DE GRUYTER

Mita Banerjee

CENTENARIANS' AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

AGE, LIFE WRITING AND THE ENIGMA OF EXTREME LONGEVITY

MEDICAL & HEALTH HUMANITIES
AESTHETICS, ANALYSES, APPROACHES

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Mita Banerjee

Centenarians' Autobiographies

Medical & Health Humanities

Aesthetics, Analyses, Approaches

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Volume 2

Mita Banerjee

Centenarians' Autobiographies

Age, Life Writing and the Enigma of Extreme Longevity

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1 Introduction

> If I could offer you only one tip for the future,
> Sunscreen would be it
> The long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proved by scientists
> whereas the rest of my advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience . . .
> I will dispense this advice now
>
> Enjoy the power and beauty of your youth
> oh, never mind;
> you will not understand the power and beauty of your youth until they have faded
> But trust me, in 20 years you'll look back at photos of yourself
> and recall in a way you can't grasp now how much possibility lay before you and
> how fabulous you really looked
>
> Get plenty of calcium
> Be kind to your knees, you'll miss them when they're gone
> . . . .
> Maybe you'll marry, maybe you won't
> . . . .
> maybe you'll dance the 'Funky Chicken' on your 75th wedding
> anniversary . . .
>
> Baz Luhrmann, "Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)"

Who would not like to live to one hundred? Across time and space, the number one hundred, when it comes to the human life span, has been a mystical one, a form of well-wishing, almost an incantation. Thus, the Swedish birthday song "Yes, may he live!" ("Ja, må han [hon] leva"), written in the eighteenth century, wishes the birthday child that they may live to one hundred:

> Yes, may he (she) live!
> Yes, may he (she) live!
> Yes, may he (she) live for a hundred years!
> Of course, he (she) will live,
> Of course, he (she) will live,
> Of course, he (she) will live for a hundred years!
> Hooray, hooray, hooray, hooray!
>
> ("Ja, Må Han (Hon) Leva")

Similarly, the Hindu epic of the Upanishads, written between 700 to 200 BC, notes that humans may well be able to live to one hundred and even beyond: "The Chandogya *Upanishad* gives man a *life span* of 116 years and gives instructions how one can ensure that one enjoys the full span" ("Longevity Ensured"). It is important to note here that as a Hindu epic, the Upanishads are a mixture of a cul-

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tural, historical, legal, religious and medical knowledge (Narayana 1995). The observation that human bodies can live to one hundred years of age may share with the Swedish birthday song a form of cultural well-wishing, but it is also a statement of medical expertise. Quite uncannily, then, the Upanishads anticipate what a recent article in the renowned life science journal *Nature* has noted about the biology of the human body. As *Nature News* triumphantly notes, “There’s no limit to longevity, says study that reviews human lifespan debate” (Dolgin 15). Not only the content, but also the tone of this headline seems to be characteristic of the current debate, both medical and cultural, about longevity. There is something deeply human about wishing to live as long as possible, and possibly into eternity. The longevity debate is thus both old and new; it mixes the age-old dream of human immortality with the promises of biomedicine at the beginning of the twenty-first century. At the same time, in *Nature* and well beyond, longevity research is both a highly interdisciplinary field and a highly controversial topic. The above-described article hailed by *Nature News* (Dolgin 2018), was written by a statistician; it was immediately contested by both biologists and demographers. As the *Nature* newsflash goes on to note,

> Others say the conclusions of the study are biologically implausible. “You run into basic limitations imposed by body design,” says Jay Olshansky, a bio-demographer at the University of Illinois at Chicago, noting that cells that do not replicate, such as neurons, will continue to wither and die as a person ages, placing upper boundaries on humans’ natural lifespan. (Dolgin 15)

The issue raised here from the perspective of the life sciences is also characteristic of the cultural debate: Uncannily, even the Upanishads stress the connection between the desire for extreme longevity[2] or even immortality, and the role of the body’s “hardware,” which may be an impediment to such a utopia. The question thus becomes not simply whether we want to live to one hundred, but rather, what physical or mental state we may be in once we have managed to live to one hundred or beyond. What is at stake in these desires about human longevity is thus both extreme aging and the possibility of aging *well*. The utopia, then, may not only be living into infinity, but living *healthily* into infinity.

This book takes its beginning at precisely this intersection. It contemplates the current fascination with life narratives by centenarians and at the same time zooms in on a particular genre in which these life narratives have been circulated: the genre of centenarians’ autobiographies. Centenarian autobiographies, this study argues, can be located at a particular point in time: a time when living into extreme old age seems suddenly to have become possible; a time when bio-

2 I am indebted to Julia Velten for this term.

medical progress seems to make longevity not only desirable, but within reach. Yet, as outlined above, if living to one hundred is increasingly becoming a possibility rather than a utopia, one question remains: Even if we manage to live to one hundred, in what mental and physical state will we reach this biblical age? As Christine Overall puts it in her book *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* (2005), coming from the field of philosophy,

> The complexity of this question and contemporary ambivalence about its answer are hinted at in a "Wizard of Oz" comic strip. A physician says to the Spook, "The good news is you're going to live to be a hundred." The Spook says, "What's the bad news?" The physician says, "You're going to live to be one hundred." (13)

Overall's evocation of the Wizard of Oz is paradigmatic for the present study as a whole. In the pages that follow, I argue that "centenarianness" has become one of the central riddles of our time when it comes to conceptualizing age and the aging process. I understand centenarians' narratives – and centenarians' autobiographies in particular – as a prism that refracts different opinions, often diverging and contradictory ones, about what aging means in the present moment. Even as I will delve into the structure and texture of these narratives, I am thus equally interested in what they tell us about ourselves: about the dreams and desires we bring to the *reading* of these life narratives.

1.1 Centenarians' Autobiographies and Successful Aging

This book argues that centenarians' autobiographies can be seen as emblematic of a paradigm that has been established in the life sciences over the last two decades: the paradigm of successful aging. Co-written by a gerontologist, John Rowe, M.D., and a social scientist and psychologist, Robert Kahn, the concept of successful aging may in retrospect be said to have inaugurated a paradigm shift in thinking about age. What Rowe and Kahn argued was that age did not necessarily have to be defined by decline; rather, it could also be seen as a period of life in which active fulfillment was still possible. As their book promises in the dust jacket summary, "Learn the surprising results of the MacArthur Foundation Study – the most extensive, comprehensive study on aging in America. Find out how the way you live – not the genes you were born with – determines health and vitality" (dustjacket). Old age, Rowe and Kahn argued, was no longer something to dread, but might even be a life phase that we may look forward to. What was even more revolutionary, perhaps, was Rowe and Kahn's idea that whether or not a person was able to age "successfully" was not only determined by their genes, but, rather, was a possibility that lay in their own hands. The key paradigm shift that

Rowe and Kahn inaugurated was to argue that we could influence our own aging process: by living well, eating right, exercising, living an active life, and trying to be resilient. In other words, successful aging was not simply something that could be observed in some older people, but it was a lifestyle that could actually be emulated by those who wished to grow old successfully as well. According to Rowe and Kahn, “What does it mean to age successfully? What can each of us do to be successful at this most important life task?” (xi). The latter question in particular, is of singular importance here. What happens to definitions of aging if aging is redefined from a biological process to as “life task”? What this implies, it could be argued, is that the individual is now in charge of their own aging process, with all the benefits and pitfalls this entails. With their article “Successful Aging,” first published in 1997, Rowe and Kahn thus inaugurated an entirely new field: the field of the so-called “new gerontology” (xi). Before the onset of the new gerontology that they inaugurated, Rowe and Kahn write,

> [there] was a persistent preoccupation with disability, disease, and chronological age, rather than with the positive aspects of aging. This negative perspective was coupled with a serious underestimation of the effects of lifestyle and other psychological factors on the well-being of older persons. (xi)

In the pages that follow, I will hence also inquire into the concept of what Rowe and Kahn have called “successful aging” (xi). This is where we may well return to the riddle posed by the Wizard of Oz: The riddle is precisely whether it is good or bad news that we may live to one hundred. Rowe and Kahn’s concept of “successful aging” tips the scales in favor of the first answer: They suggest that growing into extreme old age will be good news if only we take the right precautions. For Rowe and Kahn, aging is no longer just a natural biological process which will simply take its course. Rather, they argue that this is a process into which we can intervene. They write,

> Substantial increases in the relative and absolute number of older persons in our society pose a challenge for biology, social and behavioral science, and medicine. Successful aging is multidimensional, encompassing the avoidance of disease and disability, the maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities. Research has identified factors predictive of success in these critical domains. The stage is set for intervention studies to enhance the proportion of our population aging successfully. (433)

The individual is thus no longer seen as being at the mercy of their own aging process; rather, this process of individual aging as successful aging is something of which the individual can take charge.

This book argues that since the publication of “Successful Aging” in 1997, its repercussions are virtually ubiquitous. Successful aging is visible in advertising,

giving rise to new consumer groups and new fashion lines designed for "best agers" or "young-old" (Neugarten 1975; Forman et al. 1992). Even as definitions of age and old age may have relapsed into notions of frailty during the Covid-19 pandemic, successful aging has become prevalent as a depiction of the old age one would like to live into.

Seen from a humanities perspective, however, the model of successful aging is tantalizing and troubling at one and the same time. First, it is seductive in the sense that one cannot not want to live into an active, healthy, fulfilled old age. Second, Rowe and Kahn's idea of preventing disease as we grow older is, of course, based on research in gerontology and the life sciences. There seems to be little point in questioning the idea that eating right and exercising may be conducive to health, or that having an active social life may be one factor in combatting depression. From a humanities perspective, especially from the field of Critical Aging Studies (Wellin 2018; Goldman 2017), however, what may be troubling about the paradigm of successful aging is that it may run the risk of becoming what Holstein and Minkler have called a "master narrative" (787). They caution,

> we emphasize the need for a more careful examination of the model [of successful aging] itself. . . . [We] critique this normative vision by focusing on its unarticulated (and perhaps unexplored) values, assumptions, and consequences. We argue that these unexamined features may further harm older people, particularly older women, the poor, and people of color who are already marginalized. (787)

The paradigm of successful aging may become problematic, then, when it is being elevated to being the only "right" model for aging. What, we may ask, is the opposite of successful aging? Are those who live into old age with illness, disability or dementia by definition "failed" agers, who can look at the "best agers" only from the sidelines? It is this dilemma between the seductiveness of successful aging as a model for imagining what old age may be like, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the implicit dismissal of other forms of aging with which this book is concerned. The more ubiquitous representations of successful aging become, in other words, the more easily may depictions of disability or dementia be dismissed as examples of undesirable forms of aging. From the perspective of disability studies, then, the paradigm of successful aging may be deeply troubling (Chivers 2011).

Throughout the chapters of this book, I will be interested in what centenarian narratives say, and in what they do *not* say. It is in this way that I will try to describe both what makes centenarians' autobiographies so fascinating, and what makes them so problematic. This book is concerned with what I see as an impossible desire: Living into extreme old age, and into *healthy* old age in particular, is something that we cannot *not* want. And yet, celebrating centenarians' lives may come at a cost: What we may risk is not celebrating other lives: the lives of those who may not have

had the good fortune to live to one hundred, or who may have lived into old age only with impairment (Chivers 2011; Leahy 2021). As I suggest in this book, we need to celebrate centenarians' lives and to give them credit for growing into extreme old age, without, however, marginalizing those whose life course has taken a different turn. What I am looking for in this book, is a discourse about longevity which guards itself carefully against becoming a master narrative. Living to one hundred is one way of aging, I suggest, but it is by no means the only one.

1.2 Successful Aging as Cultural Capital

This book investigates under what circumstances a medical paradigm becomes a cultural one (Kay 2000). So far, research has argued (Rose 2007) that developments in the life sciences "filter" into the life worlds, in time often coming to inform how we view and position ourselves (Spencer 2020). Following these arguments but also differing from them, this book investigates, with regard to concepts of extreme longevity, the specific mechanisms in which life sciences concepts are systematically inscribed into cultural discourse. The point I am trying to make in this book, then, is not simply that life science paradigms about extreme longevity simply "filter" into our life worlds, but that there may be particular mechanisms that enable or facilitate this process. I investigate, in other words, how "successful aging" has become, not only a medical concept – a concept that inaugurated the so-called "new gerontology" –, but also a cultural imaginary, a cultural inscription of what it may mean to live into extreme old age. What are the cultural circumstances, this book argues, under which such a translation can take place? This book hence investigates the cultural ground, the social soil onto which the concept of "successful aging," when it was first introduced by Rowe and Kahn in 1998, can be said to have fallen. The conditions under which a life science concept can "take hold" in the social sphere, I argue, need to be investigated by a form of cultural inventory. So far, studies have argued that the paradigm of "successful aging" intersects in many different ways with the idea of neoliberalism (Brown 2015; Lemke 2007). The point that I would like to make here, however, is that this intersection can at once be seen as a specific form of translation. Neoliberalism, in other words, makes the ground onto which the "seed" of successful aging falls such a fertile one. According to Wendy Brown,

> neoliberalism transmogrifies every human endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized. (10)

Given this climate of the "economization" of every sphere of human life, it may be no wonder that the "mastering" or "conducting" one's own aging process, too, can be viewed in terms of increasing or squandering one's capital. My aim in this book, therefore, is not only to read centenarians' autobiographies in dialogue with the historical moment from which they emerge, but to gain a deeper understanding of this historical moment by looking at centenarians' autobiographies. My point here would be not simply to ask, how centenarians' life writing narratives are neoliberal, but what specific facets they reveal about the politics of neoliberalism.

I am thus investigating "successful aging" as both a medical and a cultural paradigm. By using successful aging as a case in point, my aim is to examine how medical concepts do not simply "filter" into the social sphere but undergo specific processes of translation. This process of translation, in turn, is where the concept of life writing enters the debate. In order for a life science concept to "take hold" in the social sphere, there needs to be a vehicle that makes such a translation possible. In this book, I locate this vehicle on the terrain of life writing research: Centenarians' autobiographies, I suggest, are one form in which successful aging as a paradigm gets translated into cultural capital. This privileging of one particular form – the genre of autobiography –, however, may at first seem counterintuitive. Successful aging as a concept is being circulated in our life worlds not only through autobiographies, but also through advertising, marketing, social media, and popular culture. Successful aging may thus in fact be ubiquitous to our contemporary life worlds. This argument notwithstanding, however, I argue that there is nonetheless a particular way in which centenarians' narratives as forms of life writing lend themselves to translating successful aging into cultural capital. Crucially for the purposes of this book, the medical paradigm of successful aging emerges at a point when there is simultaneously a "memoir boom" (Rak 43): A point in time in the sphere of culture in which the general public or general readership is particularly avid for narratives about individual lives (Rak 2013). It is this intersection – the ascent of successful aging as a master narrative about aging, and the "memoir boom" – which causes successful aging to take hold in the cultural sphere. As life writing narratives, in other words, centenarians' narratives translate the medical paradigm of successful aging into a cultural paradigm. This book sets out to investigate just how this process takes place.

Centenarians' Autobiographies argues that centenarians' life writing narratives do not simply circulate the overall concept of "successful aging"; rather, they also translate into cultural capital the many different dimensions of the medical paradigm of successful aging. This process, I suggest, is interesting in its own right: What precisely are the ways in which different biomedical paradigms or concepts can be translated into cultural knowledge? I argue that it is the medical underpin-

ning of successful aging as a concept emanating in the life sciences that imbues centenarians' narratives with a very particular "aura" and enhances their fascination. Reading an entire chapter about a person's diet, in all other circumstances, would seem not only trivial but even tedious; what, then, makes for the fascination of reading about a centenarian's day by day diet? In R. Waldo McBurney's autobiography, an entire chapter is dedicated to advice on ageing as successfully as McBurney has done. Crucially, the list is headed by "exercise" (after all, McBurney was a long-distance runner well into old age), to be followed by "nutrition": "NUTRITION? Yes – fruits, vegetables, whole grain cereals, beans, low-fat, low-salt, and low-sugar help control weight, and help prevent cancer, heart trouble, diabetes and many other diseases that shorten life. We tend to 'dig our graves with our teeth'" (83). It is crucial to note that in all the centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this book, the centenarian's diet is inevitably addressed; it is in this sense that the autobiographies verge on guidebooks and self-help manuals. This is a question that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.

Crucially, the detailed attention that is being paid in centenarians' autobiographies to the dietary advice of the oldest-old is itself in line with the politics of neoliberalism. In our present time, nutrition has come to be key since "eating right" can itself be seen as an act of self-optimization. This is the time – and the cultural context – from which the practice of "orthorexia" has emerged (Scarff 2017).[3] One point that could be made here is that we can trace in centenarians' autobiographies also practices that have come to characterize society at large. As Reinhardt and Schober observe,

> The self as a project, then, has been a well-known project and topos for a long time, and self-enhancement or self-optimization has a long cultural and economic history. In recent self-tracking practices, however (ironically, perhaps), the body has come center stage and has become the main target of enhancement and control. (9)

This book is based in the humanities, but it also takes into accounts developments and discourse in the life sciences. What is at stake, I would like to ask in this book, if the results that are being attained in life science research curiously make their way into cultural knowledge? And in this process, do these concepts get distorted, reworked, or re-energized? To practitioners in the life sciences, this book tries to bring an idea of how their forms of knowledge circulate, and how in the cultural sphere, they may be "repackaged." Coming from a humanities perspective, however, I also believe that such "repackaging" is never trivial; that it is not simply the "coating" of a scientific concept, but also adds layers of meaning to

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3 I am indebted to Ulla Kriebernegg for this point.

this concept. What is at stake, then, is not only the "culturalizing" of the (medical) paradigm of successful aging, but a new amalgamate that is located at the intersection between culture and medicine, between life sciences and life writing (Paul et al. 2015).

If this book is located at the intersection between life sciences and life writing, it also takes into account sociological studies about human differentiation (Hirschauer 2020). Taking a praxeological perspective, it asks not only who centenarians "are," but also how they are being "produced" as specific social and cultural subjects. I will thus not only inquire into the narratives that centenarians tell about their extremely long life span, but also into who *curates* these narratives: What is the role of the co-authors writing these narratives, coaxing the centenarian to tell their story? Who are the agents that in turn suggest to the co-authors to write a centenarian's narrative? And, as importantly, who stands to gain from the publication of these life writing narratives, and what may be the role of the larger public for this economic and ideational gain? At the core of this book on the life writing of the oldest old, there is Thomas Couser's notion of "collaborative autobiography." According to Couser,

> Ethical issues may be particularly acute in collaborative autobiography because it occupies an awkward niche between more established, more prestigious forms of life writing. On one side is solo autobiography, in which the writer, the narrator, and the subject (or the protagonist) of the narrative are all the same person; at least, they share the same name. On the other side is biography, in which the writer and the narrator are one person, while the subject is someone else. In the middle, combining features of the adjacent forms – and thus challenging the common-sense distinction between them – is as-told-to-autobiography, in which the writer is one person, but the narrator and subject are someone else. The ethical difficulties in collaborative life writing are rooted in its nearly oxymoronic status; the single narrative voice – a simulation by one person of the voice of another – is always in danger of breaking, exposing conflicts of interest that are not present in solo autobiography. (334)

It is this ethics of collaboration that I will be concerned with in the chapters that follow. As I approach these co-written autobiographies by centenarians, I would like to ask with Couser, quite simply, "Whose book is this?" (334). The point that I am trying to make in this study is that in the writing and the publication of these life narratives about extreme old age, the act collaboration is carefully veiled. The fascination that these narratives hold for us, I propose, depends on the idea that it is really the centenarian's voice that we hear when we open these books.

Quite simply, my aim in this book is thus to ask how centenarians are made; who their "producers" are and what processes go into this "making" of centenarians as social subject holding cultural capital. In line with what I have suggested above, I argue that centenarians are being "made" by both life sciences and life writing, that they are a product of both culture and medicine. *Centenarians' Auto-*

biographies is thus also located squarely in the domain of constructivism, seeking to know how particular bodies are being imbued with social meaning.

Finally, my goal in this book is not only to investigate what medicine brings to culture, but also what culture may bring to medical understandings and definitions of extreme old age. In the domain of medicine, age is conceived as a universal human process; the particularities of human subjects are tangential, even to some degree irrelevant to this process. The seductiveness of the paradigm of successful aging may thus lie precisely in its universality: The idea that it seems to be applicable to *any*body. Yet, seen from both a cultural and a social perspective, there is a sense in which this seductiveness may also be a flaw: The point that is increasingly being made not only by social scientists, but by medical practitioners as well (Cameron et al. 2019), is that while aging is a universal biological process that concerns all human (and non-human) beings, there may nonetheless be a way in which the processes in which we age are specific. Is there such a thing, we may ask, as black aging, female aging, or queer aging? (Worsfold 2005; Watson 2018; Hess 2019). This is an idea that both the humanities and the social sciences would answer in the affirmative. If the humanities and social sciences are convinced that aging is both universal and particular, moreover, this is a "reading" of the aging process that may also be translated back into medicine and the life sciences.

