

4 Extraordinary 'Old' Age and (Auto)Biography: George Dawson's *Life is So Good!* at the Intersection of Age(ing), Race, and Class

The growing interest in accounts of centenarians is not only satisfied through visual media but also through written narratives. Alongside a general boom of written auto/biographies in North America and especially the U.S., there is an emerging genre of centenarian (auto)biographies. Besides many self-published narratives and collections of stories, there have been a few publications by well-known publishing houses that generated the interest of a large number of readers. Among these more prominent narratives, the story of George Dawson gained fame, as Dawson was represented in the media because he learned to read and write at the age of 98. Dawson's (auto)biography is promoted by its publishing house Penguin Books, as a "remarkable book" which tells the story of "a slave's grandson who learned to read at age 98 and lived to the age of 103." He "reflects on his life and shares valuable lessons in living, as well as a fresh, firsthand view of America during the entire sweep of the twentieth century" ("*Life is So Good!*"). This description of the book, taken from the Penguin website, indicates the three main selling points of the narrative: first, Dawson is an African American who grew with the legacy of slavery directly graspable; second, he achieved literacy very late in his life; third, he lived beyond the age of one 100.

Dawson was sought out by Richard Glaubman who convinced him to write down his life's story and thereby to contribute to the fairly new trend of writing centenarian (auto)biographies ("Biography"). The product of the collaboration, *Life is So Good!*, was published in 2000. As opposed to the accounts discussed in the previous chapters, this full length (auto)biography does not merely focus on what it is like to *be* a centenarian, but it also tells the story of *becoming* one. In that sense, the narrative presents itself as a special case within the corpus of texts chosen for this study, as it raises questions of how 'young' age, 'middle' age, and 'old' age are represented from the perspective of a centenarian. It is thus the special concern of this chapter to trace the representations of age(ing) not only in extraordinary 'old' age but also throughout Dawson's entire life-course.

Furthermore, the fact that this is a co-authored narrative gives questions of autonomy a different nuance than the videos discussed in the previous chapters. Whereas in Macklemore's music video, it is perfectly clear that the audience gets to see a staged setting and therefore a 'real' centenarian acting out the story of her own one 100th birthday, Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier's representation leaves open the question of scripting, yet, she gets to respond to questions and thereby performs a certain autonomy. George Dawson and his co-authored (auto)biography present an opaquer situation of agency, as the reader can never know whether they read the voice of Dawson or the voice of his co-author Glaubman. Therefore, the modes of production and the question of agency will be prominently addressed in the first part of this chapter.

The second part of the chapter deals with the topic of aging through the life-course. I elaborate on African American aging and investigate how Dawson's blackness influences his life-course in general and his aging process in particular. As the narrative follows Dawson through his life in the Jim Crow South, his travels throughout the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, and his encounters with racism and discrimination, it suggests itself to read the book from an African American studies perspective. This chapter thus not only presents a change in medium but also faces the challenge of discussing age in light of blackness and masculinity, rather than whiteness and femininity. Consequently, this chapter specifically deals with the challenges of black aging and what it means for the representation of centenarians on the one hand, and the construction of centenarianness on the other. Furthermore, I look at the way Dawson is 'aged by culture' not only in terms of his race but also through class, education, gender, and his everyday surroundings.

The third part of this chapter specifically discusses how Dawson's centenarianness is portrayed and constructed within the narrative. Bearing all the previously mentioned aspects in mind, the last part of the chapter returns to the construction of Dawson's extraordinary age in at the intersection of the cultural, social, and biological.

Dawson's portrayal leads to an illusion of social mobility, claiming that no matter the odds, with hard work and persistence, anybody can achieve anything. By promoting Dawson's mobility, in a physical, as well as a social sense, in his extraordinary 'old' age, the narrative suggests that, once a person has reached the status of being a centenarian, race related issues become secondary. I aim at reading blackness and age alongside each other to understand how one influences the other. In this connection, it is crucial not only how different age categories gain relevance in different situations but also in what situation age(ing) or race are important markers of difference. How does the fact that Dawson is black influence the perception of his aging process and, on the other hand, how does his status of being a centenarian influence the perception of him a black person? Ultimately, the discussion of George Dawson goes to show that, in terms of extraordinary 'old' age, he is

fabricated with the distinct markers of centenarianness, showing that this newly emerging age group is imagined in a generalized way, glossing over cultural, social, and most importantly, racial differences. The fabrication of centenarians can thus be accused of engaging in a discourse of color-blindness.

4.1 Co-Authorship, Vulnerability, and the Art of Age (Auto)biographies

Whereas the material discussed in the previous chapters focuses mainly on being a centenarian, *Life is So Good!* as the full length (auto)biography of George Dawson describes scenes from various stages of his life in detail. Therefore, it is not, as Katherine Woodward criticizes many accounts of 'old' age to be, merely "words, plucked as they are to fit the compact and condensed frame of a news story, [that] necessarily lack the sense of a vital connection to a unique life" ("Telling Time" 65). Woodward is concerned that a narrative solely about 'old' age denies the aged person a history and therefore a personality that is not primarily defined by being 'old.' Hence, Dawson's life narrative works against this impression, setting extraordinary 'old' age apart from 'old' age yet again. Dawson, as a centenarian, is granted a history and gets to tell his life story because of his extraordinary 'old' age. However, Dawson's (auto)biography does not completely satisfy Woodward's requirements for the 'perfect' age narrative. She "long[s] for the contours of individual voices reflecting on their own experience and speaking, as it seems, directly to [her], not words mediated by a website content provider or an interviewer" ("Telling Time" 66). Since the narrative is a co-production of Dawson himself and Caucasian primary school teacher Richard Glaubman, it is impossible to untangle whose voice is heard within the story. Therefore, the narrative at hand is a mediated one, as Dawson told it to Glaubman and Glaubman wrote it down. The extent to which this influences the result of this collaboration is not clearly distinguishable. Nonetheless, looking at the modes of production of *Life is So Good!*, is fruitful in terms of voice, agency, and the power of narration.

When it comes to the question of agency, *Life is So Good!* serves as an interesting example for two reasons: first, unlike the two video examples discussed in the previous chapters, Dawson's narrative is surrounded by a number of para-texts. Accounts on websites, publisher's notes, or acknowledgements provide at least some insight into the modes of production of the story, and therefore a better understanding of the politics of agency. Second, the co-author of the narrative is part of the story and thus the relationship between Dawson and Glaubman becomes a subject matter of the book and can be analyzed.

From the publisher's homepage, the reader learns that Glaubman interviewed Dawson and then supposedly did a great job in "captur[ing] Dawson's irresistible voice and view of the world, offering insights into humanity, history, hardships,

and happiness” (“Life is So Good”). The publishers suggest that Glaubman did the writing, yet, he imitated Dawson’s voice in a way that it seems plausible enough that it appears as if Dawson is speaking to the reader. In other words, Dawson told his life story and Glaubman translated it into a sellable narrative, leaving the reader not with the voice of the centenarian but with the co-author’s interpretation of it. Glaubman thus becomes a mediator between Dawson and the public and, at the same time, a “vulnerable subject” as described by Couser in the sense that due to his age and rudimentary literary skills he is “vulnerable to misrepresentation” (x) by his co-author. In the case of *Life is So Good!* Dawson’s vulnerability increases because of general power structures of U.S. society. It remains questionable whether a middle-aged man is truly capable to capture the voice of someone who has grown up in an entirely different space and time. Additionally, and maybe even more crucial, it is highly problematic for a Caucasian man to speak for an African American.¹

Suspicious about Glaubman’s take on the ethics of life writing arise in the acknowledgements of the (auto)biography. Not only does Glaubman repeatedly refer to the book as “my work,” he also writes: “I humbly offer this book as a tribute to George Dawson for the life he has lived” (ix). Hence, even though he “humbly offers” what he has written about another person’s life as a tribute, it becomes clear that Glaubman sees himself as the dominant and more important agent in this collaboration. Further, he may also be the main profiteer of the collaboration, as Dawson signs the rights to the book to Glaubman which is described as a triumph within the narrative. Dawson, in this scene, is able to actually sign his name on a contract for the first time in his life. Dawson did not take the decision to sign lightly. He explains: “I had to think on [signing the contract] some more. Nobody said nothing. I knew I was with friends and whatever I chose would be okay. . . . It was quiet for a long time. It was for me to decide. I put my glasses on and signed in cursive” (256). The narrative here suggests that Dawson’s decision to have his

1 Here, the relationship between Dawson and Glaubman begs for an analysis through the lens of slave narratives. As the common slave narrative, *Life is So Good!* tells the story of an African American who achieves a major change in life. For the slave narrative, this was the transition from bondage into freedom. Many narratives work with the common framing that ‘education is key’ to a life as a free person (Coleman). This mantra is taken up in Dawson’s life story, as it presents his achievement to learn to read and write as the greatest achievement of his entire life. Furthermore, slave narratives work with a white abolitionist’s foreword, validating the written account to a white audience (Coleman). The same mechanism can be seen in *Life is So Good!*. In that connection, it is also notable that many (auto)biographies of African American centenarians (cf. Delany, Delany, and Hill Hearth; Cheeks Johnson and Mulcahy) have Caucasian co-authors. This new genre of African American centenarian (auto)biographies, thus demands a reading as a continuation of the traditional slave narrative, an academic endeavor which goes beyond the scope of this study.

