Paragon of Aging, Paragon of Voting

Centenarians and the Imaginary of a Model Citizen

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Introduction: Centenarians and the Struggle to Vote

Citizenship as a concept entails many different aspects that are all loosely connected with a sense of belonging to a certain place or "political entity" as well as a right and duty to participate within that entity (Cooper 4). This does not only incorporate the right to political participation or political citizenship, including the right to elect and be elected, but also what is called social citizenship. In his 1992 lecture "Citizenship and Social Class," T. H. Marshal speaks about this concept, claiming that full citizenship includes "a share in the social heritage, which in turn means a claim to be accepted as full members of the society" (6). Thus, in order to be a full citizen, not only political participation but also social and cultural inclusion are necessary. The notion of social participation that Marshall describes, however, is frequently denied to people within the US because of their class, gender, ethnicity, religion, ability, age, or many other factors that seem to draw an invisible line between what is considered a social "norm" versus a social minority. It is along this line, Judy Rohrer argues, that "citizenship in this country has long been (re)produced through the violences and exclusions that establish normalcy" (107), pointing towards the often-violent attempts of a powerful majority in the US to secure their political influence by establishing themselves as the "norm" and deeming everyone outside this "norm" as not eligible to political or social participation. Following this line of argument, social citizenship is not only a part of full citizenship but becomes a prerequisite for it, acting as a method to select who is close enough to a social "norm" to being granted participation.[1]

By looking at voting narratives of centenarians, I will deal with one deviation from what Rohrer calls normalcy, namely age. While centenarians, as part of an el-

1 I am assuming throughout this paper that African Americans and other minority groups in the United States are still largely denied political and social citizenship to this day. Although legally they, of course, have the right to vote, mechanisms of voter disenfranchisement often prevent them from exercising that right.

derly demographic, are often seen as outside of society, they are frequently photographed and interviewed when engaging in acts of political participation. Centenarians are regarded as the "paragon[s] of positive aging" in a sense that they have managed to live an exceptionally long life which, in the general imaginary, has been exceptionally healthy (Robine and Vaupel x). Looking at centenarian (auto)biographies and media representations of centenarians voting in the 2020 US general election, I argue that centenarians are also idolized as role models of political participation.[2] This idolization is especially strong in narratives of African American centenarians, supporting discourses of the US as a post racial society in which every individual can achieve full citizenship, no matter their background. Consequently, these narratives cover up struggles for or problems with citizenship, implying that through self-improvement, hard work, and social assimilation, every individual can become a US citizen in a social and a political sense. This neoliberal narrative of centenarians as the model citizens, however, hides historical and current struggles and barriers that have denied and are denying voting rights to many people in the United States. Ultimately, then, the politics of centenarians' voting narratives are representative of more general structures of citizenship in the United States as it presents itself as inclusive to all, while excluding many.

Renegotiating Citizenship in Centenarian (Auto)Biographies

The oldest old are frequently questioned concerning their ability to participate socially and politically in a discourse that is closely linked to citizenship and disability. In public discourse, old age and disability—mental as well as physical—are inextricably linked. It is this link that makes it impossible to think about centenarians and participation without pondering the concept of biological citizenship. Biological citizenship is defined as "forms of belonging, rights claims, and demands for access to resources and care that are made on a biological basis such as an injury, shared genetic status, or disease state" (Mulligan). Besides making certain claims possible, however, the condition of the human body can also be used to deny access, as Douglass Baynton argues. According to him, "disability has functioned rhetorically to structure thought about social hierarchy in general" (562). Hence, discourses of disability have historically been used in order to deny individuals access to political participation. Biological citizenship then becomes another piece of the puzzle

2 I put the "auto" in parentheses throughout this paper because, although often advertised as autobiographies, all narratives discussed here are collaborations between centenarians and co-authors whose influence is more or less tracible. These collaborations pose their own set of questions concerning the centenarians' participation in terms of voice, agency, and autonomy, which will be discussed in more detail in a coming section.

when trying to understand access to political participation. If old age in the public imaginary is linked to a physical and mental narrative of decline—as suggested by leading scholars in the field of aging studies, including Margaret Morganroth Gullette who, in her monograph *Aged by Culture*, argues for the necessity to overcome this cultural imaginary—biological citizenship of the aged is up for debate. At the same time, the elderly are often imagined as disengaged from society, existing only in the figurative space of a "'waiting room' in which people bide their time until they die" (Hartung and Kunow 18). In this sense, then, being old and therefore confined within a 'waiting room' restricts access to social citizenship.

