

## 5 Representations of Extraordinary 'Old' Age: Same, Same, but Different?

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In the past three chapters, I have outlined how centenarians are staged as a distinct age group of extraordinary 'old' age which is separated from 'old' age in various ways. The most prominent aspect is that all the narratives discussed reflect an inherent fascination and commodification of extreme longevity. The number 100 as threshold to a stage that exceeds mere 'old' age, appears as a desirable goal for every individual to reach. The concept of age is then made visible through an institutionalized age that exceeds the expected norm of the life-course.

In Macklemore's music video to the song "Glorious," featuring his grandmother Helen, the centenarian is portrayed as a form of the 'other' not only to midlife but also to 'old' age. I have therefore traced how through the sensationalized way her behavioral age is staged, as well as through the lyrics of the song accompanying the video, Helen is imagined as an other 'other,' inviting the audience to think of centenarians as their very own category within the life-course. Aldéa Pellerin-Cormier presents a more subtle imaginary that, on the one hand, ties into stereotypes of 'old' age but, on the other hand, paints a picture of a centenarian's life that is defined by in-betweenness rather than binaries. This effect may well be due to the different perspectives traceable within "A Sunday at 105": That of the middle-aged director, echoing the media images of centenarians and successful aging, and the one of the centenarian herself, providing a more nuanced representation by refraining from tying into some of the stereotypes expected from her. Lastly, George Dawson is presented as not only a 'posterchild' for literacy but also a 'posterchild' for living and aging well. With a focus on his ability to achieve literacy at the age of 98, as well as being able to write down his life story, the focus here lies in high performance especially in terms of mental aging. Moreover, Dawson's narrative has made explicit when and how categories of difference, such as age, race, and class, interact with and trump one another.

The fabrication of centenarians thus imagines them as still very much a part of society and not disengaged from it. Rather, they are culturally constructed as wisdom-bearing role models who take up an advisory position for younger generations, including those currently considered 'old.' At the same time, the centenari-

ans tend to distance themselves from this supposed social role, as well as from the cultural imaginary it is based on. The biological aspect of age(ing) is linked to the role model function ascribed to centenarians. Although the cultural imaginary requires an able-bodied centenarian, they are presented as physically 'old' from time to time. This then counters the supposed indivisible link between 'old' age and disability without explicitly denying the biological facts of age(ing).

The extraordinary institutionalized age of 100 provokes awe within mainstream society. In many ways, outward age, behavioral age, and physical age become secondary to the construction of centenarianism, as the number 100 appears to bear all the defining power. While centenarians are thus too 'old' to even exist in the public imaginary and therefore become a phenomenon, they are allowed to show physical weaknesses and still be considered role model figures. Nonetheless, neither of the centenarians depicted show physical or mental signs of aging that go beyond being tired or needing a walker. If centenarians are too old to exist in public imaginary in the first place, even with these minor signs of aging, their physical age is depicted as younger than their institutionalized age. At the same time, the phenomenon of centenarianism is frequently emphasized through the juxtaposition of institutionalized age and behavior. Wherever the behavior of a centenarian does not align, interest is generated. This goes especially for Helen's youthful activities and Dawson's late education. Going beyond the expected behavioral age is, as the narratives suggest, only possible because of the remaining physical and mental fitness. Through the positioning of the centenarians as role models of age(ing), as well as through their extraordinary 'old' age in the first place, the stories are thus still somewhat connected to and sometimes even defined by a successful aging paradigm.