(auto)biography published is an autonomous one. Yet, he presumably did not benefit from it, as the rights and profits largely remain with Glaubman and continue to do so after Dawson's death. Glaubman still gives talks about his experience of writing *Life is So Good!* ("Appearances") and has published a second narrative about George Dawson after his death (Glaubman). Consequently, it is crucial to keep the relationship between Dawson and Glaubman in mind and to be aware that this might, yet again, not be an account of the centenarian's voice but rather a staged story where Glaubman acts as the ventriloquist and Dawson as the puppet.

In addition to the dominance in the claim on the rights to the book, Glaubman has also been accused of dominating the narrative itself. In the online blog *Pratie Place* the author criticizes that "Dawson's Ghostwriter, Richard Glaubman, is annoying. Far from being a Ghost, Glaubman is overweening from the very first sentence" ("George Dawson Update"). According to this blog, Glaubman is present throughout the entire story through the style of writing. In the post, the author claims that it would be very unlikely that Dawson, as a person who is not formally educated and had just started to learn to write, would begin his life story with the grammatical construction of a gerund. While this statement itself can be accused of being highly classist, it nonetheless raises suspicions about the voice the reader gets to hear. These suspicions are intensified throughout the book, as the style of writing switches between General American English in the overall narration and African American Vernacular in Dawson's speech acts. As Lejeune describes in his theory of the "autobiographical pact," both, narrator and protagonist, need to be the same person in order for a work to be considered an autobiography. The break in writing style in *Life is So Good!* indicates otherwise.

Besides these indications deriving from the texts surrounding the narrative, Glaubman is also featured as a character within the book. His appearances, which are usually situated at the beginning or the end of a chapter, frame Dawson's life narrative and tell the story of how the book was written. Glaubman is introduced to the readers through the narrator George Dawson as follows:

His name is Richard. He has lots of questions, thinks he wants to write a book. He comes with a tape recorder and we just sit and talk all day. He's different than other people that I know. I don't mean because he's white or because he's younger than me. Most folks that I know don't read as much and don't have great book learning. This man Richard is different that way. He's read a lot of books and knows about things I never heard of. (41)

This introduction offers insight into the writing process of the (auto)biography. Glaubman had interviewed Dawson and then wrote he the book. This knowledge makes the passage all the more ironic. After all, it was written by Glaubman imitating Dawson's voice who probably spoke to his co-author about the way he felt being interviewed. This irony or entanglement of different voices is approached

by Gabriele Linke who argues that the “process of transforming oral histories can be characterized as the collective (re-)construction of meaning. . . . In this way, oral historians and their interviewees jointly create the autobiographical narratives. Here, personal recollections are mediated for the first time” (76). According to Linke, Glaubman and Dawson both function as mediators of Dawson’s story. The narrative is based on a joint process of conducting interviews that is then translated into a coherent book and thus mediated for a broader audience. With this mediating process, it is not only important to create a narrative that makes sense to a large variety of readers but also to establish the illusion that it was told by Dawson himself entirely and that *Life is So Good!* is an ‘authentic’ ‘as-told-to narrative.’

‘As-told-to-narratives’ were especially popular in a Native American context. Edward Valandra elaborates that “a significant portion of the ‘as-told-to’ formula involves a non-Native writer who brings all of his or her cultural and racist baggage” (109). He criticizes narratives that involve writers who come from an entirely different cultural background than the person they are collaborating with. This same mechanism can be found in the production of *Life is so Good!*, not only in terms of race but also in terms of age, class, and education. It is then crucial to understand that the narrative is not merely the story of a centenarian but that this is an account that has been mediated through a number of voices and is, although it might advocate a certain ‘authenticity,’ to be treated as another performance of not only centenarianism but also blackness through the lens of middle-aged whiteness.

4.2 Aging through the Life-Course: The Interconnectedness of Race, Class, and Age

With the complex relationship between the producers of the narrative in mind, this subchapter focuses on the way George Dawson is ‘aged by culture’ as well as by the social structures that influence and are influenced by cultural imaginaries. Despite the increasing number of published life narratives and the scholarship surrounding them, aging studies scholars criticize the absence of critical engagement with the aging process within the genre. Gullette, for instance, points out that “auto-biography, and life storytelling as a whole, could become far more acutely aware of the ways in which people are aged by culture” (“From Life Story Telling” 103). In this statement, Gullette connects her claim of people being ‘aged by culture’ to the genre of life narrative. She asks for accounts that are aware of age being not merely a chronological or biological fact but a cultural construct. I would add that not only the way culture deals with age(ing) and its representations, but also social hierarchies add to the way people are aged. While George Dawson’s narrative might not be one of these age aware narratives Gullette imagines, his story often reveals the ways in which cultural forces and social expectations influence his aging process.

In that connection, there is a special focus on the way age(ing) and race interact as categories of difference throughout Dawson's life. Therefore, I will first focus on the way racial issues influence his life-course and therefore his aging process. In a second step, I will give examples of how age is constructed under the influence of other factors, not primarily concerned with race.

As Dawson travels through the U.S. and encounters his own difference in various spaces, the book promotes an image of possibility that is very much like a narrative of the American Dream in the sense of a "self-made man." Although often connected to Benjamin Franklin and his autobiography (Paul 370-371), the concept was also used and adapted as a more inclusive concept by Frederic Douglass in a lecture of the same title:

Self-made men are the men who, under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary helps of favoring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position and have learned from themselves the best uses to which life can be put in this world, and in the exercises of these uses to build up worthy character. . . . Such men as these, . . . whether Caucasian or Indian; whether Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-African, are self-made men and are entitled to a certain measure of respect for their success and for proving to the world the grandest possibilities of human nature, of whatever variety of race or color.

Douglass clarifies that all men, no matter their race, can become self-made men, if they come from nothing and work hard to achieve something. This sentiment is presented in George Dawson's (auto)biography, as well. Much like Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, which suggests a set of rules for healthy and moral living (97-80), Dawson's narrative provides a manual on how to lead a good life and become the best possible self. Thereby, it not only connects a story that is, due to the fact that it is told by a centenarian, about age, to a story about racial discrimination, it also uses the trope of social and spatial mobility in order to cover up barriers U.S. society puts up for people of color, poor people, or people of certain age groups.

4.2.1 African American Aging

Life is So Good! assigns great value to both the categories of age and race from the very beginning. In many instances, the two aspects are intertwined or related. This relation between age(ing) and race is also pointed to by Frances Adomako in a fact sheet on African American aging, provided by the American Psychological society. Adomako describes that "African American older adults experience significant health disparities, including lower life expectancies and an increased risk of chronic health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, dementia, stroke, and cancer" and that these higher risks of disease may occur due to "race-related stress," that

is, “[racist] encounters [which] are accumulated over the lifespan, stored in memory, and relived with each new racist and discriminatory experience.” If encounters of racism put stress on the body, which is then stored and remembered, the bodies of older African Americans are under constant pressure. The aging process itself, especially when it comes to physical age, is thus affected by the outside world. At the same time, as Adomako points out, ‘old’ African Americans have “[l]imited access to community resources (e.g., grocery stores, pharmacies, culturally competent health and aging service providers, transportation, housing, etc.)” and therefore lack essential resources to lead a good and meaningful life in later years. *Life is So Good!* implicitly discusses the interplay of race and age, however, it disregards the far-reaching effects racism may have on the aging process as a whole. By playing down racist encounters in the first place and staging Dawson as a model centenarian without referring to the problems of black aging in the United States, the story rather denies the realities of the influences of racial tensions on an individual’s life. At the same time, it discusses how both age and race are constructed and reconstructed alongside each other throughout Dawson’s life-course.

The first time Dawson is confronted with the fact that age has meaning is when he is eight years old and realizes that the children surrounding him are entering school. He states that “the last of the Coal children [white children, Dawson used to play with], was to be starting school in the fall, I was eight years old and that’s about when children started being just with their own color. Besides, I was getting too old to play anyway. That spring, I started working full-time” (29). In this instance, he not only realizes that age can mean something, it also becomes apparent that this meaning differs from context to context. That is, only if a family can afford to manage without the workforce, a child’s turning a certain age means the start of school. The narrative shows how people are indeed ‘aged by culture’ and underlines that these cultures can be very different in a very limited space. The way institutionalized age influences the life-course thus depends on the cultural and social background, as well as the historical time, a person lives in. Simultaneously, Dawson gains a stronger awareness of race. Eight is the institutionalized age at which children who can afford to do so start school. Additionally, it is the age where the color line becomes solid. Whereas playing with white children is not a problem for Dawson before he turns eight, afterwards it becomes unthinkable because of ever-present social boundaries. In that sense, the narrative shows how the perception of race is highly influenced by a person’s age.