In this study, I will discuss eight centenarians' autobiographies in detail: Sarah and Elizabeth Delany's autobiography *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First Hundred Years*, with its sequels *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* and Sarah Delany's *On My Own at 107: Reflections on Life without Bessie*; George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*, with its sequel *More than a Book: A Story of Friendship*; Ann Nixon Cooper's *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name*; Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's *It Is Well with My Soul*; and R. Waldo McBurney's *The First Hundred Years: A Look back from the Finish Line.* Except for one, R. Waldo McBurney's life narrative, all of these autobiographies were co-authored by the centenarian and a co-writer who collaborated in the writing, editing, and publishing of the final book. Moreover, except for McBurney's narrative and another centenarian's autobiography, George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*, all of the centenarians' autobiographies I investigate were written by women; one, *Having Our Say*, was written by centenarian sisters, Sarah and Elizabeth Delany. It is also significant for the purpose of this study that except for R. Waldo McBurney, all of these centenarians are African American, and most of the co-authors who support them in the writing of these narratives are white. What, I will ask in the pages that follow, would this imply for the intersection between age and race in the writing of centenarians' autobiographies? Finally, it may also be significant that except for George Dawson, who learned to read and write only at age 98 (thus becoming the "poster

child" of black literacy campaigns), all of the centenarians whose autobiographies I discuss here are educated, many of them possessing college degrees, and can be seen as middle-class. This, I will elaborate in the chapters that follow, may add a class dimension to the investigation – and the writing – of extreme old age.

Since I am interested in the cultural and historical moment in which centenarians' autobiographies emerge as a potential subgenre within the field of life writing, however, I will not only examine life writing narratives published in the form of autobiography. Rather, I will try to situate these autobiographies in an entire field of narratives about centenarians: from business advice to cookbooks. Centenarians, this book argues, are *en vogue*. But what are the questions that we bring to these narratives? What fears, what hopes and desires do we project onto the oldest old? The aim of this book is to provide at least some answers to these questions.

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This book thus reads centenarians' autobiographies as emblematic of the paradigm of successful aging. Yet, in line with the critique of this paradigm outlined above, it attempts to read centenarians' life writing narratives both with the grain and against it. In so doing, my goal will be to examine both what is being said and what goes unsaid in these life writing narratives. In reading centenarians' autobiographies such as George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*, the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say*, Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's *It Is Well with My Soul*, I will argue that these autobiographies can be seen as life writing illustrations of successful aging. Conversely, I will also try to point to gaps and fractures in these narratives, moments in which the model of successful aging "slips"; and I will link the reading of centenarians' autobiographies to other texts that resist the idea of successful aging becoming a master narrative.

The notion of successful aging may be so troubling, then, because it corresponds so strongly with the concept of neoliberalism. In this context, which is closely linked to the idea that our bodies are a capital we have to constantly take care of, centenarians' narratives become a form of capital in a quite literal sense. If our bodies are our capital (Lemke 2007; Wright and Harwood 2012), what story can be more successful than the narrative of an individual who has maintained this capital for over a hundred years? As Wendy Brown suggests, "today's *homo oeconomicus* is an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and non-monetary) portfolio value across all of its avenues and venues" (19). In the sense of this neoliberal agenda, centenarians' autobiographies can themselves be seen as "portfolios" of aging well. Biopolitics are hence at the core not only of neoliberalism, but also of centenarians' autobiographies. At the core of these forms of life writing, it can be argued, is the idea of self-government: of taking charge of

one's own aging process. This self-government, in turn, is one of the key aspects of biopolitics as described by Michel Foucault. According to Thomas Lemke, "Biopolitics is less an expression of the will of a sovereign, but aims at the management and regulation of life processes at the level of the population" (13; my translation). In our contemporary historical moment, it is not the state who tells the population to "age well"; rather, we as individuals may have internalized the imperative to take good care of our bodies as a form of biological capital. To the extent that we have internalized the goal of successful aging, we are "regulating our life's processes" in a way that they relieve the health care system. In this way, "self-care" becomes a neoliberal imperative. As Wendy Brown notes, those who subscribe to other forms of conduct are "made to appear as thieving dependents operating in the old world of entitlement, rather than self-care, they are blamed for sinking states into debt, thwarting growth, and bringing the global economy to the brink of ruin" (134).

At the same time, the relationship between centenarians' autobiographies and the paradigm of successful aging is a complex one. What is at stake here, I suggest in this book, is the relationship between medical knowledge and the way in which this knowledge may inform or may filter into our life worlds. To the extent that the paradigm of "successful aging" has become ubiquitous – particularly because it is so seductive and so desirable –, it may have come to pervade all areas of our life worlds. Successful aging may be visible, in other words, not only in media and advertising, but also in how we tell our own life narratives. For many different reasons, then, successful aging may also be visible in autobiographies about age and aging, and thus also in centenarians' autobiographies. At the same time, what is at stake is not only the stories we tell about our own lives, but also the question which life narratives actually get published.

At the core of centenarians' autobiographies, I will argue in this book, there are two central elements. First, there is the relationship between the centenarian and their co-author, who urges them to tell their story; and second, there is a general reading public avid for ever more stories about what it may mean to live to one hundred, and to do so in a manner that is both healthy and happy. One of the questions I will explore, then, is the extent to which we may actually be able to speak of a veritable "centenarian industry": On book markets across the globe, it would seem, narratives about centenarians are proliferating. For book sellers, the number of "one hundred" may have come to be magic in and of itself, from John Robbins' *Healthy at 100* to Franklin and Adler's *Celebrate One Hundred: Centenarians' Secrets to Success in Business and Life*.

In the context of what I see as a centenarian industry, my argument about centenarians' autobiographies will be twofold: I will read these narratives in conjunction with other texts about what it means to live to one hundred – from cookbooks to advice literature; and I will argue that centenarians' autobiographies in

themselves may serve to fulfill many of these “other,” non-literary functions. They may “double” as advice literature, mental health manual, book of wisdom or even cookbook. It is this versatility, I suggest in this study, that make centenarians’ autobiographies so fascinating as a literary genre.

This study enquires into the “culture” of extreme old age by using centenarians’ autobiographies as a case in point. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette, one of the founders of the field of aging studies, has argued, “age” is not only a biological process, but it is also culturally inscribed. Age, in other words, is inseparable from the cultural and social meaning that we bring to it. As Gullette suggests, we are literally “aged by culture” (5): That is, we inhabit particular ideologies or forms of socialization that cause us to conceive of the aging process in a particular way. Gullette writes, “If we mean by ideology a system that socializes us into certain beliefs and ways of speaking about what it means to be ‘human,’ while suppressing alternatives, it is useful to call this training ‘age ideology’” (6–7).

What is at stake is hence what sociologist Stephen Katz has called “cultural aging” (2005, 13). Crucially, in his definition of the intersection between age and culture, Katz explicitly addresses the current fascination with extreme longevity. He writes,

> if one considers the life span to be more than the indisputable biological fact and examines it as a *discursive or imagined production*, symbolic of a culture’s belief about living and aging, then one can also glimpse something of the larger social and ideological orders from which such beliefs derive their significance. (23; italics added)

What, then, is the moment in which centenarian autobiographies have suddenly gained such cultural currency? This book suggests, first and foremost, that the current boom of centenarian autobiographies is symptomatic of a much wider interest in centenarians in general. This interest, in turn, is increasingly visible in both science and society. With regard to the origins of this visibility, we may find ourselves in a sort of chicken and egg situation. The interest in extreme longevity may in part have originated in the life sciences, giving rise to the new gerontology and the concept of “successful aging.” However, research may itself be sparked by a public interest in what aging means, how aging processes may be crafted through individual action or even choice, and how age-related conditions such as neurodegenerative diseases might be prevented. As research results from the life sciences are being communicated to the larger public, moreover, they will take on a “cultural” life of their own, thus once again fueling public opinion and social relevance, and giving rise to new research projects.

It is in this sense that centenarian autobiographies can be located at the intersection between life sciences and life writing, an idea that I will explore in more detail in Chapter 2. Centenarians may be living proof that biomedical progress has

made it possible to reach an age which, half a century ago, still seemed miraculous. In examining different centenarians' autobiographies, such as George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*, the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say*, Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's *It Is Well with My Soul*, Ann Nixon Cooper's *The Day the President Called My Name*, or R. Waldo McBurney's *My First One Hundred Years: A Look back from the Finish Line*, I will be interested in the continuity between these different narratives, in life sciences and life writing, about extreme longevity. At the same time, I will also locate these autobiographies at a specific moment in the history of both the life sciences and cultural discourse on age. I argue throughout this book that centenarians' autobiographies are part of a larger context in which narratives about extreme longevity have been increasingly *en vogue*.

Moreover, if centenarians' autobiographies are a prism for a number of discourses and developments – the "society of singularity" (Reckwitz 2019), the age of neoliberalism, and the concept of successful aging –, then they may simultaneously serve as a means through which we may be able to observe these developments. In other words, we cannot only read centenarian narratives through the discourse of neoliberalism, but we can also learn about the different facets of neoliberalism by reading centenarians' autobiographies.

Centenarians' autobiographies can hence be located at a particular point in time: In the age of singularity, as Andreas Reckwitz has observed, there has been a shift from the conformism of modernity to postmodernity's need for uniqueness. Reckwitz notes,

> Wherever we look in contemporary society, what is increasingly expected is not the *general*, but the *particular*. The hopes, interests and efforts of institutions and individuals are not pinned on the standardized and regulated, but on the unique, the singular. (9; my translation; italics original)

The idea of "exceptional" or "extreme" longevity (Velten 11), I suggest in this book, can also be traced in centenarians' autobiographies. In his groundbreaking study, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*, Reckwitz points out that lifestyle practices such as extreme sports have been on the rise; what is sought for in postmodernity is hence no longer the reassuring feeling of losing oneself in the crowd, but standing out from the fold, the search for ever more extreme accomplishments. The point to be made here, then, is not only that centenarians' narratives are deeply meritocratic accounts – celebrating the achievement of an exceptionally long life –, but that they are also proof of an extreme challenge having been mastered: the challenge of growing extraordinarily old (Velten 2022). As Reckwitz goes on to say, "thus, passions are directed to live concerts and music festivals in their extraordinary nature, to sports and art events, but also to the activity of lifestyle sports and the imaginary worlds of computer games" (9; my translation). It

could be argued that in centenarians' narratives, all of these pastimes converge: Perusing a centenarians' narrative is akin to a computer game, because in the act of reading, we *simulate* what it may mean to become extremely old. At the same time, precisely because, as I will elaborate in Chapter 3, the achievement of living that long is compared in the narrative to running a marathon, centenarians' life writing narratives also evoke "Lifestyle-Sportarten" (lifestyle sports) since the act of living is itself likened to a sports challenge. Finally, reading a centenarians' autobiography becomes emblematic of *Außeralltäglichkeit*, of being outside the daily routine, since we immerse ourselves in the realm of the odd, the unusual, and the potentially bizarre. The notion of simulation, moreover, is further enhanced if the centenarian's autobiography is replete with recipes: In *The Delany Sister's Book of Everyday Wisdom*, the centenarian sisters include the recipe of their favorite pound cake (26). Baking and eating this relic from the past – the recipe, after all, is a family recipe –, the reader can in fact taste what the centenarians are eating and hence (almost) become a centenarian themselves.

Finally, as outlined above, I will propose in this book that given this complex intersection of the interest in singularity, the age of neoliberalism, the belief in the progress of biomedicine and the achievement of successful aging, centenarians' autobiographies may have become "master narratives of aging" (Holstein and Minkler 787). The point which I am trying to make here is not just that the life story of a centenarian is one narrative among many. Rather, I argue that this narrative has become indicative of a form of aging that is seen as particularly desirable, and as being more desirable than others. Precisely because these centenarian life stories are exemplary of the above-described discourses – singularity, success, and individual achievement –, they may serve to marginalize *other* stories of aging.

1.3 Extreme Longevity – An Impossible Desire?

Living up to one hundred and attaining such a biblical age while still being in good health is something we cannot not want. This book sets out to look at centenarians' autobiographies as a terrain onto which the hopes and fears surrounding longevity in the current moment can be projected. As in the *Nature News* article, these autobiographical texts may become a prism through which multiple discourses about extreme longevity are reflected; and as in the article, these discourses, intersecting in one and the same narrative, may often be contradictory. One of the points which this study sets out to make is that the emergence of a particular narrative genre – centenarians' autobiographies – at a specific moment in time may be an indication of the current cultural imaginary about longevity and about extreme longevity in particular. If, as Siegfried Kracauer famously argued, literature can be a seismo-

graph of cultural vibrations (2011), the same may be true of the genre of life writing. In this vein, centenarians' autobiographies may reveal to us, not only the opinions of actual centenarians about what it is like to live to one hundred, but also the desires which we bring to these texts. In fact, as I will try to illustrate in the pages that follow, the parameters and specificities of the *production* of these autobiographies are such that they may in fact tell us more about our own desires for reading about longevity than they might reveal about the lives of the actual centenarians themselves.

To be sure, no autobiography is ever purely mimetic. It is always a form of "autofiction" in the sense that when we tell others about our own life, we will always to some extent perform this life. We will edit out some events and enhance the scope or even meaning of others. Autobiography is thus always a performance of the self (Hornung 2010). Yet, one of the questions which this book sets out to ask is whether this "fictional" dimension of autobiographies is even more true of *centenarians'* autobiographies. The central question which this study wants to explore is whether the promise inherent in the genre of autobiography – the promise that the text that we read is one of *self*-representation – is not inversely proportionate to the desires we bring to reading centenarians' self-narratives. What if, in other words, these desires – brought to the texts by readers, publishers and editors alike – were to overdetermine the texts themselves? One of the claims of this book is that the interpretive repertoire brought to and surrounding these narratives may be so overbearing that the centenarian's self-narrative may disappear. This fact may be exacerbated by the fact that, with the exception of Waldo McBurney's life narrative, all of the centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this book were written with the help of co-authors. These co-writers may thus bring to the writing of someone else's narrative their own interpretation of the autobiographical subject's life. From the written text, the voices of the co-author and the centenarian can no longer be disentangled. While this may be true of any co-written autobiography written, for instance, by iconic figures who had an editorial team helping them to shape their life narrative, it may be particularly true of centenarians' autobiographies. If there is an ideology or at least a specific mind-set surrounding the writing and the publication of these texts – the desire of aging *well* –, then the re-shaping of these texts to the demands of both the co-author and the publishing industry, may be all the more pervasive.

At the same time, precisely because it seems to be all too "human" to want to live into old age, and still be in good health, it may be as important to read centenarians' narratives *with* the grain as it may be necessary to read them *against* the grain. In the latter vein, humanities' approaches to narratives of longevity in particular have stressed what they see as the complicity of such narratives with the framework of "successful aging." Summed up by Rowe and Kahn's seminal study

"Successful Aging" (1997), the notion of successful aging inaugurated the field of the "new gerontology." The paradigm shift which this field helped bring about cannot be overestimated. Virtually overnight, "age" was redefined from a state of inevitable mental and physical to a period of life which held new promises. Against the "deficit model" which had characterized gerontological research until then, Rowe and Kahn proposed an alternative view of aging: a time of life when individuals could still be healthy, active, and socially integrated, and hence a period which was by no means inferior to youth or middle age. They suggest, "We define successful aging as including three main components: low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life" (433).

To Rowe and Kahn, age in itself was no longer "pathological." For this very reason, it was no longer a state that would have to be avoided but rather, a period of life that one could actually look forward to. Building on their own previous research, they write,

> In an earlier article . . ., we proposed the distinction between usual and successful aging as nonpathologic states. Our purpose in doing so was to counteract the longstanding tendency of gerontology to emphasize only the distinction between the pathologic and nonpathologic, that is, between older people with diseases or disabilities and those suffering from neither. (433)

Perhaps even more importantly, this theory of successful aging held that the model set by the successfully old was one that could well be emulated by others. Rowe and Kahn hence stressed the prevention model: To the extent that individuals sought to stay fit and remain active in middle-age, they might well lay the foundation for living healthily into old age as well.

As I will try to illustrate throughout this study, however, there are a number of problems or at least shortcomings with this model of successful aging. One of the most crucial arguments to be marshaled against this model is that it runs the risk of becoming normative. Even if we all desire to live and age successfully, we need to be wary of the inverse conclusion. At worst, notions of successful aging may be taken to imply that lives lived with physical disability or mental impairment, for instance, are in some way inferior to the lives "attained" by the successfully old. At the same time, there may be a risk for the (medical) model of successful aging of blurring into an economic rationale. In an economic and a political system based on the responsibility of each citizen for their own health, the successfully old may simply be more "desirable" than those who are a burden on the state or county budget, especially in terms of health insurance. Seen from this perspective, the model of "successful aging" can thus be easily critiqued from the perspective of biopolitics (Lemke 2007).

If these are the flipsides of the successful aging model, the ways in which it might easily be *abused*, however, this might not lead us to dismiss this model altogether. Healthy aging, as I have stated above, may be our desire, even if we may not solely be responsible for its fulfillment, especially given the relevance of social and economic parameters for living, and aging, in good health. One of the premises that the following study is based on is that current research, in the humanities, may be premature in dismissing discourses of "successful aging," to which they ascribe a neoliberal mindset and the danger of becoming a master narrative of aging. Contrary to such a dismissal, the present study sets out to trace the fascination which, whether or not we like to admit it, narratives of extreme longevity may hold for us, while at the same time probing into the cultural politics, the marketing and the dissemination of narratives by or about centenarians.

In the pages that follow, I will locate in centenarians' autobiography a genre which emerges at a particular moment in time, namely at the turn of the twenty-first century. Moreover, I will look at autobiographies by American centenarians specifically. Thus, while the idea – and the desire – of "successful aging" – has long become a global phenomenon, it may nevertheless have culturally specific manifestations. In a country as meritocratic as the US (Paul 367), I will ask, to what extent is there a cultural specificity to the narratives of US American centenarians?

At the same time, quite in keeping with the Swedish birthday song and the Indian Upanishads, looking at centenarians as proof of the possibility of extreme longevity is quite complex in the implications it holds. Thus, both texts – the birthday song and the Hindu epic – may be as much about the object of the felicitations – the birthday child herself –, as it is about the speaker who wishes her well. This, in turn, has implications for the study of narratives about extreme old age. It may be argued that in the speech act of wishing the centenarian well, we may not only be speaking about the centenarian, but we may in fact be speaking about ourselves. It is specific to the category of age as a form of human differentiation (Hirschauer 2020), that it is a difference from which no-one is exempt. As Katherine Woodward points out, age "is the difference we must all live *with* because it is 'the one difference we are all likely to live *into*'" ("Power, Possibility & Purpose" np). This lack of exemption does not hold, for instance, for race or for gender: Men do not have to "fear" that they may eventually become female, and white people can be sure that their race will not change "naturally" in the course of their lifetime. Problematic as these dichotomies are in a plethora of different ways, what emerges from these considerations – in pitting age difference against race and gender difference, for instance – is that in these cases, subject and object of an utterance are not one and the same person. In other words, the moment that I, as a middle-aged person, wish a centenarian well, I may also imply my own desire to age in equally successful ways. In describing the centenarian as

successful, and in congratulating him about both his biblical age and, presumably, his good health, my own future will always-already be implied. This is where Susan Sontag's dictum that we carry two passports – one of the healthy and one of the sick, since all human bodies will eventually become sick and die – recurs in an inverse situation. Sontag observes, "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place" (*Illness as Metaphor* 3).

Sontag's metaphor of the passport may also be applied to the process of aging. What passports do each of us carry when it comes to the imagination of extreme old age? One the one hand, and this is something that many of the chapters that follow will touch upon, we may strive to stress that as middle-aged readers, we carry only one passport. As we look upon the centenarian as a sort of spectacle, a freak even, we may try to forget that we, too, will eventually become older; we may be afraid of the changes, both physical and mental, which this may bring. At the same time, however, we will always be at least subconsciously aware that in writing the story of the centenarian, we are also writing about ourselves, about our own wishes for the future. It is this complex relationship between the subject of the writer or reader on the one hand and the centenarian as the "object" of the narratives on the other hand, which turns centenarians' autobiographies into a prism through which we may examine the cultural ascriptions of extreme old age at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Ours is an age, moreover, in which biomedicine has succeeded in containing many of life's contingencies; from the beginning of life to the end of life, what was hitherto ascribed to "fate," to circumstances beyond human control, has now become something that we believe to have "mastered." Such belief in the power of biomedicine, we might assume, may also accompany narratives of extreme old age. Centenarians might allude, we may hypothesize, to the miracles of modern biotechnology. What may be remarkable, on the other hand, is that in most of the centenarians' autobiographies which will be discussed in this book, biomedicine, if it is present at all, only plays a minor role. In fact, time and again, these centenarians insist that they have never needed a doctor in their life. As George Dawson tells his co-author Richard Glaubman in *Life Is So Good*, he is proud of the fact that he has no GP. When Richard asks him, "What does your doctor say about your health?," Dawson replies, "Don't have no doctor."

"Daddy," Dawson's son reminds him, "but you did see a doctor once" (*Life Is So Good* 246). The centenarian's reply can be seen as paradigmatic for many other centenarians' autobiographies, which stress in a manner that is almost formulaic that their centenarian subjects have rarely needed a doctor in their entire life. Dawson observes,

> I threw the pills out and just got better. The old way works for me. I can go out in this backyard and take some grasses or plants if I need to throw up or take some plants and make a tea to settle my stomach. I can do whatever it is that I need. Those things work just as well as any pill. My grandmothers taught me all that. (*Life Is So Good* 246)

In this passage, there are a number of aspects which may serve as a pars-pro-toto for many of the centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this book. First, these narratives can be seen to defy a medicalization of old age by emphasizing the fact that the centenarian has no need for medical care. Second, Dawson alludes in this passage to "folk medicine" as an alternative to allopathic medicine. As I will show in Chapter 8, this is in line with what can be seen as an ethnographic interest in the ways of the oldest-old that many of these centenarians' autobiographies cater to. Finally, Dawson can be said to make a virtue out of a necessity here: At a time when in the US, health care and Medicaid have been substantially cut, centenarians who are in no need for health insurance may seem all the more beneficial for the system.

