

Conceptualization of Aging Women in 2nd Wave Feminist Literature and Theory

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Introduction

The processes of aging occurs in all healthy mature women, yet it has been historically and culturally pathologized in the United States. Perceptions on aging women are feminist issues, as awareness of intersectional identities adds to and complicates gender discourse. U.S. cultural perceptions of ageism and menopause will be characterized and applied to an analysis of second wave (late 1960's to early 1980's) U.S. feminist literature and theory.

Guiding Questions

How are age and aging processes conceptualized...

- By feminist novels?
- By feminist theory?
- By primary accounts of women undergoing these processes?
- By scientific literature?
- By mainstream media?

What are the unique opinions of aging women?

- In what kinds of contexts can older women be in integral positions?
- Who decides visibility in public positions?
- Does visibility in feminist movement signify an inherently public space?

Background

Growing aging population:

U.S. population aged 65+
(1900) 3.1 million
(1990) 31.2 million

In 1980, many women:²⁰

- Were not in the paid labor force for enough years required for pension eligibility
- Worked in marginal jobs/industries (not unionized) that did not provide benefits like pensions
- Often found themselves ineligible for husband's pensions if widowed/divorced

Gender disparities in aging:

(1980)

Life expectancy

♀ 81 years ♂ 71.6 years

Percent of population

Up to age 45 ♀ 51% ♂ 49%
Over 65 ♀ 59% ♂ 41%

Methods

Feminist literature and theory addressing ageism, aging women, menopause, and/or life stage will be critically read and analyzed in light of the cultural perceptions on menopause.

Materials identifying cultural perceptions on menopause, including healthcare pamphlets, medical advertisements, and biological literature, will be examined and synthesized to provide a view of cultural/historical context

Findings

1a) Theory vs. literature disconnect

Many theories assumed a "Nuclear Family Model"

Nuclear Family Model



Husband = Works

Wife = Housewife

Biological children

Works assuming the nuclear family as norm^{5,6,9,16, 21,19} often theorized older women's experiences as:

- Often silenced
- Often lacking authority
- Sometimes hostile towards freedom-seeking younger generations (choice, sexual freedom, gender expectations)

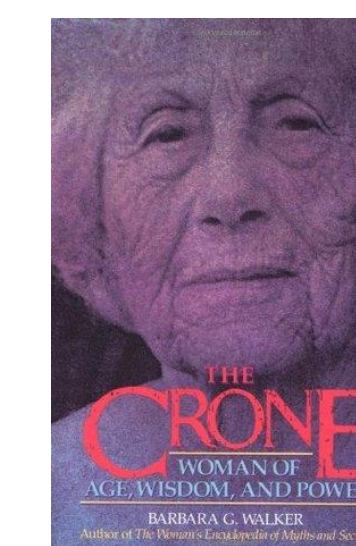
Not included in nuclear family model:

- Single parent families
- Homosexual couples
- Couples with no children
- Larger extended families
- Families with more than two parents
- *Relationships between different families*

1b) Non-nuclear families in literature

Showed

More empowered images of older women
Deviance from dominant discourse



These novels are not captured by theories assuming nuclear family as norm:

Type A: Non-nuclear family depicted^{2,4,10,12,21}

Type B: Rejection of/destabilization of nuclear families as major plot point^{8,15,18}

Result:

Reimagination of family structures provides a space for older women's identities to be reconceptualized and contested

2) Consideration of public vs. private

Depicted in theories and literature

→ **Private:** Cross-generational feminist solidarity can begin within the family^{10,17,2}

Challenges to this also articulated^{8,15,18}

→ **Public:** Outside domestic constraints, older woman still susceptible to certain perceptions of herself popularized by media and regurgitated by societal actors

Age, body image, attractiveness, power, self-perception^{5,6,9,13,14,16,18,20}

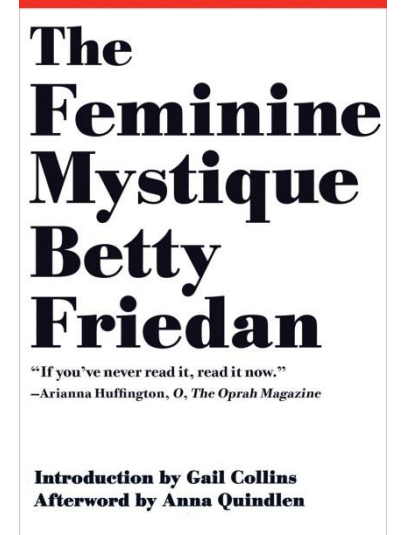
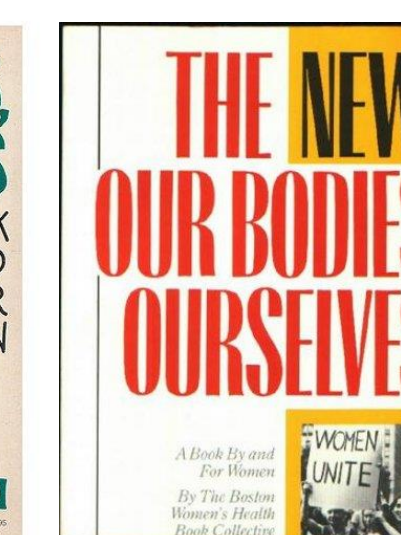
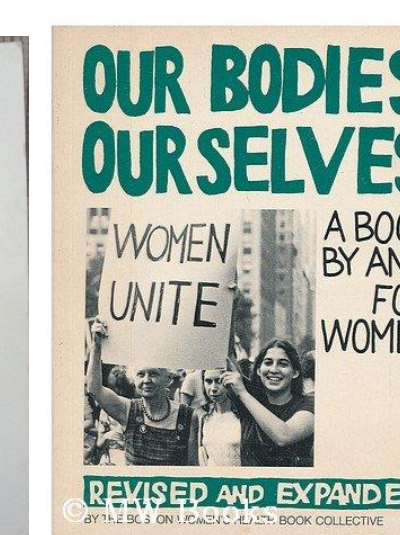
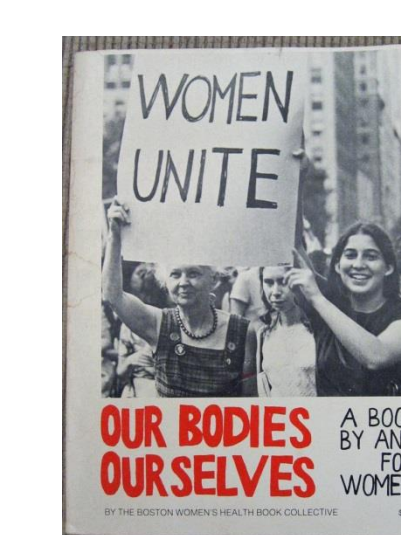
Questions to consider:

- What does it mean to bring more visibility?
- Whose perceptions are we talking about?

3) Developments of author's works

With advancing age

- Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* 1963 ed. vs. 20th anniversary ed.
- *Our Bodies, Ourselves*



Questions to consider:

- How does subject matter and audience change?
- What are they trying to accomplish?
- How is the writing culturally/historically influenced?

Conclusions

Some feminist scholars would argue there is problematic homogeneity in the 2nd wave feminist movement, and that it discounts aging women from its discourse for a variety of reasons, such lack of media representation, generational divides, family structures and differing expectations.

However, I want to call attention to and provide my readings of different types of 2nd wave feminist texts that supply rich narratives /ideas on issues faced by aging women, solutions they have found, and integral roles they play. Further analysis of these texts can add to feminist discourse on aging in terms of rethinking existing theory, and re-reading narratives.

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