These racial lines are made even more impermeable as Dawson goes to work on a farm at the age of twelve. Instead of being in school, he is now ‘old’ enough to work for a white family away from home. Although working away from home would generally be considered a ‘grown-up’ task, Dawson’s grappling with the situation indicates that he does not yet fit the role of an ‘adult.’ He gets homesick and “that first night, even under the blanket [he] shivered and [he] cried till [he] fell

asleep" (54). Although the circumstances demand for him to behave like a 'grown-up,' his unusual life-course cannot hide that he is still a child. In that sense, his institutionalized age forces him into a behavioral age that he may not be ready for, in turn forcing him to 'grow-up' faster in order to cope with his circumstances. Ultimately, the reason for the necessity of his premature adulthood certainly lies in his race and class. Because his family is African American, living in Texas in the early nineteen-hundreds, they do not have very limited opportunities to make enough money to provide for their family without the labor force of their oldest son. Therefore, age, race, and class are inextricably linked.

Through his race, Dawson is required to act unusual for his age. The parting advice he gets from his father, not to mingle with white people, is regarded by Dawson as "part of growing up" (49); a ritual that occurs at the threshold between childhood and adulthood. This special ritual emphasizes the importance of race over the importance of age. Dawson gets behavioral advice not only because he is technically still a child and would be considered to behave as such, but because he is black. His status as an almost 'grown-up' who is earning money to support his family does not help him on his path to become an independent individual. Rather than his age, at this point, it is his race that defines his life.²

After Dawson spent his childhood working in order to help supporting his family, his father allows him to keep his wages once he turns 21. This presents to be step toward adulthood and responsibility in terms of financial freedom, marked by institutionalized age. Dawson uses this newly gained financial independence to start traveling. In this instance, his institutionalized age defines the spatial freedom, he is granted. Before turning 21, he was not able to travel, because his father made economic and life-altering decisions for the entire family, including Dawson. Now that Dawson is an adult in terms of his institutionalized age, his father grants him to manage his own finances. This responsibility, in the eyes of the father is not connected to Dawson's behavior or the question of whether he is capable to handle it but to the mere occurrence of a birthday. Dawson's father thus measures age solely by its institutionalized component.

Besides making claims about the aging process, Dawson's ability to travel implies a certain economic well-being. Furthermore, him travelling through the Jim Crow South as an African American, suggests that it was indeed possible for African Americans to travel rather effortlessly. However, his encounters on the road show

2 While working for a Caucasian family, not only racial matters that are connected to Dawson's age are foregrounded by the narrative. Dawson has to enter through the backdoor, is not allowed to sit at the same table as his employers, and ponders the question how he, as an African American boy, is allowed to behave in an all-white environment (54-55). All these aspects are certainly worth discussing, yet, a detailed analysis of the narrative in terms of critical race theory goes beyond the scope of this study.

that he can never escape the stigma attached to his skin color. He explains that “[i]t wasn’t easy for a colored person back then to travel. Matter of fact, it could be dangerous. Sometimes, other coloreds would step in and warn a traveler” (111). Thus, spatial mobility can only do so much. Dawson is, wherever he goes, an outsider who is unable to permeate social walls. However, the book highlights situations in which he is more accepted, suggesting that he is content with his social boundaries, as long as he can move freely in the sense of spatial movement. Although the narrative does not deny the dangers of traveling for an African American completely, it promises that with the right behavior things should remain uncomplicated. The necessity of a ‘right’ behavior is reinforced a few years after Dawson has traveled the South by the publication of *The Negro Motorist Greenbooks* (Green). These books were designed for African American road trippers and advised them on dangers and possibilities while traveling. Yet, Dawson’s narrative manages to mostly disregard the fatal dangers whose existence the emergence of the *Greenbooks* show. In other words: before the *Greenbooks* assisted African American travelers by telling them where to go and—more importantly—where *not* to go, traveling while black was not only dangerous but, in many cases, life-threatening.

Although the life-threatening nature of traveling while black in the Jim Crow South is mostly disregarded, *Life is So Good!* hints at minor occurrences of racism. For this study, especially those moments are of interest where age and race are mentioned in the same instance. This happens, for example, when a ticket agent at the train station asks Dawson, who, by that time, is in his twenties: “Where are you going, boy? I was a man, but that didn’t matter to him” (131). Here, age and race are intertwined linguistically. Whereas the word ‘boy’ is a marker of ‘young’ age and childhood, it is also used as racial marker, as white people used to refer to black people as ‘boy.’ Consequently, ‘blackness’ and ‘childhood’ are linked together, taking away adult agency from African Americans. In that connection, Corinne T. Field argues that historically, citizenship and therefore social and political participation was tied to adulthood, which was denied to women and African Americans because their maturity was questioned by a white, male norm (3). There was thus no “equal adulthood” (1) which becomes visible through the use of the word ‘boy’ to address a grown man. In this instance, bringing age and race together on the one hand results in racism, as Dawson is denied being treated as an adult and is denied being a full member of society which then results in a lack of empowerment. On the other hand, this derogatory treatment of African Americans only functions in a mindset where children do not have agency. As African Americans and children are put on the same level, it becomes clear that both groups are not expected to be able to take care of themselves and are denied agency.

After his life as a traveler, Dawson settles down, gets married and has seven children, all in accordance with the expected life-course of a man. It is only after his official retirement when he is working for a white woman as a gardener that the

narrative hints at the interconnectedness of age and race again. In this encounter ageism and racism mutually influence each other. When Dawson works on hot day his employer states: "I guess that heat doesn't bother you people. You're fortunate that you can just keep working. It's so hard for us, especially when we get older.' Now, I was sixty-five and at least as old as she was" (209). First of all, there is a clear 'us vs. them' distinction and the expectation that black people are generally not influenced by weather conditions in the same way as white people. This racist assertion is presented as something positive, whereas the woman ignores that Dawson working in the heat is not because he *can* but because he *must* for economic reasons. This basic claim is then supplemented by the assumption that African Americans age differently than Caucasian Americans. Either the woman categorizes Dawson in the wrong age group due to his physical abilities and outward appearance; or she thinks that age means something different for her than it does for him. The generalization shows that the woman regards Dawson as fundamentally different from herself because of his skin color. In the eyes of a white woman in her sixties, Dawson's age thus does not matter at all. The only necessary category of difference remains race.

Even though Dawson encounters these forms of racism, at the point in history where African Americans throughout the country begin to collectively fight for civil rights, he does not join the protests: "I wasn't one that marched on Washington or joined the marches across the South. It just wasn't me. I was an old man by then and it wasn't the way I been living all those years" (213). This statement, in line with the rest of the narrative, promotes a certain contentment with his situation. Dawson managed to have a decent life without equal rights and apparently never thought about striving for more. By distancing himself from the civil rights movement, Dawson engages in so called 'respectability politics.' Mikaela Pitcan et al. describe respectability politics as

rooted in resistance to racist imagery of Black people, particularly Black women, who adopted self-presentation strategies that downplayed sexuality and emphasized morality and dignity to reject White America's stereotypes of them. In this context, respectability is a tactic used by low-status individuals in the hope of obtaining social mobility.

As a black male, Dawson resists stereotyping by working hard and not criticizing white dominance. In that sense, he is depicted as harmless towards a white, male, and heteronormatively dominated society. Moreover, Dawson's attitude toward the civil rights movement shows how now, in his later life, it is his age, or rather the behavioral expectations he sets for himself in relation to his age, that prevents him from pursuing equality. Ironically, whereas in his earlier life it was his age that gave him freedom as he could escape the race restrictions of the South, in his sixties,

age seems to be the restrictive factor. As he had lived with discrimination his entire life, at his age he seems ready to continue do so.

The connection between age and race continues to be an important factor in Dawson's life, especially once he turns 100. Primarily, the relationship to his co-author is not only questionable because Glaubman is so much younger but also because he is white, facts that, in the social power dynamics of the U.S., give Glaubman more agency than Dawson. Further, in this case the question suggests itself whether this narrative is so successful because Dawson was "a slave's grandson," because he "learned to read at age 98," or because "lived to the age of 103" ("Life is So Good"), inextricably linking issues of age, education, and race. Since Glaubman only sought Dawson out *after* his one 100th birthday, age appears to be the defining factor for the production of this (auto)biography. However, it is noteworthy that among the many centenarian (auto)biographies flooding the market in recent years, those which have been most acclaimed and published with renowned publishing houses are those about African American centenarians (cf. Delany, Delany, and Hill Hearth; Cheeks Johnson and Mulcahy). While, as I will argue in the following sections of this chapter, there are certainly instances where Dawson is aged by cultural forces that are not primarily linked to his race, there appears to be a connection between age and race when it comes to the production and perception of centenarian (auto)biographies. The fascination of an exceptionally long life seems to be reinforced through narratives about people who did *not* have the perfect conditions getting there in the first place. The narrative of the American Dream of aging works even better if the goal is achieved against all odds. At the same time, this line of reasoning brings back neoliberal ideas: if people who had to face discrimination and poverty throughout their lives can healthily and happily live to 100, more privileged people have no excuse of not doing the same.

