

2 “I feel glorious”: The 100th Birthday of Macklemore’s Grandmother

In his 2017 music video to the song “Glorious” (featuring Skylar Grey) rapper Macklemore surprises his grandmother Helen on the day of her 100th birthday. A centenarian being part of a hip hop music video alone presents to be a juxtaposition of age categories as this musical genre is stereotypically assigned to be the taste of younger generations. This notion is emphasized by the activities shown in the video and the lyrics of the accompanying song. Through this juxtaposition and the way Helen is presented, it becomes clear that centenarians are seen as an age group that is certainly ‘old’ but a kind of ‘old’ that deserves rewards and recognition. Additionally, this video is to be seen as a part of the industry that uses centenarians as a sensation. Where Smucker’s tries to sell food products, Macklemore tries to sell his new song by shifting the focus on a phenomenon that does not seem too common and can thus draw the interest of a wider audience. Connected to this supposed aim of the video, it is important to note that this form of narrative is arguably only a life narrative in a very broad sense of the concept. Helen does not get to narrate her own life but performs a day that was not planned due to her own wishes but staged by her grandson. Yet, the way she acts around this staged setting as well as the way she is staged in the first place allow for a discussion of the constructedness of centenarians in particular and age(ing) in general.

It is especially because of the specific genre of a hip hop music video that the representation of Macklemore’s grandmother becomes important to an overall discussion of the construction of age(ing). Due to the fame Macklemore enjoys, this representation is bound to be seen by a wide international audience.¹ This becomes important in connection to Ulla Kriebner’s and Roberta Maierhofer’s argument that

[r]epresentations determine how we understand age and aging and influence the way we perceive others and define ourselves over the life course. Iconographies

1 Here, the public interest in centenarians and Macklemore’s popularity may well have a mutual influence on the range of audiences reached by this piece.

and representations mark changes in social and cultural perceptions and have very real consequences in terms of social, political and cultural practice.” (9)

It is accordingly due to representations of age(ing) in the media that people are ‘aged by culture.’ Whereas that applies to any type of representation, it is those that reach a wide audience and maybe also an audience that has not previously been confronted with specific images of (extraordinary) ‘old’ age, in which the power of determination becomes stronger. While strongly contributing to the way extraordinary ‘old’ age is constructed within society, this new age testimony of centenarianism indicates how extraordinary ‘old’ age is perceived in Western societies.

In order to trace the implications this video makes for my overall discussion of extraordinary forms of age(ing), I will focus on three major aspects. First, I read the lyrics of the song “Glorious” with a focus on age(ing), arguing that the words contribute to the idea that turning 100 marks a new life stage. I then outline to what extent the lyrics contribute to the construction of this life stage. Second, I look at the actions taking place in the video, discussing how they foster an image of a sensationalized phenomenon and ask whether this video is merely another account of a positive aging narrative. In that light, I further elaborate on the ‘othering’ of centenarians, inquiring their relations to other age categories. Third, I shift the focus to the aging body. In dialogue with the discussion of positive aging I look at the way the focus on the centenarian’s body interacts with definitions of progress and decline, as well as with positive aging.

2.1 New Beginnings: Rereading “Glorious” in Terms of Aging Studies

At first glance, the lyrics of the song “Glorious” do not appear to have any connection to aging studies. They do not discuss matters of ‘old’ age or ageism but can be read as a general appeal for a positive change. The narrator describes their overcoming of hard times with the result of now feeling “glorious.” The idea of connecting the lyrics of the song to extraordinary ‘old’ age is then added by the artist through the music video accompanying the song. Because of the visuals of Macklemore’s centenarian grandmother, the lyrics of the song demand a rereading in terms of aging studies. The issue at hand is the way in which Macklemore, who claims on his own homepage that “[a]s artists, we are committed to using our platform, resources and creativity to have an impact on racial and social justice issues” (“Activism”), tries to use his voice in order to undermine prevalent and demeaning stereotypes of ‘old’ age. In this subchapter, I am thus especially interested in the contribution Macklemore’s lyrics make to the understanding of extraordinary ‘old’ age.

The song begins with the exclamation “[y]ou know I’m back like I never left” (Macklemore 00:38-00:41) which signifies a return. In the context of age(ing)

stereotypes and centenarianism, this return can be read as one from the realms of the 'waiting room' of the 'old,' as well as the invisibility connected to later life. Along the lines of this reading, turning 100 would mean that a person is given a second chance—that they can break out of the 'waiting room' and return to the world of the living once more. Turning 100 could then be seen as an 'antidote' to the ageisms people face in later life. By pointing out the number 100 as a threshold out of the 'waiting room,' the lyrics hint at a need to break out of something negative—'normal old age'—into something that is generally connotated in a more positive way—centenarianism. It appears the crossing of the threshold is possible for all those who turn 100 and are able to do "another sprint, another step, another day, another breath" (00:42-00:49), as Macklemore continues his song. Combined with the imagery of a centenarian, the lyrics of the song seem to have a message that go beyond the lines of a successful aging paradigm. On the one hand, Helen's breaking out of the 'waiting room' is only possible because she managed to age in a way that would be considered successful, on the other hand, in order to really be successful, she needed to cross the threshold of 100. This sets a higher bar of what is ultimately be considered positive or successful aging and implies that physical fitness alone may not be enough. Rather, an individual has to achieve an extraordinarily high institutionalized age—namely 100—to really be considered successful.