Narratives about centenarians often contradict these normative assumptions about old age. Centenarians are frequently portrayed as role models of aging and experts on diet, exercise, wisdom, and life in general. The *Guinness Book of World Records*, for instance, not only honors the oldest living people (all of them centenarians), it also elevates them into the role of teachers for the rest of the world by publishing articles such as "The World's Oldest People and Their Secrets to a Long Life" (Punt). This title not only suggests that it is desirable to live as long as possible but also that every individual can "learn" how to do so. The age of 100 seems to present a magic threshold into the realm of those who are done learning and get to teach their life lessons. In line with this connection, centenarian Waldo McBurney titled his own (auto)biography *My First 100 Years: A Look Back From the Finish Line.* As a runner, McBurney certainly imagined this title as a pun; yet, it also suggests that he has arrived at the finish line of life, having made it as far as anyone would need to. Generally, then, centenarians are not connected to a loss of citizenship. Rather, they are idolized as beacons of wisdom whose voice actually counts. Consequently, centenarian (auto)biographies (and media coverage of centenarians in general) seem to counter stereotypes of decline in old age. As Mita Banerjee and myself argue, "[a]s master narratives of aging, centenarians' autobiographies, with their emphasis on performance and a lack of dependency, serve to widen the gap between aging and disability" (2). While a discontinuation of the instant image of old age in connection with bodily decay may be desirable, these narratives gloss over the problems at hand, namely, that old age often does lead to a loss of social and/or biological citizenship. Moreover, in order to establish the role model figure of the centenarian, these narratives only function as long as the centenarian presented is imagined as a model citizen.

Agency, Autonomy, and the Right to Participation: The Genre of Centenarian (Auto)Biographies

The genre of centenarian (auto)biographies has been growing since the late 1990s. While there are a large variety of different narratives from centenarians of different backgrounds, in publication numbers, prestige of publishing houses, and general

professionalism, almost all these narratives share the authorial structure of a centenarian author and a younger co-author. When looking at these collaborations from the angle of social citizenship this means that often a person who holds social citizenship helps, encourages, or writes for a person whose social citizenship may be contested due to old age. Interestingly, the most successful centenarian (auto)biographies are those of African Americans, a large number of which are women.[3] When looking at the respective co-authors for the narratives, it stands out that gender boundaries have been met, meaning that the gender of the centenarian matches that of their co-author. At the same time, age and race seem to not have been considered as African American centenarians usually work with white middle-aged co-authors. G. Thomas Couser argues in his monograph of the same title that collaborative life writing is prone to produce "vulnerable subjects" that is, subjects of the narrative who are "vulnerable to misrepresentation" by their co-authors (3). This vulnerability may well increase if the co-author does not share a common cultural and social background with the subject of their writing. Moreover, as Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith suggest in their book *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, other stake holders, such as publishing houses, can influence stories in order to make them more approachable for a mainstream audience, thereby tapping into normative ideologies of a given society (23). Both co-authors and publishers then have a significant influence on the work itself, calling into question the experience the audience is presented with. On the other hand, when considering the concept of "relational autonomy," it also becomes clear that co-authorship may be the only way to make centenarians' stories heard and thus a means to advocate for social citizenship of the elderly: "If centenarians become role models for autonomous lives lived into extreme old age, their stories might not have been made public had it not been for the support of a co-author. There are hence different degrees and forms of autonomy which have to be considered here" (Banerjee and Velten 2). While the question of co-authorship and autonomy thus remains complex, it is important to note that when reading autonomy, agency, and voice as aspects of social citizenship, the means of production of centenarian (auto)biographies seems to undermine this form of participation.

The readers of centenarian (auto)biographies have to trust in the writing process and assume that the co-authors managed to keep their own ideologies out while remaining aware of the power they are given. Speaking to this complexity, one co-author of a centenarian (auto)biography uttered the following in an unpublished interview:

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3 Examples of these phenomena are *Having Our Say: The Dalany Sister's First 100 Years* by Annie Elizabeth Delany, Sarah Louise Dalany with Amy Hill Hearth; *Life is So Good!* by George Dawson and Richard Glaubman; *It is Well with My Soul: The Extraordinary Life of a 106-Year-Old Woman* by Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson with Patricia Mulcahy.