Ultimately, this section showed the extent to which categories of difference, in this case primarily race and age, mutually influence each other. When they occur together, especially in Dawson's early life, race seems to be more of a defining category. Later on, especially when it comes to his lack of participation in the civil rights movement, his age, too, becomes a restricting factor. The narrative also shows that Dawson's cultural aging is very much influenced by his race. His life-course, and therefore the meaning of different life stages is affected greatly by his social standing and the fact that he is black. Clearly, his aging process is not solely defined by his race. Sometimes race and class are inextricably linked and sometimes other factors influence Dawson's aging process. The next part of this chapter thus focuses on the way Dawson ages through the life-course in instances where race is not the defining factor of the process. As his race is implicitly ever-present, however, it can never be completely muted within the analysis.

4.2.2 Aging Through the Life-Course

This section focuses on the instances in Dawson's life where the construction of his age is not primarily influenced by his race. I am discussing examples where age becomes the defining moment of his life as well as those where his aging process is influenced by the culture, he lives in.

During World War I, Dawson works at a sawmill whose owner values his work enough to forge his documents in order to make him appear younger than nineteen and therefore not fit for war. He states: "I was about nineteen years old. I didn't know much about the war. But from the way people talked, I thought I might be going too. The mill owner changed my birthday on a piece of paper" (88). This action shows the extent to which institutionalized age influences a person's life. Since the military has inscribed the rule that only people over the age of nineteen can be drafted for war, every person who has not reached that threshold is free to stay at home. Furthermore, it shows how just 100 years ago, the system of institutionalized age was easy to evade, especially for a person who was not part of mainstream society. Yet, it shows that age is a category one can, at least to some extent, lie about, as long as the different age categories still somewhat align, that is, because Dawson's behavioral, outward, and physical age do not oppose the altered institutionalized age. What this section shows, then, is that a certain age brings opportunities and responsibilities. In that connection, being a certain institutionalized age at a certain point in history may drastically change a person's life-course and thus bears immense power.

Dawson uses the freedom of not having to go to war and being released from the duties of financially supporting his family to start traveling at the age of 21. While his spatial mobility thus increases during his twenties, his social status remains the same, due to his skin color and the lack of education. Yet, his attitude towards life, and his motivation to always work hard at least provide the economic means for him to travel. He is a low budget traveler and the fact that his travels are interrupted by periods of working reminds the reader of the fairly new trend of 'Work and Travel,' the possibility for mostly Western 'young' adults to live, work, and travel within a foreign country for a year. In that sense, the travel narrative reads like a coming-of-age story. Although the narrative does not present strictly "crises of late adolescence involving courtship, sexual initiation, separation from parents, and choice of vocation or spouse" ("Coming of Age"), it deals with the instances in which Dawson learns how to cope with life on his own. As well as many 'young' adults nowadays travel after high school in order to gain independence, Dawson describes many instances of growing up or becoming an adult throughout his journey.

When he takes his first job building levees along the Mississippi River, for example, he states that "I was excited about 'my wagon' and 'my mule' as if I was just a kid

and not a man of twenty-one years of age. I may have been grinning like a kid, but I felt like a man, all right" (119). Dawson hence describes himself in an in-between state of child-and adulthood. This is the first time in his life that he has a job that he acquired himself and that only he will benefit from. Further, it is the first time in his life that he is in charge of property. Even though he just rents the wagon and the mule from his employer, he is responsible for them and for the time being, they are his. Adulthood is thus tied to two different things in Dawson's narrative. First, to the number of 21, a number that is institutionalized as a milestone of growing up in the U.S. until today. Moreover, Dawson 'feels like a man' because of his responsibilities. Conversely, he admits that he might have acted like a child, presenting a juxtaposition of outer and inner perceptions of age(ing): what a person feels—in Dawson's case the feeling of being an adult—does not necessarily align with what other people see—in Dawson's case, a person who is excited like a child.

Interestingly, this passage also introduces questions about perspectives on the life-course. Being 21, riding on 'his' wagon, Dawson feels like an adult; looking back on the scene and narrating it from his perspective of a centenarian, he questions his own feelings of maturity. It is also clear that from whichever perspective this tale is told, behaviors such as excitement and grinning are regarded to belong to children, whereas—following that logic—adults must be sincere and calm. It seems that perspectives on what attributes belong to a certain age group change with the age of the onlooker. Whereas 21-year-old George Dawson feels like an adult due to his responsibilities, his centenarian self takes into account other behaviors and considers himself at 21 to be rather childish. This emphasizes the arbitrariness of age as a cultural construct as intrinsic or extrinsic identification is constantly renegotiated through human interaction.

The travel narrative of the book is restricted to Dawson's younger years and, as he grows older, he marries and settles down back in the South. At this point, Dawson returns to a rather normative model of the life-course, indicating that there is a certain time and place in life to settle down and start a family. Here, again, age is the decisive factor in his decision. Hence, his age becomes the restrictive factor to his spatial mobility. Because he is ready to have a family at the age of 28, he has to stay in one place. The woman he meets and falls in love with is twelve years younger than Dawson, which points toward constructed ideals of age differences in a relationship. Generally, the preferred age in a partner for males is significantly lower than for a female, that is, in a heteronormative relationship, the male partner presumably needs to be older than the female partner (DiDonato). It is thus socially acceptable for Dawson to marry a woman who is twelve years younger than himself, while the other way around would not be as easily acceptable. Here, the narrative hints at the distinct difference between male and female aging, thereby pointing to Susan Sontag's 'double standard of aging.'

In that connection, it is also noteworthy that Dawson, after his first wife passes away, gets remarried three times, a significant fact, as social mechanisms of age(ing) do not restrict elderly males from romantic relationships, as much as females.³ Once he is 100, he even states that “[p]eople always ask me if I will ever get married again. I might. I might. There’s lots of women that would like to marry me” (219). As opposed to Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier, who cannot imagine having a relationship at her age, Dawson would happily get remarried. He claims that there are many women who would be interested in marrying him. Apparently, he is still very much desirable and therefore an eligible bachelor. As men age differently than women, romance in ‘old’ age seems to be more likely to occur. Here, a comparison between the narratives of the female centenarians previously discussed with the one of George Dawson intensifies the notion of a ‘double standard of aging’ and emphasizes that gender norms are still very much significant into extraordinary ‘old’ age.⁴

When Dawson reaches retirement age, social security is not enough for him to get by and he continues working as a gardener until the age of 89. He only retires because his tools are stolen and he cannot afford new ones (221). When he retires from his official job, he explains: “[w]hen I had to quit my job in 1963, I didn’t stop working. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t have done that” (208). Due to economic reasons, Dawson’s work life is tremendously extended. He had to ‘grow up’ early in order to support his family and keep on working far longer than would be considered the social norm. If ‘old’ age is connected to a lack of economic productivity and retirement, Dawson’s midlife is considerably stretched. John Macnicol explains that “there has been increasing pressure to redefine old age almost out of existence in the name of agelessness, to remove the protective walls that have hitherto shielded older people and, in the process, to attack their welfare rights” (2). As Dawson does not retire—because he is financially unable to—he is, in a way, staged as ageless.

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- 3 Age here does not seem to be a factor that matters too much when it comes to choosing a partner. Race on the other hand is given a very high importance, as Dawson does not even allow himself to speak with a white woman—which, given the realities of the Jim Crow South, appears to be a safe course of action. Furthermore, education appears to be a deceive factor for Dawson, as he cannot ask a woman, he meets on the train out because he thinks that her literacy makes her too different (147). Categories of difference thus gain and lose importance due to the situation Dawson finds himself in.
 - 4 Another issue pointing toward gender difference in extraordinary ‘old’ age would be that in the narratives about Helen and Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier, outward appearance was a major topic while it is mostly left out in Dawson’s case. This, of course, may not only be because of gender differences but also because the previous two narratives were told within visual media, allowing for more of an emphasis on outward appearance. Yet, there is no mention at all of Dawson’s appearance at 100 throughout the entire book, indicating that his appearance just is not important for his persona.

This then ties into a neoliberal discourse of the necessity of protection of 'old' people and the need for welfare. If, in other words, everybody aged as 'well' as George Dawson, there would be no vulnerability among the elderly and thus no need for protection through the community. Dawson's narrative shows that working beyond the average U.S. retirement age of 65 is possible but, at the same time, implicitly criticizes the lack of protection he is given. Ultimately, his continued employment shows that class is a significant factor in the structure of a life-course. Money, in Dawson's life, is the determining factor on when he has to 'grow-up' or when he can 'grow old.'

