

Rant of the Menopausal Cyborg

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Old women and men in America today are a class of liminal beings who daily commit public nuisances as they clutter up space and use up resources just by staying alive. On the one hand, they are often treated much

like imprisoned criminals: Subjected to involuntary

confinement (in nursing homes and hos-

pitals), experimental medication, sed-

ation, material dispossession, loss of

the right to drive, physical abuse, sexual deprivation, surveillance, and the like.

On the other hand, as the baby boom gen-

eration approaches age 55, they are also a

growing consumer market and a politically powerful

voting population. Still, the dominant represen-

tation of the old—and particularly of old women—is one of obsolescence, irrelevance, uselessness.

They waft among us like wraiths, reminding us of

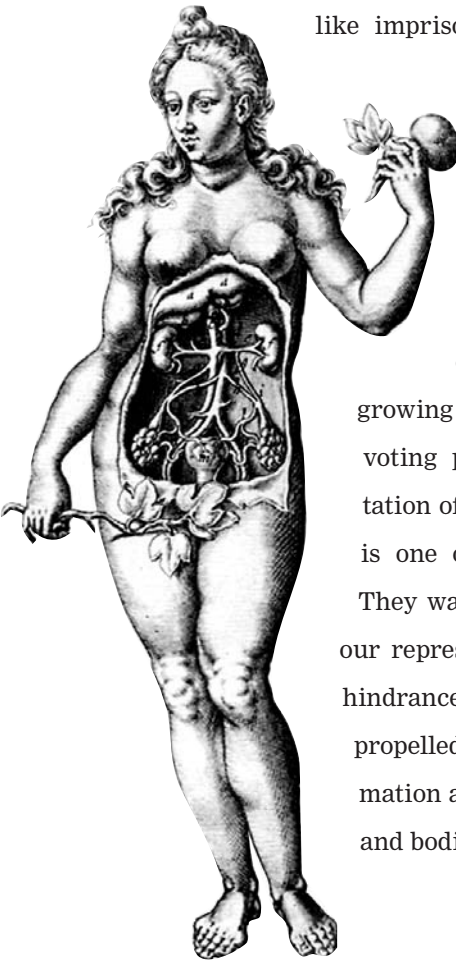
our repressed fears of death and decay; they are a

hindrance to the high-speed, youth-driven, novelty-

propelled information culture. The old have no infor-

mation anyone needs or wants to hear. Their minds

and bodies belong to the past.





New flesh technologies, genetic engineering, and computer-driven medical technologies of the body have a perfect new subject and marketing target: The aging woman. Old(er) women are becoming compulsory menopausal cyborgs and involuntary experimental subjects for new medications and medical procedures which have little proven healing value. They are the paradigmatic patient for hormone and drug therapies, for diet and fitness marketeers, for experimenting with the boundaries of new fertility technologies, for aesthetic and reconstructive surgery, and for somatic cell genetic engineering; they are also apt subjects for gerontology studies and experiments, given that the majority of nursing home residents are women. It is worth noting that the definition of what constitutes "old" has become more flexible, and is often determined by commercial or institutional interests. For example, many plastic surgeons now advise consumers to start with face lifts in their mid-thirties; fertility doctors are often reluctant to accept patients older than 40 (so as not to lower their success rates); pharmaceutical companies compete to entice the over-60 set to try new virility medications and youth-enhancing hormones and drugs; meanwhile the cosmetics industry produces new miracle anti-wrinkle and age-defying lotions every month for a spectrum of ages from 20 to 80. Class, race, and economic factors also play important roles in determining the stages and experiences of aging: Looking (and acting) young beyond one's chronological age depends so much on access to a wide array of technologies and services, as well as on the economic resources and time to take care of oneself.



Old bodies are seen as abject. They walk among us as a living testimony to death and decay. They walk among us deformed yet still desiring, still consuming, still lusting, still covetous, still angry, still proud. The old are infertile; they produce only excrement and effluvia. They commit the supreme crime of biological uselessness, which ironically could be their strongest point of autono-

my. The ironic utopian Cartesian slogan, “The body [meat] is obsolete” (often repeated by the [mostly] young, male, and wired), takes on a very different meaning for old people who are not “wired,” and creates an ever more painful generational separation and alienation in the menopausal cyborg population. In the pre-biotech age, female bodily obsolescence meant the cessation of ovulation and menstruation (menopause), and the concomitant loss of fertility and reproductive powers. However, older women could still be valued by the culture as carriers of collective memory, and for their knowledge of life processes; as teachers and mentors for younger women and children; and—more metaphorically—their aging bodies functioned as signs of mortality and gateways for experiencing the mystery of death. While old female bodies were often feared, loathed, and avoided, they were also understood to be fundamentally instructive and cautionary—a necessary part of the life cycle. Yet who in the American youth-worshipping culture wants to represent death to others? Strangely, while the bodies of older women function for others as strong cultural signs of nonrational fears and desires about the ultimate experience of death and dissolution, they themselves can experience this life stage as a powerfully autonomous moment when body and subjectivity are released from (re)productive and utilitarian necessities.