> Oh, you mean, did [the centenarian] have concerns that I was white? … Never! No. I was from [a good publishing house], they hired me. [They were] glad to have a contract! [They weren't] going to say "Give me an African-American [person]" in that contract! [They] said "Okay, if this [person] is who you want, I'm glad to work with her." … I think [they're] one of the least racially concerned people I've ever met, frankly. I mean, [they were] thrilled with Obama, believe me, [they] understood the significance of all that … [They] interacted well with everyone. I mean, it was a big deal to [them] because the society made it a big deal but in terms of her personal views … I think, unfortunately, that whole topic what one would call "cultural appropriation" or whatever has become much more problematic in the last five years. It wasn't so much even when I interviewed [them], now it's become quite a talking point at universities and this whole political correctness thing with trigger warnings and people from different ethnic groups not wanting certain things said.[4] (unpublished interview)

The co-author here portrays themselves as a professional who justifies their right to tell the story at hand through the credentials of a prestigious publishing house. For the purposes of legitimacy, professionalism is thus more important than shared experience. In a way, this appears to be a valid point: a professional co-author should be trained to untangle their own ideologies from the person whose voice they are trying to capture. However, the patronizing tone of this statement counters any hope for an equal partnership between author and co-author. By emphasizing that the centenarian "understood the significance" of the Obama election, the co-author implies that this would be surprising to their audience. In fact, this statement questions the centenarians' maturity, and therefore their claim to citizenship. Speaking to this, Corinne T. Field argues that historically, citizenship as tied to adulthood, has been denied to women and African Americans because their maturity was questioned by a white, male "norm" (3). This claim to "equal adulthood" likewise appears to be denied to the centenarian by their co-author most likely because of their age and race (1). By belittling the centenarians' political and social awareness and therefore questioning their maturity, the co-author implicitly questions their claim to any citizenship rights.

Moreover, the co-author's elaboration on mechanisms such as cultural appropriation indicate that they may be ignorant of the subject. By arguing that identity in this instance does not matter, they suggest that differences in ideology are unimportant in collaborative life writing. This then indicates that they have not untangled

4 As part of a research project on centenarians' autobiographies within the research group "Un/Doing Differences: Practices of Human Differentiation" funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG Research Group FOR-1939/2), I conducted several interviews with co-authors of centenarian (auto)biographies. In order to ensure the anonymity of the interviewee, the quote here has been anonymized.

their own ideologies from those of the centenarian. Although this presents just one example of the relationship between a centenarian and their co-author, it strongly suggests that centenarians are used as pawns by the middle aged to satisfy their hope that growing old is not as negative as the media posits. Furthermore, in the case of African American centenarian (auto)biographies, there is always an implicit notion of a white savior—a white person who appears to support African Americans (or other minorities) but in the attempt to do good ends up patronizing them.[5] These mechanisms then suggest that the centenarian here is denied the right to their own story and therefore voice, agency, participation, and ultimately, social citizenship. The centenarian is dragged out of the "waiting room" of old age and is presented by a co-author in the way the co-author sees fit. The centenarian thereby becomes a pawn of the public perception rather than an active agent in society. Ironically, despite always being on the verge of being patronizing and of conveying the white middle-aged conception of what a centenarian should be like, centenarian (auto)biographies give a stage to narratives of empowerment and the struggle for social citizenship that would otherwise remain unheard. Yet, when looking at these narratives closer, we have to bear in mind the means of production and remember that the narrative may be a white middle-aged person's idea of what a centenarian should have to say. Because centenarians are regarded as "paragons of positive aging," it is in turn crucial for a performance of centenarianism to have the narratives emphasize how much the centenarians carry all forms of citizenship: social, political, and biological. In other words, narratives about centenarians seem to be produced in a manner that challenges claims to citizenship while the narratives themselves, as I will illustrate in the following sections, aim at painting a picture of centenarians as "paragons of citizenship."

Female African American Centenarian (Auto)Biographies and the Struggle for Political Participation

While the means of producing centenarian (auto)biographies appear to contradict social citizenship, the contents themselves reveal narratives of belonging, adaption, and ability, therefore offering a demand for social, biological, and political citizenship. In order to exemplify this, I will briefly discuss two different narratives: Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's and Patricia Mulcahy's *It Is Well with My Soul: The Extraordinary Life of a 106-Year-Old Woman* and Ann Nixon Cooper's and Karen Grigsby Bates' *A Century and Some Change: My Life Before the President Called My Name*. Both texts tell

5 Similar mechanisms are also present in other centenarian (auto)biographies. For further discussion on this topic, see "The Elephant in the Living Room: Centenarians' Autobiographies, Co-Authorship and Narratives of Extreme Longevity" by Banerjee and Velten.

the life stories of African American female centenarians and therefore touch upon the struggle of civil rights for African Americans. By discussing these issues, both narratives portray a claim to participation and belonging and, ultimately, suggest that this claim has been heard.