The unusual structure of Dawson's life-course continues as he goes back to school at the age of 98. Interestingly, Dawson himself states that the imaginary of a model life-course kept him from doing so earlier: "People wonder why I didn't go back to school earlier. After I retired, I finally had time. I was proud to get my children through school and raise them properly. But I understood that school was there for children" (226). The conventions of the life-course restrict Dawson from getting an education once he is an adult. Even with fairly new concepts of the necessity of lifelong learning, Dawson's late education does not fit the expected Western life-course model, for as Manuel London writes in his introductory text to the topic of lifelong learning, "[l]ifelong learning builds on prior learning as it expands knowledge and skills in depth and breadth" (3). If lifelong learning is only defined as the continuation of institutionalized learning, Dawson's efforts cannot be defined within this framework.⁵ Instead of being an example of the lifelong learning paradigm, he is, yet again, an extraordinary case of starting institutionalized learning in 'old' age. Consequently, the narrative presents an interesting blurring of age categories and life-course models. The fact that the term 'adult education' needs the specification of 'adult' shows that it is something outside the norm, as the term 'education' would be associated with learning in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Hence, by going back to school to learn to read, Dawson enters the role of a child.

Whereas in Western imagination the teacher is usually older than the student, in this case the student exceeds the teacher in age by many years. This role reversal of life stages continues into Dawson's private life where he now comes home to his son to tell him about his day at school, a routine that they enacted with opposite roles when his son was still in school (230). An unusual life-course, which might be inviting stigmatization for some people does the opposite for Dawson as he receives praise and fame. It could thus be argued that the admiration one gets when living an extraordinarily long life increases when coupled with behavior that

5 Furthermore, lifelong learning, as defined by London, is a process that should be supported through a person's employer (3). Consequently, according to this definition, people who have retired would not be in need of lifelong learning any longer.

is not considered the norm of 'old' age. The phenomenon of being a centenarian is thus amplified by Dawson's going back to school.

His efforts are met with great appreciation that wins him an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show where he is promoted as the 'posterchild' for U.S. American literacy. This terminology again promotes the juxtaposition of age and role, as well as reinforcing the irony of it. Because he is going back to school, the centenarian can be referred to as a 'child.' Hence, Dawson's late education could be read as a sign that 'old' age, indeed, is like a 'second childhood.' However, as Achenbaum elaborates, the concept of the 'second childhood' is tied to an idea of cognitive and physical inability and the idea that children cannot take care of themselves ("Delineating Old Age" 301). Consequently, Dawson's illiteracy and the resulting helplessness in a society where literacy is the norm puts him into the position of dependence associated with the 'second childhood.' In his case, however this dependence occurred throughout all life stages and is not connected to the common decline narrative of 'old' age. Rather, Dawson turns this expected decline around by emphasizing his cognitive abilities by going back to school. Interestingly, although he is called a 'posterchild' and openly ponders on the role reversal with his son, he would not be defined as a member of the 'second childhood.' This then shows how arbitrarily these terminologies and the concepts of 'childhood' or 'old age' are in the first place. They mean different things to different people and, most importantly, are connoted in various ways. However, childhood and the dependence that comes with it is not associated with something negative. 'Second childhood,' on the other hand, is regarded as negative. Dawson, by going back to school, establishing cognitive ability, and therefore reinterpreting his late life, reimagines the 'second childhood' as something positive.

Dawson's efforts are not only notable when it comes to renegotiating life-course models, his image as 'posterchild' is supported by his teacher, Carl Henry, as he describes the allure Dawson presents for his adult education program. As Henry states on the Oprah Winfrey Show, his students are impressed and motivated by Dawson's performance. He explains that "[i]f Mr. Dawson can do this, honey, you can do it too" (01:39-01:41). This motivation does not only capture Dawson's classmates but also his teacher, who came back to adult education after his retirement "since Mr. Dawson's been here I don't feel so old. Retirement was good for a few months, but I don't need it" (227). By encouraging Henry to keep working after his retirement, Dawson implicitly passes on the neoliberal values that are prominent throughout the entire narrative. His life thus becomes not only an example of neoliberal values put to action but also starts a chain reaction of people living up to his standards. Dawson, in other words, gives people a purpose. He becomes sort of a prophet so people can now ask 'what would Dawson do?' This role model function does not only work through his strive for education but by his age, as well. When Dawson is around, Henry feels younger himself. With all positive imaginari-

ies connected to being 'young,' Henry's motivation may hence be increased through a feeling of opportunity and progress.

In summary, a critical reading of Dawson's aging through the life-course raises three major issues. First, the fact that we are 'aged by culture' does not mean that 'alternative' life-course models lead to social exclusion. Rather, Dawson's non-normative life-course leads to respect and admiration. At the same time, the narrative shows that there is no escape from the cultural forces of aging, the norms that surround him significantly shape Dawson's persona through his age. Second, the narrative shows that being 'aged by culture' is inextricably linked to social categories of difference such as race, class, and gender. The reciprocal influence of these categories suggest that African Americans are 'aged by culture' differently than Caucasian Americans, women differently than men, the rich differently than the poor. Third, the emphasis on Dawson's work until 'old' age and his efforts to take care of himself and continue learning echo the neoliberal paradigm of modern Western civilization. The narrative promotes that with hard work and self-optimizing everyone can live an exceptionally (long) life.

4.3 Framing Extraordinary 'Old' Age: The Fabrication of George Dawson

The last section worked with the narrative of George Dawson's life in order to show how he ages through his life-course and how this process is influenced by cultural specifics. This current section proceeds to discuss the portrayal of Dawson's extraordinary 'old' age and how he is staged as a centenarian who is not only a 'posterchild' for literacy but also for aging well. The previous chapters have shown that, comparable to Luce Irigaray's argument about women, centenarians are fabricated. This next section will argue along the lines of this fabrication and show how, in Dawson's case especially, the centenarian becomes a commodity. I will begin by discussing the means by which his extraordinary 'old' age influences the way he is treated by other people. Thereby, I will address the expectations these interactions indicate about being extraordinarily 'old' and thus what this implies about the fabrication of Dawson as centenarian. I will then address the specific fabrication of the model centenarian George Dawson from three different angles: mental fitness, physical fitness, and wisdom. I focus on the way these categories are used to establish Dawson's role model function through othering and a sense of social mobility. Finally, I will refer back to the genre of (auto)biography and discuss the ways in which the image fabricated of Dawson turns him into a sellable commodity.

Within *Life is so Good!*, George Dawson, as the protagonist and narrator, describes interactions with other people. These interactions create an image of Daw-

son as a centenarian that mirrors the expectations of the onlooker. I would thus like to argue that George Dawson becomes a reflection of what idealized extraordinary 'old' age looks like. It is because of this idealized image that selling Dawson's story works so well. This becomes especially apparent as the interactions between him and other people, tied to his extraordinary age, are openly addressed in Dawson's narrative.

Even in extraordinary 'old' age the interplay between age and race as categories of differences remains apparent. When Dawson, for instance, returns to his old hometown, Marshall, Texas, and enters the local newspaper's office, he muses that "I walked right in through the front door of the paper and somebody called me 'sir.' That's not the Marshall I knew. It wasn't just talk either. The people wanted to be helpful" (43). This multilayered statement, at first glance broaches the issue of change within the society of Marshall. Not knowing the history of the U.S. or George Dawson's origin, it would simply state that in the past, people in Marshall were a lot less polite. Knowing, however, that the changed times brought an end to racial segregation, the fact that he enters through the front door becomes a signifier for improved race relations. While when he was 21, he was a grown up and yet referred to as 'boy,' he is now called 'sir.' This, points at the decrease in racial discrimination and the changing of social roles. However, it also indicates age: a 'sir' is no doubt an adult. This double meaning of the title 'sir' points toward the markers of age(ing) that are hidden within Dawson's statement: People might 'want to be helpful' because Dawson is extraordinarily 'old.' This then would indicate respect for the elderly that trumps racist behaviors.

However, the instances in which age and race are interconnected decrease with Dawson's 100th birthday. He states that "most people only know how old I am. They don't really know me" (250). It becomes clear that people only seem to see the centenarian in him, not the person. Here, it becomes questionable whether for the reflection of the model centenarian race, gender, or class are even important. It seems as if as soon Dawson turns 100, his age status becomes more important than anything else. Surely, learning to read and write at the age of 98 was a phenomenon but then continuing to live to be 100 appears to be the factor that is most notable.

What seems to be highly important in the fabrication of the model centenarian is the emphasis on independence. Whereas Dawson is happy about the polite people in modern Marshall, he implicitly complains about peoples' tendency to be overly helpful because of his age. In that connection, he describes his relationship with Glaubman as follows: "[Richard] doesn't try to help me too much like most folks do when they find that I am over 100 years. One night he cooks dinner, the next night I cook dinner. Afterward, we do some dominoes and the loser does the dishes" (42). This statement suggests that Dawson does not need help around the house. He is perfectly capable of cooking and doing dishes by himself. He does not need the overly helpful 'young' people to do these things for him. This, again, ties

back to the successful aging paradigm and is connected to questions of elder care. As discussed in connection to Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier, the fear of a grey tsunami is oftentimes triggered by a fear of large number of 'old' people who are unable to take care of themselves. Yet, more important than not *needing* help is the fact that Dawson does not *want* any help. He is much happier if people do not constantly try to support him. In a cynical reading, one could argue that this passage works as an excuse for people to not even try to help their elderly relatives and friends. It gives those people a clean conscience who do not have the time to even offer help to 'old' people because if they had lived a life as exemplary as George Dawson, they would not want or need support.