In this as in many other instances, there may hence be a certain sensationalism which accompanies centenarians' accounts. What is more miraculous than a person who has not only lived to one hundred, but who has reached such extreme old age without the help of medical intervention? The miracle, we may assume here, is all the greater in the absence of medical care. In this context as in many others, I am interested in the cultural climate to which centenarians' narratives may contribute. The boom of centenarians' autobiographies coincides with a time in which, under his presidency, Barack Obama tried to achieve universal health care for all Americans, an initiative that his successor then sought to annihilate. In his recent autobiography, *A Promised Land*, Obama writes about his friend, Teddy Kennedy:

> Through seven Presidents, Teddy had fought the good fight. But, for all his power and legislative skill, the dream of establishing universal health care—a system that delivered good-quality medical care to all people, regardless of their ability to pay—continued to elude him . . . . My interest in health care went beyond policy or politics; it was personal, just as it was for Teddy. Each time I met a parent struggling to come up with the money to get treatment for a sick child, I thought back to the night Michelle and I had to take three-month-old Sasha to the emergency room for what turned out to be viral meningitis. I remembered the terror and the helplessness we felt as the nurses whisked her away for a spinal tap, and the realization that we might never have caught the infection in time had the girls not had a regular pediatrician we felt comfortable calling in the middle of the night . . . . Most of all, I thought about my mom, who had died in 1995, of uterine cancer. (379)

One of the aims of this book is to put centenarians' autobiographies in conversation with other narratives from the realm of life writing and beyond. It is only through this juxtaposition, I propose, that we can ensure that centenarians' autobiographies

and the model of successful aging they propagate do not become master narratives of aging. Given their correspondence to the politics of neoliberalism, centenarians' autobiographies may well be seen to imply that there is no need for universal health care: One can easily live to one hundred, they assure us, without Obama Care.

In the chapters that follow, I will delve into what I see as a parallelism between Rowe and Kahn's model of "successful aging" and centenarians' autobiographies. If Rowe and Kahn argue that successful aging is a model that can be emulated by those striving to age equally well, then centenarians can become the role models whose lifestyle we may want to copy. It is this climate, I propose, which may in part be responsible for the ongoing boom of centenarians' narratives.

1.4 R. Waldo McBurney: The Oldest Worker in America

In keeping with their function as advice literature that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, there is a certain oracular quality to centenarians' narratives, or at least to the ways in which we read these narratives. If there is a key to longevity (which can be found in the centenarian's lifestyle, her diet, her fitness routine, or the way in which she deals with strokes of fate), the centenarian's narrative may reveal it. As the Delany sisters put it in *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, "We get up with the sun, and the first thing we do is exercise" (Delany and Delany 1994). There is a way, then, in which the centenarian, as a *griot* of extreme old age, may hold the prophecy of our own fate: If only we follow the centenarian's advice, we too may age successfully, and we too may live into extreme old age. As R. Waldo McBurney puts it in the introduction to his autobiography *My First 100 Years: A Look Back from the Finish Line*,

> Some ask to what I attribute my length of life. Most people assume it is because I have continued to run. Some would suggest that it is because I eat honey, or I eat right. Others say it is a gift of God. As I look for my own answer, I think of things that may have contributed to quality and length of life. To start right, "I must have picked my parents with great care." But, of course, I didn't pick my parents or choose the genes I wanted – God did this. So my list of answers is long. (np)

Until he passed away in 2009, R. Waldo McBurney was celebrated as "the oldest worker in the United States." For most of his life, he lived in Quinter, Kansas, and worked as a beekeeper. Having taken up running only late in life, McBurney became a multiple Masters' Athletics world record holder in the discipline of track and field. With characteristic self-irony, McBurney once said about his own achievements: "'It is easy to earn gold medals when one has no competition in

one's age group!'" (38–39). McBurney published his autobiography when he was 102 years old.

McBurney's biography can be seen as emblematic for most of the centenarians' (or supercentenarians') autobiographies discussed in this book. The way that his life story is being circulated in the public, and the way in which he has narrated his own life, has been as a testimony to resilience, optimism, and personal strength. McBurney was born in rural Kansas as the third of six children; he competed in the Masters Athletics even after he had suffered a heart attack in 1994, at age ninety-two. In all these aspects and in the way of framing them, McBurney's life is clearly emblematic of the concept of successful aging. Yet, this narrative, for all the admiration we may bring to the centenarian's resilience and perseverance, could also be read against the grain. In a country that has been reluctant to extending social security and health care benefits to all its citizens, would there not also be a downside to celebrating America's oldest worker? As I will show as this book progresses, many of the centenarians portrayed in this study only have scorn for the concept of retirement. George Dawson, the African American centenarian from Texas, still worked as a gardener and yardman well into old age. As George Dawson recalls, "I had to stop doing yard work. I was eighty-eight and really did retire then. I haven't just sat around for all those years, though. I went fishing just about every day. I fished for catfish at Hubbard Lake or on some of the other lakes" (*Life Is So Good* 221). This is a disdain for retirement that these centenarians share with Iris Apfel, the oldest fashion model, who once remarked that "retirement is a fate worse than death" (Elkins). There is a fine line here, we might argue, between individual resilience and economic need: In other words, do all these centenarians choose to or do they have to work well into their old age? To what extent do many of these centenarians turn necessity into virtue? George Dawson, after all, writes in his autobiography that his monthly check would run out by the second week of the month. As the life narrative of R. Waldo McBurney indicates, then, centenarians' autobiographies and the way in which they have been publicly circulated may be both fascinating and troubling. They may be fascinating in chronicling, one by one, the hardships that these centenarians succeeded in overcoming; and they may be troubling in that many of these hardships are in fact systemic. Resilience and social inequality, as this study will attempt to show, are often closely interwoven.

In this sense, centenarians' autobiographies are clearly in line with the neoliberal imagination. In the list of the twenty-one elements that may provide the secret to aging as successfully as he did, the third most important element is work: "WORK? Ten-hour days and six-day weeks were the standard in my early days. Heavy physical work was available. Today's boys have little chance for regular physical exertion, and some have their first taste of it in athletics. Hard work didn't hurt me – it helped" (McBurney 83). A number of concepts converge in this

passage, we may argue: the glorification of physical labor, the idea of rugged masculinity, and the concept of successful ageing.

The example of R. Waldo McBurney may also be indicative of the idea of "fabricating" the centenarian. Who precisely recognizes the centenarian for their achievement, and what medals and honors await a person once they have turned 100? Crucially, McBurney was awarded the title of the "oldest worker in America" by Experience Works, a non-profit organization dedicated to "improv[ing] the lives of older people through training, community service, and employment" ("Experience Works"). What, then, are the titles and honors that are being bestowed on centenarians? Here, the achievement, the bestowing of the title of the "oldest worker in America," may be seen as another facet of the concept of successful aging, which is once again located at the intersection of medicine and culture. In keeping with the example of R. Waldo McBurney, then, this book sets out to examine how the (biomedical) paradigm of successful aging is being circulated in the cultural and social sphere. In this context, his book – as a manual of how to live into such extreme old age happily and healthily – can be seen as translating "successful aging" into cultural imagination. At the same time, by recognizing him as "the oldest worker in America," Experience Works, too, may be seen as a mediator. In this sense, centenarians' autobiographies do not exist in a void, but are part of a network of producers of "successful aging." The point that I am trying to make in this book, however, is that the "fact" of extreme longevity in itself may have little meaning; thinking of a person having turned 100 may seem abstract at first. The power of centenarians' autobiographies, then, lies precisely in translating this fact – the metrical measurement of an individual's life – into a narrative: Reading centenarians' life narratives, we may not only know that these authors have lived to their 100th birthday, but we may come to know what it feels like to be this old. In this sense, the award bestowed on R. Waldo McBurney by Experience Works and Burney's autobiography may actually work in tandem: Experience Works celebrates what has previously been narrativized. The narrative, I suggest in this book, becomes the translation that makes the celebration possible. In his autobiography *My First One Hundred Years: A Look Back from the Finish Line* (2004), McBurney provides a narrative recipe for running across the "finish line" of one's one hundredth birthday. Part of this recipe is to never stop working, a dedication that is then rewarded by Experience Works in 2006.

At the same time, McBurney's life narrative may also be emblematic of another concern. To what degree, we might ask, is there a class dimension to centenarians' autobiographies? Centenarians' autobiographies, it could be argued, are curiously democratic. Their publication – and the very process of their being written, or co-written – is based on the simple fact that a person has reached their 100th birthday. It is by virtue of having turned 100, then, that these subjects

become celebrities. As Ann Nixon Cooper puts it in her autobiography *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name*,

> My family still teases me that when the newly elected president of the United States called, I was on an outing with friends. Well, who knew? I go out all the time, even if I am over one hundred years old. I have many friends and social obligations, and I enjoy them all. If someone had phoned ahead of time to tell me that Barack Obama was going to call, I would have stayed home. Probably. (1)

This passage is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates that the centenarian has become a celebrity by virtue of having turned one hundred; the president of the United States does not just call anybody, but he calls Ann Nixon Cooper, whom he had also acknowledged in his inaugural address as the woman who may well have been his oldest voter. As Obama said in his victory speech in 2008,

> This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations. 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 106 years old.
>
> She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons—because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin.
>
> And tonight, I think about all that she's seen throughout her century in America—the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress; the times we were told that we can't and the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes, we can.
>
> At a time when women's voices were silenced and their hopes dismissed, she lived to see them stand up and speak out and reach for the ballot. Yes, we can.
>
> When there was despair in the Dust Bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs and a new sense of common purpose. Yes, we can.
>
> When the bombs fell on our harbor and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. Yes, we can.
>
> She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that "We Shall Overcome." Yes, we can.
>
> A man touched down on the moon, a wall came down in Berlin, a world was connected by our own science and imagination. And this year, in this election, she touched her finger to a screen and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change. Yes, we can.

> America, we have come so far. We have seen so much. But there is so much more to do. So tonight, let us ask ourselves: If our children should live to see the next century; if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper, what change will they see? What progress will we have made?
>
> This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. This is our time—to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope, and where we are met with cynicism, and doubt, and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. ("Transcript of Barack Obama's Victory Speech")

In many different ways, Obama's invocation of a black centenarian, Ann Nixon Cooper, is emblematic for the point that I would like to make in this book. Obama's ending his victory speech, the speech made on the occasion of his first election as president of the United States, with a story about the woman who may well have been his oldest voter, speaks to age and race at the same time. It could be argued here that this simultaneity of blackness and universality is emblematic of Obama's presidential campaign as a whole: While many accused him of not being "black enough," the balance that he attempted to strike is that of being both a black American and the president of all Americans. The pitfalls of this balancing act notwithstanding, what emerges is both an African American and an American victory speech. What, then, of the role of Ann Nixon Cooper in this balance? What is remarkable, I would like to suggest here, is that Obama's invocation of his oldest voter contains many of the qualities that characterize centenarians' autobiographies, as well as the paratexts that have surrounded them. In Obama's victory speech, Ann Nixon Cooper's life is one of overcoming: of overcoming the hardships of slavery's legacy, the barring of women from the right to vote, the poverty following the Great Depression. In Obama's speech as much as in most of the black centenarians' narratives discussed in this book, Ann Nixon Cooper seems to be less a black centenarian than a centenarian who happens to be black. While slavery is evoked in the first reference to Ann Nixon Cooper's life, what Obama stresses as his speech continues is her position as a woman and as an American. As a centenarian, then, Cooper becomes emblematic of "America's" power to transcend all obstacles, in keeping with Obama's mantra of "Yes, we can." I would like to argue that Obama's speech is emblematic of the twenty-first century's fascination with centenarians; at the same time, it seems both intriguing and disquieting that Obama's invocation of Ann Nixon Cooper, the 106-year-old black woman, should also verge on color-blindness.

It is by becoming a centenarian, then, that Ann Nixon Cooper has become a celebrity, whose fame is then further enhanced by her being credited by Obama

as his “oldest voter.” In keeping with the idea of color-blindness, it seems noteworthy here that Obama should speak of his “oldest voter,” not of his oldest black voter. In the president-elect’s victory speech, Cooper becomes an American centenarian, even as Obama carefully weaves elements from African American history into his victory speech: the Montgomery bus boycott and the words of Martin Luther King are subtly woven into this American narrative of “overcoming.”

As soon as the magic number of 100 has been reached, then, a person is turned from being just a person to being a celebrity. In this sense, the link between “nobody memoirs” and “somebody memoirs” is crucial for centenarian’s narratives.[4] Literally overnight, the centenarian is turned from an ordinary person to being a celebrity: a centenarian and hence a person who, to use the words of R. Waldo McBurney, has “crossed the finish line.” As Sarah Delany recalls in *On My Own at 107*, “You won’t believe it, but they’ve officially named a rose after us – the Delany Sisters Rose! A man named J. Benjamin Williams in Silver Spring, Maryland, bred a rose in our honor” (146).

The notion of the “finish line” is itself significant here. In Obama’s victory speech as much as in the centenarians’ narratives discussed in this book, it could be argued, a celebration of longevity – what I call “centenarianness” – and US exceptionalism converge. It may be interesting to consider Flávio Cunha’s review article of the “finish line” here (354). The “finish line” is a metaphor that in US history, has described all kinds of “races” and competitions. It is thus no coincidence that Obama should have invoked in his victory speech the “race to the moon,” a race that the US proceeded to win. In terms of metaphoricity, then, the narrative of Ann Nixon Cooper and that of Neil Armstrong converge: the race for longevity that is celebrated in centenarians’ narratives evokes prior races that the US has won as well. In this sense, then, Cooper’s narrative – and her autobiography which I will discuss in the pages that follow – is not only a centenarian’s narrative, but also a specifically US American account of extreme longevity. Just as Neil Armstrong has crossed the “finish line” of the world’s race to the moon, Ann Nixon Cooper crossed the line of her one hundredth birthday in a country where African Americans, in many different ways, have been at a disadvantage. What is crucial to note here is that in a way, there is the same shying away from “race consciousness” in Obama’s victory speech that is also characteristic of centenarians’ autobiographies. As I suggest throughout these chapters, what centenarians’ accounts consistently downplay are factors of social and economic inequality. The question they do not ask, then, is under what circumstances, in what conditions the “race” to the finish line is being run. As an African American “runner” enrolled in marathon of life, then, Cooper

4 I am indebted to Damla Özkan for this reference.

was clearly at a disadvantage; it is this systemic disadvantage, however, that Obama's victory speech carefully conceals. In a way, then, his narrative of the life of Ann Nixon Cooper, the centenarian, is doubly-coded: it can be read – or rather, heard – both as the narrative of a centenarian and a centenarian who happens to be black. In both cases, however, it is also a specifically US American narrative, with the patriotism and pathos that "crossing the finish line" evokes. One of the questions that this book seeks to explore, then, is the role of black aging in centenarians' narratives: Blackness, I argue in my discussion of narratives such as George Dawson's *Life Is So Good* or the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say*, is both present and absent in these narratives.

To return to the idea of turning one hundred, then, the point that could be made here, is the idea of life writing turning "nobodies into somebodies." Centenarians' narratives are strongly in conversation with the concept of "nobody memoirs." Lorraine Adams discusses the genre of "nobody memoir" in a 2001 review in *The Washington Post*. These memoirs, she notes, have been frowned upon for their lack of literary merit (np). Such criticism may well also be applied to centenarians' autobiographies, which may seem to verge on popular literature. At the same time, Adams notes, the accusation that memoirs are trivial has been leveled not only at nobody memoirs, but also at memoirs about celebrities' lives. She writes,

> It is fashionable, a bid for superiority, to denigrate memoir and explain its causes in derogatory terms. The reasons have calcified. Memoir is Jerry Springer. Memoir is narcissistic. Memoir is easy. Memoir is made-up. Memoir is ubiquitous. Memoir is self-help disguised. The counter-argument also has hardened. Memoir is a genre—some practitioners are good, some not. Memoir is not new—vide Augustine. Fiction is exhausted, memoir is vital. (np)

One of the questions that this book tries to explore is the extent to which centenarians' autobiographies straddle the border between "somebody memoirs" and "nobody memoirs." As virtually all of the autobiographies discussed here attest, centenarians can be seen as "nobodies" who were turned into "somebodies" the day they reached their one hundredth birthday.

However, the dichotomy between "nobodies" and "somebodies" may also serve to conceal other dimensions, such as inequality in terms of race, class, or gender. Arguably, centenarians' autobiographies may make notions of class curiously irrelevant. R. Waldo McBurney, after all, has worked as a beekeeper all is his life; his life narrative, seen from this perspective, may thus be read as the autobiography of a worker as much as that of a centenarian. However, in keeping with the complexity of centenarians' autobiographies, this idea can be questioned and refracted in multiple ways. Prior to working as a beekeeper, McBurney graduated, in 1927, from Kansas State Agricultural College. The title bestowed on him by Experience Works, the title of the nation's "oldest worker," may thus be somewhat misleading. As a

beekeeper, McBurney may be a worker, but he may not actually be working-class. This is a question that I will return to throughout these chapters. In centenarians' autobiographies, I argue, age, race, class and gender intersect in multiple ways.

At the same time, the example of R. Waldo McBurney may also be indicative of how life writing may not only "translate" life science research into cultural capital, but also of how narrative can in turn inform research in the life sciences. McBurney's success narrative, we might argue, was recognized by Experience Works. Honored as "the oldest worker in America," however, McBurney's narrative began circulating in the wider public. It is through this circulation, in turn, that life scientists, too, became interested in this man who worked well into extreme old age and who became a long-distance runner at age sixty-five. Having become well-known in the cultural arena, in other words, McBurney also became a person of interest for the life sciences. In this as in many other examples throughout this book, I am intrigued by the parallelism between life sciences and life writing. In the field of life writing, there is an interview situation: As I will show in more detail in Chapter 4, the centenarian is being "recruited" by a co-author, who wants to write down his life narrative for the sake of public interest in extreme longevity. This interview situation, however, is strikingly in keeping with research in the life sciences. As the case of R. Waldo McBurney indicates, life scientists, too, seek out the centenarian in order to explore or fathom their "secret" of extreme longevity. Experience Works, in tandem with McBurney's life narrative, thus became the basis of McBurney's "recruitment" by the life sciences. The point that could be made here is not simply that the centenarian has become a celebrity the moment that they turned 100; rather, it is that we might inquire into just what this celebration means in the arenas of culture and medicine, respectively. The relationship between life sciences and the cultural sphere, then, may be a circular one. Once McBurney had been recruited by gerontologists, he was then politically and socially recognized as a "health hero." The Governor of Kansas, McBurney's home state, recognized McBurney as "Hometown Health Hero." The point which could be made here, then, is that in the recognition, in the honoring and celebrating of the centenarian, there are multiple judges. The jurors of the "prize" for extreme longevity and successful aging are numerous. As a writer in search of a subject, the co-author chooses the centenarian as the subject for his next life writing narrative. The organization "Experience Works" honors the centenarian as the "oldest worker" in the nation. Reading about the nation's oldest worker in the papers, gerontologists set out to study just what made this achievement possible. Once gerontologists have investigated the centenarian's secret to health, state politicians then proceed to honor the centenarian as the "Health Hero" of his hometown. What emerges here is a network of interrelated interests, all of which converge in the figure of the centenarian themselves. Each of these individuals and organizations brings to the centenarian their

own desires: The co-author is in need of a scintillating subject and a good story; the organization wants to show to the nation that one is never too old to work; the gerontologist needs to study the centenarian's genes, lifestyle, resilience and social life in order to come one step close to solving the riddle of longevity; and the governor wants to promote local heroes in his state. The fascination of centenarians' life narratives, then, lies in the different desires that we may bring to them. Each of these desires, directed as it may be towards the narratives, also reveals something about us. It is in this sense that we can read the centenarians' narrative backwards. The centenarians' story and the interview that precedes it may be indicative of the state of life science research at a particular moment in time; it may be emblematic of the "memoir boom" and the growing desires, by the general public, for both life narratives and narratives about extreme longevity; it may also serve as a prism through which we can trace back the increasing relevance of organizations such as Experience Works and their connection to neoliberal capitalism. It is in this sense, I will suggest below, that centenarians' narratives may serve as a prism: They may reveal as much about their subjects – the centenarian themselves – as they tell us about their readership. This readership, in turn, may ultimately be ourselves.

1.5 The Centenarian as a Mirror of Our Future Self

Part of the fascination that surrounds centenarians' life writing narratives may thus also stem from the questions and desires we bring to them. At a moment in the history of industrialized nations when extreme old age seems to be well within reach, the centenarian may thus serve a number of functions all at once. For each individual reader, he may have different personae. There is a sense in which the centenarian's face is a mirror which we can look into and then proceed to travel in time. If only we follow his cue, this is what we may manage to look like, say, fifty years from now. It is this mirror-like quality (a prediction or prophesy rather than a distortion), too, which may make for the fascination with the centenarian.