Every narrative discussed in the last three chapters contains aspects of successful and active aging. At the same time, they all overcome the paradigm at certain points by, for instance, portraying the centenarians as weak and tired or in need of assistance. Thereby they show, on the one hand, that being a role model in aging is possible without being perfect and that being 'old' (especially physically) is also acceptable. On the other hand, the fascination with centenarians in the first place is of course due to the imaginary that they have aged successfully and can presumably help others to do so as well. In that connection, centenarians are expected to perform age in a certain way, namely active and successful in body and mind. While in parts, the centenarians discussed here seem to go against this performance, as a whole it is ever-present within the narratives. While the institutionalized age of 100 as a benchmark invites a cultural imaginary of successful aging, the number is always part of the story, deeming the narratives not entirely ageless (cf. Katz). This then distances centenarian narratives from a successful aging paradigm in the sense that they are growing older, at least in institutionalized age, instead of being entirely ageless. Nonetheless, with the 'success' in institutionalized aging comes

the expectation to be successful in other age categories, as well, as we are prone to believe that the age categories need to align for a naturalized performance of age. On the other hand, the centenarians themselves counter this understanding, oftentimes breaking with the cultural imaginary at hand and the performance going along with it.

It is therefore too simple to dispose narratives of centenarians as mere amplifications of a successful aging paradigm. Nevertheless, there are those centenarians who are depicted and those who are not. Dementia, for instance, appears to be an uncrossable red line, as well as needing a wheelchair. The imaginary of the centenarian is thus very exclusive. While the centenarians depicted attempt to narrate their own lives with nuance and meaning, refraining from successful aging tropes, the selection of people depicted by the middle-aged producers of the narratives reinforce the paradigm.

In all three cases observed, we can assume a form of double oppression. While the white female centenarians cannot get over the stigmas of gender roles in terms of relationships and sexuality, the African American male centenarian has to over-perform the centenarian role in order to remain a role model for mainstream society. Presentations of extraordinary 'old' age may here attempt to portray centenarians as one new age group by stressing commonalities, reading these narratives against the grain, however, shows that overall social structures are always part of the cultural representations, as well. That is, being a centenarian may get an individual out of the 'waiting room' of 'old' age in public perception but only if it is performed in the right manner. The requirements for this performance differ according to the social status of an individual and the cultural imaginaries that go along with it.

These issues show how complex age(ing) socially, culturally, and biologically is, and that a discourse reflecting this complexity has yet to be established. Connected to this, the centenarian narratives discussed here show that the expectations of what a centenarian is supposed to be like, imagined by 'young' people, are not always shared by the centenarians themselves. Read against the grain, they rather show the complexity of late life, especially when the centenarians get to speak and visibly break with the expectations of their co-authors/producers. In these instances, it becomes apparent that by trying to make sense of something they do not fully understand, people are inclined to establish master narratives that conform with their expectations of life itself. What engaging with centenarian narratives shows, however, is, that these master narratives of aging are much too simplified to fulfill the purpose of making sense of extraordinary 'old' age or the construction of age in general. Relating this back to 'old' age, one message this discussion drives home is that there is a need to listen to 'old' people in general, not only those who have crossed the magical threshold of 100, in order to recognize the complexities of their realities. This very simple paradigm is widely accepted within aging scholar-

ship, yet, in popular media, 'old' age is more often than not represented as a mere stereotype. The same would happen to the representation of centenarians, if it was not for the few moments in which they are allowed to speak for themselves.

The fabrication of centenarians works against images of isolation and disengagement in later life. As especially Dawson's narrative works against the centenarian paradox by indicating that the social status does not tremendously change once a person turns 100, he advocates for aging as a continuum. Everything that is supposed to be possible for centenarians should also be possible for everyone, despite their age. In that connection, the narratives discussed here advocate a meaningful late life especially through a sense of purpose and future, but also by stressing family relations and community. At least, if not depicting general 'old' age, centenarian narratives raise the question of what happened before their subjects made it to the 'finish line.' Certainly, for the individual, the institutionalized age of 100 did not bring back their meaning in life. Rather, these narratives suggest that there can be meaning and meaninglessness in all stages of life. However, society refuses to look at certain age groups, deeming them invisible.