His independence is further emphasized by a description of his activities: "Nowadays, I work hard at school. On Sunday morning, I get up and go to church. Saturday is the day that I catch up with things or maybe now that spring is coming, I'll just go fishing" (154). Dawson keeps himself busy with his education and leisure activities. He thereby stresses that, for him, 'old' age is not and never has been a 'waiting room' for death. In fact, Dawson's mortality is not addressed within the narrative. Rather, the story is future-oriented: Dawson plans to get his GED, Glaubman plans for Dawson to go on a book tour. The planning element then makes the story a progress narrative and connects back to Ricca Edmonson's concepts of a continuing "development through time" (102) in order to make a life meaningful. Dawson shows that, even, or especially, with 100, there is a purpose in his life and that he has a reason to keep going. The narrative here reverses stereotypes of expected decline and can in that sense be read as a narrative that contributes to a more nuanced imaginary of later life. This potential for nuance, however, is mostly shadowed by the neoliberal elements of successful aging interwoven within the narrative. George Dawson is allowed to break out of the 'waiting room,' into the future, in order to serve the role model function of activity and independence.

Although Dawson's years of being 'old' are part of the narrative, he is always presented in terms of progress rather than in terms of decline. Unlike Macklemore's music video, this narrative does not suggest that there is a significant break of extraordinary 'old' age versus 'old' age in terms of being freed from a culturally imagined and socially enforced 'waiting room.' Rather, Dawson seems to have skipped the 'waiting room' altogether. In Dawson's case, there does not seem to be a centenarian paradox in the first place because living like him leads to the omission of 'old' age in terms of decline and disengagement. Nonetheless, there is a slight difference in perception once he turns 100: His extraordinary 'old' age makes him more phenomenal, turning him into a valuable commodity. Moreover, the focus on his extraordinary 'old' age prevents the narrative from portraying Dawson as completely ageless. His commodification is only possible because he is portrayed as exceptionally fit at his age. This focus on his age, crucial to his commodification,

however, only appears once Dawson has turned 100. Before that, he is depicted as an example of what Katz calls “growing older without aging.” Consequently, although the narrative moves away from the stereotype of decline, it does not manage to completely abstain from a successful aging paradigm. This becomes even clearer when looking at the way the narrative emphasizes Dawson's mental and physical fitness, as well as the portrayal of his wisdom.

4.3.1 Extraordinary 'Old' Age and Mental Fitness

Dawson's ability to tell his life story is an indicator of his mental fitness. Throughout the narrative, his ability to remember details from his past are highlighted, supporting the claim of an 'authentic' (auto)biography: Because Dawson is able to remember, the story must be truly his. Besides the emphasis on Dawson's general good memory, mental fitness is represented in three major points. First, Dawson is valued as a contemporary witness for the twentieth century, second, he is portrayed as a knowledgeable person whose help is needed by friends and family, and third, his ability to late life learning remains the focus in his extraordinary 'old' age. I will thus, in the following, give an example for each of these cases and discuss how this emphasis on his many mental abilities contributes to his fabrication as a model centenarian.

Dawson's witness qualities for important events of world history are implied through Glaubman's inquiries about them. He wants to know, for instance, how Dawson remembers World War I. However, Dawson does not conform to the expected answers and tells his own version of history: “I remember the year 1914 all right, but I don't recollect any archduke or much about the World War” (65). Dawson stresses his mental capacity of remembering but not by functioning as a lay historian. He, in that sense, refrains from his own fabrication by not confirming his own historical value. Nevertheless, he stresses a different, unexpected, and maybe more important sort of value by indicating that he might not know about world history but about his personal one. Dawson explains: “‘Back in the 1920s that would have been white news. It had nothing to do with the colored.’ ‘But it's part of American history,’ Richard said. I laughed. ‘That's good, son. But it wasn't part of the America I knew. If it was, I would remember’” (169). Consequently, Dawson cannot contribute to historical knowledge in a way that Glaubman expects him to. Rather, he uncovers a history unknown to normative U.S. culture. Thus, the historic value of the centenarian is increased through him not conforming to the knowledge that is passed on in history books.

Accordingly, personal history is not automatically in line with world history, and history from a person of color's standpoint offers perspectives opposing predominantly white historical discourses. The centenarian's narrative promises to shed light on issues of history that remain underrepresented by Western main-

stream historical scholarship. By telling his story, Dawson contributes to decentralizing history. As Takashi Shogimen puts it, there is an “anti-Eurocentric movement” that “has been gaining momentum quickly since the dawn of the twenty-first century” (324). History, as many other scholarships, has in the past predominantly looked at history from a white, heteronormative, European perspective, providing a Eurocentric view on the past. The life story of an African American can hence be read as part of the ‘anti-Eurocentric movement’ as it fosters knowledge of alternative histories. In order to become a valuable commodity, the centenarian thus needs the mental capacity to retell their life story and retell history from their own perspective. Further, the constant emphasis on Dawson’s ability to remember shows that this fact is so unlikely that it needs to be recalled various times for the reader to believe it. Here, the narrative goes against stereotypes of ‘old’ age and memory loss and establishes Dawson’s life as a counter narrative to images of Dementia.

Besides the historic value of Dawson’s mental fitness, he is experienced concerning the trivial things in life; as trivial as setting up a VCR machine. Following stereotypes of ‘old’ age, one would assume that when it comes to technology, younger generations are at advantage as they grew up with these mechanisms. Yet, Glaubman has trouble setting up the VCR because he did not read the instruction manual properly which causes Dawson to step in. After succeeding, he muses: “It’s the same when my kids are around. Sometimes, I have to wonder how they can get along without me being there to help them. But that’s okay. Even though I’m pretty busy with school these days, I don’t mind helping people” (190). Dawson is portrayed as the savior who has to help out in every area of life. For this, his mental fitness is crucial, as he needs to be mentally healthy to assist with everyday issues. This emphasis on cognitive abilities, again, implicitly refers to Dawson’s narrative as progress narrative. Instead of waiting for death, he keeps himself busy by learning and helping others. In that sense, he is portrayed as selfless: a Good Samaritan who uses all his resources to be there for others. The reader is thus not only in awe of his mental capacities but also convinced that he deserves his longevity and his health into extraordinary ‘old’ age. He did not only live an exceptionally long life by being active and staying healthy, he did so by being an extremely good person.

The third and maybe most crucial aspect of Dawson’s mental health is his ability to learn to read and write at 98. Because of his late education, he quickly rises to fame in America as the ‘posterchild for American literacy.’ Marketing his (auto)biography as co- and not ghost-written underlines the phenomenality of his efforts. Not only did he go back to school at an ‘old’ age, he has been so successful in his endeavors that he ultimately managed to co-write his own (auto)biography. This promotes his mental ability as well as it again makes a claim for the validity of the narrative: Because Dawson is mentally very fit, he is able to use his own voice to write his own life narrative. This fascination shows that the ability to learn to read and write at such an ‘old’ age is not taken for granted. Unlike the aspect of physical

fitness, the narrative does not promote this as a possible new norm for 'old' age that anyone should or could strive for. Yet, it gives the implication that only people who are cognitively able are worthy of being written about (or of writing about themselves). As it becomes clear from one of the notes Dawson receives for his 100th birthday, which reads, "I'm happy that your brain still works" (250), his cognitive abilities are not taken for granted but are certainly perceived as something to aspire to. He thus becomes not only a role model encouraging people to learn to read and write but also to generally never stop learning in order to keep one's mental abilities. As mentioned above, this emphasis on his late education also juxtaposes life-course expectations and the reality of Dawson's life.

When it comes mental fitness, Dawson's narrative undermines stereotypes of 'old' age. His mental capacities stand in stark contrast to the expectations directed towards an 'old' person. Focusing on his efforts to achieve literacy and to tell his life story becomes sellable because he is acting in a way that is age inappropriate. This denaturalization of age shows how working against social expectation does not have to result in social sanction, yet, it raises awareness. On the other hand, this positive awareness is only possible because in other instances, Dawson performs as a model 'old' person. Thus, framing him as a person of historic value and thereby buying into the stereotype of 'old' people as storytellers, the (auto)biography stages Dawson as someone who is not denying his 'old' age but simply not conforming to negative images about later life. Although the narrative thus implies that the only way to age meaningful is by keeping one's mental capacities, it also manages to establish an image of 'old' age without age denial.