In addition to this notion of successful aging conveyed throughout the song, the lyrics suggest a plan to accomplish the stage of extraordinary 'old' age by stating "[w]anna piece of the pie, grab the keys of the ride" (00:56-00:59). This metaphor in itself can be translated into an analogy of the American Dream or a myth of U.S. American meritocracy: in order to get from 'rags to riches' a person has to work hard and take their destiny into their own hands by 'grabbing the keys of the ride.' This myth of the American Dream can then be connected to a neoliberal mindset, giving people the idea that whatever fortune they have to face in life is up to them. Accordingly, people who do not manage to 'grab the keys' have only themselves to blame for not getting 'a piece of the pie.' Connecting this thought to aging, would mean to read this quote as telling 'old' people that weather or not they are regarded in terms of decline or disengagement is due to their own actions. If they have lived their lives 'right,' that is, if they have worked hard and lived healthily, they will be able to abstain from the negative images of later life. The connection between life narrative, the life-course, and the American Dream has been previously made by Margaret Gullet who elaborates that "[w]hether a spur, or reward, the so-called American dream is a model national biography that shapes subjectivity and autobiography" ("From Life Storytelling" 104). Accordingly, every U.S. American life story should be, in one way or another, connectable to the concept of the American Dream. In Helen's case this connection means that it is now up to her, as a cente-

narian, to overcome the supposed decline forces of later life and to break free of the 'waiting room' of 'old' age.

These two quotes from the first stanza of the song paint the picture of centenarianism as a desirable phase in life that is achievable for every person who is willing to work hard enough to get there. Establishing this view on extraordinary 'old' age works through a clear cut, which is made between this desirable life stage and the one coming before. This becomes even more obvious when reading the refrain of the song: "I feel glorious, glorious/ Got a chance to start again/ I was born for this, born for this/ It's who I am, how could I forget?/ I made it through the darkest part of the night/ Now I see the sunrise/ Now I feel glorious, glorious" (01:33-02:00). The glorious feeling is only achieved after a new beginning. Only after rediscovering the joys of life, after going through 'the darkest night,' the narrator can enjoy the sunrise and feel good again. Enduring darkness in order to come to a new beginning can be read as a metaphor for having to endure ageism and isolation during 'old' age, before reaching the stage of extraordinary 'old' age. Only when turning 100, the dark period is overcome and the centenarian can now enjoy the rest of her life knowing that she has made it into the realm of the stars of aging. Read from the perspective of aging studies, the lyrics of the song distinguish between 'old' age and extraordinary 'old' age by implying the latter is an overcoming of the former. Interestingly, this differentiation of 'old' age can be seen as a continuation of the distinction between "independent and capable Third Age and a deep old Fourth Age that is characterized by sickness, frailty and dependency" (van Dyk, "The Othering of Old Age" 109). Centenarianism could then either be seen as a continuation of the third age or, as implied by the lyrics at hand, an overcoming of the fourth age.

Van Dyk argues that when it comes to age there are processes of othering at work "with the young-old being valued as other and the oldest old disdained at the other" (110). These mechanisms of othering work in comparison to midlife. By encouraging a comparison to other categories of 'old' age "Glorious" suggests that there is, indeed, a difference between them. At the same time, this comparison might work to disrupt the hegemony of the midlife by specifically *not* comparing centenarians to the middle-aged. The lyrics of the song then paint a glorified picture of centenarianism, especially by demeaning 'old' age in general. In that sense, the lyrics themselves, when connected to the subject of the music video, are of highly ageist nature. Further, it remains questionable whether the idealistic image of extraordinary 'old' age conveyed through the narrative of new beginnings is not an example of wishful thinking, deriving from a 'young' man who hopes there is a better future for his grandmother and ultimately himself.

Throughout the song, the tenor of the lyrics remains similar to the examples discussed above. The theme of a new beginning is a recurring one. Additionally, the lyrics specifically hint at the utopian imaginary of the life span beyond 100 to bring a second youth. In the second stanza it says "[w]e've been going in/ Since

we hopped out that DeLorean" (02:08-02:02:14.). Mentioning a DeLorean is a clear reference to the *Back to the Future* trilogy in which the protagonists use a converted DeLorean to travel through time. Hinting at this is one of the few direct references to time in the song. The lyrics here indicate some form of time travel which can have a twofold meaning. Either, turning 100 initiates a jump back to the supposed glories of youth and away from decline and disengagement or, the song ties in with the music video that shows a centenarian engaging in behaviors that are associated with a younger generation.² In that sense, the lyrics would describe a day of time travel for Macklemore and his grandmother. The take home message of both readings, however, is the same: there is a cut in a person's life once they turn 100. This cut allows them to go back to the time before the 'waiting room' and invite a new imaginary of a possible future free from decline.

Ultimately, reading Macklemore's lyrics through the lens of aging studies reveals that "Glorious" imagines extraordinary 'old' age as a new beginning after going through the phase of 'old' age. Thereby, it promotes the concept of active and positive aging in suggesting that extraordinary 'old' age is positive and can, like the American Dream, only be achieved if a person is willing to work hard for it. Thus, the lyrics of "Glorious" give an image of centenarians as an age group very much separated from other people who would be considered 'old.' By using his voice to give visibility to his grandmother, a centenarian, Macklemore's lyrics fail to include people of other age groups. Only through distinctively separating extraordinary 'old' age from what came before, the imagery of a possible future free from decline can be established. Now, the question presents itself, what happens when the video is brought into the context of aging studies, centenarians, and centenarianism, bearing in mind the implications of the lyrics.

