <b>Mature Adults</b>  | <b>Young Adults</b>               |
| Declining influence by peers  | Heavily influenced by peers       |
| Declining materialistic values  | Highly materialistic values       |
| More subjective   | More objective                    |
| More introspective  | More extrospective                |
| High sensitivity to context   | Low sensitivity to context        |
| Perceptions in shades of gray   | Perceptions in black and white    |
| More flexible   | More rigid                        |
| More individualistic  | More subordinated to others       |
| More discretionary behavior   | More predictable behavior         |
| Less price sensitive  | More price sensitive              |
| Complex ways of determining values  | Simple ways of determining values |
| Whole-picture oriented  | Detail oriented                   |

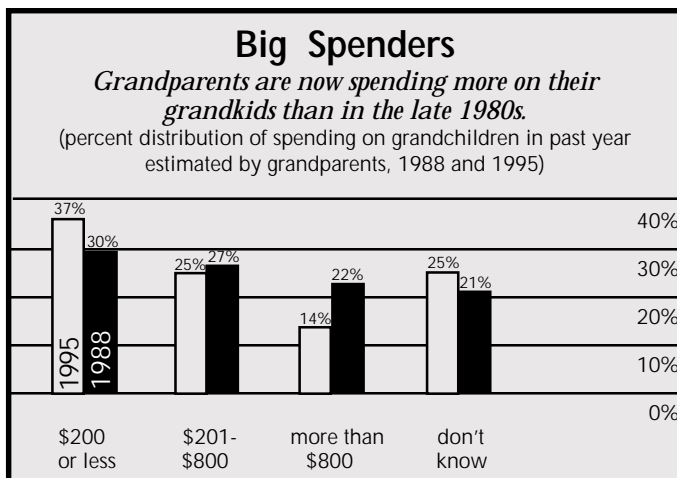
*Figure 5.*

that they “now consider America’s oldest citizens to be an insurance niche, worthy of its own nomenclature and product development activity (and dollars)” (27). In this case, the longevity market differs from the senior market (aged 50 through 75) in that the former are people aged 75 and over who are at risk of outliving their assets.

Younger people, or young adults, are also pressed into consumer categories that blur age boundaries and reset generational characteristics according to demonstrated spending patterns. In a figure (from Wolfe 1994, 35) comparing young and mature adult behaviors related to marketing research, I also find it interesting that the vocabulary is inconsistent: the terms “middle-aged,”

“older consumers” and “mature adults” are used interchangeably. *Figure 5.*

Marketing research can also alter or transform traditional images and realities of later life. Grandparenting is a case in point. Marketers are now increasingly interested not only in the consumer activities of grandparents, but also in how grandparentage itself can be enlarged beyond its generational definitions to include marketing criteria. *Figure 6* is an example of this attempt to know grandparents as “big spenders” (Fisher 1996, 13). Indeed, another study (“Markets” 1996) is concerned with the trend of creating databases of “grand-parent lists,” because, as an advertising director notes, “grandparents are very hard



*Figure 6.*

to find” (22). Hence, Lifestyle Change Communications of Atlanta and Caring Grandparents of America in Washington D.C., among others, are today busily expanding and designing new grandparent lists.

These figures are a component of the strategy to depict developments in maturity and consumerism as intrinsic to each other, even as the lifecourse itself in marketing literature seems to have no particular time-lines, goals or boundaries except to enter into transient circuits, networks and systems of spending, owning and investing. Subjectivity in later life is reduced to a spurious cluster of consumer identities. In short, as the title of Patrick Flanagan’s report in Management Review recommends, “Don’t call ‘Em Old, Call ‘Em Consumers” (1994). But in order to “call ‘em consumers,” marketers require more than just new vocabularies



and imagery—they also need to reconstruct the prospects and problems of aging in terms of demographic targets and “segments.”