Although social citizenship can be regarded as a prerequisite for political citizenship, many African American female centenarian (auto)biographies use the centenarian's peaceful endeavor to achieve political participation as a narrative tool to advocate for social citizenship. That is, the narratives emphasize a sense of belonging within mainstream society by stressing that the individuals presented are willing to play by rules deemed adequate. In that sense, the relationship between political and social citizenship presents itself as a chicken-egg scenario: it is by no means easy to entangle what comes first. This interconnectedness of social and political citizenship is echoed, as Frederick Cooper states in reference to Charles Taylor, in "[t]he question of who has voice in deciding how a state will act and who is entitled to assistance or protection" (17). Thus, with the right to vote there should come the power to alter who is accepted within the benefits—and therefore the social structures—of a nation. These struggles also become apparent within the two narratives that serve as examples for this chapter. What both narratives have in common is that they do mention the struggle for equal social and political rights leading up to and during the Civil Rights Movement, but they stress how little they were interested in causing disorder or harm to the political and social structures at hand. Thereby, they establish themselves as model protesters who would never fight for their citizenship rights in a way that would disrupt what was considered to be the "norm." The two narratives also touch upon inequalities but ultimately tell the story of their own success which was made possible through hard work and despite their minority status. In that sense, these stories are narratives of the myth of the American Dream, indicating that by working hard, Cheeks Johnson and Nixon Cooper have earned their citizenship socially, as well as politically. Moreover, they managed to live an exceptionally long and healthy life leaving them physically and mentally able to perform their citizenship rights.

In *It is Well With My Soul*, Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson and Patricia Mulcahy describe Cheeks Johnson as a "good Samaritan," whose purpose it is to help others more than anything else (3).[6] This philosophy establishes the centenarian as a do-gooder who is in no way threatening to strive for power. This image is intensified through her occupation as a social worker, giving back to the community. Framing Cheeks Johnson as a peaceful person whose purpose in life is to support others leads to an image

6 For more on the politics of help, see Kaitlyn Quinn and Erika Canossini's chapter in this volume, "'Clean Body, Clean Mind, Clean Job': The Role of Penal Voluntary Sector Organizations in Constructing 'Good' Carceral Citizens." Here, Quinn and Canossini focus on how non-profits seek to "help" criminalized individuals reenter society as carceral citizens.

of a person who will not interfere with the status quo. Thus, despite being African American, she does not incite fear within those in power who may perceive her as wishing to undermine social structures as they are.

This reality is emphasized through Cheeks Johnson's and Mulcahy's portrayal of racial issues. Cheeks Johnson was enrolled at Fiske University during the student protests of 1924–25 in which she took part by boycotting her classes. While she did participate, her (auto)biography emphasizes that her personal approach to racial issues differed fundamentally from that of W. E. B. DuBois, who sparked the protests in the first place. She explains that "[DuBois] was the fighter" (28), "I didn't yell. I wasn't openly rebellious. I didn't fight" (33); she even describes DuBois' manner of protesting as "disturbing" (32), meaning too aggressive. By separating Cheeks Johnson from a more "aggressive" form of protest, the narrative claims that she is eager to adapt to what a mainstream society would deem appropriate, as long as she gets to be a part of this society in return. Hence, the narrative advocates for social and political citizenship of African Americans by promoting a discourse of assimilation. In this way, the (auto)biography shows how belonging in the United States still has to be achieved through adaptation.

Similar mechanisms are on display in Ann Nixon Cooper's and Karen Grigsby Bates's *A Century and Some Change: My Life Before the President Called My Name.* Nixon Cooper is described as a woman who stands up for her rights but always does so in a manner that would be deemed appropriate by mainstream society. Her acts of rebellion include getting out of a bus's front exit and staying in her seat on public transport when a white person wants her to leave (146–47).[7] Of course, this form of protest reminds the reader of Rosa Parks whose actions are now recognized as justifiable by mainstream US society. Both Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson and Ann Nixon Cooper thus engage in a discourse of respectability politics, asking for change in a way that is deemed appropriate by those in power. Their struggle for citizenship is portrayed as a politely phrased inquiry rather than a strong demand. This portrayal leads to their framing as model citizens as they emphasize their adaptability and focus on the wish to belong and participate rather than to fundamentally change social structures. The narratives thus emphasize the social belonging of Ann Nixon Cooper and Ella May Cheeks Johnson by elaborating on their efforts to assimilate to whatever is considered the norm in US society. Therefore, they are idolized as role models for people who may feel left on the outside of social citizenship. Read against the grain, this approach offers a pessimistic reading of the concept of citizenship and belonging in the United States: it appears that the national ideals of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are solely granted to those who assimilate to the "norm." In turn, one