2.2 "I wanna do it all": Extraordinary 'Old' Age and Extraordinary 'Young' Behavior

According to Haim Hazan, "the behavior of older people and their attitude towards themselves are shaped and reinforced by society's prevailing images of them. By adopting these images, the elderly in turn confirm and strengthen them" (33). Hence, as there are widely recognized cultural stereotypes of 'old' behavior, people are inclined to, at some point, adopt these behaviors which in turn confirms the stereotypes within a given society. Yet, Macklemore's grandmother, Helen, behaves in ways not conforming to widely recognized stereotypes of 'old' age. Consequently, her behavioral age does not align with an institutional 'old' age. Rather, she engages

2 The theme of 'young' behavior and centenarianism which is prevalent throughout the music video will be discussed in detail in chapter 2.2.

in activities that directly challenge them and thereby question established cultural images. Simultaneously, showing a centenarian engaging in activities that would stereotypically be regarded more suitable for 'young' people, plays on the assumption that one can age positively and successfully, triggering the notion of Helen's narrative to be merely one of successful and positive aging. Yet, because the gap between expectation and behavior is extremely wide, the video raises the question if this sensationalized representation of centenarianism can at all be regarded as a positive one.

The surprise Helen receives in the music video is not only a visit from her grandson but, more importantly, a day of all sorts of birthday activities. In fact, after entering his grandmother's house, Macklemore tells her "we're gonna do whatever you wanna do" to which she replies "I wanna do it all" (00:26-00:32). Interestingly, this statement already goes against the expectations of 'old' age. Contrary to popular imaginaries, Helen does not conform to stereotypes of an elderly person living in the past but is eager to experience new things. In their article "Queering Aging Futures" Linn Sandberg and Barbara Marshall argue that it is a crucial part of successful aging to have a sense of a possibility of future: "In what follows, we expand our arguments to suggest that successful aging is not just about what one does in the here and now but contains an imperative for the future—an association of aging with possible futures" (3). This then goes along the line of Ricca Edmondson's analysis of meaning in life through a notion of 'development through time.' It becomes clear that concepts of successful aging and concepts of meaning are not always easily separable. In order to accomplish what would be considered successful or meaningful aging, it is thus crucial to be able or allowed to imagine a future. Even though the notion of future presented here is very short term, it is crucial that Helen still plans to do it all instead of uttering a stereotypically 'old' phrase such as 'I have done it all.' This, then, goes along the lines of the lyrics of the song, indicating that Helen has emerged from the period of futureless aging by turning 100. Helen's 'doing it all' includes going to the mall, buying a pair of sneakers, singing Karaoke, playing video games, throwing eggs at houses, and enjoying the performance of a stripper at her birthday party. All these activities contribute to the imagery of age(ing) provided in this video. Other than the lyrics' rather unspecific notion of new beginnings, the activities Helen engages in suggest what these new beginnings can look like and, at the same time, indicate what 'normal old age' does not look like. At the same time, these new beginnings remind the audience of 'young' behavior, indicating that the desired form of aging from a 'young' perspective, would indeed be a continuation of what they know for the most part.

Showing a centenarian going on a shopping trip indicates that centenarians are an active part of modern consumer culture. Helen is able to go to the mall and actively select a pair of sneakers while enjoying herself and spending money. Her choice of shoes further indicates a connection between institutionalized age and

assumptions made about a person's behavior or personal taste. Macklemore suggests a particular type of beige shoe with velcro fastener that would be associated with older women (01:05). Thus, a certain type of consumerism is expected from certain age groups (and genders). In that connection, Stephen Katz argues that exactly these associations are being eradicated more and more as marketers try to sell an ageless self. Accordingly, especially an ever-growing spending power amongst senior citizens

has inspired real estate, financial, cosmetic, and leisure enterprises to target a growing and so-called 'ageless' seniors market (usually pegged at 55+) and to fashion a range of positive 'uni-age' bodily styles and identities that recast later life as an active, youthful, commercial experience. (*Cultural Aging* 190)

In other words, those who can still join into a consumer culture that is not specifically associated with a certain age or, at least not with being 'old,' are specifically targeted by various industries with ageless products. In turn, the availability of these items sparks a new need for them; if a majority of people over that age of 55 try to appear ageless, it becomes an imperative for the individual to join this movement in order to remain an active member of society by interfering with one's outward age. It is, for instance, less socially accepted to wear naturally greying hair than to dye it another color. Hence, products that change visible indicators of an advanced age such as hair dye and anti-aging creams are as important as clothing and other items that are considered to be ageless. According to the advertised need of agelessness, Helen turns down her grandson's suggestion and indeed refuses to align to the consumerism that is expected from someone categorized as 'old.' Interestingly, however, the sneakers Helen finally buys in the video are not ageless but, in their style, rather connotated with youth culture, as she goes for trendy white sneakers (01:16). She thus goes beyond the concept of agelessness, actively protesting the cultural imaginaries of 'old' age as well as the connected social expectations.

Instead of confirming to the general movement towards ageless attire, the video plays with expectations of 'young' and 'old' through the use of everyday items. The shoes here serve as a material manifestation of age appropriate or inappropriate behavior. Buying the beige, old-fashioned shoes, would have been the expected consumer choice, buying the white, trendy sneakers at first glance seems to break with stereotypes of 'old' age. Yet, the question remains whether this purchase is only acceptable because it is significantly different from any expectations. Because the video goes against the expected, it remains interesting for a younger audience. The juxtaposition of institutionalized age and behavior is thus a tool to produce extraordinary 'old' age as a phenomenon.