This fascination with extreme old age and with centenarians in particular, may inform life sciences and the humanities alike. In his essay, "Geist – Gehirn – Gesellschaft: Wie wurde ich zu der Person, die ich bin?" (Spirit – Brain – Society: How did I become the person I am?"), brain scientist Onur Güntürkün begins by discussing the portrait of an older woman. Looking at the photograph titled "Hamburger Deern" ("Hamburg Gal"), Güntürkün notes, we wonder about the lines on her face, and about the stories these lines may tell. We wonder, in other words, about how she became the person she is today. What is crucial for my purposes here is that we may come to ask central questions about what constitutes the self in the era of biomedicine by viewing old age – and the lives of the oldest

old – as a prism through which these questions may be refracted. At the same time, Güntürkün's intervention is crucial for my purpose here also because he points to the multiple factors determining the course of human life, which is constituted, he argues, by an interplay of brain, genome and society. All of these fields recur in longevity research and are taken up in multiple ways by centenarians' autobiographies. This fact of their recurrence may itself point to the intertwining of life sciences and life writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Güntürkün writes,

> The image stays with us because it seems to tell many stories: stories full of personal hopes, feelings of happiness, disappointments, fears and worries. It is thus the face of an individual with a unique story. But how did this lady become the person she is? Is her spirit a product of the particular societies in which she spent her life? Or did she become the person she is because her genes determined it? . . . . Social structures have an effect on the thinking of individuals, so that mind and society influence each other reciprocally. (13; my translation)

This book explores what I define as a new genre of "centenarians' autobiographies." It locates these autobiographies at the intersection of a variety of discourses and fields: gerontology, longevity research, philosophy, biomedicine, resilience studies, age studies, autobiography and life writing research, among others. Centenarians' autobiographies, like the face of the woman in the photograph discussed by Güntürkün, become a prism through which we discuss central and most existential questions of human life, questions which are by no means confined to old age. It is the nature of this prism and what it may tell us about ourselves, which make these autobiographies so fascinating. For Güntürkün, the exact age of the "Hamburger Deern" in the photograph is secondary; my point here is, however, that the fact that we should pose some of the most fundamental questions about human life – "how did I become the person I am" (7; my translation) through the example the face of an older woman, or the narratives of the oldest-old, is by no means coincidental.

Güntürkün's question, "how did I become the person I am," is thus symptomatic of the way in which we may look at extreme old age. In looking at the "Hamburger Deern," we may try to look at ourselves, or rather, at the older selves that we may eventually become. As Katherine Woodward has argued, the "mirror image" is one of the central concepts when it comes to representing the aging process. According to Judith Oster, "Kathleen Woodward writes of the preponderance of mirror images in literary representations of the aged body, and the horror at the recognition it forces on the one looking in the mirror" (59). Centenarians' autobiographies may hence be said to replicate this very process of mirroring: We may read these autobiographies about extreme old age as if looking into a mirror and seeing the person that we may eventually hope to become.

It is crucial to note, moreover, that Margaret Morganroth Gullette should have started her groundbreaking study *Aged by Culture* with the discussion of an "aging mirror." In a local museum, she writes, there was a device or electronic "mirror" that one could look into to see what one might look like in old age. Crucially, Gullette notes that when a local school came to visit this museum, the children were both fascinated and appalled by the device. Gullette recalls,

> At the Boston Museum of Science, one exhibit in particular attracted long lines of children: "Face Aging." . . . After standing for long periods with remarkable patience, the youngsters sat down inside under bright illumination, faced forward trustingly . . . and had their portrait taken by an automatic camera . . . . Then, tapping a button like a VCR remote, each child could rapidly call up simulations of what she or he would look like at one-year intervals up to age sixty-nine . . . . In seconds, the computer added grotesque pouches, reddish skin, and blotches to their familiar faces; the faces became elongated and then wider and then saggy . . . . The children were almost uniformly shaken. One eight-year-old girl . . . moaned, "I don't want to get old!" . . . . Nobody stayed in the booth long. (3–4)

What Gullette goes on to argue, and with what she inaugurates the field of cultural aging studies, is that she doubts the "objectivity" of the mirror. How we imagine old age, she highlights, is based on culture, not on biology. Rather than simply a simulation of biology, then, the "age mirror" is a cultural device. It shows us how culture imagines the face of old age: saggy, blotchy and deeply wrinkled. Aging, for the culture that came up with this device, is inevitably figured as a form of distortion. Far from simply allowing us to time-travel, the mirror confronts us with an aging grotesque. It is also crucial to note that in her book *Aged by Culture*, written in 2004, Gullette in fact anticipates current research in Science and Technology Studies about how algorithms are deeply culture-bound. Far from simply "recognizing" race or age, machines programmed through algorithms only recognize what has been culturally defined as racial or age difference (6). What Gullette calls for, then, is for us to resist these algorithms and the cultural preconceptions that have shaped them. What if, she asks, we were to imagine age differently? She writes,

> I was also skeptical about the predictive power of the software they had used in the exhibit. Because I know beautiful people in their sixties, I had been surprised that no-one on the monitor looked good, aging, to my willing eyes. No-one looked *better* as they reached midlife, although youngsters can improve considerably with age, acquiring more harmoniously related features. The bogus faces had none of the qualities one might expect: drama, humor, intelligence, character. (4)

Two aspects are highly significant in this passage. First, the narrative that the device tells us about the aging process is not only one of decay, but also pertains to the fading of physical attractiveness. Second, this idea of aging as loss fails to rec-

ognize all those aspects which may actually increase as we get older: all the manifold traits, qualities and minute details that have made us into the persons and personalities that we are.

So, what, I would like to ask in the chapters that follow, is the connection of centenarians' autobiographies to the aging mirror at the Boston Museum of Science? As I will point out, centenarians are the faces we would like to become. In-between the youthful face starring trustingly into the camera of the aging device, and the other side of the valley of aging grotesquely, the centenarian's face emerges as emblematic of who we may want to be. In the aging mirror, our face at sixty-nine may look blotchy and horridly misshapen; once we fast forward to age 100, however, we have once again been transformed. It is this enigma that I set out to trace in this book: What is there about the "finish line" (as employed in the title of McBurney's autobiography) of the 100th birthday that turns the nightmare of aging into its opposite? Why is aging undesirable, but living to 100 a dream? It is these questions that I will discuss in more detail as this study progresses.

In our looking at narratives about extreme old age, moreover, there may be an inherent teleology. The age of one hundred, in the contemporary imagination (harking back to precursors such as the Swedish birthday song and the Upanishads) is portrayed as the end of a long marathon, that of the human life itself. It is no wonder, then, that in his autobiography, R. Waldo McBurney should speak of his one hundredth birthday as a "finish line," as the title of his autobiography implies. There is a complex temporality at work here: The centenarian's one hundredth birthday is the telos which we ourselves may hope to reach one day; at the same time, from the centenarian's perspective, it is the "finish line" which the centenarian has crossed successfully, and from which they are now looking back at their life. If the centenarian's autobiography functions as a mirror of our own desires about extreme old age, however, then the point to be made here is not only that it is essential to "cross" the finish line, but the state in which this finish line is being crossed matters as well. Centenarians' autobiographies are emblematic of "successful aging," in other words, only if the state in which we cross this finish line is a healthy and happy one. Cynically speaking, the image that centenarians' life narratives paint of crossing the finish line is not that the centenarian crosses this line using a walking cane, but that he is able to run across this finish line. These life narratives evoke the paradigm of successful aging, then, because the centenarians whom they celebrate stress that they are still in full possession of their mental and physical abilities. George Dawson, the centenarian who learned to read and write when he was 98, for instance, is scornful about one of his birthday gifts. As George Dawson notes, "most people think that once I turned one hundred, I can't think well or I need a cane or I got to use a wheelchair. My mind is fine and I walk just fine. I've never used a cane in my life, but it seems

everybody suddenly thinks that I should have one" (*Life Is So Good* 250). Similarly, R. Waldo McBurney not only uses the image of the "finish line" as the title image of his autobiography, but the point he makes is that, as a long-distance runner and a champion of marathon championships, he was able to run rather than walk across the finish line.

In keeping with the idea of successful aging, then, readers may bring to centenarians' autobiographies certain expectations. What readers want to hear from the centenarian, in other words, is a form of *Glücksgefühl* or happiness, even *Glückseeligkeit* or bliss. As a recent special issue of the German newspaper *Die Zeit* puts it, we may all want to become "Happy Centenarians" (Brinkbäumer 2019). As Klaus Brinkbäumer wrote in the German newspaper *Die Zeit* in 2019, "How do you live a long life and at the same time a good, fulfilling life? What are people who grow very old proud of at the very end, and what do they regret? A world tour of centenarians across the globe" (np). A number of aspects are significant in this context. First, centenarians are being interviewed with regard not just to their life's memories, but they are also asked to reveal what turned their lives into successful lives in the first place. What, the interviewer will inevitably ask the centenarian, are the "felicity conditions" (Searle 54) of extreme longevity? Second, as I will elaborate in more detail in Chapter 7, the centenarian's life is associated with a travel account. The implication of the travel account, I would suggest, is twofold: Not only does Brinkbäumer travel to many different countries across the globe to interview centenarians, but the interview is itself conceived as a form of journey: a journey into the country of extreme old age.

At the same time, the fact that they have happily lived to one hundred endows each centenarian's pieces of advice (what each centenarian reveals about their diet, their secrets to healthy aging) with a certain halo or glow: Contradictory as these pieces of advice may be (one centenarian recommends warm cereal while the other insists on collard greens and chopped garlic), each is by definition approved because it has earned this particular centenarian a healthy, happy one hundredth birthday. As Bessie Delany observes in *Having Our Say*, "If you asked me the secret to longevity, I would tell you that you have to work at taking care of your health. But a lot of it's attitude. I'm alive out of sheer determination, honey! Sometimes I think it's my meanness that keeps me going" (Delany and Delany 17). This "meanness," in turn, can be read on a number of different levels. First, it is clearly proof that the centenarian is mentally fit: it takes mental fitness, in other words, to be mean. Second, Bessie Delany's own explanation for her having lived into extreme old age and for having aged successfully at once implies a form of determination: growing successfully old, narratives such as *Having Our Say* reiterate, is a project in and of itself.

It is in this assessment of successful aging, moreover, that the content of these autobiographies can be said to fuel the industry that drives their publication in the first place: There is a key to successful aging, and the centenarian holds it in her hand. Moreover, if indeed successful aging is a project that can be *mastered*, one may be well advised to read centenarians' autobiographies as both advice literature and a guidebook into one's own potential future.

The complex temporality at work in reading centenarians' autobiographies may well pose a riddle. For if indeed centenarians – or at least those centenarians who are allowed to publish their life narrative as autobiographies – are the selves who we hope we may eventually become, then at the same time the position from which we look at these narratives is that of the not-yet-so-old. One of the hypotheses from which this study emerges is that the study of the lives of the oldest-old may be a project of the middle-aged: those who are on the verge of becoming older, and who may wonder, for good reason, about who they may become. There is hence a complex form of *surrogacy* involved in reading centenarians' autobiographies. Centenarians, for middle-aged readers, are the selves these readers hope to become; but at the same time, they are radically different from these selves. I suggest that this double movement of identification *and* distancing informs our readings of centenarians' autobiographies in contradictory but highly intriguing ways. To return to Onur Güntürkün's discussion of the "Hamburger Deern," it is by no means incidental that Güntürkün should implicitly position himself as a middle-aged "reader" of the older woman's photograph. Centenarians are thus both us and not-us. On the one hand, they are the selves we may hope to eventually become, but at the same time, we are "safe" in the distance which may separate us from old age, and from extreme old age in particular.

What emerges from this complex temporality – the fact that the centenarians are us and not us at the same time –, is a form of what I would call *age surrogacy*. As we imagine living into extreme old age, the centenarians become our surrogates in performing age for us. In this book, I am interested in the complex literary performance which this surrogacy may entail. Seen from this perspective, centenarians' autobiographies may become a literary stage on which we see others perform extreme old age, a state which we may both hope and fear of achieving ourselves.

In the American context, one of the most central questions which arises from this issue of age surrogacy is who precisely this surrogate may be. What cultural group, in other words, may lend itself most readily to fulfilling this function of performing the aging process for members of the "mainstream" culture? As Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has argued in her seminal study *Playing in the Dark*, from the very beginnings of the US American nation, this function of surrogacy was given to African Americans. Black Americans, Morrison argues, were seen as a "serviceable presence" onto which white anxieties could safely be pro-

jected. In white imagination, black characters were thus made to "act out," to perform in complex processes of cultural surrogacy, white fears and desires. The question I would like to ask in this book, then, is whether the same may be true for white fears and desires about aging, and of aging successfully. To what extent, I want to ask, is the age surrogacy at work in US American centenarians' autobiographies also a surrogacy of race? Is it a coincidence in other words, that virtually all the centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this book should have been written by African American centenarians?

1.6 Centenarians' Autobiographies as the Prism of Longevity

The aim of this book, then, is to read cententarians' autobiographies through the other discourses about "centenarianness" which proliferate around them: through photographies, cook books, interview collections, and popular science books. How, then, do Brinkbäumer and Shafy describe their motive for wanting to embark on a journey across the globe in order to interview centenarians? Crucially, they write that their motivation was twofold. First, they themselves were growing older; second, they saw their own parents age, and were concerned about their health and well-being. Klaus Brinkbäumer and Samiha Shafy write,

> Our curiosity was aroused, the sheer joy of conversation [with centenarians]. And what it is like when you get older yourself: We thought about our own aging parents, about Samiha's mother, who was a pianist, humorous, full of life, and yet suffering from Parkinson's disease. Why her of all people? . . . And yes, we talked to our parents about the biggest question of all: How does life become successful? (28–29; insertion mine; my translation)

As this passage indicates, and as I will elaborate in more detail in Chapter 9, the publication of centenarians' autobiographies may hence also be fueled by the fear of middle-aged readers about what it means to grow old. Brinkbäumer and Shafy's account is thus emblematic of a gesture and framework which is also at the core of centenarians' autobiographies. In the passage quoted above, Brinkbäumer and Shafy figure as both readers of – or rather, listeners to – centenarians' narratives and as authors of a book about extreme longevity. Their interest in centenarians' narratives, moreover, is informed by their relationship to their own parents, and their worries about their future. As Shafy's mother is suffering from Parkinson's, a neurodegenerative disease which has been associated with aging, she turns to stories of centenarians in search for ways to prevent the symptoms of age. It is deeply significant in this context that Brinkbäumer and Shafy's account should explore centenarians' narratives not just for what they may reveal about individual happiness, but also for what they may tell us about living healthily into extreme old age.

There is a fine line here, I would like to suggest, between the human desire to live a long and happy life, on the one hand, and the creation of a master narrative of aging. Who qualifies as a subject fit to be interviewed for Brinkbäumer and Shafy's book fittingly entitled, *Das kluge, lustige, gesunde, ungebremste, glückliche, sehr lange Leben: Die Weisheit der Hundertjährigen (The wise, funny, healthy, momentous, happy, very long life: The wisdom of the centenarians)*? And what centenarian subjects would not fit this mold?

The centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this book answer the question of whether the prognosis of longevity evoked by the Wizard of Oz is good or bad news in the affirmative. It is this affirmation which may in fact make for the success of centenarians' life writing narratives on the contemporary book market. In a way, then, they tell us what we would most like to believe about extreme old age. Their credo is that it is indeed possible to "escape" almost all forms of degeneration and decay that have long been associated with old age. In this promise, moreover, these life writing narratives converge with recent research on longevity in the life sciences. It is this research that the following chapter will discuss in more detail.

Chapter 2 will explore the dialogue between the life sciences – the questions they ask and the metaphors they use in their research on and description of extreme longevity – and centenarians' autobiography as a specific form of life writing. Throughout this book, I read these autobiographies as a prism through which, as if through a magnifying glass, we can view the context from which these life writing narratives emerge. This is a climate, I will suggest in Chapter 2, which is saturated by the discourse of the life sciences, which has long filtered into our life worlds (Knorr-Cetina 1999). In Chapters 3 to 10, I will then describe what I view as a narrative pattern or overall choreography which centenarians' narratives can be said to follow. Throughout this book, I ask whether centenarians' autobiographies subscribe, implicitly or explicitly, to the idea of "Successful Aging" (Rowe and Kahn 36), which can itself be said to have become a master narrative of aging as such. In Chapter 3, I discuss one component which is central to the narrative structure of centenarians' life writing accounts: the celebration of the subject's one hundredth birthday, and the metaphorization of this day as a sort of "finish line" as suggested in McBurney's autobiography. Chapter 4 will then turn to the choreography that surrounds the "making of" centenarians' autobiographies. I argue that the moment of recruitment is not only at the beginning, but also at the core of these accounts. More often than not, the centenarian is a subject who needs to be recruited by a co-author. The centenarian, in other words, may wonder about her sudden fame and the media coverage which often accompanies her one hundredth birthday. Moreover, she may not actually know that she wants her autobiography to be written; it is the co-author who has to convince her that

this is actually her deepest desire. Chapter 4 then turns to the question of authorship which, I claim, is central to understanding how extreme old age is *constructed* in centenarians' autobiographies. I situate the concept of co-authorship, the collaboration between the centenarian and "his" co-author, both within life writing research and aging studies. Chapter 5 will then investigate the generic qualities of centenarians' autobiographies. I will try to show that these accounts of extreme old age are much more than "mere" autobiographies. In fact, they can be said to double as forms of advice literature. It is small wonder, then, that centenarians' autobiographies often give rise to other texts by or about the same centenarians, such as books of advice, feature films and Broadway plays. Chapter 6 then goes on to link the discourse of extreme old age to the logic of citizenship. To what extent, I ask in this chapter, can centenarians' autobiographies be seen as demonstrating the "fitness" of the oldest old for citizenship? This idea is particularly relevant since older people have often been construed, in both public perception and political rhetoric, as a "burden on society" (Cohn Schwartz and Ayalon e313). To the extent that they describe themselves as morally and civically "fit," then, they may be able to defy such rhetoric. Chapter 7 investigates the convergence between life writing narratives by centenarians, on the one hand, and the paradigm of ethnography on the other. I will ask to what degree centenarians' autobiographies invoke the framework of ethnography, or of tourism, and what role the co-author may play in this context. Chapter 9 then explicitly shifts the discussion from age to race. I will investigate centenarians' autobiographies such as George Dawson's *Life Is So Good* and the Delany siters' *Having Our Say* as being deeply embedded in the US American imagination of race. Centenarians, I suggest, invoke both the mammy and the minstrel; they may be "serviceable figures" (Morrison 1992) who help assuage a white public's deepest fears of what it means to grow old. The framework of the minstrel show, in turn, may be connected to that of the freakshow. To what extent, I will ask in Chapter 10, are the centenarians portrayed in these narratives depicted as freaks or remnants from another time? And what agency can they be said to have or retain in this context?

As this chapter overview may show, I suggest that centenarians' autobiographies are to some extent bogged down or overdetermined by the discourses that surround them. There is a crucial contrast, I claim, between the curious uneventfulness of these narratives, on the one hand, and what they may reveal about the culture which gives rise to them. Ultimately, these narratives about extreme old age may tell us more about ourselves than about the centenarians whose lives they chronicle. They may speak less of the centenarians' presence than the ubiquity of our own fears of living in aging societies. The journey into centenarians' lives may hence be a journey into our own culture and into our own psyche.

2 Centenarians’ Autobiographies between Life Sciences and Life Writing

If in aging societies, age constitutes an unknown terrain, this very metaphor at first seems to be in complete contradiction to the idea that at the turn of the twenty-first century, biomedicine has unraveled virtually all secrets of human life. From the beginning of life and technologically assisted reproduction to the end-of-life debate, the contingency which is inherent in human life seems to have been minimized to an unprecedented extent (Paul, “Captious Certainties”).

In this climate of biomedical certainty, however, aging research may constitute a curious dilemma. On the one hand, gerontological research has expanded significantly over the last decades, and has become a vibrant and highly interdisciplinary field. In the history of biomedicine, “age” has been hailed as one of the last frontiers. As Nikolas Rose points out in *The Politics of Life Itself*:

> At the close of the twenty-first century, many predicted that “we” were entering a “biotech century,” an age of marvelous yet troubling new medical possibilities. Some believed that the sequencing of the human genome would inaugurate an age of genetic manipulation with marvelous perhaps terrifying consequences . . . . Still others dreamed of the conquest of mortality, and a world in which humans had extended their life span indefinitely. (1)

At the same time, biomedicine is at the loss to determine why some individuals live into extreme old age and others may not. What are the “secrets” to extreme longevity?

This study is interested in reading this moment in the history of the life sciences through the lens of cultural analysis. What discourses, what metaphors does this uncertainty give rise to? One of the assumptions on which this study is premised is that in any period in which biomedicine is as yet at a loss to explain a given phenomenon about human life, this uncertainty will give rise to a highly prolific production of metaphors. Not only in literature, but also in the language of biomedicine, the charting of unknown territory will be ripe with metaphorical language. What is at stake here, and what this book sets out to explore, is the role of metaphor – and of narratives and narrativization in general – at the intersection between literature and biomedicine. As Alan Bleakley puts it in *Thinking with Metaphors in Medicine* (2017),

> While medical language is soaked in metaphor, and thinking with metaphor is central to diagnostic work, medicine – that is, medical culture, clinical practice and medical education – outwardly rejects metaphor for objective, literal scientific language. This . . . book argues that this is a misstep, and critically considers what embracing the use of metaphors and similes might mean for shaping medical culture . . . . (1)

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What the present exploration of centenarians' autobiographies seeks to ask, then, is whether this "soaking" of medicine in metaphor is particularly true of the medical discourse on longevity, and on centenarians in particular. To what extent does the absence of medical certainty about the reasons for extreme longevity give rise to metaphor? And what is the nature of the metaphors surrounding longevity as a "crossing" of the final frontier, that of the inevitable end of the human life span? The aim of this second chapter, then, is to explore the metaphors about centenarianness that abound in scientific studies of extreme longevity, especially in longitudinal studies of centenarians and their offspring. I would argue that such an analysis of the scientific discourse about longevity is necessary to understand the cultural climate from which centenarians' autobiographies emerge: Scientific research may fuel public interest in life writing narratives by centenarians; it may also filter into the public. As a result of such public dissemination, the questions asked by gerontologists and other practitioners in the field of the life sciences may inform the questions asked by the co-authors to the centenarians that they interview.