To establish the art of market segmentation in later life, George Mochis has invented the term “gerontographics.” Mochis is not only a Professor of Marketing, director of Georgia State University’s Center for Mature Consumer Studies, and a member of the University’s Gerontology Program Faculty, but is also the instructor of a first-of-its-kind course on “Marketing to Older Adults.” His text, *Gerontographics: Life-Stage Segmentation for Marketing Strategy Development* (1996a), is a sophisticated compendium of research in social geron-

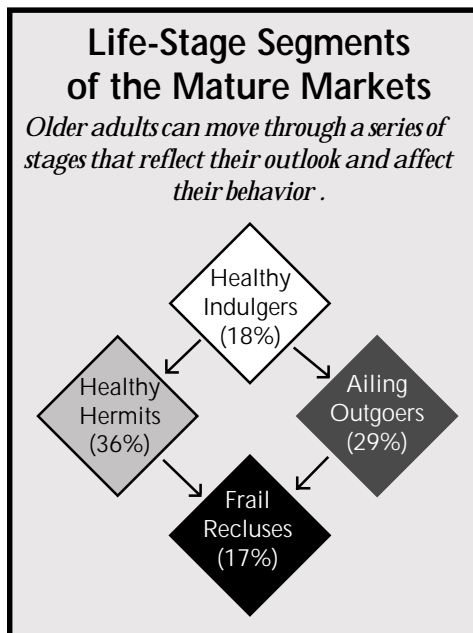
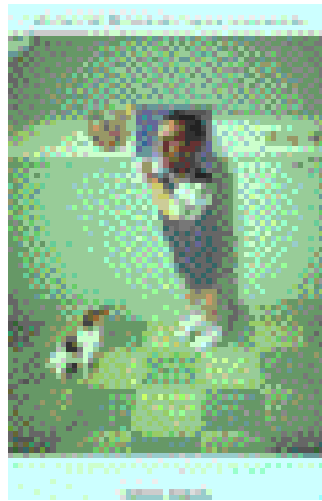


Figure 7.

tology, life-course studies and consumer behavior. In the author’s words, gerontographics “is a life-stage model” developed “to help marketers better understand the heterogeneous older consumer market” (xiii). Mochis’ life-stage model consists of a quartet of segmented subgroups which represent the schematic results of a comprehensive survey of biophysical, behavioral, health and contextual factors.

In Mochis’ work (1996b, 47) we find an image that displays four gerontological life-stage segments, aged 55 and over, each differentiated on the

basis on their product preferences and lifestyle profiles. The segment definitions are obvious, but note the movement of life stages represented by an arrow, the largest group being called the “healthy hermits.” *Figure 7*. Mochis advises that this group, with its penchant for cautious shopping, negative attitudes towards marketing strategies, consistency in paying off charge account balances and lack of self-indulging and leisure interests, is a challenge to marketing tactics (1996a, 153-58). Together with the “frail recluses,” the “healthy hermits” form the majority of the mature market and are the most difficult segments to interest in new product promotions. Note as well that the areas between these life-stage



*Figures 8 and 9.*

segments link them to a general lifecourse movement, so that the lifecourse is driven, ultimately, by consumer activity.

Gerontographics is part of the larger trend to define, segment and empower a new consumer-oriented senior citizenry. Yet the discussion of such a citizenry rarely mentions gender or ethnic differences, class and poverty, or rising healthcare and housing costs. Not only does the “gold in gray” financial marketing strategy assume that middle and older ages are periods in which wealth naturally and easily accumulates for everyone, but also that the lifecourse offers an unvarying gravitational pull towards consumer lifestyles and identities premised on the expanding exercise of choice.

### III. Postmodern Time: Nostalgia and Generation

In addition to meeting in a “lifestyling of the lifecourse,” consumer culture and aging cross paths through representations of generational relations and nostalgia. Again, to cite Bauman’s reflections on postmodern time: “Instead of trying (in vain) to colonize the future, it dissolves the future in the present” (1992b, 187). Nostalgia, generation, and consumerism can be articulated in various ways, as represented in *Figures 8 and 9*. A British Airways ad shows fantastical generational relations within a collapsed time, taking consumers “back” to images of a more comfortable, innocent time of childhood. The image mixes young and old selves and bodies in a montage of two different points in the lifecourse. In order to convey the idea of airline comfort, the ad superimposes the head and shoulders of an adult man, photographed in color, onto a child’s body cradled in its mother’s arms, photographed in black and white. Thus the innocence of childhood and the stress of adulthood are juxtaposed into one generation-jumping image. The photographic trick of using black and white to represent the past in a nostalgic way, with color distinguishing the present and future, is effective here, and is a commonplace usage in other advertisements that attempt to package generational time as part of the progress of a commodity form.

