

***Modernist Poetics of Ageing: The Late Lives and Late Styles of Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and H.D.* Jade Elizabeth French. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025. Pp. 208 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick, Indiana University Columbus

Rarely can academic studies be categorised as page turners, but Jade Elizabeth French's *Modernist Poetics of Ageing: The Late Lives and Late Styles of Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and H.D.* is one such book—and a superb one at that. French weaves together biography and key concepts in cultural gerontology to produce a study that tracks how the ageing body, especially the ageing female body, is constituted in life and art. Principally interested in how Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and H.D. portray and embody ageing, the book examines the conditions of their lives, their non-canonical and archival work, and the configuration and function of archives as signatures of their visibility. This scholarship is critical, given the relative dearth of research on these canonical and influential writers outside of the high modernist years of 1914–1945.

New Modernist Studies gained traction in 2006 with the appearance of the *PMLA* article by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz by that name,¹ and it became canonical with the publication of *The New Modernist Studies Reader* in 2021—what the editors, Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, call a sourcebook.² Mao and Walkowitz sum up the “transformations in modernist literary scholarship” in their emphasis on the act and implications of “expansion.”³ For instance, New Modernist Studies scholars engage in expanding boundaries and borders across times, spaces and places, genres and styles, and authors. This ambitious agenda is one that French takes up. In *The Modernist Poetics of Ageing*, French details the various geographical locations that Loy, Barnes, and H.D. inhabit over the course of their lives and how those places inform the writing and art they produce. These places become important in grounding the authors and their writing (and, in Loy's case, photographs and collages) in material realities that overwhelmingly

¹ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 123, no. 3 (2008): 737–48.

² Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, eds, *The New Modernist Studies Reader: An Anthology of Essential Criticism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 1.

³ Mao and Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” 737.

determine the shape of the work. Moreover, the book shines when it offers close readings of these fascinating and important lives in concert with their ever-evolving experiments with genre, their embodied late styles, their experimental late-life writing, and their more or less well curated archives. In treating Loy, Barnes, and H.D. together, French weaves a narrative that compares and contrasts the difficult, fragmented, and opaque texts of three high modernist women writers who engaged in modernist practices post-1945 and whose lives show us the embodied poetics of ageing female bodies in three particularised stories.

Modernist Poetics of Ageing is a highly engaging and excellent book of academic stories: biographical accounts working in tandem with academic snapshots and close readings of memorable texts. A significant amount of archival research at Yale University, which houses the archives of Loy and H.D., and the University of Maryland, which holds the archive of Barnes, is incorporated into the book, giving it an intimate feel. French also draws upon and cites others who work with Loy's experimental memoir and restored collages, Barnes's marginalia and drafts of poems, and H.D.'s life writing. A takeaway from the book is that readers tend not to value—and, in fact, devalue—the ageing modernist woman writer and, consequently, readers and scholars lose opportunities to discover mature work and engage in new approaches to experimental practices of older artists. Furthermore, new critical takes on these authors are presented in French's study, as inroads in cultural gerontology cohere to make up the theoretical framework within which Loy, Barnes, and H.D. are read.

The introduction presents overviews of Loy, Barnes, and H.D., stipulating that non-canonical materials will be discussed within the framework of literary modernist studies and cultural gerontology. The body of the book, chapters 1 through 5, argues for new views of the selected authors in terms of their biographies and literary contributions and efforts. While French does engage with work across the authors' corresponding lifespans, the stated primary focus is on late work, namely H.D.'s life writing in her notebooks and *Hermetic Definition* (1972); Barnes's late poems, especially "Rite of Spring" (ca. 1960–1982); and Loy's last interview (1965), artistic assemblages (ca. 1940s–1960s), and late-life writing.

Chapter 1 provides meticulous analyses of Barnes witnessing ageing bodies in her early journalism as a reporter in New York; Loy documenting ageing female bodies in her Bowery/New York poems, such as “Chiffon Velours,” “Mass Production on 14th Street,” and “An Aged Woman”; and H.D. being captured in images, especially the 1956 Bernhard Obrecht photograph of her, which is referred to as “the Beethoven.”⁴

Chapter 2 sketches the networks that the three writers maintained in letters, the trappings of interpersonal relationships, and interviews. Although considered reclusive, Barnes kept up a vital and vibrant relationship through letters with Natalie Barney, and the letters which served the same purpose for H.D. and Bryher are examples of what French characterises as “a caring communication” (63) that facilitated “their queer family network” (60). Loy’s modernist influence is captured in her recorded interview with the avant-garde Black Mountain College poets, an interview that refuses to be dull or incoherent because she centers herself and responds by showing how the present impinges on the past and vice versa (71).