At the core of the fascination with centenarians, I would suggest, there is the distinction between the so-called third age and the fourth age (Baltes and Smith 2003; Higgs and Gilleard 2017). As demographically, the group of the "old" has been expanding, what ensued was a distinction that has come to be made within this group. We now distinguish between the "young old," on the one hand, and the "oldest old" on the other hand. At the core of the concept of successful aging, in turn, there is clearly the category of the "young old." As Higgs and Gillard write in their study *Rethinking Old Age: Theorizing the Fourth Age*,

> In [our previous book] *Ageing, Corporeality and Embodiment*, we realized that as we explored the embodied practices of the new social movements and their encounters with ageing, there was a large dimension that we had not got the space to consider . . . . This was the issue of corporeality in "deep" old age. We were aware that if the "new" ageing is represented as active, healthy, productive or successful aging, then "old" old age appears as a set of antonyms to this, an arena of inactive, unhealthy, unproductive and ultimately unsuccessful ageing. (vii).

What is so remarkable, however, is that to the extent that centenarians conform to definitions of successful aging, this implies that the category of the "young old" may well be extended even to the age of 100. By implication, then, it may be possible to remain "young" well into extreme old age. Conversely, as Higgs and Gilleard suggest, the category of the "old old" may come to be an umbrella term of those who have aged unsuccessfully, and who are beset by frailty, illness and disability. As researchers both from the field of Aging Studies and Critical Gerontology have emphasized, however, this is a highly problematic distinction (cf. Baltes and Smith 2003). As Higgs and Gilleard go on to note, the "concept of 'frailty' acts

as one such boundary between [the Third Age and the Fourth Age], its conceptual ambiguity embodying the omnipresence of risk and intangible vulnerability that are ascribed to the 'really' old" (vii). What is so remarkable, then, is that in the autobiographies discussed in this study, the centenarian emerges as the exact opposite to such frailty: Even where the texts hint at physical disability, such as in Ann Nixon Cooper's use of a wheelchair, they nonetheless stress the agility and energy of the centenarian. Mental frailty and dementia, on the other hand, are not only completely absent from these narratives, but the texts seem to go out of their way to stress the mental fitness of the centenarian, and their presence of mind. At the intersection between the Third Age and the Fourth Age, centenarians' autobiographies occupy a remarkable position: They seem to imply that the Third Age – the period of "active, healthy, productive or successful aging" (Higgs and Gilleard vii) may extend even to people who have lived to one hundred. This remarkable achievement, however, may cast an even more dismal light onto those who have come to inhabit the Fourth Age: If even a centenarian can defy frailty, would not the mental or physical impairment of an eighty-two-year-old seem even more like failure? Reading centenarians' narratives against the grain, I suggest, we need to resist this logic that defines the Fourth Age as "unsuccessful ageing" (Higgs and Gilleard vii).

It is in this cultural and scientific climate, this study suggests, that the centenarian emerges as a highly complex figure. The centenarian, I propose, is both an actual person and a metaphor for the riddle of extreme longevity. The "narrative" of the centenarian, in *both* the life sciences and in documents of life writing, is highly overdetermined by the discourses that frame it. Even as he may to some extent be present in his own life narrative or, in a different mode and on a different level, in the work of a life scientist, the centenarian may nonetheless disappear from view. The centenarian's actual presence, I suggest, may be overwritten by the multiplicity of discourses that surround him, and the meanings which these discourses project onto him.

What this implies, moreover, is that practices of performance and projection are by no means limited to the terrain of culture. Rather, the life sciences, too, may resort to metaphor, especially at moments of scientific uncertainty. This convergence in metaphor may give rise to a similarity between life sciences and life writing when it comes to the enigmatic figure of the centenarian. The centenarian, I argue, is the prism onto which both life sciences and society at large may project meanings of extreme old age.

I am thus interested in the ways in which the temporal coincidence of biomedical longitudinal studies such as the New England Centenarian Study (NECS) or the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie ("Heidelberg Centenarian Study," HH-100) with the boom of centenarians' autobiographies may be far from accidental.

Centenarians' autobiographies, I propose, can be said to answer the questions that are also asked in the New England Centenarian Study and the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie. There is thus at the core of these autobiographies a dialogue between life sciences and life writing: between the writing of the self and the questions asked, by gerontologists, about the self of the centenarian.

One of the aims of the present study is to capture the dialogue which may be unfolding between life sciences and life writing when it comes to centenarian research. As I will try to show as this study progresses, the present moment – in the histories of both the life sciences and the domain of life writing – is characterized by a convergence between these two fields. In the context of centenarian research, the life sciences can be said to turn to narrative, to metaphor. Conversely, forms of life writing can be said to incorporate the (triumphant) rhetoric of the life sciences. If, given their own methodologies, gerontological studies mostly use questionnaires to assess their subjects' way of life, the questions asked by centenarians' co-authors are similar in tone, but different in method. What centenarians' autobiographies may provide in this context is an extended commentary or a detailed answer to the questions which are *also* asked in gerontologists' questionnaires.

The aim of this study is not only to explore centenarians' autobiographies for what they contribute to life writing research, but also to read them through a framework provided by the life sciences. I am thus interested in what I view as a parallel development in this history of life writing and the history of science. The phenomenon of centenarians' autobiographies, I propose, can be fully understood only if we take into account both these developments. In centenarians' autobiographies, life sciences and life writing work in tandem. Each can be seen to respond to the questions asked by the other.

At the same time, centenarians' autobiographies can be said to react to the medicalization of old age in the life sciences, and they can be said to resist this medicalization. Conversely, life science research on extreme longevity can be said to admit to its own lack of certainty and, in its desperation, may turn to centenarians' personal accounts. As the researchers of the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie note, extreme longevity may not only be a result of an individual's genetic make-up, but it may also be based on centenarians' social life. It is in this context that interviews with centenarians may become key since they enable the researcher to delve more deeply into the centenarians' own attitudes towards life. As Christoph Rott and Daniela Jopp note,

> In Germany, there are currently only a few studies dealing with the very old, i.e., persons aged 80 or 85 and older . . . . Especially with regard to social science and psychological issues, there is currently a considerable research deficit . . . . Because most centenarian studies view extremely long life primarily from genetic, medical, and physiological perspectives, numerous questions for social science and society remain unanswered. For example, there

> are no clear ideas about the tasks facing individuals and society if the “completion of human development” (Rosenmayr) continues to emerge in the form of extreme longevity. (np)

What is at stake in this context, I suggest, is the use of metaphor and images in scientific texts. What does it mean, in other words, to speak of extreme longevity as the “Vollendung der humanen Entwicklung,” the “completion of human development?” It is such metaphors, it could be argued, that turn centenarians’ narratives into a master narrative of aging, and of successful aging in particular. The point I would like to make here, then, is that when it comes to the representation of extreme longevity in scientific texts, the concept of “writing science” takes on a particular significance (Kay 2000). The metaphors that are used about the writing of extreme old age may be instrumental in fueling the desire for narratives of longevity. In this desire, I propose, life sciences and life writing may actually converge.

The agency of centenarians’ narratives, in turn, may be born of this medical moment of uncertainty. Until the gap in medical knowledge about longevity will have been filled, any detail in a centenarian’s account may be crucial. Conversely, we may also speculate that once this gap of medical knowledge has been closed, once the key to longevity has been found, centenarians’ accounts may no longer be needed. The details about centenarians’ lives – their daily routine, their diet, their coping with loss – will then merely be seen as quaint, but no longer as being in any way significant for understanding or solving the riddle of longevity. The present moment in which centenarians’ autobiographies (in tandem with centenarians’ interviews and oral accounts) possess so much power and elicit so much fascination may thus be a unique moment both in the history of science *and* in the history of culture.

I am interested, then, in a historical moment in which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, scientific knowledge about the (multi-factorial) reasons for longevity have not yet been established conclusively. What both research in the life sciences and narratives of life writing are searching for, then, are the “predictors” which make extreme longevity possible. As the founders of the New England Centenarian Study note,

> **Predictors of Reaching 100:** Once it truly became apparent that living to 100 was a terrific advantage, not just in years of survival but importantly in many more years of quality life, we set out to understand what factors the centenarians had in common that might explain such an advantage. Not all centenarians are alike. They vary widely in years of education (no years to post-graduate), socioeconomic status (very poor to very rich), religion, ethnicity and patterns of diet (strictly vegetarian to extremely rich in saturated fats). However, the centenarians we have studied do have a number of characteristics in common. (“Why study centenarians?”; emphasis original)

It could thus be argued that in the present moment, life sciences and life writing converge in their common quest for "predictors." This common quest, in turn, has two consequences. It entails the fact that, first, there is a striking convergence between life science and life writing when it comes to extreme longevity. Second, the search for predictors may make for the fact that centenarians' narratives are so similar, serial, and almost formulaic in the topics they address. Just as the life sciences follow their set of questions, these questions are also dealt with, one by one, by each of the centenarians' autobiographies. These, then, are the "predictors" that the New England Centenarian Study has identified with regard to the secret of centenarians' success of aging well:

- Few centenarians are obese. In the case of men, they are nearly always lean.
- Substantial smoking history is rare.
- A preliminary study suggests that centenarians are better able to handle stress than the majority of people.
- Our finding that some centenarians (~15%) had no significant changes in their thinking abilities disproved the expectation by many that all centenarians would be demented. We also discovered that Alzheimer's Disease was not inevitable. Some centenarians had very healthy appearing brains with neuropathological study (we call these gold standards of disease-free aging).
- Many centenarian women have a history of bearing children after the age of 35 years and even 40 years. From our studies, a woman who naturally has a child after the age of 40 has a 4 times greater chance of living to 100 compared to women who do not. It is probably not the act of bearing a child in one's forties that promotes long life, but rather, doing so may be an indicator that the woman's reproductive system is aging slowly and that the rest of her body is as well. Such slow aging and the avoidance or delay of diseases that adversely impact reproduction would bode well for the woman's subsequent ability to achieve very old age.
- At least 50% of centenarians have first-degree relatives and/or grandparents who also achieve very old age, and many have exceptionally old siblings. Male siblings of centenarians have an 17 times greater chance than other men born around the same time of reaching age 100 years and female siblings have an 8½ greater chance than other females also born around the same time of achieving age 100.
- Many of the children of centenarians (age range of 65 to 82 years) appear to be following in their parents' footsteps with marked delays in cardiovascular disease, diabetes and overall mortality.
- Some families demonstrate incredible clustering for exceptional longevity that cannot be due to chance and must be due to familial factors that members of these families have in common.

- Based upon standardized personality testing, the offspring of centenarians, compared to population norms, score low in neuroticism and high in extraversion.
- Genetic variation plays a very strong role in exceptional longevity ("Why Study Centenarians?")

As Alan Bleakley has argued, medicine is "soaked" with metaphor (1); this passage from the New England Centenarian Study clearly supports Bleakley's point. What would it mean, then, what associations would it carry to speak of the "gold standard of disease-free ageing"? What centenarians' autobiographies share with such discourse, I would suggest, is that they, too, imply that while centenarians' lives are emblematic of successful aging, all other forms of ageing are not even "silver" forms of ageing, but may constitute a failure to age well.

There is one paradox inherent in my argument here, however. My point is that the centenarians' autobiographies analyzed in this book confirm most of the "predictors" described by the New England Centenarian Study. This correspondence, however, may not automatically be ascribed to the centenarian's or the co-author's search path, inspired by the discourse of the life sciences. Rather, it may be seen as further proof that the predictors identified in these studies are in fact correct. Seen from this perspective, the predictors described in the New England Centenarian Study can be identified both through the questionnaires they used and through centenarians' autobiographies. What this would suggest, in turn, is that there is a continuity between life science studies about centenarians and centenarians' autobiographies not only in the way they are being framed, but also in what they reveal about the factors contributing to extreme old age.

At the same time, however, both centenarians' autobiographies and scientific studies may, to varying degrees, admit to their own uncertainty when it comes to definite knowledge about extreme longevity. In this way, the fact that uncertainty should be stressed in centenarians' autobiographies – and that it should be confirmed by the centenarian himself who, he argues, is clueless as to the secret of his success – may serve to alert us to the uncertainties and ambivalences in scientific studies.

At this juncture and before the consolidation of knowledge about extreme old age, there may be an increased need for metaphor, and for metaphors which gesture to what as yet is only conjecture, hypothesis. It is this lacuna in biomedical research which centenarians' autobiographies can be said to step into. The proliferation of metaphors, many of which point to the enigmatic nature, for the life sciences, of extreme longevity, may create a space in which centenarians' voices can be heard, published, and sought after. These voices, because of the enigmatic nature, for the life sciences, of the centenarians' existence, may assume an

authority which they might not have been granted had biomedical knowledge been consolidated already.

What, then, characterizes gerontological research at the present moment? In keeping with the very logic and methodology of their field, the number of case studies researched in longitudinal studies such as the New England Centenarian Study (NECS) and the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie (HH-100) have to be large. According to Sebastiani and Perls, "Between 1994 and 2012, the study has enrolled more than 1,800 centenarians and 123 supercentenarians (age 110+ years), more than 600 centenarian offspring and 437 controls" (1).

Arguably, however, this logic of quantitative analyses of longevity and of centenarians' research in particular may also be ingrained in the logic of reading, and of demanding, ever more centenarians' autobiographies. This demand for more and more case studies of successful aging, in other words, may be yet another instance of the extent to which the logic of medical science – in this case, of gerontology – may have come to permeate our life worlds. As Rose notes, the possibilities of biomedicine have fundamentally affected how we understand "life itself." He observes,

> the vital politics of our own century looks rather different [than the twentieth century]. It is neither delimited by the poles of illness and health, nor focused on eliminating pathology to protect the destiny of our nation. Rather, it is concerned with our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures. It is, I suggest, a politics of "life itself." (1)

According to Rose, then, modern biomedicine gives us the power not only to restore health and counter illness and impairment to an unprecedented manner, but also to intervene into "vital politics" in cases where illness and health are not immediately at stake. This "engineering" and "modulating" of human life, it could be argued, is also linked to the question of enhancing the life span. In fact, discourses about successful aging can also be linked to the concept of enhancement (Flood and Scharer 2006). What is also important to note in this context, however, is that this changed notion of "life itself" is not confined to the discourse of the life sciences, but also affects how concepts of life and the life course are being *culturally* circulated. This cultural circulation, in turn, may also manifest itself in centenarians' autobiographies in their representation about extreme old age.

2.1 Centenarians' Autobiographies as Serial Narratives

The logic of centenarians' narratives, it can be argued, can also be seen as curiously aligned with the logic of the life sciences when it comes to studying the factors that may contribute to extreme longevity. The reason for the seriality of

centenarians' autobiographies may thus, paradoxically, be found in the life sciences. To be sure, autobiography is conceived as the opposite of seriality: An autobiography can never be a "serial" narrative since its very premise is that it is based on an individual's life. The seriality of centenarians' autobiographies, I suggest, lies in their intertextual connection to other centenarians' life writing narratives. It is the formulaic character of these narratives which makes for the high degree of intertextuality, I would argue, and for the striking degree of parallelism between different narratives. This formulaic quality, I claim, is triggered by the discourse of the life sciences which strongly affects the framing of centenarians' autobiographies in the writing of extreme old age.

There is thus a paradox at the heart of centenarians' autobiographies. Each of these narratives is both unique and part of the *serial* production of centenarians' narratives. Each narrative is unique in the sense that any one of these narratives can finally crack the code of extreme longevity, by stumbling upon a detail which solves the riddle. On the other hand, precisely because it is as yet unclear what this detail is, one centenarian's narrative has to follow another in the readers' and researchers' search for the key to longevity.

It is this seriality (Kelleter 2012), moreover, which may account for the curiously anti-climactic narrative choreography of most centenarians' autobiographies. Crucially, it can be argued that most of these autobiographies lack a particular form of emplotment, which is usually associated with autobiography as a genre. Rather in the emplotment and narrative suspense they follow – or rather, which they do *not* follow –, centenarians' autobiographies resemble the answers given in gerontologists' interviews more than they resemble autobiographies "proper."

One crucial aspect about centenarians' autobiographies is that there is no detail to trivial to tell. Precisely because any detail can turn out to be a cue to the riddle of centenarianness, it can also be included in an autobiography. As R. Waldo McBurney recalls, "One day, I was standing alone when a big boy came along and knocked my feet out from under me. I fell flat and had a headache the rest of the day. I didn't tell the teacher. That event gave me a bad feeling about bullies. The problem with bullies didn't end with the country school" (15). In McBurney's narrative, this passage follows an account of when he himself had hit another boy in retaliation. He himself had thus also been a bully to another boy and was now bullied in return. Why, however, would passages such as this one not seem entirely trivial to the reader? It could be argued that centenarians' autobiographies can afford to be trivial, even pointless, because the suspense is brought to these narratives in the act of reading. This suspense, in turn, centers on a single question: In this passage, however banal it may in fact seem, is there not perhaps a clue to the centenarian's art of living? More perhaps than in most other narratives, meaning is

brought to centenarians' autobiographies only in the act of reading. The above-cited excerpt from McBurney's narrative becomes significant only because it is written by a centenarian. If, as the New England Centenarian Study inform us, centenarians cope differently with stress, then there may well be an indication in this passage about young McBurney's resilience: After all, he refuses to be bullied. Strikingly enough, when read from this angle, this trivial account from McBurney's childhood may correspond to one of the predictors of the New England Centenarian Study: “A preliminary study suggests that centenarians are better able to handle stress than the majority of people” (np). This correspondence, in turn, may serve as another reason for the current fascination, by a public readership, with centenarians' autobiographies. Because in the current historical moment, the discourse of the life sciences has long filtered into our life worlds (Knorr-Cetina 1999), we can bring the “meaning” of the life sciences to a text as seemingly trivial as Waldo McBurney's life narrative.

Seriality thus takes on a particular significance in centenarians' narratives. First, it may be identified as a factor *within* the narratives. Since the narratives often lack a form of emplotment, other than the centenarians' chronologically recounting events from her childhood to the present, the entire narrative can be seen as a series of events with no logic or specific sequence to these events, other than chronological.

Second, however, this seriality also informs the parallelism and similarity of one centenarians' narrative to another. Finally, this seriality can be seen as a form of enumeration: Just as in the New England Centenarian Study, there is a bullet point list of predictors, centenarians' autobiographies can be seen as enumerating a similar list of predictors. In the bullet point list, moreover, the predictors' sequence seems to be interchangeable; their sequence may be altered without a change in meaning. By the same token, the specific chapters of a centenarians' autobiography may be shifted about randomly: Other than chronology, which is often broken up by the narrative's associative style, there seems to be no principle or logic governing the chapter sequence. McBurney's account contains the following chapters: This, too, corresponds to the bullet point list. Why, in other words, could “Losing and Gaining” (60) not come after “Trusting the Untrustworthy” (65)?

At the same time, there is a sense in which these chapter headings possess a striking convergence with truisms. When, however, are truisms turned to words of wisdom? I would argue that this transformation occurs precisely through the speaker's subject position. After all, it is a centenarian that we are listening to: a person who is positioned, by both the life sciences and the reading public and the co-author, as a griot about his own success in aging well.

It is this seriality, in turn, which may turn centenarians' autobiographies both into serial literature and into popular literature. From the perspective of literary studies, this may render the genre or subgenre of centenarians' autobiographies potentially suspect. The question that is *not* commonly asked about centenarians' autobiographies, then, is the question about their literariness, let alone their literary aesthetic. It is this curious lack of literariness and of aesthetics, then, which may turn the centenarian into a biomedical specimen rather than a literary author. According to Andrew McCann, "*fin-de-siècle* commentaries about Literature and popular fiction encapsulate a set of differences between the two that remain in currency today. Literature is complex, popular fiction is simple" (24). While McCann is concerned here with the distinction between highbrow literature – or rather, "literature with a capital 'L'" (McCann 24) – and popular fiction such as the sci-fi novel or the sentimental novel, the distinction between literature and popular fiction may also pertain to how we conceive of centenarians' autobiographies. These autobiographies, it could be argued, verge on popular fiction or perhaps, on popular autobiographies, because, as I argue in chapter 5, they are also akin to advice literature. In this sense, if the autobiographical text is on the spectrum between "fact" and "fiction," centenarians' autobiographies lean towards the factual or rather, the non-fictional.

As all these aspects imply, centenarians' autobiographies may hence be, despite the apparent simplicity of their plot, a highly complex genre born at a particular moment in time. They are inseparable from both the discourse of biomedicine (gerontology, genetics, resilience research) and from what is seen as the demographic challenge of "aging societies." It is in this sense that centenarians' autobiographies become a prism of a society's fears and expectations at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

2.2 "Writing Science" in Centenarians' Autobiographies

In terms of methodology, this book views the concept of life writing as being constantly in dialogue with the discourse of the life sciences. In fact, centenarians' autobiographies may be key examples of the ways in which as individuals living in Western societies in the age of biomedicine, we may have come to describe ourselves in biomedical terms**.** In the telling of our lives in the era of biomedicine, we may unwittingly respond to the questions asked by the life sciences about both healthy and successful living. It is for this reason that, as I am trying to suggest in this book, any reading of centenarians' autobiographies cannot confine itself to the methodology of life writing research alone. Rather, it must seek to create a critical dialogue with longevity research from the neurosciences, geron-

tology, and epigenetics, remote as these fields may at first glance seem from the genre of autobiography.