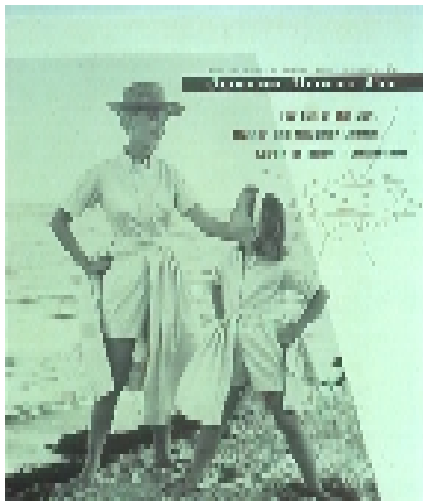
Other images, as the one in *Figure 10* taken here from a 1956 edition of *Vogue*, showing a mother and daughter at the beach, strike me as interesting because familial and generational relations, which were once so omnipresent in popular imagery, and now have largely faded, replaced with more commodified versions, so that even commodified generational relations contain an important cultural history.

### IV. Anti-Aging and the Sciences of Defense

In his analysis of both positive images of aging and the attack on ageism, Mike Hepworth concludes that “the chief characteristic of prescriptions for positive aging should be an ironic acceptance of the natural ending of one’s life” (1995, 190). However, the mass-media narrative of the lifecourse has produced just the opposite—it has fashioned a disciplinary link between positive aging and anti-aging. The proliferation of techniques around exercise, cosmetic surgery, diets and beauty products have created an anxiety-riven culture where, as

Kathleen Woodward notes, “at precisely the historical moment that the elderly are appearing on the historical stage in record numbers, many are vanishing into the crowd, no longer visibly marked as old” (1991, 161).

Skin—with its wrinkling, cracking and sagging—is one of the key betray-ers of aging, especially for women. Thus masking skin-effects is part of a major offensive in the war on aging. Advertising images and copy often employ this simulated “war” vocabulary of “science” and the metaphorical power of military might to lend authority to these products.

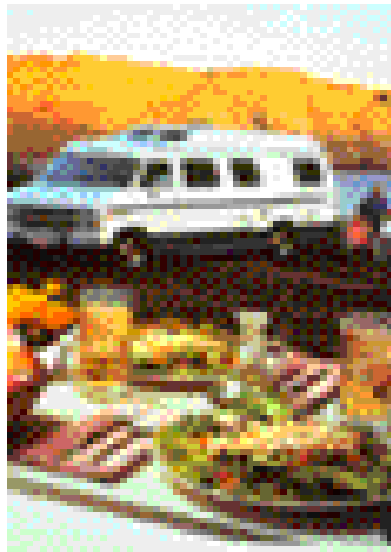


*Figure 10*

## V. Heroic Lives

While anti-aging techniques and products create an illusion of consumer democracy by projecting a world in which everyone can have age-resistant beautiful bodies, it is the elite celebrities of Hollywood to whom homage is paid for their anti-aging heroism. Mike Featherstone has noted that one of the characteristics “demanded of celebrities is to have *personality*,” which replaces “the more traditional virtues of *character*” (1992, 177). And part of having personality, today, is the adoption “of a positive attitude towards the aging process,” an ability to “remain ‘forever young’ in work habits, bodily posture, facial expressions and general demeanor” (1995, 227).

Before-and-After images are also very effective ways to calibrate heroic aging. Such images have been around since 1860, when they were linked to treatises on physical education and at their outset were generally gender neutral. In the 1920s, Charles Atlas's advertising agency created a new imagery that dissociated physical culture from health and promoted muscularity as valuable in its own right (During 1997, 828-30). Especially images around beauty products demonstrate how postmodern anxiety about living in a nether world between "before" and "after" can be commercially exploited, particularly for women.

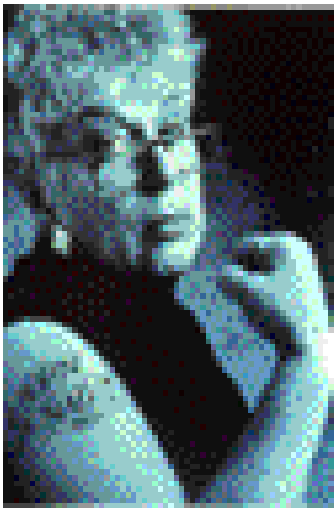


*Figure 11*

## **VI. Tourism and Elderscapes**

Travel industries are marking out increasingly more geographical landscapes and locations suitable for elder-travel. This process goes along with the larger global leisure economy that makes places into transferable spaces. MacDonalds, Holiday Inns, theme parks, etc., are examples of spaces where, as gerontological geographer Graham Rowles says, "every place can be anyplace in an essentially placeless world" (1994, 122). If elder-worlds, elder-scapes and touristic spaces intersect through advertising and imagery, then bodies, landscapes and lifestyles are

