

II. Centenarians—The Stars of Aging

The fascination with extraordinary longevity is ever-present in modern media. The *Guinness Book of World Records* names the oldest living person each year. This 'honor,' accomplished by centenarians as the longest living individuals only, is accompanied by numerous newspaper articles and sometimes even TV interviews. The *Guinness Book* itself, for instance, publishes articles such as "The World's Oldest People and Their Secrets to a Long Life" (Punt.). These articles usually contain basic information on the centenarians' life in a historical context as well as a section on diet and lifestyle, supposedly uncovering how they managed to live to extraordinary 'old' age. This fascination contradicts the much-criticized invisibility of 'old' age. Psychologist Tamara McClintock describes the phenomenon of invisibility in her own life: "I realized that when I walk down the street, younger people simply don't see me. Not a glance, not a smile, none of the customary, friendly gestures we're used to here in neighborly San Francisco. It was as if I actually disappeared from the sight of people much younger than I." Seeking out centenarians and reporting on them, contradicts this notion of invisibility, at least in public media discourse. Instead of showing for a generally new engagement with 'old' age, however, I argue that this visibility is rather connected to a form of sensationalism that accompanies extraordinary 'old' age.

This sensationalism is not tied to being the oldest living person on earth but to merely turning 100. This trend can be seen in many media outlets concerning a variety of topics. For instance, prior to the 2020 U.S. general election, there were a number of news segments on voting centenarians, including titles such as "101-Year-Old Anna Belfield Casts her Vote in Queens" or "104-Year-Old Ruth Rosner on Casting her Vote." These titles indicate that it does not matter whether a person is 101 or 104 years old. As long as they have reached a three-digit age, their act of political participation seems to be worthy of news coverage. Similar mechanisms can be seen at the morning show *Today!* which has an advertisement on their homepage reading "Today's Al Roker and our sponsor Smucker's are continuing Willard Scott's tradition of recognizing viewers turning age 100" ("Celebrate with Today"). Here, turning 100 seems to be an achievement worth being covered and celebrated. What is it, then, that makes this number so fascinating? For one, reaching a full decade is always considered somewhat of a milestone birthday; 100, as the first three-digit birthday seems to amplify this phenomenon. Further, once a person turns 100, they enter an elite group of those who lived longer than most other people, which, in turn, inspires visibility and fascination. Centenarians' institutionalized age thus exceeds the expected, leaving all other age categories without reference. If a new age group emerges, growing older than most other people, what are cultural expectations in terms of behavior, outward appearance, and physique? This shift in age categories makes age as a construct visible by denaturalizing it and, at the same time, encourages the fascination with this emerging age group.

The partnership between *Today!* and Smucker's not only points to a fascination that starts at a person's 100th birthday but also to a commodification of the centenarian lifestyle. Smucker's, primarily producing jam, peanut butter, and ice cream toppings, highlights the significance of extraordinary 'old' age for the food industry through the connection of their company to centenarians. Smucker's could thus be interested in advertising centenarians because it directly links their products to extraordinary longevity. In other words, in advertising centenarians, Smucker's suggests that consuming their products contributes to achieving a long and healthy life, using them to sell their product. The general fascination with centenarians becomes a marketing tool in this case. This marketing strategy is, however, only possible because, of a mechanism I call the centenarian paradox: even though being 'old' does not seem to be generally enticing in Western societies, becoming a centenarian appears to be a desirable goal to achieve. The longing for achieving centenarianism in turn creates a market for advice on food choices and healthy living which Smucker's seems to capitalize on.

One reason for the fascination with centenarians might stem from simple statistical facts. Christine Overall elaborates that "[a] small number of people attain the age of one hundred, and throughout the world nine times more women than men are aged one hundred or more. The probability the people in the West will live to one hundred has been doubling approximately every ten years" (9). Accordingly, as of now, living to the age of 100 is still rather rare, yet, the numbers of centenarians are constantly growing. Western societies are hence precisely at a point in time when the phenomenon is frequent enough to be noticed as such and, simultaneously, rare enough to still be regarded as something special.