The material manifestation of age inappropriate behavior in the form of shoes is supported by the activities Macklemore and Helen engage in during the video,

most of which are activities considered to be suited for a younger population, or plain childish. Helen's behavioral age is thus framed as being much younger than other age categories would imply. Yet, the act of singing karaoke, for instance, plays with images of 'old' age and (in)visibility. Kathleen Woodward argues that "[i]n our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops, conspiring to render the older female body paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible" ("Performing Age" 163). While, as mentioned above, everyday encounters tend to make aged individuals feel invisible, media representations, according to Woodward, are complex interplay of hypervisibility and invisibility. Invisibility, for there is a lack of representation, hypervisibility for the aged female body appears as strange and denaturalized moving it into direct focus of the onlooker. This concept is especially applicable to the aged female body, which appears to be consistent with the way Helen is portrayed. Accordingly, the extraordinary 'old' woman is made hypervisible in the sense that she is forced into the spectators' perception by being put into a situation that does not look 'natural' for her age. This goes along the lines of Charyl Laz's discussion of the naturalization of age(ing) in general: because Helen behaves in a way that counters stereotypical expectations concerning her age, not only she, as an aged individual, but age itself becomes visible. By breaking with these stereotypes, the video encourages its audience to think about whether age should be a determining factor of a person's actions or if age really is just a number.

Further, Helen's performance can be read as a message to younger generations, telling them that growing 'old' is not something to be dreaded but that they can escape the 'waiting room' of 'old' age through their personal attitude. It is crucial to note, however, that Helen's behavior is depicted as being fabricated by her grandson—a famous representative of the younger generations—as he puts her into the spotlight, presenting her in ways that counter normative assumptions of what being 'old' should look like. In that connection Sharon-Dale Stone points out that

[i]n contemporary Western societies, it becomes difficult to really see images of old people engage in activities usually associated with youthfulness. . . . When such evidence exists, dominant ideology encourages the dismissal of these people either as too unusual to be taken as exemplars of old age, or as not really old. (61)

In other words, if 'old' people engage in 'young' activities, they are either considered too much of a curiosity to be considered in discourses about 'old' age or they are regarded as not being 'old' in the first place. Consequently, buying sneakers for a centenarian or letting her perform in a karaoke bar raises the question of how she is positioned on the spectrum of age. Does Helen become a curiosity or is she regarded as not 'old'? Reconnecting this argument to the discussion of the song's lyrics implies that Helen is regarded as not merely 'old' but, since she is a centenarian, as someone who has overcome being 'old.' Instead of being portrayed as

'not really old' or ageless, Helen appears to be staged as beyond aging. In other words, this video suggests that centenarians as the stars of aging are placed outside any existing age categories, as they have 'won' the aging process. Nonetheless, the emphasis on centenarianism is needed for this new age category to function. Consequently, at least in terms of institutionalized age, Helen is not depicted as ageless at all. Rather, the focus on institutionalized age allows for the other age categories go beyond any expectations of age-related behaviors.

This line of thought is again reinforced by van Dyk's discussion of the 'othering' of 'old' age as a universal phenomenon. In that connection she argues that third agers—who she closer defines as "fit and healthy retirees in their 60s, 70s or even 80s" ("The Othering of Old Age" 109)—are romanticized in Western societies to a degree that is comparable to colonial concepts of 'the Oriental' as exotic (cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism*). Van Dyk elaborates that

[a]s with the 'exotic oriental', the widespread praise for elderly people who are capable, warm and charitable seems harmless at first sight . . . The fact that this generalizes sympathetic praise serves precisely to reinforce the assumed superiority of the imagined 'agelessness' of midlife becomes visible only throughout the lens of postcolonial studies. ("The Othering of Old Age" 114)

Accordingly, the seemingly encouraging discourses of positive or active aging are, comparable to concepts of the noble savage or the exotic oriental, derogatory toward the aging population with regard to their reinforcement of a powerful midlife norm. An 'old' person, in other words, can only be a valuable member of society if they are regarded as active or positive from a midlife perspective. Connecting this framework to Macklemore's rap video, two things become instantly clear: The process of othering is not only tied to the lyrics of the song but also to the imagery provided within the video. Helen's preference in sneakers as well as her various performances throughout the video would not be noteworthy if she was not considered to be some sort of 'other.' By showing her having fun with her grandson, her life stage is indeed romanticized. However, it is crucial to note that this romanization stems from the way she is staged by Macklemore. As the romanization of indigenous peoples in terms of concepts such as the 'noble savage' happens from a Eurocentric point of view, the romanization of the centenarian happens from a midlife perspective. Consequently, the video portrays a well-functioning centenarian in surroundings that would be considered fun from the midlife or 'young' adult perspective. In other words, Helen is acting according to an imaginary of 'young' people who wish later life to be a continuation of their current state. The major 'positive' element of Helen's performance is then the fact that she indulges in especially these behaviors that seem desirable to the 'young' audience of the video. However, even though her actions seem like a continuation of 'young' behavior, she is still considered to be different, for instance, to all the other people in the karaoke

bar. Her appearance there remains a phenomenon. At the same time, the lyrics of the song suggest a new life stage. In addition to the staged uniqueness of a person like Helen, this reinforces that centenarians are not only an 'other' from the midlife perspective but also an 'other' within 'old' age itself.