naturalized together in these spaces. Indeed, such spaces, especially retirement communities, are separated out from real communities under the sign of being “escapes,” “villages,” “havens,” and “parks,” where age disappears while remaining as an isolating factor in a postmodern sense. However, life in a retirement “village” can also mask the aging process by recasting retirement living as continuously active and problem-free. Hence, new retirement developments, like new touristic landscapes, can have the ironic effect of presenting agehood as an ageless and timeless experience even while making it a separate segment of the lifecourse. *Figures 11 through 13.*



*Figures 12 and 13*

## VII. Seniors Culture

On the one hand, seniors culture—where life and lifestyle interact—calls out to “seniors” as specialized consumer citizens, re-democratizing them as “active” and acquisitive. On the other hand, seniors culture is an opportunity to go beyond the disciplining bounds of consumer practices and ideals—not to defy aging, but to defy positive ageism, subvert its spaces, temporalities and subjectivities, and cultivate an alternative politics of representation, living *in* time, rather than against it. Advertising also has the power to produce images of older women that counteract what Mike Featherstone criticizes as stereotypes which depict the

“elderly as subhuman or para-human beings [who] comprise a suppressed minor strand within consumer culture; they form part of the repertoire of the pornography of old age” (1995, 227). *Figure 14* challenges this stereotype.

### VIII. Aging by Other Means

To foster the radical potential of seniors culture, however, we might also consider how innovative metaphors about human aging come from aging in other areas, such as architecture or nature. A text on buildings, for instance, begins with the



*Figure 14.*

statement: “Finishing ends construction, weathering constructs finishes” (Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow 1993, 5). Weathering, while destructive of buildings, also adds to and enhances them by slowly revealing their finishes. Finishes, in turn, do not signify an ending, or an “unending deterioration,” but are intrinsic to the “the continuous metamorphosis of the building itself, as part of its beginning(s) and its ever-changing ‘finish’” (15).

The aging of buildings thus inspires us to contemplate not only the beauty and profundity of “weathering” and “finishing” in everyday environments, but also to expand our understanding of human aging by seeing it in other material contexts where time is governed by different movements and meanings. This

reflective exercise prompted me to look around my own house to see what other kinds of aging (outside of myself) existed. Of all my aging objects, the one that gets my utmost respect is an African drum, with its skin slowly being worn through years of playing (by me) to reveal another skin underneath, a drum-skin, that will wear as well, constantly producing different looks and textures and resounding with the evolving rhythms of aging.





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## Audience Comments

**Katz:** I know there are many more important things to say. Lawrence Cohen [Berkeley anthropologist] has raised a question that comes from an anthropological and sociological perspective—a significant question, about political blurring, the body-part world, and the class, global and bodily hierarchies that are inscribed in these sorts of things. I have been discussing how everyday life is negotiated and configured according to new ways of maturing. There is so much to say; my mind’s popping from this.

But while there is time, if other people have other kinds of questions, let’s hear some of them.

**Audience Comment:** The implication I think you gave in your talk is that these marketing efforts are very successful, and I don’t think they are that successful.

**Katz:** Well, I agree. I don’t think they are that successful. I just think the expansion of their presence in marketing journals and literature, and the evolution of new kinds of models is interesting. The fact that George Mochis has a whole program and a whole course is telling. I’m interested in the aggressivity of it. In terms of its *working*, you’re right—like any marketing endeavor, it is a way of targeting so-called groups, trying to sell products, pouring millions and billions of dollars into it over time, but that’s not to say it’s necessarily working. Nonetheless I think it has a kind of after-image success—people start talking the talk a bit, and images borrow from other images. When the word “yuppies” first came out, or “empty nesters,” or any of these other terms—“boomers,” for instance—these

were marketing terms. Now we are quite familiar with them and use them as if we know what we're talking about it. And in a way we do, but in other ways we have to ask what the sources of these new vocabularies are. Still, in terms of actual dollars and cents, I think you are right.

**Audience Comment:** What was the term for the older people who didn't spend money? Were they depression-era people, or would this population be too young for that? It seems to me that the depression generation never really got over that feeling of financial constraint, and that could be a factor in their not wanting to spend.