It is in this sense that centenarians’ autobiographies may thus be seen as a form of what German cultural philosopher Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht has called “writing science.” As Lenoir and Gumbrecht note,

> Science is writing . . . . The Writing science series brings together textual studies, which share an epistemological and historical concern with the conditions grounding the emergence of meaning and signification . . . . Writing science volumes examine the literary technologies practitioners of science employ to fashion arguments and enroll other social worlds in agreement; they analyze the ways local contexts are multiplied in order to account for the striking capacity of science to capture supposedly universal features of the world. (np)

Crucially, the paradigm of “writing science” can be said to eclipse the very dichotomy between the life sciences and the humanities. In contrast to such a division, the concept of writing science implies that science, too, is *written*. In order to be translated into a discourse that can then be circulated in a larger public sphere, any form of data has to be turned into narrative. Seen from this perspective, science, in other words, is never free from metaphor. This is a point which has been emphasized, for instance, in Lily Kay’s influential book on the metaphorization of DNA as the “book of life.” According to Kay,

> Metaphors, as I will examine, are ubiquitous in science, but not all metaphors are created equal. Some, like the information and code metaphors, are exceptionally potent due to the richness of their symbolisms, their synchronic and diachronic linkages, and their scientific and cultural values. They are the elements of . . . the “cultural poetics of science.” (3)

> The conceptualization, breaking, and completion of the genetic code, 1953–67, was one of the most important and dramatic episodes in twentieth-century science and a manifestation of the stupendous reaches of molecular biology. The so-called code – actually a table of correlations – outlined the logic of gene-based protein synthesis, providing the key to what was widely perceived as the “secret of life.” (5)

Kay’s groundbreaking argument about the way in which the discipline of molecular science was described – and the metaphors used to convey the power of this discipline – may well be applied to the current discourse about longevity. What would it mean to talk about centenarians as “paragon[s] of positive aging” (Robine and Vaupel v), as being close to the “Vollendung der humanen Entwicklung,” the “completion of human development”? (Rosmayr, quoted in Rott and Jopp np). The point that I am making throughout these chapters, then, is that the current fascination with centenarians’ autobiographies does not stem from a cultural climate alone, however vague such a definition of “cultural climate” may be; rather, I argue that this cultural climate is being affected, created, to a substantial degree, by the dis-

course of the life sciences on extreme longevity. As I will try to prove in the chapters that follow, it is this discourse that shapes the metaphors, the chapters, the topics, and the emplotment (or lack thereof) of centenarians' autobiographies.

At the same time, I argue that this relationship between the life sciences and the field of life writing may by no means only be monodirectional when it comes to depicting extreme longevity. Rather, just as the discourse of life writing may be replete with topics and frames from the life sciences, the life sciences, in their turn, may be replete with metaphors and narrative structures. To use Gumbrecht and Lanier's argument about "writing science," then, I am interested in how life writing and life sciences may form a curious symbiosis at the current moment in time when it comes to deciphering the enigma of longevity. It is this dual perspective – the narrative turn in the life sciences and the "biomedical" turn in the humanities – which may be key in understanding centenarians' autobiographies as a form of writing extreme old age in the era of biomedicine.

The turn to narrative which I locate in current life science discourse about longevity, moreover, can be identified on two levels. First, texts in the life sciences may be replete with metaphors; second, however, there may actually be a narrative turn in yet another sense. Quite literally, the life sciences may be in need of narrative in the literal sense of the term. They may actually have to speak to centenarians themselves in order to find out how these individuals have achieved such remarkable longevity. This, as Rott and Jopp indicate, is all the more necessary since what may contribute to longevity is not only the centenarians' genes, but also their general attitude to life and mental set-up. Not incidentally, one of the major aspects that has been addressed by centenarian research is the idea of resilience. As Stacy Andersen argues in an article in *Advances in Geriatric Medicine and Research*, "Here, I give evidence of the association of exceptional longevity with resistance and resilience to AD and describe how cohorts of centenarians and their offspring may serve as models of neuroprotection from AD" (1). Crucially, then, the aspect of resilience and resistance to adverse circumstances is also at the center of centenarians' autobiographies, as I will show in the chapters that follow.

At the core of longitudinal studies about centenarians such as the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie, there is thus interest in narratives, in the autobiographical narration by centenarians, of their own lives. This, in turn, constitutes a shift from data to narrative. This interest in centenarians' life narratives may also be informed by the fact that a sense of personal well-being, derived from the centenarian's embeddedness in her social environment, may be conducive to good health.

It is thus important to note that gerontological studies such as the Heidelberger Hundertjährigen-Studie also contains sociological research ("sozialwissenschaftliche Hochaltrigkeitsforschung") (Rott and Jopp 356). This shift in what is

generated and understood as "data" in this context cannot be overestimated: Studies such as the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie (HH-100) collect a large number of narratives by centenarians, looking for patterns or parameters which can then be further empirically verified. What is interesting for my purposes here is that narratives, as the self-description of the centenarian herself, thus complement neurological research. The narratives generated and solicited by gerontologists are thus being scanned for indicators, for factors which may contribute to longevity. Longevity research and gerontology thus turn to narrative. What emerges is what may be called a narrativization of "centenarianness" and the phenomenon of longevity exemplified by the oldest old. It is this narrativization, in turn, to which centenarians' autobiographies may contribute in their own turn. If the interviews used in gerontological studies such as the Heidelberg Centenarian Study are based on questionnaires, centenarians' autobiographies are as qualitative as any research on longevity may get. Here, the co-author's questions about the centenarian's lifestyle may pertain not only to the centenarian's sense of her own happiness or well-being, but also to her diet and her exercise regime, as I will explore in more detail in Chapter 5.

Once again, there is a striking parallelism between centenarians' autobiographies and the predictors identified by studies such as the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie. As noted above, one of the predictors was refraining from smoking. As the New England Centenarian Study notes, "Substantial smoking history is rare" ("Why Study Centenarians"). This predictor, in turn, is confirmed by Waldo McBurney's description of his lifestyle (83–85). As McBurney points out, "It takes strong incentives to eat the right foods, avoid the junk foods, and exercise regularly" (86).

The point to be made here, however, may not simply be that the centenarian confirms gerontologists' finding that few centenarians had a history of smoking. Rather, the fact that McBurney should refer to smoking in his life narrative may itself be triggered by the kinds of questions to which his narrative implicitly answers. As George Dawson observes, he has constantly been asked about his diet and lifestyle ever since he has turned one hundred. Similarly, McBurney, too, seems to answer similar questions. It is in response to these questions, then, that he emphasizes that he has never broken his pledge not to smoke. As he recalls in his autobiography,

> In early days, our church encouraged us to sign a pledge to abstain from the use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages. I signed this pledge and have kept it during my entire life. My parents told us that tobacco was bad and that cigarettes were worse. A mystery to me is how my parents knew this before 1910, but many people haven't learned it until they approach death at an early age from heart trouble, lung cancer, emphysema or other tobacco-related ailments. (10–11)

In McBurney's case, it is thus curious to note that this pledge to refrain from both alcohol and tobacco was triggered not by his doctor but by his church.

As I will examine in more detail as this book progresses, gerontologists' questionnaires and the questions they contain are strikingly similar to the topics addressed in centenarians' narratives. In fact, despite the obvious difference in genre, the table of contents of centenarians' narratives may in fact function as a gerontologist's questionnaire in the study of extreme longevity. What this implies, in turn, is that both the life sciences and pieces of life writing set out to "study" the reasons for extreme longevity; and that the two fields, in this common concern, may in fact be in dialogue with each other.

My point here is thus to suggest a continuity between the interviews with centenarians conducted by gerontologists and the published autobiographies co-written by centenarians and their (usually middle-aged) co-author. In each of these cases, the centenarian is being interviewed – by the gerontologist and the co-author of a centenarian's autobiography – as to the causes of his longevity. It is in this context that centenarians' autobiographies, for all the differences between the centenarians in terms of social background, regional location, or ethnicity, read like one single narrative. In *Life Is So Good*, George Dawson describes his bewilderment at multiple interviewers' questions as to the secret of his extreme longevity:

> Lately, there be a lot of folks coming to ask me questions. It's always the same questions. They want to know what I eat, what I do to stay healthy. I've done what I want and never gave it much thought. But now so many folks keep asking me why, at 101 years old, I walk just fine without a cane, I eat what I please, I have all my teeth, and my memory is fine. I even got a letter from a little boy that said he was glad that my brain still works. Well, I'm glad, too, but folks have asked me about it so often that now I wonder too. (41–42)

In the context of the argument I am proposing here, this passage could not be more significant. Implicitly, Dawson notes that since the day that he turned one hundred, he has been the object of interest by both life scientists *and* biographers. The questions they ask, he notes, are the same: they are concerned with his diet, his exercise, his resilience. Once again pointing to the striking parallelism between life sciences and life writing, *Life Is So Good* converges with Rowe and Kahn's work on successful aging in highlighting the centenarian's resilience. As Rowe and Kahn point out, "We propose the concept of *resilience* to describe the rapidity and completeness with which people recover from such episodes and return to meeting the criteria of success" (439).

To say that in a discussion of longevity exemplified by centenarians' autobiographies, life sciences and life writing are in constant dialogue with each other, thus turns current debates about the "epistemic reach" of the life sciences

on their head. My aim is less to determine whether the epistemic reach of the life sciences has long “colonized” our life worlds (Rose 2007), which would then be expressed through genres such as autobiography and life writing. My point, rather, is to assume the *complementarity* of life sciences and life writing as a given, and to inquire into the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between these fields. Age and longevity may thus be one instance in which the duality or “two cultures” divide between the natural sciences and the humanities has become obsolete (Snow 1993). What is at stake is thus less a castigating, by the humanities of the privileged position or “Sonderstatus” of the life sciences, than a probing into the consequences which may arise from this privileged status. I am arguing, then, that the assumption of the unevenness or even the hierarchy between the life sciences and the humanities should not prevent us from seeking a critical dialogue nonetheless. According to Volker Roelcke,

> Although in the last decades of the twentieth century this special status was called into question by work in the history and sociology of science by scholars such as Thomas Kuhn, Bruno Latour, Karin Knorr-Cetina, and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger . . ., the assumption of such a special status is still widespread both in the self-image of neuroscientists and geneticists, for example, but also in the general public. (187; my translation)

Read in this context, centenarians’ accounts may thus work, at this particular moment in the history of the life sciences, towards an *upsetting* of the hierarchy between life sciences and life writing. The uncertainty of the life sciences as to what aspects in particular may provide the key to extreme longevity opens up a space for the emergence and proliferation of life writing accounts by centenarians themselves.

2.3 “Successful Aging” as an Antidote to the Fear of Dementia

At what point, then, do centenarians’ autobiographies proliferate on the American book market? In the US and elsewhere across the globe, particularly in industrialized societies, the group of the so-called “oldest old” has been the fastest growing segment of society. We live in “aging societies”; researchers in the life sciences argue that theoretically speaking, the end of human life could be set at an age of 122 (Elkins 2018). Moreover, demographers predict that one half of all girls born in 1970 may live to be one hundred. In this context, then, age seems to have become one of the last frontiers not just in cultural rhetoric and the triumphant rhetoric of the life sciences, but also in our cultural imagination. As Christoph Rott puts it,

> If the linear and continuous increase in life expectancy continues in the future, then in 2060 the record life expectancy in one country on earth – probably Japan – will be 100 years. The

> results of this study have serious consequences for politics as well as the planning of personal life. (55; my translation)

Thus, it is important to note that such prognoses of demographic shifts, in which longevity may eventually become far more than an exception which concerns only rare individuals, create a need for narrative. How do we make sense of the fact that our own life span, or at least that of our children, will exceed the widest hopes of our parents' generation?

It is the demographic shift, the prognoses and the reality of aging societies, which accounts for a surge in the interest in gerontological research. In the present moment, the demographic section of the so-called oldest-old (*Hochaltrige*), who have reached an age of eighty years and older, is one of the most dynamic segments of society. As Rott puts it,

> It is a remarkable result that nowadays more than half of the men and almost three quarters of the women reach old age (80+), a phase of life that is still too little considered and researched by gerontology and also by society . . . . Such a dynamic can be round in no other age segment. (57; my translation)

In this context, it would be one-sided to speak only of the triumphant side of the idea of extreme longevity. The idea of aging, as the ultimate frontier of all human lives, is also accompanied by fears, especially by notions of inevitable physical and mental decay. In this context, as noted above, gerontological research has distinguished between the so-called "third age" (comprising the group of the "junge Alte," aged between 65 and 80) and the members of the "fourth age." While the "third age" has been said to hold a hitherto underestimated personal physical, mental and social potential (Rott 59), the obverse has been said of the "fourth age." According to Rott, this period in the life course has been characterized as a "a very vulnerable phase of life where individuals are increasingly subject to injury and where the effective compensation of deficits is increasingly impossible" (59). It is here that centenarians' autobiography may figure prominently in our imagination of extreme old age. In fact, through its very genre, a centenarian's autobiography may belie gerontological definitions of the fourth age. As a rule, the centenarian authors, by being mentally capable of telling their own lives, disprove the assumption that extreme old age is inevitably accompanied by dementia. Autobiography may hence itself be seen as a sign of mental fitness since the centenarian is literally able to tell, and hence make sense of, their own life.

Through their very publication and their generic classification as "autobiographies," centenarians' autobiographies may hence serve to allay the fear that old age will be accompanied by illness, disability, and dementia. Statistically, as Rott has pointed out, there is "a considerable prevalence of dementia (about 50% at

the age of 90 and over)" (59; my translation). Centenarians' autobiographies may thus set out to beat the statistical odds: Their very proliferation may make us believe that the statistical chance of extreme old age correlating with dementia does not "really" hold true. In an implicit dialogue with gerontological research, forms of life writing such as centenarians' autobiographies may hence serve to change – for the more optimistic – the imaginaries of extreme old age.

The cultural climate in which centenarians' autobiographies are proliferating, then, is one in which the fear of dementia is particularly widespread. As Marlene Goldman has argued,

> Novelists, poets and dramatists play a profound role in any period's understanding of illness and disease. The idea that fiction, more than medicine, is responsible for shaping our concepts of disease is central to the analysis of Canadian biomedical, media and literary depictions of age-related dementia and Alzheimer's disease in this book. (3)

The point I would like to make here, then, is that this fear in society of dementia as a debilitating neurodegenerative illness may prompt research in both life sciences and life writing about the possibility of maintaining one's mental fitness as long as possible. As Goldman notes, we are surrounded by images in which dementia is conveyed to us in Gothic style. This cultural portrayal of a neurodegenerative disease, in turn, serves to exacerbate rather than allay widespread fears about Alzheimer's Disease. Not incidentally, Goldman's introduction to her study is called "Apocalypse Now," implying that the diagnosis of Alzheimer's, in cultural representation, is often portrayed literally as the end of the world. She notes,

> Americans now fear Alzheimer's more than any other disease, even cancer, according to a survey from MetLife . . . . The current 'Age of Alzheimer's' is . . . characterized predominantly by fears of an epidemic of terrifying proportions . . . . The media also relies heavily on Gothic and apocalyptic metaphors to describe Alzheimer's. (4)

Importantly for my purposes here, Goldman goes on to observe that Gothic imagery is by no means limited to media, filmic, and literary representations of Alzheimer's, but also permeates scientific discourse (5). Doctors may diagnose a disease, then, but the way in which this diagnosis will be received by the patient or her relatives is also determined by the social and cultural meanings which are attached to the disease that is being diagnosed. Goldman's study of the representation of Alzheimer's Disease in the public imagination as well as in literary and cultural texts can be seen to be in close dialogue with Higgs' and Gilleard's discussion of the Fourth Age. As they write about their own writerly agenda in *Rethinking Old Age*, "Our aim in this book is to throw light on this dark vision of old age" (viii). Higgs and Gilleard hence share Goldman's concern that some forms of age-

ing, particularly when accompanied with dementia, have been represented in the social and cultural imagination through a "dark vision" (viii).

Goldman's remarkable study on the cultural imagination of Alzheimer's Disease as well as Higgs' and Gilleard's intervention into the facile and often misleading distinction between the "productive" Third Age and largely "unsuccessful" Fourth Age may be significant for an understanding of both the life sciences and life writing. Science is bound to society in a double bind: On the one hand, science has an impact on society through the concepts it creates (as in Kay's analysis of molecular science decoding DNA as "the book of life"). On the other hand, however, science in its turn is influenced by social assumptions. Science is thus by no means simply aloof from fears and assumptions that are present in society at a particular moment in time. In fact, social need for new discoveries may fuel scientific research. To the extent that the fear of dementia is ubiquitous in our society, then, funding bodies will see the relevance of Alzheimer Research. Not incidentally, then, the New England Centenarian Study was in part funded by the Alzheimer's Foundation.

One of the arguments that I am proposing in this book is that the triumphalism which is part both of life sciences discourse about centenarians and of centenarians' autobiographies, then, is that they stand in direct relationship to the current fear of dementia. If dementia is culturally framed in Gothic style, then, centenarians' narratives paint an exuberant picture of life over one hundred. The "darker" and more dismal the picture that society paints of Alzheimer's disease, then, the lighter and more optimistic the portrayal of old age in centenarians' narratives becomes.

The point is not, I would reiterate, that Gothicism is absent from centenarians' narratives; it is, rather, that they defy this Gothic style by emphasizing, time and again, the centenarian's mental fitness. Seen from this perspective, centenarians' narratives, insist as they do on the centenarians' mental fitness, become so powerful precisely because, as Goldman suggests, Alzheimer's has become a "master illness" in the current social and cultural imagination. According to her,

> At the bottom, the meanings attributed to the sufferings and loss instigated by "master illnesses" such as Alzheimer's disease – as well as the delegation of blame, culpability, and agency – are mediated through narrative and, more precisely, through literary modes such as the Gothic . . . . Apocalyptic narratives, which prophesy the end of the world, feature terrifying plagues, and install divisions between the elect and the non-elect that are also popular ways in which to master fear and uncertainty. (4)

Goldman's argument about the media representation of Alzheimer's disease is important for an analysis of centenarians' autobiographies in multiple ways. First, it can be argued that it serves as a framing of centenarians' autobiographies by

pointing to the cultural climate in which autobiographies by centenarians may not only be interesting, but *necessary*. Old age comes to be feared, it can be suggested, to a large extent because it is said inevitably to be accompanied by the onset of Alzheimer's disease. It is this connection, as outlined above, that centenarian studies explicitly address.

In this vein, publications surrounding the Heidelberg Centenarian Study (Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie) assure academic and non-academic audiences alike that only half of the centenarians who were part of the study showed signs of dementia. As these longitudinal studies imply, not only is it possible to achieve extreme longevity, but it is also possible to "age well" even at the age of 100. According to Rott, "It is therefore possible to reach the age of 100 years even without serious cognitive deficits" (66; my translation). It is this idea of *successfully* achieving extreme old age which also characterizes the rhetoric of the New England Centenarian Study. Three aspects may be worth noting here for an understanding of centenarians' autobiographies. First, these narratives, by being labeled "autobiographies," may be fueled by the same concern which also provides the impetus for longitudinal studies on centenarians: the probability rate of dementia. Second, centenarians' autobiography shares with some gerontological studies such as the Georgia Centenarian Study (Rott 65) a certain "Bestenauslese," a selection of the "best" or "fittest" individuals: The Georgia Centenarian Study ruled out as participants individuals who were cognitively impaired and who lived in a retirement home. The same is true of centenarians' autobiographies. In fact, these narratives meet precisely the selection criteria which were also at the heart of the Georgia Centenarian Study: As narratives, centenarian autobiographies go out of their way to stress that these "authors" of their life's narratives all live at home, living (mostly) independently, surrounded by friends and relatives. Second, the very label of "autobiography" stresses the fact that they are "cognitively unimpaired." Third, it is for these twin reasons that the rhetoric which emerges from centenarians' autobiographies is a celebratory one. These centenarians are indeed what gerontologists Jean-Marie Robine and James Vaupel have called the "paragon[s] of positive aging" (v).

Such triumphant rhetoric is strikingly at odds with the findings of the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie. Since unlike the Georgia Centenarian Study and unlike centenarian autobiographies, this study did not exclude individuals who were cognitively unimpaired and who lived in a retirement home, their conclusion differed significantly from the Georgian study and centenarians' life narratives. According to Rott, "In this combination of functional and cognitive resources, only 9% of Heidelberg's centenarians are capable of independent living" (68; my translation).

Yet, it may be important to note that one other factor is stressed in the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie: The idea that the *Glücksempfinden*, the individual conception of one's own personal happiness, was strikingly at odds with the external observation of centenarians' physical or mental impairments. As Rott goes on to say,

> An impressive example of successful coping processes and psychological strength is provided by the study of the happiness of centenarians. Participants in the Heidelberg Centenarian Study who were still capable of self-report (56 of 91 individuals) revealed an astonishingly high level of happiness . . . despite an enormous degree of limitations. (70; my translation)

One aspect which may inform discussions of extreme old age in both the life sciences and the domain of life writing may thus be one of framing. The narratives which may shape our cultural imaginaries of extreme old age may themselves be part of a *Positivauswahl*: In its conclusion, the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie may zoom in on those individuals who were capable of telling their own story, and of assessing their own happiness and mental well-being. Similarly, two criteria may account for the recruitment, by a prospective co-author, of a centenarian whose life story this co-author will set out to write. First, this centenarian must be cognitively capable of telling their story; and second, the tenor of this life's story must be one of happiness. Why else would such autobiographies bear titles such as *Life Is So Good* (George Dawson), *My First Hundred Years* (R. Waldo McBurney), *It Is Well with My Soul* (Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson) or *The Delany Sisters' First One Hundred Years* (Delany sisters)? At the same time, it is interesting to note here that these titles share the triumphant rhetoric of the life sciences not only in celebrating the centenarians' agency and successful aging, but also the implicit assumption that these centenarians' lives verge on immortality. By gesturing, ironically, at the fact that this may be the centenarian's *first* century, these titles share with gerontological accounts a probing of the question of whether a definitive limit to human life will ever be set. As Rott suggests,

> On May 10, 2002, an article appeared in the journal *Science* that fundamentally changed views on the development of life expectancy. Jim Oeppen and James W. Vaupel ingeniously refuted the established opinion, held by many researchers for decades, that life expectancy would soon reach a ceiling. (55; italics original; my translation).

