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Women in Later Life: Critical Perspectives on Gender and Age

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Martha Holstein. (2015). *Women in Late Life: Critical Perspectives on Gender and Age*. Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, 316 pp., \$90.00 (cloth), \$32.00 (paper), \$31.99 (ebook).

In many ways, this volume represents Martha Holstein's tour de force as a feminist scholar of aging, as an activist, and as an ethicist. Here we have a beautifully written book that combines the personal and the political; it employs both interdisciplinary and critical gerontological and feminist perspectives. Holstein does not shy away from the complexities and challenges of aging, including end-of-life issues. Yet she also empowers us to take charge of our aging and to shape it despite the powerful ageist cultural messages that permeate our daily lives. Indeed, she gives us a template for disrupting dominant ways of thinking about old age, in general, and thinking about old women, in particular. Consequently, the author both acknowledges old age but also seeks to explore and reveal its emancipatory possibilities. Throughout the book she offers the reader a striking level of personal insight about her own aging, and she calls also on the experiences and voices of a group of women (the "women of Mayslake") to help us understand better the lives of old women. As a result, she brings to the reader perspectives that are too often missing in gerontology and in the field of aging, in general. Those of us who teach aging courses to both undergraduates and graduates would do well to require our students to read this book—the content alone justifies this requirement, but there is an added bonus in that the author provides a superb and compelling model of feminist scholarship and writing.

The author begins with an introduction in which she lays out the goals of the book. Here she provides the reader a concise map of the book's themes and organization. Holstein begins the exploration of how women experience late life and how their experiences are shaped by life biographies as well as by extant cultural norms and political realities. The inequalities that women face throughout their lives continue to haunt them in old age. Indeed, they are often exacerbated. Laying a foundation that emphasizes how ageism and sexism intertwine to shape the lives of old women, she also reminds us to be mindful of the power economic elites and organized business interests have in the setting of public agendas that profoundly affect the lives of old people. In this introduction she also introduces us to the "women of

Mayslake"—a group of ordinary women who live in an affordable independent-living retirement community. She met with them regularly over three years and they had wide-ranging discussions about growing old, being old, and what it means for women to grow old in a society that devalues them. Not surprisingly, for Holstein these conversations serve as a powerful reminder of the need to reclaim "old" as a time of life that is both important and valued. Hence, the desire that old women not only define what old age is for us but also that we give old age meaning not by denying it but by embracing it. The introduction also provides an important description and rationale for the personal and conceptual frameworks used by Holstein throughout the book. Context, in all its complexities, is key to uncovering and understanding how inequalities interface and shape lives. She also highlights how neoliberal ideologies shape and control key issues that especially affect old women.

Part 1 contains four chapters: the first explores the body and how consumer culture and the beauty industry dominate the narrative of what acceptable old age looks like—most especially for women. Cultural standards of beauty and femininity are deeply rooted in youthfulness. Consequently, antiaging strategies are heavily marketed in our culture, and class privileges allow more affluent women to avail of strategies that can, at least in the short run, forestall obvious signs of old age. Thus, social class allows women of privilege to age differently than women who are poor. Because the body is a critical marker of age, it serves to signal age; it also signals the extent to which we are self-disciplined and "in control" of our aging. Holstein is at her most compelling when she writes about how she herself thinks and acts relative to negative notions of women's aging bodies. Chapter 2 explores ageism and focuses on how others respond to us. Here the author shows the many ways that ageism manifests itself. She reminds us of how difficult it is to resist ageist stereotypes and myths unless we focus on the social relations of power inequalities. Even then the battle is uphill. Chapter 3 delves into issues of productive aging and antiaging—the myriad ways that our culture signals the need to stay busy, to look youthful, to not be a burden on

society as we age. This “new aging”—often called “successful aging”—is fraught with problems, and Holstein’s critique is impressive in its insightfulness. Chapter 4 examines issues of chronic illness and the ways that women, who live longer, experience the disruptiveness that accompanies mental or physical decline. Whatever the challenge, whether it is osteoporosis, stroke, heart attacks, or other illnesses, these illnesses change our relationship with our bodies, with family and friends, and with the ways that we manage to live and give meaning to our lives. Additionally, deep old age is predominantly the purview of women and, thus, women experience yet again the multiple disadvantages shaped by their varying social locations. Holstein persuasively articulates these challenges, and she also dwells on the ethical and philosophical dimensions they present.

Under the general heading of “Aging Women in Contemporary Society,” Part 2 is comprised of three chapters. A major focus of Chapter 5 is the exploration of how care for the old is given and received in our society. Holstein does not shy away from the harsh truths of current or future realities with regard to how, as a society, we care for our most vulnerable members. Critiquing the current political agenda of retrenchment in resources devoted to services for our aging population, she is at her most persuasive when she helps us explore what is, what might be, and what *should* be relative to how old people are taken care of in our society. She articulates convincingly the costs to individuals and their families of our current inadequate system of care. She compels us to rethink what needs to change, and she offers examples of other societies that do a much better job of addressing these issues. In Chapter 6 the author explores retirement—particularly through the lens of women’s economic security. She illuminates the critical issues surrounding Social Security, which is a critical lynchpin in the economic portfolios of older people, especially women. She also illuminates the ways that women are more disadvantaged and vulnerable than men in old age. She informs us that women, already disadvantaged from workplace inequalities, have an average Social Security payment of around \$1,200 per month—a sum that for most represents their total income and, as such, belies an ability to live comfortably even with a bare-bones budget.

Yet, as she reminds us, there is a strong political narrative that has redefined Social Security as an entitlement in need of reform. Holstein is at her best when she engages these concerns and challenges through the lens of social justice and the need for retirement security. In Chapter 7 the author reflects on end-of-life care. Again, Holstein takes an unvarnished look at painful issues that even the academicians among us would often prefer to gloss over. She examines in considerable detail, both personal and through others, the challenges one faces at the end of life in attempts to preserve integrity and die with honor. She reminds us of the costs of living in a culture that not only denies old age but also denies death. Holstein again does an admirable job here of challenging dominant ideas of what it means to “die with dignity,” and she offers the reader much food for thought about how we might get closer to a “good death.” Once more, this sort of analysis shines in its thoughtfulness and acuity.

Martha Holstein ends her book with a third part which contains one chapter. It is an especially fitting end to a provocative and insightful book. Chapter 8 is concerned with how to effect change so that we might have a society where age and gender are no longer sources of inequality. Holstein recognizes that such change is indeed a tall order, but she forges ahead with strategic suggestions for how change can be brought about. She calls on both scholars and activists to join in the reform work necessary to extinguish the marginalization of older women in our society. Citing Maggie Kuhn’s mantra, “I’m an Old Lady and Damn Proud of It,” she also invites old women to engage in organized strategies to confront ageism and to recognize the ways that all of us, mostly unwittingly, reinforce the notion that we are “less than.” In this book Martha Holstein has not only given us a comprehensive, critical, and bold exploration of gender and age, she has additionally provided us a template for how to bring about much needed change.

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