**Katz:** That is a good point. I don't know how much sociological value these texts have in their generational divides, because they are all so flat and "in the present" in a way. There's no history to these generations because they've been made up. But you are right—spending, thrift, saving, worrying about having debt, all these definitely have a historical context to them, like the depression or the war. The fact that consumers have to be unglued from their context in order to be the object of a strategy is really insidious.

**Audience Comment:** You made several mentions of "pre-modernism" and "post-modernism." I don't know what that means, and am wondering what the time periods are we are dealing with, or what a good definition would be.

**Katz:** The best definition of "post-modernism" I've read is "nobody knows what that word means so we should use it as much as possible." [laughter] But that's a fair question. In the terms I've been using a historical period is united by certain motifs, beliefs, governmental policies and the like. That is, modernism is a belief in progress, a belief that science holds the cure to our ills. Nationalism is a big part of modernism. And then there is a kind of break-down in this thinking, in which the bulwarks, the props, to modernism are kicked out from under it.

So, for instance, the narratives that say that science is the ultimate authority of knowledge are now fairly thoroughly questioned. We question our doctors, our teachers, science, progress, nationalism. There are also others kinds

of questions of race, more sociological questions. The way in which life was cut into bounded parts is now being critiqued or dissolved. In terms of the lifecourse, what were once thought to be discrete segments—childhood as a certain point that functioned in terms of schooling, for example, and the regulation of life through those sorts of means, the military, where ages were demarcation points—these, according to post-modern theorists at least, are blurring, are breaking down, through media and through the critique of the old means through which lives were measured. So children are all kinds of ages now. Being a child can happen at various ages. Being a “mature person” can happen at various times.

Post-modernism is also an art movement, an architectural movement. So a modern house tells us of a style, represents a kind of style or period or location. A post-modern house could have elements of the 15th century with 19th century railings and 20th century doorways. We accept that. Pastiche becomes an artistic statement, while one hundred years ago it would have been an abomination, would have been seen as a mess, a wreck, because it did not represent anything authentic. And we, the post-moderns, apparently don't mind that. We are not upset by inauthenticity. We in fact like authenticity to be upset, we like to play with that sort of thing. That's the best I can do on that right now.

**Audience Comment:** On *60 Minutes* there was a segment devoted to ageism of another kind. There was a story of a woman who had written something and posed as age nineteen when she was really thirty-two, and was then fired. The emphasis was that if you are over thirty, you are not marketable. The explanation for the policy was “commercial interests.” The assumption is that once you are over thirty-five years of age you have your habits, and there is no need to lure you into the market. The focus, rather, is put on younger people who *are* the market, starting with ten and twelve year olds.

I am wondering whether putting so much emphasis on commercialism is wise. I would suggest an additional thesis —that aging, for society, in terms of social theory, is problematic. We have a growing population of people who are dependent in a society where dependence is anathema, and it seems to me that there is a political interest in keeping people healthy and active—to cut the cost to the state and families who are not willing to take care of older relatives.

**Katz:** Absolutely. In fact I've just finished another paper that tries to look at the ways in which neo-liberal society or late liberal society, in its de-evolution of its commitments, its welfare state commitments, to sections of the lifecourse, has fostered new practices around older ideals: empowerment, being healthy and independent, being yourself, being fulfilled. These practices are the strategic means by which alliances are formed between communities and the state in order to pass off the costs. Health promotion is an example. The ideas on the one hand are good. But the practices that are clustered around them end up attaching people and communities to political agendas. Neo-liberalism really is about how to empower your community to be responsible for itself, how to take care of yourself, how to be a good citizen.

**Audience Comment:** This is interesting to me because my parents live in a retirement village. I have students come in for help with their papers and they are always sure, absolutely certain, that older people want to get together with younger people. But in the larger context of the United States, I don't think that's the case. I mean, a lot of older people actually isolate themselves, and I don't know whether that is bad or good. So I'm wondering in the context of your presentation whether you think this is a chicken-and-egg kind of thing. Were older people talked into wanting retirement villages by advertisements or did advertising cater to a demand it saw already existed? Who says "we don't want this family ideal"? Can people be happy in retirement communities even though—or despite the fact that—they have been promoted as "ideal" communities?