The discourse on extreme longevity provided in centenarians' autobiographies is thus celebratory, hailing "successful aging" as a model to be emulated by the not-so-old, and it is triumphant in its claim that old age need not be feared. Yet, the extent to which celebratory notes abound (in both the life sciences and the domain of life writing) is perhaps indicative of the fears that, for many, still accom-

pany the notion of aging. If age is indeed the new frontier, it is a frontier which some have reached while other have not. The oldest-old, especially if they are still physically and mentally fit, thus figure as role models of a successful crossing of this frontier. As neuroscientist Daniel Levitin puts it in his book *Successful Aging*, research on aging may provide us with a “guide to the ultimate stage of human development” (dustjacket). Yet, how precisely this frontier can be crossed, and how it can be crossed successfully, remains a miracle. It is a miracle, moreover, which even the centenarians themselves are at a loss to explain. It is at this point that life writing may come into play as a supplement to the life sciences. To the extent that as yet, genetic research has not managed to decode the riddle of longevity, centenarians’ own narratives suddenly move center stage. How do they account for their own “success” in aging, and in aging so well?

One aspect which may be worth considering in this context is that of cultural specificity. Biomedical research on centenarians, of course, is global; centenarian studies has been conducted in the US, in Germany, and in Japan, among many other countries. Yet, in keeping with Gumbrecht’s model of “writing science,” the narratives and the metaphors which are then used to convey the findings of these studies may be culturally specific. The rhetoric used, for instance, in the New England Centenarian Study (NECS) could not be more triumphant: As the website puts it,

> **A Model of Aging Well**. Centenarians (age 100+ years) markedly delay disability towards the end of their very long lives, at an average of [about] 93 years (that’s 33 years beyond the age of 60!). Thus, we regard these individuals as wonderful models of aging well. Some of our subjects, [about] 15 % have no clinically demonstrable disease at age 100 years and we call them “escapers.” (“Why Study Centenerians?” 1; bold print original)

The triumphant rhetoric could not be more pronounced here. Successful aging, of which centenarians are said to be exemplary, is posited here as a counter-model to what is implied to be “failed” ways of aging, namely aging accompanied by illness and disability. What is at stake here, then, is the very intersection between the life sciences and our cultural imaginations of aging: The triumphant rhetoric of successful aging is crucially indebted to “failed aging” as its implicit counterpart. It is for this reason that, from a cultural studies perspective, such rhetoric is so disturbing. Seen from this angle, the ways in which centenarian research is portrayed opens up a gap between those who age well and those who do not. Age, as Sally Chivers has noted, may thus explicitly be pitted against disability or dementia (9). The point to be made here is a crucial one: To a wider public which may fear the “side effects” of getting old, the portrayal of centenarians as “escapers” clearly serves as a role model meant to allay these fears. Centenarians become a source of cultural inspiration, role models to be emulated by the not-yet-so-old. Yet, by the same token, those who, at any age, fail to “escape” illness or

disability are implied to have failed. As Christine Overall puts it, "It is false, as antiableism activists and writers insist, to suppose that a life lived with disabilities is a life not worth living or that it is less worth living than the lives of nondisabled persons" (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 43–44).

It is here, then, that the cultural implications from which the life sciences are by no means immune may surface. Crucially, the life sciences communicate their findings by putting data into narrative. This narrative, however, may be culturally inflected according to the location of the researcher herself. What emerges in the comparison between the Heidelberg Centenarian Study (HH-100) and the New England Centenarian Study (NECS), then, is a difference in tonality, in the coloring of their rhetoric. Even if, on the level of data, the findings of these two studies may be similar, the rhetoric through which these findings are conveyed is strikingly different. To what extent, then, is there a specifically US American rhetoric of successful aging?

With regard to developments in the life sciences, particularly in gerontological research, it is also important to note that the study of age has changed in its tone. Whereas before, aging was primarily seen as an inevitable process of decay, centenarian research proves that this does not have to be the case. In fact, centenarians are taken by studies such as the New England Centenarian Study to show to the public that as age increases, there does not have to be a "downward slope" of an individual's health. This downward slope, as the New England Centenarian Study puts it, can be "escaped."

This, too, is indicative of a parallelism between life sciences and life writing. Just as longitudinal studies of centenarians increase in the field of gerontology, so does the publication of centenarian autobiographies on the American book market. In both the life sciences and the field of life writing, centenarians seem to be key at the turn of the new millennium. Given the triumphant rhetoric of the life sciences, then, it may thus be more than a coincidence that centenarians' autobiographies proliferate at the turn of the 21st century. What is even more interesting to note is that if the rhetoric of the life sciences is triumphant in hailing centenarians as models of "successful aging," centenarians' autobiographies are similarly celebratory in their rhetoric. In these autobiographies, too, centenarians emerge as role models of "aging well."

It may also be interesting to consider at this point that the rhetoric of the life sciences does not actually celebrate the life sciences themselves, but marvel at the successful aging of the centenarians. The point made by the life sciences is not, then, that it is due to innovation and new developments in the field of biomedicine that these centenarians have aged so well; the point, rather, is that they have somehow managed to "escape" disease and disability altogether. This is an aspect which also resonates strongly within centenarians' autobiographies: Time

and again, these centenarians reiterate that they rarely needed a doctor. As Bessie Delany puts it in *Having Our Say*, “One thing Sadie and I do is stay away from doctors as much as possible. And we avoid hospitals because honey, they’ll kill you there. They overtreat you. And when they see how old you are, and that you still have a mind, they treat you like a curiosity: Like ‘Exhibit A’ and ‘Exhibit B’” (Delany and Delany 26).

As I will argue in the following chapters, centenarians’ autobiographies can be characterized through a complex relationship to medicine. Almost invariably, centenarians state in their life writing narratives that they are skeptical at best about the promises of modern biomedicine. As noted above, the Delany sisters reiterate that “[they] avoid hospitals because honey, they’ll kill you there” (*Having Our Say* 26); George Dawson, too, declares that he has not needed a single doctor in his life. Intriguingly, centenarians’ life writing accounts can hence be said to resist a medicalization of old age. What is paradoxical, however, is that while on the level of the narrative, medicine seems to be completely absent from these autobiographies, there is nevertheless a common cultural climate that the texts share with the life sciences. Precisely because there is a double bind that binds medicine to society, I have tried to argue in this chapter, life sciences and life writing are intricately linked: Prompted by their co-authors, centenarians can be seen to answer the same questions that gerontologists and geneticists also ask their centenarian subjects: Just what does one have to eat, what kinds of exercise does one have to engage in to live to one hundred? Moreover, both the life sciences and centenarians’ accounts as forms of life writing stress the desire – and the possibility – of “ageing well.” The desire that seems to underlie both scientific studies of extreme longevity and life writing accounts is a situation in which the question asked to the Wizard of Oz can be asked in the affirmative: Is it desirable to live to one hundred? With both scientific studies and autobiographies converging in the concept of “successful aging,” both scientists and centenarians would assure us that the prophecy of being able to live to one hundred is indeed good news. It is in this context that I will now delve into centenarians’ autobiographies more deeply. In a manner of speaking, these autobiographies can be said to spell out in infinite detail just how good the news of living to one hundred is.

As Higgs and Gilleard have observed, living in aging societies is accompanied by a widespread fear about the frailty and vulnerability that may accompany the Fourth Age. Centenarians’ autobiographies, I will attempt to show in the subsequent chapters, negate all of these assumptions: they assure us that even at one hundred, the individual is by no means frail or vulnerable. One of the aims of this book, then, is to explore both the fascination of centenarianness as proof that ageing can be healthy and successful, and to resist this fascination. Even as we may be tempted to revel in the celebration of the productiveness and happiness of the

Third Age that centenarians inhabit, we may also want to be wary of what this celebration implies about those who have not been blessed with living healthily to one hundred. Where Higgs's and Gilleard's urging us to "rethink old age" is so crucial is that they remind us that living with impairment or frailty is by no means to live unhappily. It is for this reason, I believe, that it is essential to take centenarians' autobiographies and the "aging magic" they imply with a grain of salt.

2.4 George Dawson and the Plasticity of the Brain

There is a sense in which narratives such as George Dawson's *Life Is So Good* may serve as illustrations of neuroscientific insights into longevity. From the perspective of both life sciences and life writing, there is something deeply fascinating – and enigmatic – about a man who learned to read at age 98. The case of George Dawson, moreover, is significant in that Dawson becomes a role model not just of "aging well," but also of "black aging."

As I propose throughout these chapters, there is a sense in which the centenarian becomes the empty canvas on which the fears and desires of the middle-aged can be projected. George Dawson in particular has become a "poster child" for African American literacy campaigns. In this instance as in many others, the attempt to analyze the cultural representation of extreme old age is fraught with ambivalences. On the one hand, the representation of centenarians as paragons of "successful aging" may turn into a "master narrative of aging," as Holstein and Minkler suggest (787). On the other hand, however, this pitfall must not lead us to disregard the life's achievement of a centenarian such as George Dawson. An account of centenarians' autobiographies, seen from this perspective, must strive to celebrate centenarians' lives and to recognize their achievements, while at the same time viewing the boom of centenarians' accounts in the public arena with a certain caution. In other words, the fact that the publication of Dawson's narrative may be fueled by a growing interest in centenarians' autobiographies should not take away from Dawson's own achievement in living up to one hundred. Dawson's own life, and his biography, must thus be distinguished from the way in which it has been both narrated and marketed. The centenarian may be part of an "aging industry," of which he may even become a pawn; yet, this should not lead us to dismiss the centenarians' own achievement. Thus, there is certainly solace in the fact that after his death, a school in Texas was opened in George Dawson's name: the George Dawson Middle School. As a promotional video about the school informs us, "George Dawson's Life Story is the stuff of legend in this school. George Dawson may be gone, but his legacy lives on in the halls and classrooms of George Dawson Middle School. George Dawson's motto 'it's never too

late to change' is a life lesson these students wholeheartedly embrace" (Boyle 0:36). The video goes on to show how Dawson, the son of former slaves who remained illiterate for most of his life, eventually went on to receive an honorary doctorate from two universities. This form of academic recognition, in turn, may also lead us to view Richard Glaubman's co-authoring of Dawson's autobiography in a much more favorable light: After all, it was the autobiography *Life Is So Good* which helped create the "legend" of George Dawson's life, which eventually resulted in a school being named after the Texan centenarian.

In this context, too, the cultural function of an African American centenarian's narrative is both ambivalent and complex. To be sure, there may be a certain sensationalism which accompanies the media representation of a black centenarian's life. In its search for uniqueness, the "society of singularity" described by Reckwitz is also defined by its distrust of the notion of age conformity. The need to conform to patterns and modes of behavior implied to be "appropriate" for a given age group clashes with the desire for uniqueness in late modernity (9). To be unique, as Reckwitz notes, is also to be unpredictable.

In accounts of "successful aging," by the same token, age conformity has long been superseded by instances in which older people are said to "outdo" their chronological age. What would be more unique or unexpected, then, than a 98-year-old black Texan centenarian who goes back to school to learn to read and write? George Dawson became an instant celebrity after he had appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show on March 16, 1998. On Oprah Winfrey's website, he is part of "The Oprah Show's Greatest Lessons":

> The grandson of a former slave, George started working full time when he was just 8 years old and never even learned the alphabet. By the time his classmates threw him a surprise 100th birthday party, George was able to read his own cards for the first time. ("The Oprah Show's Greatest Lessons")

The decision to turn a quasi-centenarian into a "poster child" for African American literacy is hence particularly apt in capturing a specific zeitgeist at the turn of the new millennium. First, it resonates with the rhetoric, recently fueled by brain research, of "lifelong learning" (Brink 14). Precisely because the brain is flexible and can be reshaped through processes of learning even in extreme old age, acquiring literacy in old age is no longer seen as an impossibility.

3 Crossing the “Finish Line”: Celebrating the Centenarian’s 100th Birthday

Centenarians’ autobiographies may be interesting not only in aesthetic or literary terms, but also as indications of a specific cultural moment in the history of aging and in the history of the cultural construction of aging. The narratives of aging and the cultural construction of aging which centenarians’ autobiographies create are strikingly similar in their choreography. This choreography centers on two moments in particular: the reaching, by the centenarian, of his or her one hundredth birthday, and the subsequent recruitment of this centenarian by a person (usually middle-aged) who wants to co-author the centenarian’s autobiography. As I will try to illustrate in the chapters that follow, both these moments – the choreography of the 100th birthday and the moment of recruitment – are connected; and they are highly significant in what thy reveal about social and cultural expectations of age at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As the choreography of the 100th birthday and its role in centenarians’ autobiographies illustrates, longevity has now been transformed into an achievement. The birthday child becomes a *Leistungsträger* to the extent that s/he has successfully crossed the “finish line” of his or her 100th birthday. It is this “finish line,” taken from R. Waldo McBurney’s centenarian’s autobiography which recurs as a metaphor in virtually all centenarians’ autobiographies discussed in this book.

What is at stake, then, in the construction of the “finish line” of the 100th birthday as the telos of an individual’s life? What happens when aging is itself redefined as an achievement? At the same time, the metaphor of the finish line is significant in one more respect: What matters in the narrative choreography of centenarianness is not only the fact that the centenarian has reached his 100th birthday, but what is stressed by the narratives is that he is also physically able to cross the finish line. Life, seen through this metaphor, becomes a marathon, and one that requires physical fitness. In R. Waldo McBurney’s autobiography, one chapter is fittingly titled “Running for Life” (21). This metaphor, it could be argued, captures one of the central dimensions of successful aging: the idea that physical fitness – and constant physical exercise – may be one of the secrets to extreme longevity and health aging. As McBurney observes,

> When did I start running? When my son Kenneth overheard me telling someone that I started running at age 65, he objected, “Oh, you never stopped running!” He was right, because I have always enjoyed walking and running. But it was also true that I revived distance running at 65. (22)

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This passage is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, like many centenarians, McBurney’s narrative testifies to the notion of “lifelong learning.” As I have suggested in Chapter 2, there is an intricate link between life sciences and life writing when it comes to centenarians’ narratives. In the life sciences, studies have explored the link between lifelong learning and “active ageing.” Narushima et al., for instance, have explored “Lifelong learning in active ageing discourse: its conserving effect on wellbeing, health and vulnerability” (651). A similar link, I would argue, permeates accounts such as R. Waldo McBurney’s and Ann Nixon Cooper’s. Where centenarians’ narratives are so seductive for middle-aged readers, it could be suggested, is that they reiterate the idea that one is never too old to learn, too old to change one’s routine. George Dawson, after all, learned to read and write when he was 98 years old; and R. Waldo McBurney took up long-distance running at age 65. In his autobiography *My First Hundred Years: A Look Back from the Finish Line*, McBurney seems to be well aware of the incredulity that his narrative may meet with. At age 88, he writes, he did he not stop running, but rather, entered the period of life where he would proceed to win gold medals in Masters’ Athletics. In this context, one strategic decision was crucial. As he recalls, “My national and international competition started when I was 88, and shifting from distance running to shorter distances and race walking” (36). The autobiography contains a picture of McBurney on the victory staircase: “Celebrating three gold medals at age 100, in Puerto Rico” (51).

In these centenarians’ narratives, then, the centenarian runs or dances through the finish line, and this act of reaching extreme old age (Velten 2022) is not only metaphorical, but also a physical act. It is no coincidence, then, that McBurney should stress the fact that he started competing in long-distance competitions when he was 65, and that a photograph in Ann Nixon Cooper’s autobiography should show her dancing at her granddaughter’s wedding when she was 81 years old. Cooper writes, “Let me tell you, dancing will keep you young! Here I am with my grandson Ernest, dancing at his sister Theresa’s wedding in Tallahassee in 1983” (Cooper and Bates 177).

Aging is hence transformed in these narratives into an achievement; and it is an achievement which often centers on physical performance. Physical fitness in turn, is tied inextricably to the notion of successful aging. There is to these centenarians’ autobiographies a neoliberal undertone (Lemke 2007). If indeed the reaching of extreme old age is seen as an achievement, and if this achievement, in turn, is portrayed in terms of physical fitness, then what follows is that the responsibility for this achievement – and the ensuing deserving of celebration – lies with the individual herself. It is in the sense of this choreography, then, that these narratives of aging are highly individualist ones. The question which is *not* asked

in centenarians' autobiographies is under what circumstances reaching extreme old age was possible.

One idea follows from this logic of longevity as an individualist performance; and this is an idea, I believe, which could not be more crucial for our understanding of the construction of age at the beginning of the twenty-first century: What if, in celebrating the centenarian, we are in fact celebrating ourselves? In other words, who congratulates whom on reaching their 100th birthday? One of the underlying hypotheses of this book is that if indeed the centenarian is a mirror to what we hope will be our future selves, then this mirror may in fact tell us more about ourselves than about the centenarian, who is purportedly the subject of centenarian autobiographies. In celebrating the centenarian's birthday, then, we may actually be celebrating ourselves, or the selves that we hope we may eventually be. There is in the staging of this birthday party a sense of reassurance. The subject of this reassurance, however, and counterintuitive as this may at first seem, is not the centenarian, but it is us. In celebrating the centenarian's birthday party, we may be reassuring ourselves that not only is it possible to "cross the finish line" of one's one hundredth birthday, but it is possible to cross this finish line in good health. It is for this reason, I would posit, that centenarian autobiographies spend so much time in dwelling on every detail of the centenarian's birthday party.

In our cultural imaginary of aging, and of aging well, the 100th birthday party holds particular significance. It is no wonder, then, that the Swedish birthday song and the Upanishads quoted at the beginning of this book should wish the guest of honor that she may live to one hundred and not to, say, one hundred and five. In many different ways, and even or especially in the era of biomedicine, the one hundredth year of an individual's life continues to be a magical number. In this context, is significant to consider that culture may follow both science and demographics with a time lag. Even if on the one hand, progress in biomedicine has made it possible for societies to control many, formerly life-threatening diseases and have hence extended the life span, and if, on the other hand, demographics show that we life in aging societies, in our cultural imaginaries the "magic" of living into extreme old age may persist nevertheless.

In this chapter, I will focus on the act of celebrating the staging of the centenarian's birthday party, and I will argue that the guests attending this ceremony may in fact be more important for our understanding of the choreography of age and the cultural expectations connected to it than the birthday girl herself. What is central to the choreography of centenarianness, I propose, is the idea of a *society celebrating itself*; the idea that this society is so democratic, just and economically and culturally unbiased, that anyone could reach their 100th birthday. This, of course,. illustrates a particular neoliberalist agenda. At the same time, the act

of celebration, for those who attend the party, may have both an individual and a systemic dimension. Each of the guests attending the party, we may assume, wishes that they, too, will one day be centenarians; at the same time, they may each congratulate themselves on living in and contributing to a society in which such extreme old age has become possible. In this sense, I would argue, it would be short-sighted – if natural – to read the centenarian's 100th birthday party from the perspective of the centenarian; rather, it may be essential to focus on his guests. In celebrating the centenarian, these guests may in fact be celebrating themselves. In fact, the party may be held not for the sake of the centenarian, but that of his *guests*.

3.1 From Life Writing to Fiction: Celebrating the Centenarian in Jonas Jonasson's *The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared*

In order to unravel the choreography of aging in centenarians' narratives, Jonas Jonasson's award-winning novel, *The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* (2009), may actually be a case in point. As I will argue as this chapter progresses, there is in fact a striking similarity between Jonasson's fictional portrayal of a centenarian's birthday and centenarians' autobiographies. This convergence, I suggest, points to a specific historical moment in the construction of age, and of extreme old age in particular. What is central to Jonasson's portrayal of the 100th birthday celebration of Allan, first and foremost, is the centenarian's own bewilderment in having become the reason (and the cause) for such celebration. It is this bewilderment, I will suggest as this chapter progresses, which is also central to the moment of recruitment, of the centenarian by the future co-author for his own autobiography. In fact, the recruitment and the centenarian's autobiography itself can be seen as a prolonged birthday celebration: In the centenarian's autobiography, what is being celebrated across 200 pages is the fact that the birthday boy has crossed the finish line. For the purposes of the present study, what is remarkable about Jonasson's novel is not only the detailed portrayal of the choreography of the celebration, but also the fact that in this fictional narrative, the centenarian proceeds to escape from his own party. Having realized that it is not he who is the true object of the celebrations, but that in celebrating him, the town may actually be celebrating itself, Allan proceeds to simply climb out the window and disappear. Jonasson's comically bizarre narrative goes on from here, the centenarian, we might argue, has escaped not only the predictability of his birthday party, but also from what was supposed to follow it.