Thus, even though Helen is subject to a positive 'othering' process, she is neither part of the category of the third or fourth age nor of the midlife, as her institutionalized age has long exceeded the parameters thereof which is emphasized throughout the video not only because the narrative evolves around Macklemore surprising his grandmother for her 100th birthday but also because her actual birthday party is depicted in the video. This party is celebrated with a cake, including a candle with the number 100. Even without having read the description provided in the beginning of the video, it is clearly indicated that this is a surprise for Helen's 100th birthday. Interestingly, although this is Helen's 100th birthday, in the instance where she blows out the candles on the cake (02:57), it is her grandson who is presented in the center of the group of five, indicating that, even though Helen might have stepped out of the 'waiting room' through her extraordinary age, he, as a representative of a younger generation is the most important person in this situation. Consequently, as already indicated in the lyrics of the song, the video portrays centenarians as separate from other age groups. Instead of being a continuation of midlife, becoming a centenarian is presented as a new phase in life that allows going back to some youthful behaviors and thus a braking free from the 'waiting room' of the 'old.' However, this breaking free does not mean that a person is not considered as an inferior 'other' anymore.

Especially with the connection to postcolonial studies, it becomes clear that this romanticizing of centenarians points to the superiority of midlife. Van Dyk elaborates that

[o]ne of the major achievements of postcolonial scholars is their deconstruction of positively connoted stereotypes of the 'authentic other'. Said and others have demonstrated that the structural devaluation of the Oriental goes hand in hand with a striking enthusiasm for and romantic idealization of the same, ending up in a veritable 'Indomania.' ("The Othering of Old Age" 113)

Postcolonial criticism has thus long exposed that seemingly positive concepts such as the 'noble savage' or the 'exotic oriental' in fact strengthen the power structures of colonial societies by emphasizing the weaknesses of the 'other.' The same goes for elderly people in general and, in this case, Helen in particular. Not only does her grandson remain the drive behind all activities they engage in, he is also the motor in staging her in a most efficient way for his own success. Much like exploiting indigenous cultures for the entertainment of the white settlers, this video could then be read as an exploitation of centenarianness for the purpose of the success of the middle ages. In that sense, the juxtaposition of institutionalized and behavioral age

in this video could be read as a tool to increase the romanticizing of centenarians in order to make them an even more valuable commodity.

Ultimately, the behavior depicted in this video has a manifold influence on the construction of extraordinary 'old' age. On the one hand, centenarianness is depicted as a desirable state in life, which has the power of reversing structures of 'old' age. By portraying the 100th birthday as a gateway to a new life stage, the video, especially in connection with the lyrics of the song, depicts centenarianism as a life stage that is inherently different from what came before. Only as a centenarian, then, Helen is granted to 'do it all' once again. On the other hand, drawing from the connection of aging studies and postcolonial studies reveals that this extreme form of 'othering,' achieved through the establishment of a hypervisibility, serves as a means to construct the life phase of centenarianism as the inferior other or even as a commodity for the entertainment of younger generations. While Helen is thus still part of consumer culture as a buyer, she is also sold, revealing the actual weakness inherent to being extraordinarily 'old.'

2.3 Centenarianism and the Aging Body in the Realms of a Hip-Hop Video

In the previous subchapters, Helen's aging body and therefore the concept of physical and outward age has only been addressed marginally. However, discussing the construct of age requires a thorough analysis of the body and its representations. For the purposes of this subchapter, the focus will lay on three major points: first, how is the aging body presented with regard to (dis)ability? Second, how are the outward features of the body incorporated into the construct of age? And third, how is the body put into the context of the video and how is it used as a meaning bearing instance?

Popular images of the aging body are inextricably linked to concepts of decline. Besides fears of a declining mind in form of dementia, assumptions about the aging process work upon a fear of a growing dependence due to a lack of physical abilities. In that connection, Anita Wohlmann elaborates that

[t]he decline narrative that is imagined as a universal trajectory of the aging process . . . represents a prejudiced (or ageist) cultural concept of what it means to age because it suggests that growing into old age inevitably entails loss of health, vitality, social power, beauty, or sexuality. Such a cultural imaginary about age and aging can result in young people's feelings of repulsion and fear when they think about growing older. (26)

The main points Wohlmann connects with the decline imaginary refer to the aging body; the physically 'old' body is believed to be not healthy, beautiful, or (sexually)

active. This image not only fosters discrimination against the 'old' but also fear of growing 'old' in younger generations. Here, the representation of the extraordinary 'old' body in a hip hop video becomes particularly important because it can influence this very fear of decline in its primarily youthful audience. It is hence especially crucial to look at the representation of the extraordinary 'old' body, as well as outward appearance in Macklemore's music video.