The celebration of the number 100, as well as the statistical interest in people who have reached that institutionalized age, therefore suggest that this particular birthday marks a transition from being simply 'old' to becoming a 'paragon of aging' (cf. Robine and Vaupel) Looking at the narratives surrounding centenarians, I argue, offers insight into the processes that drive the fabrication of age categories and therefore into the mechanisms behind the cultural construction of 'old' age. The life narratives discussed in this section, however, do not only present the wider media discourse reporting *on* centenarians but—in some more than in others—the centenarians get to speak for themselves, offering a more nuanced approach to the aging process. In that connection James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium note that "[r]esearch has illustrated how time-framed identities such as 'teenager' or 'adult' are realized in and through the localized, symbolically defining actions of a wide spectrum of involved individuals, all of whom contribute to meanings of that life stage" (340). If turning 100, then, is the transition into the life phase of centenarianism, all texts dealing with this topic contribute to the cultural understanding of the category. As with teenagers or adults, the definition of this new category should be expected to differ from whatever category came before. Arguing that centenarians are, through

cultural interactions and texts, formed into a new age group suggests that there need to be characteristics that are significantly different from the preceding life stage of being merely 'old.' Ultimately, the life narratives discussed here show that there are mechanisms of fabricating centenarianism as a distinct life stage on the one hand, while centenarians themselves regard their own age(ing) as a continuum of 'old' age, on the other. I aim to discuss the means by which centenarians are fabricated through narratives originating from the people surrounding them, while they themselves tend to defy this fabrication. Ultimately, understanding the emphasis put on certain aspects of this life phase in order to make it distinguishable from its priors helps not only to understand how age categories are constructed but also to understand what aspects are inevitably connected to being just 'old.'

The texts I am concerned with are all accounts of centenarians who have taken more or less part in the creation of their own story. In order to provide a wide scope of different accounts of centenarianism, this section is subdivided into three chapters, each dealing with a subgenre of life narrative: a music video, featuring a centenarian's birthday party, a short documentary, capturing one day in the life of a centenarian, and a book-length (auto)biography. I am thus not only looking at the narratives themselves but also discuss how each text form can contribute to the overall discussions of what age(ing) means in a cultural, social, and biological sense.

The first chapter of this section deals with a centenarian as part of a viral internet phenomenon, the 2017 hip-hop video "Glorious" by rapper Macklemore (featuring Skyler Grey) in which he pays a surprise visit to his grandmother Helen for her 100th birthday. Despite this video being a form of life narrative only in a very broad sense, it shows desired behaviors connected to extraordinary 'old' people by staging an eventful day in a centenarian's life. As this video is a viral phenomenon with a younger target audience, it is not only influential in terms of images of 'old' age but also makes an extraordinary 'old' woman visible in a setting she would normally be excluded from. The video addresses issues such as age and visibility, as well as meaning, sexuality, and activity in later life.

The second chapter of this section deals with the short documentary "A Sunday at 105," following 105-year-old Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier for one day, inquiring about her life in extraordinary 'old' age, as well as her past and future. This film is a collaboration between Pellerin-Cormier and her great-grandson. In this intergenerational project, it is fruitful to discuss the questions deemed interesting by the 'young' great-grandson in combination to the answers and anecdotes of the extraordinarily 'old' great-grandmother. I am thus interested in what the points of inquiry of the great-grandson reveal about the image he, as representative of a younger generation, has about extraordinary 'old' age. Conversely, I discuss how the answers given by Pellerin-Cormier indicate a refusal to conform to the fabrication of her extraordinary age. This short documentary also addresses issues such

as gender, body, and temporalities in extraordinary 'old' age. Here, again, expectations of what it means to be extraordinarily 'old' and the behaviors that go along with it are challenged, yet, the documentary does this in a more subtle and less sensationalist way than Macklemore's music video.

After discussing two visual examples I will then continue my analysis of centenarians by looking at *Life is So Good*, the (auto)biography of George Dawson, an African American centenarian from Texas who rose to fame because he achieved literacy at the age of 98. This achievement questions the idea of cognitive disadvantages in 'old' age and suggests that it is indeed possible to learn new things at all life stages. As this is a narrative not only about being a centenarian but also about the entire life-course, it is particularly interesting to see how a life is narrated from this late life point of view. In other words, I am interested in the way the centenarian comments on his on past selves and the aging process as a whole, as well as how he is aged by the culture, he lives in. In connection to cultural and social structures, *Life is So Good!* highlights issues of the interconnectedness of age and race, as well as age and class. Finally, as a co-production of a centenarian, George Dawson, and his co-author, Richard Glaubman, the narrative offers an opportunity to discuss the ethics of life righting in terms of voice, agency, race, and extraordinary 'old' age.