Ironically, in the age of biotechnological nature, older women can now take advantage of the very virtuality that isolates them and renders their “real” bodies invisible, by masquerading as whatever they want to be online, and by using new flesh, drug, genetic, and aesthetic surgery technologies. And who can judge anyone for wanting to take this advantage? The desire for transcendence and immortality, for ideal beauty and eternal youthfulness, have sparked philosophers, artists, scientists and poets since before recorded history. These desires are as strong as ever today; current scientific literature promises that the new genetic and biotechnologies are bringing us to the brink of actualizing these desires now and here in the “real” flesh. While the actuality of a genetically re-engineered body that will not express visible signs of aging is still very far off, the *possibility* of this scientifically re-engineered biologically ageless body acts as a disturbing cultural probe, setting off a complex set of responses.



Obsolescence is a state of unproductiveness and uselessness. Built-in obsolescence is a fundamental tenet of American material production and fuels much of the market economy. Obsolescence also fuels much of the computer and electronics economy: Both software and hardware change almost monthly and have to be retooled and relearned; computer programmers, tech workers, web designers, data entry workers, and others have to upgrade their skills constantly; workers in the tech industries are often considered redundant by their mid-thirties. Gerontologists and geneticists are beginning to discover that obsolescence is also built into our cells and our genes. The consumer market demands that that which is obsolete be discarded and made invisible. So too must it be with human obsolescence—it must be hidden, discarded, or transcended by re-engineering. Fears of death, decay, and obsolescence underlie the frantic rush to re-engineer the physical human body through the new bio-, medical-, and genetic technologies. Much of this research is directed towards treatments which will mitigate, delay, and conceal the appearance—and actuality—of aging. Providers of hormone therapies, potency and fertility drugs, genetic implants, organ and tissue replacement, microsurgery, aesthetic surgery, and enhancement and rejuvenation therapies do a roaring business among middle-aged and older male and female consumers. Showing signs of aging is taken as evidence that one doesn't care anymore, that one has given up on oneself. From the point of view of biotech medicine, death itself is seen as a kind of failure. Increasingly, people feel the compulsion—which is usually expressed as “choice”—to avail themselves of all treatments and technologies that can help them stave off aging, decay, and bodily ugliness or deviation from the “healthy” norm. This compulsion sets ever higher standards for “good looks” among the population as a whole which are ever more impossible to attain through simple bodily maintenance and self-care. Ironically, if signs of obsolescence are hidden, and there are fewer “real” older looking people around, younger and younger people will be designated as not youthful anymore in comparison with adolescents. Many of my 20-year-old students, for example, complain that they feel old.



As an increasing population of computer and Internet users log on to the virtual sex spectacle of pornographic female images and cyber-babes on the Net, the actual bodies and sexualities of aging women are rendered ever more monstrous and un-representable by comparison. Compulsory youthfulness, fitness, and mainstream ideals of beauty have become the norm for all who can afford them, and are valued far above wisdom and experience. The race and class discrimination that underlies this norm is silenced. Ironically, “positive” liberal views of aging expressed in euphemisms like “ripening” and “you’re not getting older, you’re getting better,” and “you don’t look your age” contribute to the demonization of aging and of not looking “good.” Increasingly the culture applauds older celebrities (like Cher) who have undergone much plastic surgery and who are deployed as models for all other aging folks. Self-imposed (disciplinary) cyborgification is increasingly becoming the response to these conditions.