As with every human encounter, the first thing standing out about Helen's body is her outward appearance which bears clear features of 'old' age that, contrary to many popular depictions, are not hidden. Helen has grey hair and a substantial number of wrinkles, countering a notion of her depiction as ageless. At the same time, she paints her fingernails and wears stylish jewelry and sunglasses, attributes not necessarily connected to 'old' age. When it comes to outward appearance and 'old' age, Sharon-Dale Stone argues that

[i]t's not at all difficult to find images of people who actually look old. We can look, for example, to august individuals such as Mother Teresa who died in 1997 at age 87, Desmond Tutu who announced his intention to retire in 2011 at age 79, of Queen Elizabeth of England who at age 85 keeps up a busy schedule of public appearances. Each of these people is famous for reasons unrelated to age, physical appearance, or ability to entertain, and so now that they are old, no one needs to hide evidence of their aged bodies." (59)

If only people who are *not* primarily known for things that related to age or outward appearance are allowed to actually appear 'old,' what does that indicate for the appearance of people who are *only* known because of their age? Helen is only part of this music video because of her extraordinary 'old' age. In that sense, she has to look 'old' to some extent in order for her outward age to match the audience's expectations and signify extraordinary 'old' age at all times. The grey hair and the wrinkles are thus a necessity for her appearance, yet, it is interesting to see how her outward age is complemented by the 'young' accessories of fashionable sunglasses and painted nails. Consequently, Helen gets to do both, look 'old' and remain 'young.' In terms of representation, this indicates again that centenarians seem to have a special place on the aging spectrum. One could argue that once a person turns 100, they do not have to stick to normative structures anymore. As opposed to other 'old' people, they are allowed to publicly display their wrinkles without being sanctioned for looking 'old' or frail. Yet, the representation makes clear that Helen is a 'hip' person, juxtaposing her 'old' features against the way she dresses. Ultimately, this juxtaposition informs a representation of extraordinary 'old' age that defies notions of decline, as it shows that wrinkles alone do not mean the end of life as we know it. Instead of trying to negate outward age, it becomes clear that this representation merely speaks to a redefinition of the negative connotations that go along with aged features. Helen's representation hence implicitly

suggests that underneath the threshold of the institutionalized age of 100, a person needs to try to appear 'young' in order to be visible in society whereas above it, this is not the case. Here, proudly wearing signs of 'old' age adds to Helen's charm.

Similar mechanisms apply to Helen's able-bodiedness. While she apparently lives independently, she uses a walker to move around, which counters images of hyperability often connected with positive aging. This hyperability is established by portraying 'old' people in public discourses who emphasize their ability to be physically active or to merely act as independent individuals.³ These representations focusing on ability and independence implicitly underline the decline narrative, as they portray life as only worth living as long as it is an able-bodied life. Conversely, the walker, Helen is presented with, becomes another accessory, something that is just there, naturally belonging. In this instance, Helen's overall performance is the focus and the question of able-bodiedness moves to the margins. If the walker is not given any more significance than the sunglasses Helen is wearing, for instance, what does that indicate for centenarians and the decline narrative? If the decline narrative is an imperative story of aging, neglecting the walker as a focal point can be read as countering this imaginary. At the same time, showing a person dependent on a walker might redeem the video in terms of promotion positive aging. Marvin Formosa elaborates on the latter concept by saying "the positive aging discourse portrays older people as able to counteract the effects of aging through personal effort" (29). Connecting this statement with the above-mentioned assumption that 'old' age is primarily visible through the body, a person only ages positively as long as no physical aids are necessary. Consequently, showing Helen in need of physical aid works against the positive aging narrative conveyed through the lyrics of the song. As well as her 'old' outward age, the centenarian's compromised ability is okay to appear in the video because she has passed the milestone of turning 100. The video refuses to tie into a biology centered imaginary of age(ing) without ignoring the significance of the aging body. At the same time, treating the walker as mere accessory, the video suggests that needing physical aids does not compromise the worth of a life in any way, thus countering imaginaries of disability as failure.

Connected to the narrative told through the lyrics of the song, where it seems that becoming a centenarian is like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the centenarian body is allowed to appear 'old,' opposing demands to hide signs of 'old' age. Nonetheless, by displaying the walker as a mere tool, complementing Helen's persona, there is no imaginary of decline connected to it. Having reached the institu-

3 One individual exemplifying the concept of hyperability is, as of July 2021, 86-year-old Earnestine Shepherd. Shepherd was named the "world's oldest bodybuilder" by *The Guinness Book of World Records* in 2010 ("Meet Earnestine"). The focus on Shepherd's fitness leads to an imaginary of her as not 'old' precisely because she is hyper-able.

tionalized age of 100 appears to be enough to liberate the centenarian body from these associations. In that sense, and building on her previously discussed behavior within the video, Helen does not seem to be fragile although her body shows obvious signs of 'old' age. According to Macklemore's representation of a centenarian, this newly emerging age group then exists outside the rulebook of normative aging, meaning that the concepts developed to describe aging phenomena do not seem to be entirely applicable to the imaginary of a centenarian age group. This becomes even more apparent by looking at the way Helen's body is presented in connection to younger bodies and how it is then positioned within the hip-hop video which I will do in the following paragraphs.