7 Nixon Cooper's protest, of course, would not have been regarded as appropriate at the time but would have been deemed acceptable when the story was told in 2009.

could then easily ask the question of how free or liberated a person can be when they have to make sure to assimilate to mainstream society.

The example of Ann Nixon Cooper's (auto)biography not only addresses issues of the struggle for African American citizenship and political participation, it also presents a positive outcome of these struggles. The narrative describes Nixon Cooper voting for Barack Obama, implicitly connecting this act to the past through the Civil Rights Movement: "After all we'd been through as a people, if there was a black man who was a good candidate and he needed my vote, I was going to be there. I have been a registered voter since 1940, but this time—sixty-eight year [sic] later—I wanted to walk into that little booth and pull the curtain around me and vote. In person. For Barack Obama" (2). Ultimately, Nixon Cooper regards the struggle for political citizenship as won, not only because she has been an eligible voter for more than sixty years but also because the United States had elected their first African American president. Indicating that the goal of equal citizenship has been reached, this narrative thus supports the myth of the US as a postracial nation. According to Judy Rohrer, this mechanism is a common one in the time after Obama's election. She argues that "dominant narratives regarding citizenship [wer]e being reinforced through colorblind notions of a postracial nation" (108). Hence, Ann Nixon Cooper's (auto)biography becomes part of a vicious cycle of discourses of equal citizenship being reinforced through the notion of a postracial society and vice versa. Looking closer reveals, however, that neither the tale of equal citizenship, nor the tale of a postracial society are prevalent in the United States.

Besides touching upon racial issues, Nixon Cooper's narrative also frames her as a paragon of voting. She emphasizes that, even at the age of 100, voting was not a challenge: "Casting my vote took only a minute, but it was an important one for me, my people, and my country" (3). She is described as a patriot, doing her duty for her country and, so the narrative suggests, if she can do this as an African American centenarian, there is no reason for anybody not to vote. This notion is echoed as Barack Obama mentions Nixon Cooper in his victory speech: "*But one that's on my mind tonight is about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta. She's a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election except for one thing. Ann Nixon Cooper is one hundred six years old*" (5). Obama himself appears to be in awe about Ann Nixon Cooper's ability to vote at her age and puts her on a pedestal, for everyone to strive to be like her. In that sense, she becomes the "citty upon a hill" that puritan minister John Winthrop expected America to become in 1630 (121), namely, to be a role model for the world to look up and aspire to. Moreover, Rohrer argues that Obama's election led to a "revitalization of the myth of meritocracy" (110). This myth is intensified through the figures of centenarians managing to cast their ballots against all odds because they, like Barack Obama, managed to get to this point because they were determined and worked hard. Through the connection of Ann Nixon Cooper to inherently US American myths, the narrative imagines her as a

model American. Of course, this portrayal then propagates a US American utopia of equality when it comes to age, race, and gender.

Conclusively, both Ann Nixon Cooper and Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson are portrayed through the lens of assimilation, suggesting that social and political citizenship is reachable to those who are willing to adapt to the so-called norm. The politics of co-authorship, the framing of the narratives, and the emphasis on assimilation turn these centenarian (auto)biographies into stories that feed a discourse of a postracial, as well as post-ableist, US society in which inequality is an unfortunate chapter of the past. As opposed to Faith Ringold's story quilts, discussed by Malaika Sutter in this volume, these centenarian (auto)biographies neither use an inherently African American medium, nor question the current citizenship status of African Americans in the United States. Rather, they seem to be white-washed narratives, justifying the exclusion of any individual that does not show the same efforts of assimilation.