4.3.2 Extraordinary 'Old' Age and Physical Fitness

In addition to George Dawson's mental capacities, *Life is so Good!* emphasizes his physical fitness. Besides focusing on health and activity throughout his life, the narrative more or less subtly weaves in comments about Dawson's physical abilities in his extraordinary 'old' age. Through the focus on physical fitness throughout Dawson's life, the story becomes a manual for centenarian wannabes. The message is clear: live like George Dawson and you will be healthy until the age of one 100. More importantly for this study, the focus on physical fitness after Dawson turns 100 adds to the fabrication of him as model centenarian by juxtaposing his physical age to his institutionalized age.

Dawson becomes a 'posterchild' for active aging. In addition to the promotion of his ability to conduct physical labor until the age of 88, the narrative continues to highlight Dawson's physical fitness after he turns 100. When it comes to 'old' age and physical fitness, Sally Chivers argues that "[w]hile many are quick to assume and accept that physical disability inevitably comes with old age, others fight that connection, preferring to make sunny claims that it is possible to stay active well

into the late years" (*The Silvering Screen* 27). Both these extremes are, as it so often goes with extremes, oversimplifying the matter at hand. While presenting 'old' age as inextricably linked to disability fosters an age as decline paradigm, disregarding the biological facts of aging promotes successful aging and defines people who feel effects of aging on the body as failure.

In *Life is so Good!*, the later extreme is at hand when Dawson is offered a wheelchair at a football game, which he vehemently declines: "Let me tell you, it's a big stadium and I admit, I got a little tired. . . . Mr. Lyons, he kept trying to be helpful in the way people do. He said, 'We have wheelchairs. Let me get you a wheelchair.' . . . 'If you want to order a wheelchair that's fine. You can use it. I don't need one'" (235). This scene can be read from opposing angles. Dawson 'admitting' to be tired, on the one hand shows that his aged body is somewhat acknowledged. At the age of 100, one is allowed to be tired from time to time. This goes along the lines of the representations of the centenarian body in the previous chapters. On the other hand, the phrasing suggests that him being tired still feels wrong to him. If being tired is only marginally acceptable, using a wheelchair is presented as the ultimate failure. By insisting on Dawson's able-bodiedness, the narrative demonizes disability: Needing a wheelchair in 'old' age, equals failure at the game of aging well. Thereby, the narrative not only accuses people who are unable to walk of failed aging, it also joins in a trend to use the wheelchair as a metaphor for a life not worth living. Consequently, although the centenarian body is allowed to show signs of physical 'old' age, there are limits to the acceptance of these signs.

The narrative does not only focus on Dawson's physical ability but also on the fact that he does not need any medical attention. Apparently, he has only seen a doctor once in his life and describes the experience as follows:

"Before you know it they got me about naked except for some nightgown that don't even have any buttons in the back. Then he started in with questions, and with some questions that were none of his business. They acted like I couldn't have been alive without having seen a doctor before" (246). Unlike Aubrey De Grey, Dawson does not need biomedical enhancement in order to live a long and healthy life. In fact, he does not even need to see a doctor. Conversely, physicians seem to be in disbelief that Dawson's longevity is possible without medical attention. This scene presents a discrepancy between the demand for able-bodiedness in 'old' age and the need for medical attention to achieve it. On the one hand, it is crucial to keep 'old' people out of the hospital so that they do not overwhelm the system. On the other hand, the system only works with paying 'customers' and if everyone was like Dawson, the medical complex would collapse. At any rate, Dawson's relationship to medical profession defies stereotypical assumptions of 'old' age as a time of sickness and frequent visits to the doctor's office.

Dawson's dislike of physicians ties into a suspicion of the medical system often found in the African American community. Lindsay Wells and Ajun Gowda elaborate that

[t]he US medical institution has a long legacy of discriminating and exploiting black Americans, the haunting remembrance of which remains ingrained in the collective consciousness of the community. Historically, the medical establishment used African bodies, without consent, for its own advancement and supported medical theories, technologies, and institutions to strengthen systems of injustice.

Not trusting the medical system is thus a statistically expected behavior for an African American. In addition to showing this distrust, the narrative suggests that it is unproblematic to never consult a physician. Here, reading the (auto)biography against the grain offers insight into a common health care conundrum: In a perfect world, everybody would be healthy (like Dawson) and not need medical attention. Nonetheless, in order to catch disease early, regular check-ups are important. The narrative, in order to promote Dawson's good health, however, promotes a certain distrust in the medical system, suggesting that living a healthy life is all the healthcare a person needs. Furthermore, the narrative, once again, covers up economic factors in Dawson's life: He may have never seen a doctor because he did not have medical insurance and simply could not afford it. He therefore had no other option but to stay healthy without medical assistance. The story portrays his lack of need for it as his personal achievement and leaves out social and economic factors that may well tie into the bigger picture.

Conclusively, when it comes to physical ability, Dawson is presented as able-bodied and active. This state has been achieved by healthy living and physical activity into later life. In line with neoliberal tendencies and economic factors, going to work and conducting physical labor is euphemized into one of the reasons for Dawson's longevity. Being active, in his narrative is tied to his job, portraying him not only as able-bodied but also as economically worthy. At the same time, this disregards his poverty as the reason for his working into late life, thereby glossing over the negative effects poverty is known to have on the aging process. Connected to this, he does not need help in form of social security or any type of elder care. The age of Dawson's body, physically and mentally, is thus relatively 'young' and stand in stark contrast to his institutionalized age. While these biological capacities seem to be crucial for Dawson and his status as a sellable model centenarian, the next section discusses the role expected wisdom plays in the fabrication of a centenarian.

4.3.3 Extraordinary 'Old' Age and Wisdom

Life is so Good! establishes the connection between 'old' age and wisdom in the very beginning when Dawson's grandmother passes on her knowledge about the danger of snakes (22). The grandmother is presented as the more knowledgeable person due to her experience. As a long life inevitably fosters many experiences, the longer a person lives, the more knowledge or wisdom they presumably obtain. The reader is thus presented with the idea of respecting experiences from elders and trusting in their recommendations. The trust Dawson has for his grandmother is continued, as Dawson is supposed to be the wise person in 'old' age. As he once asked his grandmother for advice, now Glaubman asks him to share his insights about life. This knowledge is either historical content, as seen above, practical every-day knowledge as provided by Dawson's grandmother, or the answers to deeper questions of meaning and living well. The difference between wisdom in 'old' age and wisdom in extraordinary 'old' age then seems to be that the latter is supposed to entail larger philosophical and lifestyle advice on how to live a long, good, and healthy life in addition to the very practical advice on everyday life expected from the elderly. Dawson hence becomes an oracle for wannabe centenarians who are eager to learn how he managed to live this long.

Besides the obvious exchange of information between Dawson and Glaubman, which is required to write the book, Dawson also speaks about other instances in which people have asked him questions:

Lately, there be lots of folks coming to ask me questions. It's always the same questions. They want to know what I eat, what I do to stay healthy. I've done what I want and never gave it much thought. But now so many folks keep asking me why, at 101 years old, I walk just fine without a cane, I eat what I please, I have all my teeth, and my memory is fine. (41-42)

Generally, these questions again point to mental and physical fitness but the crucial point about this quote is that people ask him questions in the first place. He specifically says that the asking started 'lately,' namely after he had turned 100. The magic threshold, combined with his physical and mental abilities make him an expert on aging healthily. However, Dawson attributes his new agency and expected wisdom not only to his age but also to his literacy. He explains that "[n]ow [he is] a man that can read and for some folks that makes a difference. . . . For some folks, it made a big difference . . . when [he] turned one hundred" (243). Here, the narrative intertwines age and education. Apparently, merely turning 100 would not have been enough for some people to trust Dawson's wisdom, but since he can now read, he becomes more trustworthy. In order to be regarded as a bearer of wisdom, it is important to achieve the threshold of 100, but also to prove some level of education. Only because he is able to walk and learn, and because he has a life

experience of more than 100 years, he is considered to be wise. At first glance, the narrative here appears to stand in contrast to Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier. In "A Sunday at 105," there was a clear distinction between formal knowledge or institutionalized education and knowledge or wisdom gained through experience, suggesting that not going to school did not interfere with the wisdom of the centenarian. Yet, in Pellerin-Cormier's narrative it was also made very clear that she is literate. While both narratives suggest that life experience is more important for the imaginary of a model centenarian than a high school diploma, they also both indicate that basic education in form of literacy is needed.