Besides the obvious relation of the aging body to the question of ability, there are other scenes in Macklemore's music video, directing the gaze towards body related issues. For instance, he takes his grandmother to a tattoo parlor where he gets a tattoo with her name while she watches (02:11-02:20). Here, the significance lies precisely in the fact that Helen does not get a tattoo herself but merely acts as a bystander. Modifying the body with everlasting ink seems to be the invisible line that the centenarian will not cross. Her body can be put into the setting of the tattoo parlor, but it cannot be engrained with a tattoo itself. Moreover, getting a tattoo for the sake of advertising her grandson's music may exceed the personal sacrifice any person would be willing to make. Referring to a movement of people using piercings and tattoos to satisfy apparently pre-modern desires to modify bodies, Christian Klesse states that "[t]he intense individual act of getting tattooed or pierced, however, for Modern Primitives has also the meaning of *creating collectivity*" (310). Modern Primitives are, in the discourse used by Klesse, those individuals who change their bodies permanently through the above-mentioned means. Whereas the terminology used here is certainly controversial, the relationship of body modification to individualism as well as collectivity is crucial for my argument. Considering that this music video shows the 'young' body getting to do it while the 'old' body remains inkless establishes this scene as a denial of both individuality and collectivity for the extraordinarily 'old' body. Apparently, further individualizing her body with a tattoo would overstretch the new possibilities the centenarian now has. She is neither allowed to enter the collective of the tattooed nor to individualize her body with this permanent change. This point is crucial in order to see that becoming a centenarian is not simply going back to the ways of midlife but is still connected to many restrictions of 'old' age, especially when it comes to the body. Referring back to van Dyk, this again stresses that centenarians are the 'other,' compared to the midlife, yet, a more desirable 'other' than 'old' people under the age of 100. In terms of the othering process, centenarians thus present a third form of 'other' in terms of 'old' age, which I will call an other 'other.' Furthermore, it shows how, even though Helen, as a centenarian might have overcome issues of invisibility, there are restrictions to her individuality. Showing

her getting a tattoo would overstep normative assumptions of body art being restricted to the non-wrinkled skin. Consequently, this normative assumption works as a restrictive entity, denying the extraordinary 'old' person access to a collective of 'young' people who admire the aesthetics of tattooed skin. Using aesthetics as a means of contrasting institutionalized 'old' age is thus acceptable as long as it is not permanent. Wearing the 'youthful sneakers' might only be acceptable because Helen is able to take them off at any time and change into something that would be considered more age appropriate.

Connected to the non-permanence of Helen's actions, is a sense of performance. As previously mentioned, Helen is staged as a model centenarian by her grandson. Accordingly, there is a certain performativity within Helen's actions. In her discussion of the perception of transgender bodies in society, Judith Butler argues that "the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" (907). While, of course, gender and age are not congruent in their construction and the discrimination towards the trans* community is in no way comparable to the mechanisms of ageism, it is fruitful to borrow Butler's argument on performativity. As long as the audience knows that what they get to see is a performance of something they would consider to be outside of the norm, they are inclined to accept a variety of bodies for the sake of entertainment. In the 'real' world, however, the existence of these bodies is much less approved of. For the reading of centenarianness in "Glorious," this means that Helen's being staged as other 'other' may only work so well because the audience is very aware that this is a mere piece of performance. In other words, if Helen was to really sing karaoke, people may not be as approving. This then presumably would not lead to violence but to the very exclusion from society that is expected in 'old' age. Restricting her to change her body permanently, even for performance's sake—getting a tattoo could be performed, after all—shows that even within this staged environment, constraints of 'old' age still apply. While this sense of performativity certainly stretches the possibilities of representation in Macklemore's music video, I will argue throughout the next chapters of this book that a sense of the centenarian as other 'other' is still prevalent, even if the element of performance is reduced. That is, to some extent all centenarian narratives discussed here go beyond stereotypes of 'old' age. Yet, this notion is more subtle when the element of performance is scaled down in favor of a sense of normality.

When it comes to the aesthetics of her body, Helen is depicted in a way that meets normative concepts of femininity. She sticks to the conventions of doing her hair, however grey it may be, and painting her nails, which are beauty enhancements expected from females in Western societies. Sandra Lee Bartky transfers the Foucauldian model of the Panopticon to the female body, arguing that social mechanisms of self-regulation occur with regard to the female body in terms of

dictating rules of make-up, clothing, and sizing, among others. In that connection, she argues that “[t]o succeed in the provision of a beautiful or sexy body gains woman attention and some admiration but little real respect and rarely any social power” (24). The problem with female aging is related back to the body, as the aged body is not considered as beautiful and sexy anymore. In the video, however, Helen attempts to stick to the norms expected of a woman in terms of outward appearance. She wears fashionable sunglasses, paints her nails, and generally seems to take care of her outward appearance. Importantly, she achieves this through non-permanent accessories, only. She does specifically not dye her hair or use Botox. In that sense, her outward appearance in itself becomes a juxtaposition of the physical outward signs of ‘old’ age, which seem to be acceptable, and the ‘young’ accessories used to complement this appearance.

Nevertheless, she is not portrayed as beautiful or sexy, rather, as someone who could have been beautiful and desirable a while ago. Although sexuality appears within the video, it is outsourced and portrayed in a way that does not directly apply to Helen. Instead of allowing the centenarian to be sexy and desirable, a stripper turns up at her birthday party (03:11-03:35). This suggests that Helen is still interested in sexual encounters, yet, she herself is not the sexy component in the equation. This portrayal of sexuality shows the social mindset towards elderly people and their bodies: Sexual activity in ‘old’ age is generally denied because ‘old’ bodies are deemed unattractive in a way that provokes displeasure in many people when thinking about them in intimate contexts (Gewirtz-Meydan and Ayalon 648). Ultimately, it is Macklemore who stops the stripper from undressing completely and thereby revokes the normative assumption that sexuality becomes a taboo in later life. Here, the addressee of the video becomes an important factor: As this day is staged for Macklemore’s fans, and therefore a presumably younger audience, sexuality needs to be reined in, making the encounter with the stripper rather a cute than a sexy one. It seems to be funny to see older woman struck with abashment while watching a ‘young’ man undress while impossible to see them actually engage in the ritual.