Centenarians, Citizenship, and Voting in the 2020 Election

Frederick Cooper suggests that "[t]he discourse of elites and ordinary people is often laden with images of what the proper citizen looks like, what his or her religious beliefs should be, how he or she should behave" (15). Centenarian voting narratives present narratives of proper citizens in terms of determination and patriotism. As I have pointed out with regard to centenarian (auto)biographies, centenarians are often established as role models not only of aging but also of citizenship. The two examples discussed above, however, only describe centenarians' roles in citizenship discourse until 2008. With Obama's election, it seems, social and political citizenship is possible for everyone. Yet, accusations of voter disenfranchisement and general hurdles to take part in the political process in the US steadily increase. The US 2020 general election and a global pandemic add to the already strained situation of the political process in the United States. With these reports about the state of US democracy, there is an increasing need to advocate for the right to vote thereby not only encouraging people to make the effort but also indicating that the democratic system is working for everybody.

Thus, leading up to the 2020 US general election, there were numerous media reports of voting centenarians, either those who engaged in early voting or those who came out on election day. The stories, told by different media outlets, often follow the same formula: emphasizing the importance to vote, framing it as civic duty, and pointing out that there really cannot be any obstacle for anyone if a centenarian, being considered frail and immobile as well as at high risk to die from Covid-19, can overcome all of them. Yet, while in centenarian (auto)biographies concerns of citizenship are mostly found in the narratives of African Americans, the centenari-

ans portrayed voting in the 2020 US presidential elections are more racially diverse. More than covering up social exclusion due to race, media outlets thus gloss over the exclusion often coming with old age—especially during a pandemic, where the role of the biological informs processes of belonging more than ever.[8] At the same time, by blurring the obstacles faced by the extremely old these narratives suggest that no obstacle is too high to overcome when it comes to voting.

There are countless examples of centenarians voting in the 2020 general election on the internet, most of them rather short social media posts, such as, for instance, Queen Latifah sharing an image of Roscoe Draper mailing his ballot on *Instagram*. She adds the caption "This is Mr. Roscoe Draper. He is 101 years old! If he can do it so can you! This is America! This is patriotism! I believe in us so let's do this! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE!," thereby indicating that in order to be a true American, one has to overcome all obstacles in order to vote, implicitly shaming those who cannot. In the following, I will focus on two longer news clips, following and interviewing Rosalind Rosner and Ana Belfield throughout their voting process, connecting these clips to the portrayal of biological, social, and political citizenship.

The news segment on Ruth Rosner aired on "CBS Sunday Morning" and includes typical characteristics of centenarian narratives. While essentially focusing on the topic of voting, the interviewer is also interested in how Rosner managed to live to an exceptionally old age, thereby implying that centenarianism is an achievement that everybody should strive for. Moreover, the clip provides a recap of Rosner's life, emphasizing that this is the twenty-second election she has voted in and that she was born before women had the right to vote. This information reminds the audience of the struggle for women's political citizenship. Of course, Rosner herself never had to fight for it—she was four when the nineteenth amendment was passed—but the fact that she lived during that time seems to suffice as a reminder that political citizenship cannot be taken for granted and that participating in the democratic process is a duty every citizen must perform. Pointing out the number of elections Rosner participated in underlines her consistent participation in this process, giving her a certain expertise on the topic as well as showing her qualities as a model citizen.

During the clip, the focus is on Rosner promoting the importance of voting as well as the obstacles that make it difficult for her to do so. While she states that voting "is the most important thing I can do" (00:36–00:40), she is depicted wearing a face mask and moving around with a walker. The images thus depict everything that would exclude her from social or biological citizenship: she is physically weak and needs help moving. During the Covid-19 pandemic, she is part of the high-risk

8 For a discussion of biological and medicalized citizenship in this collection, see Mita Banerjee's "'What the Eyes Don't See': Medical Citizenship and Environmental Justice in Mona Hanna-Attisha's Medical Memoir" and Amina Touzos's "'You're My People Now': *The Last of Us* Series on the Question of Belonging and Citizenship during the Age of Pandemics."

group of people who are especially vulnerable to the SARS-CoV II virus. Nonetheless, her statement suggests that all these obstacles cannot hinder her from performing the important act of voting. While emphasizing the importance of voting and conveying it as civic duty, this narrative also promotes the image that there is no obstacle too high, thus evoking the neoliberal narrative of a meritocratic United States where those who belong work hard to stick to a supposed "norm" and, in turn, that this "norm" is reachable for everybody.