In chapter 3, French explores how H.D., Barnes, and Loy embody their late-style aesthetics and content. The discussion of *Hermetic Definition* covers H.D.’s late-life sexual desire for the journalist Lionel Durand and how this desire is embodied in the writing; such personal, embodied writing also appears in the *Hirsladen Notebooks* (2015). As for Barnes, she reworked poetic lines “thousands of times,” and this practice “becomes a way to avoid ‘the end’” (77); in the process of writing poetry, Barnes focused on “a present moment of decay which is portrayed as a horrific but preferable alternative to mortality” and “thematizes and enacts the difficulty of ageing, dwelling in the liminal threshold between life and death” (91). A compelling close reading of Barnes’s “The Walking-Mort” appears in this chapter, as do intriguing overviews of the poem “Rite of Spring” and the poetry collection *Creatures in an Alphabet* (1982). For her part, Loy upcycled discarded

⁴ Jade Elizabeth French, *Modernist Poetics of Ageing: The Late Lives and Late Styles of Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and H.D.* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 48. All subsequent references are cited parenthetically.

materials and trash to highlight marginalised experiences, French argues. An example discussed is “Christ on a Clothesline” (ca. 1955–1959).

Chapter 4 reviews the public interest in modernist memoirs and lays out the experimental life writing in which Loy, Barnes, and H.D. engaged, as all three resisted writing a more conventional memoir. Indeed, all three “avoid returning to [the 1920s] in favour of exploring a more distant past and immediate present” (115). Among the experimental life-writing texts considered are Barnes’s article “Lament for the Left Bank” (1946) and the unpublished notes/poem “Vantage Ground”; Loy’s *Islands in the Air*, which was composed from the 1930s onward but concentrates on memories of childhood; and H.D.’s *End to Torment* (1979).

Chapter 5 traces the methods by which the archives relating to H.D., Barnes, and Loy came to be and how we could foreground authorial representations of composite selves, foreclosing static and linear narratives: “the archive does not offer a final vision, famous last words, or cohesive narratives” (167). Rather, French summarises, the authors show us what ageing can look like, its challenges and possibilities.

In its conclusion, the book sums up the major stances in cohesive fashion, reminding readers that this is a study that can have far-reaching influence as we conceptualize and re-frame late-life creativity in modernist studies. The approach—a literary and critical one, informed by gerontology and fused with close readings—is marvelous, and each chapter is full of exquisite details and beautiful writing.

Although I wish that the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven’s works were treated in this study,⁵ she died in 1927, causing her to fall outside the chronology that French establishes for this book. By design, *Modernist Poetics of Ageing* encompasses three authors who “maintained a late-life creativity that directly challenges the associations between modernism’s innovations and ‘youth’” (2)

⁵ The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven is a perfect candidate for a literary and cultural treatment of the ageing female body in dialogue with experimental modernist practices (including performance art). Barnes served as the literary executor for Freytag-Loringhoven, and their archival papers once shared space.

and who lived beyond 1945, a traditional end date for the periodization of modernism.

Taking inspiration from this book, future researchers might examine and map how ageing intersects with the lives and work of modernist women writers of colour. In particular, Zora Neale Hurston's life and oeuvre are available for such a project, as are the writers who contributed to *The Crisis* magazine. Likewise, some of María Cristina Mena's published short stories lend themselves to such a project, and we might consider the lives and select short stories of Sui Sin Far and Zitkala Ša as early modernist forerunners. Additionally, modernist scholars could track the ways in which the presence of queerness disrupts the heteronormative expectations of ageing female bodies and sexuality in literature, letters, and life writing in concert with the work and biographies of, for instance, Gertude Stein or Amy Lowell. A pathway in modernist scholarship, one already established, applies crip or critical disability theory to illuminate the manner in which bodies are positioned and understood. As Madelyn Detloff powerfully argues, "When we orient ourselves to attend to disability, it suddenly appears everywhere we turn in modernist work, revealing a great deal about how normative and non-normative bodies, minds, and affective dispositions function in a given cultural imaginary."⁶ As French proves in her monograph, age serves as a parallel corrective to the records of modernism and our conceptions of such. I would suggest, too, that trauma-informed perspectives on underrepresented and minoritised older bodies in modernist literature and culture may yield productive analyses and valuable discussions of bodies and what they can teach us. Future work might also place Loy, Barnes, H.D., and other modernist women writers in conversation, closely reading and delineating how these writers relate to each other biographically and in art. This type of project would expand the networks of modernism as drawn in Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism* (1990) or Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank* (1986).⁷ We need new (re-)evaluations of modernist women writers and their work, as French poignantly argues. *Modernist Poetics of*

⁶ Madelyn Detloff, "Metrics, Methods, and Modernism," *Modernism/modernity Print Plus*, 2, no. 2 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0023>.

⁷ Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Gender of Modernism* (Indiana University Press, 1990); Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (University of Texas Press, 1986).

Ageing “challenges the stereotype that older people are not present in modernity, that late work is somehow an epigonic shadow of former output, or that, as we grow older, we might lack the impetus to create ‘new’ work” (168). French suggests that scholars “could place older modernists amongst their mid-century contemporaries to explore their intergenerational impact” (175). *Modernist Poetics of Ageing* demonstrates that age is a critical intersectional axis to pursue, and that, as subjects of academic inquiry and study, Loy, Barnes, and H.D. stand as authors who deserve such fresh and exciting scholarly treatment.