**Katz:** In one way we are not talking about being disciplined or produced as seniors through being oppressed, being told who we are or what we want. It works through our pleasures and sense of fulfillment as well. So I'm not saying that it is all a question of being governed or being oppressed by big corporations. We are also self-configuring. Sometimes our pleasures and desires ally us to certain strategies, but that doesn't dissipate the pleasure. We just have to look critically at how we have connected ourselves.

In terms of the retirement communities, I guess I was making a kind of geographical statement about new kinds of spaces that have certain vocabu-



laries, names—villages and retreats and hillsides and valleys. They are interesting places because they are imagined, they don't organically spring up—not that human environments are ever entirely organic—but these communities are actually constructed as wholes, with all spaces and activities in place, and they are, in a way, carved out of space. So I became interested in these “elderscapes” and how they come about. But I don't think people are dupes of the advertising industry for living there. These are enjoyable places, and being on your own, apart from your children, can be highly desirable. A lot of people I talked to in a “village” I visited were having a great time—a better time than they had had in ages. So I'm not trying to label your parents' lifestyle as some kind of demented media fantasy of low-intelligence. Nothing of that kind at all. My interest is a social-geographical one, aimed at the industries and spaces that come about around these “villages.”

**Audience Comment:** I loved your talk, and would defend it. I mean, if you look historically at the highly stratified age categories that we invented in the 19th century and carried forward probably until about 1970, these were very disciplined and were used for all sorts of purposes that I think today have become quite problematic. For example, not only the recruitment of old people into roles, but the recruitment of young people into roles. Millions of people died under the banner of the “young, virile” nation. So I think there has been a general retreat from the language of age as it applies to nations and states—we don't talk about young nations and old nations anymore, we don't construct the world anymore in an evolutionary schema where the primitive gives way to the mature and so on. So something is happening that is not just about aging in a personal sense. We are redefining what time means and what history means, so that what we are seeing here, in a sense, is the breakdown of categories that we used to be very clear about in terms of the lifecourse but also in terms of history. So I was fascinated with your talk. I don't think we are so much in a post-modern time as in a time of deep confusion. The old categories are gone, and we don't really have new categories.

**Audience Comment:** In some ways talking about age is talking about a kind of identity politics, identity marketing, identity niche. What has just been said is

very interesting, because, on the one hand certain kinds of categories of disciplining or locating that now seem very mechanical are being called into question. But other kinds of categories come into play like race, ethnicity, gender, economy, etc. Then we have age. I guess I'm interested in the phenomenon itself, but you're an expert on aging, and I wonder how you look at aging as a category of identity when studying your problematic. Is it the last frontier, or yet another frontier among many? Is it something different, as the previous commentator seemed to me to be suggesting, from some of these other kinds of categories? Is it created in terms of the market, or in terms of the political, or something else altogether?

**Katz:** I guess one way of thinking about this question is suggested by the work of a German social gerontologist who has come up with this term “lifecourse regime.” He says that there is not really one lifecourse but rather there are regimes: one of them would be a modernist one wherein at a certain age people would be at the age of military service or the age of this or that—that would be a regime that pieced together parts of your life into a whole. I guess what I think is happening today is that we have multiple lifecourse regimes; we have a number of ways of being old, according to the regime that happens to dominate our particular sphere, our particular life.

And because a confusing array of lifecourse regimes coexist, and we are stuck in the in-between parts of a number of them, finding identity according to our age, now, is almost an impossible task. Different regimes are set against each other. We have the social security lifecourse regime, wherein at a certain age entitlements kick in. We also have consumer lifecourse regimes, and regimes based on reminiscence and psychological models, family lifecourse regimes, models that have also shifted within themselves. I wouldn't compare these to sexuality or race or other, as you say, hardened or visible sorts of divisions. I think finding yourself as your age is a kind of impossible project in some ways. It is a laudable one. But it has been so denigrated as a basis for identity that we don't want to find ourselves in terms of our age; we have separated the chronological from the bodily regime so successfully that how we feel and how we are don't even come into the same sphere with each other.

Simone deBeauvoir, in her text *The Coming of Age*, says that she realized she was old because she looked in the mirror one day and it struck her, and suddenly her life changed; she said to herself, “Now I am old and now I have to think accordingly.” But that was a spurious moment. That is how it happened for her. Other people write about how they start getting offered seats on the bus and discounts at shows, a cluster of small everyday activities that suddenly say they are old, a senior, and that becomes a base of identity. But to actually hit a point where you can say, “I can now base my identity on my age”—I don’t know how that’s done. Even labeling adolescence is getting harder. Where is the shift between adolescence and adulthood now? Our society expands youth out and adults are supposed to feel young and be like kids, and people 35 years of age play in their offices with little toys and things that bounce and little basketball games—it’s a bit of a kid’s world. I don’t know if that answers your question.