This message becomes more nuanced when the video quotes a tweet by Hillary Clinton who mentions Rosner and explicitly says what the clip implicitly shows: "If Ruth can get out to vote, the rest of us don't have much excuse" (00:40–00:47). With her tweet, Clinton gives Rosner and her efforts, as well as the image that everyone should be able to vote, a world stage. She then not only urges United States citizens to vote but implies to the rest of the world that the democratic system of the US is intact and that, in fact, participation is open to everyone. The CBS clip sends the same message on a more local level, again emphasizing the struggle of voting during a pandemic: "And if this masked centenarian can do it, she wants you to do it, too" (02:39–02:43). Here, the video goes one step further, claiming that Rosner wants other people to go to the polls as well, despite the fact that she never utters such a request herself. While voting is important to her, she does not directly summon others to do the same. This reintroduces concerns around the centenarian's autonomy and raises the question of whether she is used to send a message that is stronger than what she intends to personally say.

What becomes certain, however, is that Rosner has no objections to being portrayed as a patriot and CBS seems to make use of this to bring their message across. At the end of the video, having her "I voted early" sticker attached to her jacket, Rosner sings "god bless America, my home sweet home" (02:43–02:50), closing the sequence with a certain sentiment that may be expected from a US morning show segment but also intensifies the image that Ruth Rosner is a model citizen in all regards.

Ana Belfield is portrayed in a similar fashion. She is featured in a segment on CBS New York where the anchor introduces her story as follows: "We should all have the positive energy and attitude of one Queens voter. Some people come up with excuses, why they shouldn't vote or don't need to. This woman gives us 101 reasons to vote" (00:01–00:12). This video then introduces Belfield's age as the main reason to encourage others to vote. Like Rosner, she is framed as a paragon of voting for participating in the election despite her age. In order to support this notion, the clip also features the imagery of Belfield needing the support of a walker to move around as well as the prominent face mask, signifying the pandemic this election is set in.

Besides these images that the two news segments have in common, Belfield's story also touches upon another topic: the digital divide. During the Covid-19 pandemic communication via digital resources became the main means of social interaction for many. At the same time, elderly populations are generally not as well

versed in digital communications as younger ones. Speaking to this point, Garbriel Martins van Jaarsveld explains that

> [a]ccess to, and ability to proficiently use technology is much lower in older populations than in younger adults. This uneven distribution of technological access and skill is known as the digital divide, or the gray digital divide, and researchers have suggested it has continued to increase as the rate of technological innovation speeds up. This results in a paradoxical situation, in which the population most affected by the lockdown is also the population least helped by the digital tools aiming to mitigate the negative effects.

One could thus argue that older people are often excluded by means of digital citizenship. This exclusion intensified through the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing those "at risk" into isolation, which becomes more difficult without the means to use modern technology to communicate. The CBS segment on Ana Belfield briefly engages with the topic of the digital divide in imagery and voiceover as she is shown using a tablet to sign herself in at the polling station and the audience hears a surprised sounding commentator saying, "she verifies her identity on a smart pad" (00:56–01:13). While this does not imply anything about her online communication skills, it shows that she is not intimidated by technology and is willing to interact with it in order to participate in society. Ultimately, what this suggests then is that the digital divide is yet another factor that can be overcome if people are willing to work hard for it.

Within the segment, Belfield herself gets to speak about political participation and elaborates on why she thinks it is crucial to engage: "It's important to vote to help bring this nation as one" (00:17–00:21). Hence, Belfield has no selfish reasons to participate but thinks about the benefit of the community. This echoes the spirit of Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's role as a good Samaritan. Furthermore, it shows that she is convinced that this democratic process is necessary for the country's unity and, at the same time, implies that only who votes can belong. As in Rosner's case, the makers of the segment go a step further and claim that Belfield "believes not voting is disrespecting those who made days like this happen" (01:21–01:28). As the audience does not hear Belfield herself utter this statement, we cannot know what she said on the matter and how much of it is a product of CBS's interpretation. However, it is crucial that the emphasis is on "days like this" in general, as it directs the audience's attention towards democracy as a whole. In that sense, Belfield would see not voting as an assault towards the founders of the US and those who fought in the revolutionary war to gain independence. Yet, Ana Belfield, as an African American woman, may not wish to thank the founding fathers, as they actively denied people like herself any kind of citizenship; rather, she may emphasize the struggles of abolitionists, suffragettes, and civil rights leaders who made her personal act of voting possible. By leaving this open, and having her refer to "days like this," the message is

made more inclusive, in turn showing that this model citizen shares the same values as the county's "norm."