In all three cases discussed, the juxtaposition of age categories leads to the questioning of stereotypes of 'old' age and therefore to a sense of the other 'other.' This subversion supports claims like 'you are only as old as you feel' or 'age is just a number.' Looking at the fact that all three narratives heavily rely on the emphasis of their subjects having crossed that threshold into centenarianness, it becomes clear that the number 100 plays a significant role in the subversion of these stereotypes. Here, the threshold of 100 seems to be important as it appears to let people go beyond many social, cultural, and biological expectations. The institutionalized age of 100 seems so incredible that any type of action becomes a juxtaposition to the expected and naturalized norm. The mere existence of the centenarians portrayed hence puts them into a role model function. Consequently, other than in many narratives of decline, the focus is not on the biological restrictions of physical age, rather on the beauty of life itself. Hence, becoming a centenarian, according to the narratives discussed, evaporates many stigmata that come with 'old' age.

Nevertheless, focusing on these three narratives, as well as guidebooks and commercials, only provided a look at those centenarians who are able and allowed to tell their tales. The danger of these narratives, as much as they can show the beauty of life in later years, is that they gloss over the fact that not every 'old' person is able to sing karaoke, has the ability to see their family regularly, or has the mental or physical ability to speak about their lives. As the people who lack these abilities rarely exist in popular narratives, it seems easy to forget about them. In order to establish a better view on the centenarian demographic, it would be desirable in the future to seek out exactly those people whose stories are not told. For this study, dealing with representations, it is unfortunately impossible to cover this

ground. It is important, however, to bear in mind that there is a large discrepancy between those who are represented and those who are not.

While the narratives discussed here thus have a lot in common in terms of presenting extraordinary 'old' age, they all remain individual stories, getting to the core message of centenarianness from different angles. Most interestingly, all centenarians come from very different cultural backgrounds: two female, one male; two white, one black; two U.S. American, one Canadian. While these categories of difference in gender, race, and region certainly play a role within the individual narratives, they do not significantly alter the overall imaginary of the centenarian. That is, although the African American centenarian has to appear even more perfect to be a role model and the female centenarians are denied a sense of sexuality, these restrictions do not seem to influence the way their extraordinary 'old' age is presented in general. All three individuals are hence staged as centenarians first and as female, male, black, white, rich, or poor second.

Ultimately, being a centenarian does not seem to matter too much to the centenarians themselves. They do not regard themselves as extraordinary in any way. For them, institutionalized age does not appear to be overly important. For the younger generations, on the other hand, it appears difficult to imagine individualism *in* and a nuanced perspective *on* any kind of 'old' age. Looking at centenarian narratives drives home three major points: First, by being 'aged by culture,' we come to expect certain images of life stages which influence our storytelling. Second, 'young' people imagining how it is to be 'old' or extraordinarily 'old' are very much taken up by these life-course imaginaries, often restricting them from telling stories of nuance in 'old' age. Third, only those who experience 'old' age or extraordinary 'old' age are able to, at least partly, question the cultural imaginary they are supposed to find themselves in. This calls for more diverse stories of age(ing) and later life written by those who have experienced 'old' age in the first place.

This first analytical part of the study has shown that when it comes to a meaningful life in 'old' age, social, cultural, and biological factors intermingle to create the concept of age. However, all centenarian narratives looked at here are united through the absence of disability or illness, echoing the wish to regard age as primarily constructed socially and culturally, rather than as a biological reality, as well. The sense of the biological aging process was only marginally addressed within this part of this book. Activists and scholars alike have tried for decades to remove the stigma from illness and disability. While fighting for the acknowledgement that with a condition that would be considered outside the norm or even with a terminal disease, life can be meaningful at any stage, these stigmas seem to come back with a vengeance in 'old' age. Accordingly, representations of 'old' age in general and extraordinary 'old' age in particular are only considered to be meaningful as long as illness and disability remain absent from the narrative. Therefore, society

only admires those centenarians who got there without falling ill, the others are not part of the public image of the centenarian as paragon of aging.

Bearing the lack of illness and disability in narratives of extraordinary 'old' age in mind makes it all the more interesting to think about the question of what happens when age truly is an illness. Therefore, the next part of this study will focus on progeria, an aging disorder that has people's bodies age significantly faster than would be considered normal. Here, aging becomes illness and is therefore regarded in a different way. Like centenarian narratives, narratives of children with progeria denaturalize age(ing) and thus make visible the underlying constructs of how it is negotiated culturally, socially, and biologically.