While it can offer certain kinds of access to the world for people who are housebound or unable to negotiate “real” space, virtual connectedness often actually increases embodied social conditions of isolation, alienation, and loneliness—problems that already assail older people whose children have grown up and moved away, and whose spouses and friends are aging and dying. Widowed and single older women, and especially women of color, are a particularly vulnerable population since they tend to live longer than men, tend to be much poorer, and are less likely to be active in the world. Due to poverty and cultural discrimination, older women of color are also statistically the least likely population to be “wired,” and there is very little (if any) mention of this group in discussions of women’s use of new technologies. For the middle class there’s a proliferation of electronic gadgets for staying “in touch” with the grandparent population—email, baby web pages, framed photos with audio

messages, web cams that transmit the family's day-to-day life, a nursebot developed at Carnegie Mellon to be a companion to the aged—and the like. But I suspect that these screenal and machinic incarnations cannot make up for the actual touch, sight, and smell of the bodies of loved ones—isn't it pheromones after all which trigger so much of the limbic brain? When I recently visited my hospitalized, fragile mother, I was riveted by the feel, smell, and sight of her delicate, withering old body, by the constant nuanced changes in her face, her gait, her eyes, her speech and memory patterns. I talk to her on the phone often, but I never really know how she is in the same way as I do when sitting next to her chair, trimming her hair, or taking her arm for a walk around the garden. The complex organism of the body needs to avail itself of so many different means to express its full life.



Cyber-colonialism is rearing its ugly head everywhere under the sign of a new global culture. The obsolescence and cultural irrelevance of the knowledge and life experience of older women has become especially acute in rural and traditional cultures and societies that are rapidly being forced to assimilate the global consumer commodities and adapt to new labor markets. A new generation of (mostly third-world and poor) young women are now the most desired labor pool in the global economy, through which they are also being seduced into a global consumer market and concomitant new social relations, which are centuries removed from the embodied experience of their mothers and grandmothers. Without quite realizing the full effects of the magnitude and speed of these cultural changes, much "traditional wisdom" has already been consigned to the historical dung heap and replaced by a survival-driven, first-world reverence for "smart" technologies; these are proving profoundly disruptive for many populations of different economic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. "Smart" technologies are preprogrammed "reactive" (cybernetic feedback loop) technologies designed to react to changing conditions (such as toasters which "sense" the moistness and thickness of the bread to be toasted and adjust them-

selves accordingly). The problem with smart technologies is that they circumvent the experience, knowledge, and decision-making power of the user, by substituting preprogrammed “responses” to a set of conditions (examples from the mundane to the crucial, include those new smart toasters, and fetal heart monitors which now often determine the course of childbirth). It is easy to see that while smart technologies may be very useful in many daily tasks of all kinds—such as toasting—surely they could never replace the emotional, psychological and experiential wisdom and responses of a complex human being engaged in a major activity such childbirth.



Now that your body and subjectivity are not useful for reproduction and production, use them as autonomous sites for your own resistant research into uselessness, obsolescence and pleasure, be it physical, social, political, emotional, or spiritual. Refuse to shut up and hide; remain visible, remain vocal. Refuse to be ghettoized in resort or senior “communities.” Commit all seven deadly sins over and over, and pretend to be forgetful or nuts if you’re caught. Cling to loved memories and cherished customs: Demand the foods and products of your youth. Slow everyone else down: Refuse to be hurried; clog up the aisles at the supermarket and the space at the post office; always go to the front of the line; demand the best tables at restaurants; drive 40 miles an hour in the middle lane with all your lights on. Park anywhere you like. Demonstrate the futility of fashion: Wear your nightgowns and slippers on the street; flaunt your wrinkles, decay, and death. Dance if you want to, but don’t bother working out if you don’t want to. Don’t be decorous and self-effacing: Be opinionated and demanding, be angry and funny. If you desire sex, pool your sexual resources with others. Revel in your uselessness; don’t work; demand full service. Resist the imperative to retool or retrain. Refuse the compulsion to be wired, but get online and mouth off if you want; refuse to be smart, new, and improved. Make coalitions with younger people to help you take over the nursing homes and convert them into livable homes and residential collectives. Live as well as you

can; share your wealth with others and don't give up conviviality, friendships, and parties; eat all you want; eat what you want; insist that Meals on Wheels hire a good chef. Don't let the churches have control of spirituality but figure out your own spiritual practices and share them with others. Practice inter-generational collaboration, friendship, love, sexuality, and intimacy. Share resources with those that have less, and hire good lawyers to help you exploit and navigate the system. Spend all you have, don't leave it for the kids. Demand recreational drugs and mind-altering substances to ease pain and loneliness. Check into the best hotels and make a row if they throw you out. Don't pay taxes; refuse to fill out forms. Do not pre-pay for your own burial and funeral. Stay alive if you wish, but use your right to a humane self-chosen assisted death if you want it. Refuse efficiency; be noise, in the codes of bureaucracy, authority, and utility. ★