The most important questions addressed to the wise centenarian seem to be the ones on how to age well. This interest does not only become apparent in life narratives of centenarians, but also in the industry of guidebooks which brought forth titles such as *Celebrate 100: Centenarian Secrets to Success in Business and Life* (Franklin and Adler) or *Healthy at 100: 7 Steps to a Century of Great Health* (Willix). Guidebooks like these are also a theme within Dawson's narrative. Interestingly, he does not seem too intrigued about their content. Yet, he ends up giving advice on the same topics these books promote. When discussing that nowadays people seek all kinds of wisdoms from advice books, Dawson criticizes: "You know what all this will do to you? 'Improve your nutrition, help balance your weight?' 'Maybe. Most likely, though, it will just make a person worry. . . . I'm healthy with what I do. I eat common food, that's what I do'" (243). This statement echoes Dawson's take on history. He might have 'achieved' what others want to achieve and is therefore expected to have a greater knowledge on dietary needs, yet, he does not tell the expected story of a special healthy diet. Analogue to his alternative knowledge on history, he establishes an alternative eating culture. He condemns the idea of the all-knowing centenarian who can share knowledge in order to help people achieve extraordinary 'old' age themselves. Rather, he claims to not even have the knowledge he is asked for. Much like Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier, however, it is difficult for him not to give implicit advice anyway. By saying that he thinks advice books make people worry, he gives the advice not to worry. Further, suggesting to do and to eat whatever suits a person is also advice in a broader sense. This notion that Dawson cannot escape his role as a wise person who is expected to teach people how to live and age well, is reinforced by him ultimately giving a detailed list of his diet (245). Consequently, even though the narrative distances itself from advice literature, in many instances, it reads like a piece of the genre itself as Glaubman asks all the questions that frequently appear in narratives on how to live long and prosper. This again points to a divided perspectives on extraordinary 'old' age: While the centenarian does not regard himself in the position to give advice, the middle-aged interviewer sparks it anyway through the questions he asks.

The third indicator of centenarian wisdom in Dawson's narrative is connected to coping with loss and grief. As a person who has outlived most of his close friends,

the centenarian is expected to have a coping mechanism at hand that can help other people overcoming the darkest phases in their lives. This aspect is also frequently addressed in advice literature concerning aging. John Robbins, for instance dedicates an entire section of his book to the topic of “The Human Spirit” and specifically writes about how centenarians deal with grief. The advice literature character of Dawson’s (auto)biography is intensified when he explains how he dealt with his daughter dying of cancer: “People asked me what did I do. Nothing to do. I just went on. Everybody has their time, and it ain’t up to me when that will be. All those times, my faith helps me going” (220). This statement resonates with Dawson’s attitude towards diet: sometimes worrying too much does not help. In line with that, he accepts that there is nothing he can do about his daughter’s condition and rather tries to ‘keep going.’ He gathers strength from his spirituality and trusts in God’s will, emphasizing the connection between spirituality and longevity discussed in the previous chapter. Moreover, his advice of not to worry about the food a person eats, is transferable to every aspect in his life. Further, his motto of always working hard and sticking to the rules resonates with his take on spirituality. Thus, if a person does their best, they can accept whatever curveball life throws at them. This serenity is portrayed as the major factor in Dawson’s extraordinary ‘old’ age.

Although all the kinds of wisdoms are expected from Dawson, he himself appears to be oblivious of his own function as a role model for aging and all other life questions. Rather, he ponders deeper questions of the meaning of his longevity and, interestingly, it is his endeavor to write an (auto)biography that seems to give him his answer: “Why am I still here?” . . . ‘I am a witness to the truth. That’s why I am still here. I can’t let the truth die with me. That’s why you’re [Richard] here: to help me get the true story down, before it’s my time” (45). This quote has several functions within the narrative. First, it advocates for the ‘truthfulness’ of the story. Second, it aims to describe the relationship between Dawson and Glaubman. They make a point of communicating that Dawson is the storyteller, whereas Glaubman is supposed to be a mere tool, required to assist in the endeavor to tell the ‘truth.’ Third, and as a consequence of the former points, this quote establishes Dawson as a figure with the power to give advice in the first place. Not only has he lived an extraordinarily long life, he is also certain that its purpose was to pass on knowledge. While he may not see himself in the position to give advice with regard to age(ing), he certainly feels that his take on history would contribute to public knowledge.

This purpose is not only met by publishing the (auto)biography. Rather, Dawson’s life in extraordinary ‘old’ age centers around giving advice. Although he is a student himself, his classmates look up to him and establish him as a role model. He is further hired by rehab facilities to talk to patients about “overcoming” (233). Although he claims not to be wise when it comes to living advice, he constantly gives it anyway. He is turned into the wise centenarian by his co-author, his teacher, and generally all people he encounters along the way. Despite his awareness of his

knowledge of the past having value for the world, Dawson himself appears to disagree on the account of his own wisdom. Dawson's presentation and his reactions show the large extent to which he, as a centenarian, is constructed into the humble figure the world would expect.

4.4 African American Aging Through the Life-Course and the Fabrication of Centenarianism in *Life is So Good!*

The previous subchapters have shown how George Dawson is constructed into the figure of a centenarian that is sellable to the public. He is turned into a commodity through the emphasis on his mental and physical fitness, as well as his presumed wisdom. In that sense, he is not the author of his own life story or a person who lived to the extraordinary 'old' age of 100, he, as the protagonist of the book, is a mirror image of what society expects him to be. By being used as a living guide-book for living well into extraordinary 'old' age, Dawson becomes a commodity in Irigaray's use of the concept.

George Dawson's (auto)biography does not only show how his extraordinary 'old' age is fabricated, it also negotiates aging through the life-course with all its social and cultural implications. Dawson is aged not only by culture but also by the social structures that go along with it. In Dawson's life, cultural imaginaries and social hierarchies go hand in hand. Therefore, his aging process is accompanied by his position as an African American, poor male in the U.S. South, living through and beyond the Jim Crow era. The narrative shows how his race and class influence his aging process tremendously. Yet, by promoting Dawson's spatial mobility within the United States, it also propagates that, through the right behavior, a poor, black male can lead a good life. As he becomes a centenarian, however, the categories of race and class are only marginally addressed, and the focus lies on his extraordinary 'old' age. Here, the sense of spatial mobility is transferred onto a sense of physical and social mobility. Because Dawson is literally able to move his body as well as his mind, he learns to read and write and ultimately publishes his (auto)biography, signifying social upward mobility. The way categories of difference influence each other thus changes throughout the life-course.

In terms of the construction of age itself, Dawson's physical fitness and therefore 'young' physical age is juxtaposed with his institutionalized age. It becomes clear that through his physical and mental abilities, he is able to behave in a way that would also not be expected, considering his institutionalized age. In that sense, Dawson's example claims that a person's behavioral age is, to some extent, connected to their physical age. Only because of Dawson's relatively 'young' physical age, he is able to go back to school and learn. Another important aspect the narrative points to in terms of the construction of age is that the prevalence of one age

subcategory over another not only depends on the situation but also on the perspective of the onlooker. Dawson's father constantly highlights institutionalized age, for instance, at 12 he deems his son old enough to work on a farm. Dawson, on the other hand, does not feel ready or old enough for this new phase in his life. Further, the white woman he works for focusses on his behavioral age and connects it to racial stereotypes. Dawson, in this instance highlights his institutionalized age to expose this racial bias. Ultimately, *Life is So Good!* suggests that in the same moment, people may focus on different subcategories of age and come to different conclusions about a person's age.

The biological implications of the age(ing) body are only scarcely addressed by Dawson rarely stating that he is tired. Ultimately, the narrative often promotes a successful aging discourse, presenting Dawson as a model figure that, in terms of the aging process, is worthy of being looked up to. The discrepancy between the emphasis on physical fitness in this narrative and the more nuanced depictions within "Glorious" and "A Sunday at 105" suggests a reading in terms of race and gender. Dawson, as a male maybe needs to be portrayed as financially independent and hardworking into 'old' age, whereas the same imaginary of success is achieved by women as long as they are able to keep their house clean. Moreover, Dawson as an African American may have to perform progress even harder than the other two individuals discussed in the previous chapters because becoming a role model in the U.S. as a black person requires perfect behavior. In order to upkeep the imaginary of Dawson as a "self-made man," it thus becomes necessary to portray him as independent and hard working as possible, even in extraordinary 'old' age. While issues of race and class are thus not directly addressed once Dawson has turned 100, this reading shows that implicitly, these differences do not disappear. Rather, the attention shifts, and extraordinary 'old' age becomes the focal point. In that sense, Dawson, as well as Helen and Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier, becomes another 'other,' as his extraordinary 'old' age becomes the defining factor of his representation.

In promoting a discourse of active and healthy age(ing), *Life is So Good!* shows certain markers that are common for many centenarian narratives, most prominently discussions about health and lifestyle. While Dawson, as Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier, seems reluctant to serve as a beacon of wisdom for these issues, he is still staged as a model in aging well. His narrative is then one of successful aging with the addition that the successfully aged individual does not necessarily regard his aging process as a success. Nonetheless, the emphasis on his extraordinary 'old' age shows that centenarians are by no means regarded as ageless, as at least his institutionalized age is constantly highlighted. The discrepancy between Dawson's self-perception and the way he is framed through Glaubman's questions again points to the assumption that the middle-aged co-author may promote cultural imaginaries he would expect from a centenarian, while the centenarian himself refrains from tying into binaries of success versus failure. By the fabrication through the nar-

rative, however, Dawson is also imagined as romanticized other 'other' who goes beyond the expectations for 'old' age but not strictly presents a continuation of the midlife.