Like Ann Nixon Cooper, Rosner and Belfield are elevated to role model figures of voting and thus become the personification of Winthrop's "citty upon a hill." Neither of the two centenarians discussed here is shown complaining about the system. Neither of them criticizes voting in person because mail-in voting is so difficult (and has been deprecated by members of the Republican Party). Neither of them recognizes that they could only vote because they have a supportive infrastructure behind them, for instance people driving them to the polls, etc. These narratives thus not only gloss over the fact that there are people who are not allowed to vote (for instance criminalized individuals, cf. Nina Heydt in this volume), but also that every individual who shows up at the polls has their own obstacles to overcome. There may be people, for example, who have to work during opening hours of polling stations and may lose their job if they go vote. In these cases, people must sacrifice their political citizenship in order to keep their social citizenship in the sense of remaining a contributing member of society. Others may need assistance in getting to the polls but lack the infrastructure that both Rosner and Belfield seem to have. If physical reasons keep people from voting, a lack of biological citizenship hinders political citizenship. By positioning centenarians as the paragons of citizenship and democracy and by deliberately leaving out those who struggle to participate in the process of voting, the narratives discussed here all suggest that the latter cases are non-existent. Thereby, these narratives contribute to an imaginary of the United States as a country with an exceptional democracy that holds true to the values of equality, liberty, and justice for all—or, in line with meritocratic practices, for those who are willing to work for them.

At the same time, however, representations of centenarians in this light only work because they derive from the underlying assumption that the elderly are generally less able or willing to participate. By presenting centenarians as paragons of citizenship, these narratives thus not only reinforce the myth of meritocracy but also uncover the structures of a deeply ageist society. While in these stories extreme old age is presented as a factor that does not inevitably lead to the loss of social, political, biological, or even digital citizenship, the implicit message remains that such a loss would generally be expected. Yet, as with all obstacles, according to the framing of centenarians, through hard work exclusion can be avoided.

Conclusion

According to Heike Paul, US national identity is based on a set of "myths," as she elaborates in her monograph *The Myths that Made America*. Prominent amongst these myths are the myths of puritan settlement, including Winthrop's "citty upon a hill"

metaphor; the myth of the founding fathers, including the celebration of the democracy they have established; and the myth of the American Dream, including meritocratic ideals of the self-made man. As this paper has shown, these myths are all to be found within narratives about centenarians, including them in the very fabric of US national identity. This myth-making elevates centenarians to the status of model US citizens while also mostly leaving out their own voices in the matter. Centenarians could thus be called "pawns of citizenship," used to promote belonging in any area of US society through a neoliberal, meritocratic myth. The narratives discussed in this paper portray all obstacles to citizenship and belonging as easy to overcome and therefore blame those who cannot participate. This then supports a myth of inclusion that can be used to silence all critics of the political system of the United States. The portrayal of centenarians' performances of citizenship rights paints an inclusive picture of US citizenship, propagating the lie that no groups are excluded, that there is no suppression of minorities, that there are no struggles for the simple right to vote. Images of centenarians—often female, often African American—aim to serve as proof that the struggles of the past have been successful. However, this imagery glosses over realities of voter disenfranchisement, upkeeping the myth of US American democracy.

Read against the grain, these narratives reveal traces of deeply rooted ageism and racism. In terms of age, the examples discussed here not only frame physical decline as a failure but also make the individual responsible for the way they age. In terms of race, they suggest that once a person assimilates to the norm, social and political citizenship will be granted. Both the discussion of age and race thus suggests that in order to belong, US society still requires its members to conform to a white, able-bodied, middle-aged ideal. Regarding this connection, the paper also touched upon the complexity of the concept of citizenship by looking at it from different angles. Social and political citizenship clearly influence each other and are influenced by other manifestations of belonging which may include but are not limited to biological and digital citizenship.

Similar to the glossing over of issues of aging and promoting neoliberal ideologies of the human body, centenarian narratives gloss over issues of inequality and disenfranchisement. As the centenarians discussed here did not necessarily have the right to their own voice—a problem of social citizenship that only reveals itself upon closer inspection—they act as mere mascots for the political system they live in. Reading these narratives through the lens of ageism then reveals how these supposedly inclusive narratives exclude many by implying that only those who age like the centenarians presented aged in the right way and are therefore rewarded. This can in turn be applied to the larger narrative of citizenship and democracy in the United States which implies a certain inclusiveness despite establishing more and more obstacles for those who are not considered part of the social "norm."

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