**Audience Comment:** I’m thinking that age, precisely as you describe it and also as a biological category, is about the negation of other more threatening and difficult identities in an essentially bourgeois society. It’s about how we don’t have to think about class and race and the like. Age always remains real.

**Katz:** I see, so age is a kind of neutralizing force. So becoming our age takes care of our identity politics. Hmm.

**Audience Comment:** I am interested in a number of juxtapositions. First of all, just within the commercial advertising sphere I think there is an interesting disjuncture between the agelessness that you talk about and the very strong and powerful demarcation and division between young and old. It is striking that the older people are very separate. I think a lot of the images you showed us very powerfully state that agelessness is an impossibility from an advertising and commercial point of view. This juxtaposition is impossible.

**Katz:** Yes, it’s a curious paradox.

**Audience Comment:** A curious paradox; yet I think it is important to consider the relation between the impossibility of blurring the boundaries and the

desire and phenomenological feeling of doing precisely that. The whole issue of generalizing age, i.e., “old people are this,” speaks to what it means to be a senior citizen. This is one of the things we do in this kind of society; we want to generalize “old.” We all go around, students of aging, asking, “how do you feel at age sixty-five, eighty-five, one hundred and five?”, but no one asks a seventeen year old what it’s like to feel seventeen or thirty-two. We do this about age. There is an expectation that old age should be an identity and I think that is part of the whole research mechanism.

**Katz:** That is very true. Even the kind of research done on younger groups and older groups changes, methodologically. I’ve been to gerontology conferences and seen some papers that have had awful results because of exactly that. I saw one last year that was on “Experiences of Sexual Abuse,” and they interviewed people 75 and over about whether they had such experiences they could remember. But the language they were using did not cross any kind of barriers, and they got zero results. No one would talk to them. And instead of asking about abuse now *and* in the past, they were asking about the past, and they offered no language that would cross the barriers from young to old experience. It was sad because they had the pie charts and the instruments, etc. These methods are sometimes culpable. That is an excellent point.

**Audience Comment:** One of the things this illustrates so well is the question about specularly and aging, visualness, images of aging. Given a phenomenological terrain such as “I am told by this mirror or that narrative that I am old, but what I experience is quite different,” or “what I experience shifts due to a different construction of the imaginary,” the issues that Kathleen Woodward addresses, the question is raised: what are the stakes, what are advertisers trying to get at, crudely or brilliantly, with their implicit social theory? In some sense the ambivalences of these images are precisely what raise the question: how does that draw me in? What advertisers are confronted with is an instability about my relationship to that aging image in a different way if I’m 17 or if I’m 65. In this sense your talk points us toward a social theory of the image.

**Katz:** We are drawn into ourselves by these ads, put together but not in a stable way. And new pieces of the lifecourse are being invented constantly. Identity comes into this, too—as you say, how is our imaginary being shifted and put together for us? I am always amazed at how crude everything is in the media, how, on the one hand, we have a large group of people who give the media and the advertising agencies a reverence of sophistication because of the slickness of things, and how they pack so much into a minute, but on the other hand, behind the slickness is an incredibly crude series of mechanisms around marketing, phone calls, phone trees, focus groups, and that sort of thing. We have not only an inexact science, but a very crude, strange, machinery behind it.

**Audience Comment:** But it is a multi-million dollar industry.

**Katz:** I'm not saying that they don't make money, I'm saying that the mechanics—you get a phone call at 6pm: Can we ask you some questions? Or you're stopped in a mall—that this is the way they get their information.

**Audience Comment:** It's all visual. I wonder what would happen if we listened to people aging? If that were our mode of learning, the difference would be enormous, I think.

**Katz:** What would we hear?

**Audience Comment:** The inner self... it would not be the outer layer of it all.

**Audience Comment:** Yes, what we have is on the inside. Why must advertising make everything so perfect, not a wrinkle or mark? That's not aging. It's not life.

**Katz:** Hear, hear.

**Audience Comment:** Why should it not be okay to look old? (As long as you don't feel it.)

**Katz:** I think that's a good note to end on.

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