The stripper scene does not only speak to the portrayal of ‘old’ age and sexuality but also adds to the juxtaposition of age categories. On the one hand, inviting a stripper to a party seems to be more common in early adulthood; for instance, at bachelorette parties or coming-of-age birthday parties. In these settings, the stripper seems to serve as a rite of passage into adulthood or married life. Putting a stripper into the setting of a 100th birthday party, can then be read as also signifying a rite of passage from ‘old’ to extraordinary ‘old.’ The extraordinarily ‘old’ body is allowed to be interested in sexiness, whereas in former years the topic of sexuality was completely erased from public discourse. On the other hand, juxtaposing the ‘young’ body of the stripper and the extraordinarily ‘old’ body of the centenarian leads to a confirmation of the social mechanisms operating in terms of age and

sexuality. The 'young' male stripper can perform for the centenarian female as long as it is absolutely clear that this scenario will never be more than a performance. The fact that Macklemore is eager to break up the scene thus speaks to the taboo of sexual activity among the elderly and confirms that even though centenarians break free of some assumptions of 'old' age, they are still expected to stick to others.

All in all, looking at the extraordinary 'old' body in Macklemore's music video provides a variety of different angles, that ultimately suggest that centenarians may live partially outside the narratives of positive aging and decline and are yet bound to confirm other stereotypes of 'old' age. However, the grappling of decline and positive aging are crucial findings. Although the analysis could, by itself, not uncover the mechanisms behind these renegotiations, the next chapters will serve to trace these concepts through other narratives of extraordinary 'old' age in order to shed light on how and if these concepts are redefined in the stories of other centenarians.

2.4 "Glorious" and the Portrayal of Extraordinary 'Old' Age

In the music video for the song "Glorious," age(ing) is addressed from a social, a cultural, and a biological angle. Being a cultural artefact itself, the video speaks to a cultural imaginary about centenarians that it may in turn well influence. It speaks to social norms and expectations that are often based on these cultural imaginaries and suggests that for centenarians, these norms only partly apply. Finally, it negotiates the biology of aging by presenting the aged body without giving it the defining power over Helen's age. It thus remains a question throughout the following chapters whether this approach to the interconnection of culture, society, and biology may lead to a more nuanced understanding of age(ing) in general.

Nonetheless, the aging body proves to be a crucial element when it comes to discussing the aging process in general. While Helen's behavioral age is portrayed as much younger than her institutionalized age and her outward appearance can be supplemented by 'young' accessories, her body seems to be caught within the expectations of 'old' age in the sense that it is presented as undesirable and unchangeable. However, being able to engage in all these activities at the age of 100 may itself be regarded as a juxtaposition of physical and institutionalized age. Yet, when it comes to the body, the stereotyping concerning 'old' age seems to be so deeply engrained in cultural imaginaries that even the centenarian cannot overcome them completely.

The discussion of the video has made clear that centenarians do not only hold a special position within society as they are seen as aging role models, but also that their extraordinary 'old' age sets them apart from other aged people in terms of the way their age category is socially and culturally constructed. Instead of showing

Helen as “conservative, inflexible, and resistant to change . . . incapable of creativity, of making progress, of starting afresh” (Haim 28), a representation that would be stereotypical for ‘old’ age, Macklemore presents his grandmother as a modern woman who is capable of having fun and look toward the future. Besides painting a rather glorified picture of centenarians, however, the video reinforces ageist structures through the clear distinction between centenarians and non-centenarians. By establishing turning 100 as a new beginning, the video and the song suggest that ‘old’ age before reaching this milestone is undesirable and negative. This reinforces the decline narrative of ‘old’ age even though being a centenarian appears to be more or less free of these derogatory concepts. At the same time, the video emphasizes that, even though becoming a centenarian is more desirable than being merely ‘old,’ extraordinary ‘old’ age does not present a continuation of midlife. Rather, according to the music video, centenarians are a distinct age group that needs to be admired. The video then explains the centenarian paradox by emphasizing the difference between ‘old’ and extraordinary ‘old.’

While contributing to the cultural construction of age categories, the video, unlike many other accounts of centenarians, leaves out how Helen got to live this long. The audience is merely presented with the fact that she has recently turned 100, there are no accounts of her diet, exercise schedule or general lifestyle. This could be connected to the intended audience of the video. The generally younger audience of a hip hop video might see themselves as too far away from ‘old’ age to even think about how to live to 100. The distinct genre of the hip hop video also shows only how the ‘young’ rapper stages his grandmother in order to serve his commercial interests best. In that sense, Helen is the centenarian icon that people *want* to imagine and ultimately want to become.

For the considerations within the next chapters, it is important to note that Helen represents a very normative centenarian. She is female, white, and well situated; all three factors add to a person’s life expectancy. As she represents a norm within her age group, it will be interesting to see to what extent the image of centenarianness differs among people who deviate from that norm. Moreover, Helen is depicted on a special occasion—her birthday. Hence, her behavior is not necessarily a depiction of an everyday behavior. Nonetheless, the video shows that the lifestyle presented is possible for centenarians to engage in. As opposed to this, the next chapters will deal with narratives that chose a more every-day approach to the topic of centenarianism. Further, I will use the next chapters to elaborate on the way centenarians are depicted in other forms of life-narratives and how these depictions add to or contradict Macklemore’s presentation of his grandmother and what different aspects of extraordinary ‘old’ age they address. Since the voice of the centenarian herself has been absent from this chapter, the following chapters will pay special attention to the break in perspectives on aging between the middle-aged producers of the narratives and their centenarian subjects.