I believe that it may be fruitful to allow for a continuity between fiction and life writing in studying the cultural choreography of centenarianness, also since Jonasson's fictional account of a centenarian's birthday party may reveal glimpses into the centenarian's own perspective which may in fact be absent or which may have been written out of the centenarian's autobiography. What if, we may ask in this context, in writing and celebrating the centenarian's life, the co-author may actually be celebrating himself? Clearly enough, in the co-written autobiography, in which the centenarian is in some way tethered to his co-author, the centenarian cannot be allowed to leave; it is this leeway, on the other hand, which Jonasson's fictional narrative gives him. The staging in Jonasson's narrative of centenarianness, I will suggest below, can also be found, as in a typology, in centenarians' autobiographies: the act of recruitment in which the centenarian is told that he is about the be celebrated in a party (or autobiography) staged (allegedly) for his benefit; the fact of being forced to sit through the celebration itself (or to patiently continue to answer the co-author's probing questions), and the feeling of entrapment in this situation from which, unlike the subject of the centenarian's autobiography, Jonasson's fictional protagonist can escape. What happens, I would like to ask in this chapter, if we read the life writing narratives through Jonasson's fictional account of centenarianness? Jonasson's fictional protagonist, then, may have an agency which the centenarians trapped in the narrative ghost written for or about them may not possess.

Because of the bizarre perspective arising from the co-authorship of the centenarian's autobiography, I argue, these narratives may have turned the guest of honor and his audience – in the instance of the co-author – into one and the same person. The centenarian cannot escape from his party because this party has been scripted for him by his co-author, who will of course, be simply unwilling to plot the centenarian's escape. One question which the following chapters will revolve around, then, is whether the emplotment of centenarians' autobiographies is that of the centenarian or that of the co-author. This may be a question, however, which is ultimately unanswerable; yet, there may nonetheless be hints, in the narrative perspective which allow us to temporarily unravel the convoluted narratives of the centenarian and his co-author.

How, then, does Jonasson stage the choreography of extreme old age? It is no coincidence of course that the centenarian should escape through the window; no-one would have allowed him to walk through the door and leave his own party. This is a moment in the construction of centenarians' narratives, I will argue as this study progresses, which is more than metaphorical. For the success of the co-author to continue, the centenarian needs to be present; the party can only be staged, the autobiography can only be written, if the centenarian is present to witness it.

Even if at this party or in this autobiography the audience/co-author celebrate themselves, the centenarian has to be present as a prop or cause for such celebration. The choreography outlined, in supreme irony, in Jonasson's narrative may thus provide us with the tools to read, and read against the grain, a specific historical moment in which extreme old age has become cause for celebration, and for a celebration in highly neoliberal terms.

If indeed centenarians' autobiographies can be read as a new (sub)genre within both aging narratives and autobiographies, it does not appear to be a coincidence that Jonasson's fictional account of centenarianness should have been published in 2009, after the turn of the twenty-first century. For the year 2000 marks a turning point in centenarians' autobiographies, since most of the centenarians' autobiographies which have appeared to date appeared after the turn of the century. What is it in the logic of millennialism that precipitates the emergence of "serial" centenarians' autobiographies?

Jonasson's narrative begins, then, with a centenarian's sabotaging his own birthday party, and the choreography of aging which underlies it:

> Accordingly, the idea was also still quite fresh when the old man opened his window of the old people's home in Malmköping, Sörmland, and climbed into the bushes. The maneuver was somewhat laborious – not necessarily surprising, considering that Allan had turned a hundred that day. In just under an hour, the birthday party was to get underway at the community center. Even the city council was going to be present. And the local press. And all the other old people. And the entire staff, especially Sister Alice, the old spitfire. Only the main character wasn't planning on showing up for this celebration. (7; my translation)

In this passage, all the ingredients of the construction of centenarian narratives are present: the fact that in turning one hundred, the centenarian should have become a celebrity; the fact that this festivity should be attended by local politicians and the press alike; and the fact that his birthday is not so much celebrated as it is *staged*; and that he himself is a *prop* in this theater of (successful) aging, but a prop that is in fact indispensable for the party to continue. Only the reference to the centenarian's physical fitness may be different from many centenarians' autobiographies: the centenarian, in Jonasson's case, is physically fit in that he is able to escape through the window; yet, the narrative admits that this maneuver takes him some time. He may not be as athletic as Waldo McBurney running across the finish line in his marathon gear, but he nonetheless manages to climb out the window.

Jonasson's fictional narrative thus offers us the fractures in the logic of successful aging which centenarians' autobiographies do not: In these centenarians' autobiographies, the centenarian's body is stressed especially where he or she excels in physical fitness. Otherwise, reference to the physical is simply omitted, as

in George Dawson’s *Life Is So Good*. In the latter case, the narrative stresses that at age 100, Dawson should still possess an excellent memory. In the case where the centenarian does not turn out to be an athlete, then, he is celebrated for his athleticism of the mind. The emphasis on biological fitness, and biological fitness as a requirement for the celebration of longevity, however, remains.

In the irony so characteristic of his narrative, then, Jonasson’s novel reveals the fractures in the logic of physical fitness which centenarians’ autobiographies would deny: “Allan crossed the cemetery in a southerly direction until a stone wall blocked his path. It was barely over a meter high, but Allan was a centenarian, not a high jumper” (9; my translation). At the same time, then, the fact that American centenarians’ autobiographies can be read through a choreography of old age provided by a Swedish novel may itself be significant. In how far can these American centenarians’ autobiographies be read as being part of a Western logic of longevity? This is a question which would by far exceed the scope of this study; more research clearly needs to be done about the question whether centenarians’ autobiographies emerge as a specific genre not just in the US but in other Western (and potentially non-Western) countries as well. In how far is the logic of longevity, which links Jonasson’s novel to autobiographies by American centenarians, specifically Western, or even potentially a global genre? How would this longevity be portrayed, for instance, in Japan, and would it also be portrayed through the genre of autobiography?

There is one more instance, then, in which Jonasson’s novel may be significant in enabling us to read centenarians’ autobiographies against the grain, and against the grain of their potentially neoliberal logic of successful aging. For Jonasson’s narrative, at the very beginning, asks a question which, in keeping with their logic, centenarians’ autobiographies do not: What comes after the centenarian has celebrated his 100th birthday? Centenarians’ autobiographies, then, end with the birthday celebration, whereas for Jonasson’s narrative, Allan’s 100th birthday party is only the beginning. Jonasson’s novel thus asks a question which, due to the logic of successful aging and the implicit link to the utopia of immortality, centenarians’ autobiographies are never allowed to ask. Eventually, as Jonasson’s novel casually observes and as centenarians’ autobiographies are never quite allowed to say, even the centenarian’s life comes to an end: “So he turned his head once again and took a look at the retirement home, where he had believed until recently that he would live until the end of his life. And then he told himself that he could die some other time and some other place” (8).

The moment of sabotaging one’s own narrative of successful aging – especially if it is the narrative *told by others* about one’s aging process –, then, is central to the irony of Jonasson’s narrative. What this reference reveals, is what centenarians’ autobiographies do not say, the narratives not written about longevity to which they are meant to be the antidote: What if, we may ask through

the logic of Jonasson's novel, the centenarian had refused to be recruited? What if he had refused to attend his own birthday party, knowing that it is his audience, not he himself that is actually celebrated? What if the centenarian, in these centenarians' autobiographies, were permitted to testify to his knowledge that he is only a prop in his own narrative? Having escaped from his own party, then, Allan chuckles at the thought that the party can hardly start without him: "The damn anniversary party at the retirement home was supposed to start at three o'clock, and there were still twelve minutes to go. Soon they would be knocking on Allan's door, and then all hell would break loose, this much was certain" (11; my translation). Allan Karlsson's story hence ends where it began: In the reference to the centenarian's one hundredth birthday party, the centenarian's contemplating the escape from his own party, for which the preparations have already begun. It is in this contemplation that Allan may in fact hit a question which may be the central taboo of centenarians' autobiographies: In what way and to what extent are centenarians' autobiographies a mere freak show of longevity, in which the centenarian is being paraded in front of an audience for the benefit (and economic gain) of his co-author? In other words, who stands to gain from the centenarian's autobiography? His unwillingness to be turned into a freak by those who, in celebrating him, celebrate only themselves, makes Allan disappear from his senior citizens' home the night before the party:

> And what was even worse, the staff at the Old People's Home had started preparing for Allan's birthday. So he would be gawked at like a caged animal, they would sing for him and feed him cake. He had certainly never asked for that. (384; my translation)

This passage, albeit an account from a fictional text, a novel, could not be more central to our reading of centenarians' autobiographies: In how far is there a voyeurism of old age at work in the current boom of centenarians' autobiographies? How can we be so sure that as readers of narratives in which centenarians are being paraded in front of us led by their co-author, we have not in fact become visitors in a freak show of old age? The question I would like to ask in this book, then, takes its cue from Rachel Adams' account of freak shows at the beginning of the twentieth century: How can we make visible the agency of the freak, who in the act of regaining such agency would cease to be a freak? *What does the framework of the freak show reveal not about the freak, but about those who run the freak show*? What happens, Adams asks, when the freak show closes for the night and the "freak" is allowed to go home? (3). Adapted to my purposes here, we may ask: What does the centenarian do when the co-author, who (as in Dawson's case) has been trying to interview him in his kitchen, has finally left? What happens when he sits down in his kitchen, finally alone? This, then, is the moment – the moment of potential agency – which the centenarian's autobiography cannot show us,

in order not to invalidate its own truth claims. The autobiography and its genre conventions, then, may be the exact equivalent of the logic of the freak show. In each of these instances, Jonasson points out, the freak is a caged animal in a zoo. What, then, is the nature of our *gaze* as visitors or as readers, when we look at the centenarian? Is there a form of what Renato Rosaldo, in another context, has called resistant reading? Can we resist the logic of the freak show in reading these narratives, purportedly autobiographical ones, about extreme old age? And what do we gain, either economically or psychologically, from reading these narratives?

3.2 From Fiction to Life Writing: The Centenarian's Birthday Party

Jonas Jonasson's fictional portrayal of a centenarian who is, in many different ways, an unruly subject, is significant for a study of centenarians' *autobiographies* in a number of ways. First, one of the questions which I will ask especially in the next chapter is the distinction between centenarians as willing or unwilling subjects of inquiry. Unlike in Jonasson's novel, then, centenarians' autobiographies begin with what may be read as a point of convergence: If the subjects of centenarians' autobiographies are at first willing to be interviewed by a prospective co-author who wants to write down the story of their lives, then the actual autobiography begins with the staging of their "conversion" from a willing to an unwilling subject. In fact, centenarians' autobiographies begin by reversing the beginning of Jonasson's novel. If in *The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared*, the centenarian escapes the bustle occasioned by his one hundredth birthday party to live his life unobserved, the reverse is true of centenarians' autobiographies. In these life narratives, the centenarian may at first have wanted to climb out the window, but, coaxed by his prospective co-author, he changes his mind and climbs back in.

At the moment in which their autobiography is written, or rather, co-written, the subjects of centenarians' autobiographies have thus been turned from unwilling to willing subjects. In a way, their one hundredth birthday party coincides with their recruitment, by the co-author, as a subject whose life is worth writing. This idea of the cultural "value" of the centenarian is itself significant. What is interesting to note here is that the number "one hundred" figures as an emblematic moment in an individual's life span to the extent that all other numbers pale in comparison. Why, we may ask, do we not have autobiographies written by, say, ninety-seven-year-olds? For people to be turned into celebrities, then, it requires the act of crossing the finish line of their one hundredth birthday and not that of their ninety-fifth. It may be interesting to consider, moreover, that in mar-

keting stories of extreme old age, publishers resort to a peculiar strategy which reinforces the significance of the one hundredth birthday. Some narratives, for instance, are marketed as the life story of a "near-centenarian." The autobiography of Harold Laufman, for instance, is titled *One Man's Century with Pen, Brush, Fiddle and Scalpel: Confessions of a Near-Centenarian with Five Lives* (2007). This title is intriguing for a variety of reasons. First, despite Laufman's not quite being a centenarian, the reference to his having witnessed an entire century nonetheless evokes the magic number of "100," which is so ubiquitous in the marketing of centenarians' narratives. Moreover, it is important to note that Laufman's memoir at the same time converges and differs from the "formula" to which centenarians' autobiographies adhere. His book, the title suggests, is about "confessions," not the advice given by centenarians in their life accounts. "Confessions," by contrast, evokes the idea of the autobiography based on the genre of the confessional, as in the confessions of St. Augustine. Laufman, a near-centenarian physician, hence situates his own autobiography less in the popular genre of centenarians' autobiographies, but rather in the more "academic" realm of autobiography. Moreover, Laufman chronicles his life as a surgeon, with his profession being far more important than his age. What is perhaps most intriguing about the marketing of Laufman's book is that it seems to set itself apart from centenarians' autobiographies, even if this genre is not explicitly addressed:

> Also, contrary to what you may expect from the pen of a physician, the author does not prescribe, preach, nor hand out platitudinous advice on how to lead your own life, nor how to stay young forever as if one size can fit all. Instead, he presents his century of life as his own exploratory and learning journey. If you find any parallels between your own life's journey perhaps his disclosures can help pave the road through yours. An extraordinary story of an extraordinary life. ("One Man's Century" np)

These differences in emphasis notwithstanding, however, it is nonetheless significant that Laufman should refer in his title to his position as a "near-centenarian." For those who have already crossed the finish line, on the other hand, the one hundredth birthday continues to be significant while the fact that they publish their autobiography at age one hundred and three, for instance, turns the publication of their life story into an event which is even more sensational.

If I argue throughout this study that the industry of centenarians' autobiographies revolves around willing subjects who subscribe to the tenets of successful aging, Bessie Delany may be an exception to the rule here. If as a rule, centenarians' autobiographies have one of their climaxes in their subject's one hundredth birthday, Bessie Delany's description of her own birthday could not be more anticlimactic:

> Now, honey, I get the blues sometimes. It’s a shock to me, to be this old. Sometimes, when I realize I am 101 years old, it hits me right between the eyes. I say. “Oh Lord, how did this happen?” Turning one hundred was the worst birthday of my life. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy. Turning 101 was not so bad. Once you’re past the century mark, it’s just not as shocking. (Delany and Delany, *Having Our Say* 296)

So why, we might argue, is Bessie’s account allowed to subvert the very framework that her story is published in? It could be suggested that within the logic of successful aging, Bessie is permitted as an exception to the rule only because her sister Sadie confirms this rule or overall framework. Bessie’s unruliness, we might argue, is contained by her sister’s narrative of triumphant aging. As Bessie herself admits,

> Tell you the truth, I wouldn’t be here without sister Sadie. We are companions. But I’ll tell you something else: Sadie has taken on this business of getting old like it’s a big project. She has it all figured out, about diet and exercise. Sometimes, I just don’t want to do it, but she is my big sister and I really don’t want to disappoint her. Funny thing about Sadie is she rarely gets – what’s the word? – depressed. She is an easygoing type of gal. (Delany and Delany, *Having Our Say* 296)

In my reading of centenarians’ autobiographies, then, I am interested in the relationship between centenarians being turned from unwilling into willing subjects – of climbing back in to be interviewed by the co-author who has patiently been waiting for them –, on the one hand, and the striking uniformity of the content of their narratives. To be willing to have one’s life story turned into a (co-written) autobiography, then, at the same time seems to lead to a certain “streamlining” of these narratives. Here, too, a comparison to Jonasson’s fictional centenarian may be interesting. While Jonasson’s novel draws attention to the fact that the centenarian, Allan, climbs out the window but does so with difficulty, the reverse is true of centenarian’s autobiographies. These life narratives, while they may occasionally refer, in passing, to the fact that the centenarian cannot walk as fast as he used to, emphasize their subject’s overall fitness.

In this context, too, it may be important to read centenarians’ autobiographies with and against the grain. If indeed we read centenarians’ autobiographies as mirrors of the self we hope to eventually become, then there is something deeply comforting about reading about centenarians’ running or even dancing across the finish line of their one hundredth birthday. In *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name*, super-centenarian Ann Nixon Cooper recalls her 104th birthday party in this way: “One hundred four and still cutting a rug! I loved doing the electric slide – you don’t need a partner or anything, just a group of people who love to dance. I knew all the moves, so I would often teach people the sequences. And they’d have to look sharp to keep up with me” (188).

Seen from this perspective, centenarians' autobiographies are a celebration of their subjects' achieving in aging successfully. What may be disturbing, however, is to consider whether, by emphasizing mental and physical fitness to such a large extent, these narratives do not in fact create a new norm. What, then, is the line between desirability and normativity here? To what extent, by emphasizing the centenarian's physical achievements and mental fitness do these stories reinforce the assumption that lives lived with physical or mental impairment are somehow less "successful"? As Bessie Delany observes in *Having Our Say*,

> One time, some doctor asked Sadie to do a senility test. Of course, she passed. A year later, he asked her to do it again, and she said, "Don't waste your time, doctor." And she answered all the questions from the year before, before he could ask them. (Delany and Delany 26)

> People assume Sadie and I don't have any sense at our age. But we still have all our marbles, yes, sir! (Delany and Delany 26)

The depiction of the centenarian's one hundredth birthday party, then, seems almost too good to be true; it may be seen as a fairy tale of aging successfully. Or, conversely, it is clearly the birthday party we would like to have, should we live to such a magical age. What is common to the choreography of all these celebrations is that the guest of honor is surrounded by his loved ones and is able to enjoy the party.

What is especially interesting to consider in this context is that in celebrating the notion of "successful aging," centenarians' autobiographies stress the role of individual achievement. They can thus be seen to promote a particular kind of autonomy, at the expense of others. There is little mention, in these narratives, of what Holstein and Minkler have called "relational autonomy" (787). According to Mackenzie and Stoljar, "traditional ideals of autonomy give normative primacy to independence, self-sufficiency and separation from others, at the expense of a recognition of the value of relations of dependency and interconnection" (5). As this book sets out to suggest, centenarians' autobiographies strongly subscribe to such a traditional model of autonomy. It is in this context that as best-selling narratives of extreme old age, these autobiographies may create a new norm of aging well. If in the life sciences, Rowe and Kahn's notion of "successful aging" inaugurated a paradigm shift in which old age was redefined from a form of inevitable decay to a period of life which one could in fact look forward to, this shift in definition may at the same time entail the creation of a new norm of aging. It is such a norm, in turn, which the centenarians' autobiographies discussed here may serve to reinforce. In this context, Sadie and Bessie Delany's description of their own autonomy at ages 102 and 100 may be especially significant. As Sadie Delany puts it, "Bessie and I still keep house by ourselves. We still do our shopping and banking. We were in helping professions – Bessie was a dentist and I

was a high school teacher – so we're not rich, but we get by" (Delany and Delany, *Having Our Say* 8).

3.3 Colorblind Celebrations and the Specter of Race

In celebrating the centenarian's one hundredth birthday, as I have argued above, we may thus be celebrating ourselves. But who is this "we" here? My aim in this study is to "unpack" the life narratives of American centenarians on a number of levels, looking at considerations of age, race, and class from an intersectional perspective. I have noted above that in celebrating the centenarian, we may also be celebrating the self which we hope to become. What if, however, there were another, more collective level involved in such a celebration? In centenarians' autobiographies such as *Having Our Say*, *It Is Well with My Soul* or *Life Is So Good*, the specter of race can be said to loom large about narratives which have been marketed within the framework of aging and of aging successfully. What does it mean, then, for an American mainstream public to celebrate the life of a one-hundred-year-old African American? The point which I would like to make here is that the underlying assumption may be not only the celebration of an individual's achievement in aging successfully – after all, the centenarian can dance or run across the finish line of her one hundredth birthday – but also a celebration of what presents itself to be a colorblind society. There is a double bind here when it comes to celebrating the one hundredth birthday of a black centenarian. On the one hand, the fact that this individual lived through, for instance, the Jim Crow era and was able to overcome innumerable obstacles occasioned by racism, may serve to make this achievement even more remarkable. On the other hand, however, it may serve to relativize the charge and effect of racism. If an individual can live up to one hundred under these circumstances, we may ask, somewhat cynically, what possibilities may lie in store for those more fortunate?

It is important to note, then, that the notion of race is central for all the autobiographies discussed here which were written in the co-authorship between a black centenarian and a white co-author. In affirming the centenarian's achievements in aging successfully, then, the narrative may in fact be affirming US American society itself which, despite its shortcomings, it is implied, has made this achievement possible. There is a sense, then, in which, even as their race is alluded to, the narrative of Sadie and Bessie Delany is "whitewashed" in the marketing of their autobiography. If indeed centenarians' autobiographies function as mirrors of the future selves of their readers, the element of "race" necessarily has to be downplayed. The "praise" of *Having Our Say* reprinted on the first pages runs as follows:

> This engaging and affirmative chronicle will be savored, and shared, by general reader and scholar alike . . . . A complex commentary on character, longevity and sisterhood . . . . a fascinating glimpse of an almost hidden racial class . . . . *Having Our Say is*, like the sisters themselves, a credit to the race and proudly individualistic. (Delany and Delany np; ellipsis original)

What is so remarkable here is that despite the reference to race, race is actually erased from both the narrative itself and the "praise" surrounding its publication. What the above-quoted passage alludes to, then, is not so much the resistance to racist social structures by the African American community, but rather, the achievement of two African American women who succeeded in rising above their circumstances. The notion of individualism, then, is deeply problematic here. Even as the Delany sisters are described in the marketing material surrounding the publication of their autobiography as "credits to their race," the emphasis on individualism serves to neutralize any "racial" politics of resistance that the story might otherwise possess.

The question of surrogacy may be said to re-emerge in this context. The sisters' autobiography is marketed both as a "credit" to their "race" and an individual achievement; it is this focus on individuality, moreover, which turns the narrative of these two African American women into a potential mirror of the future self of an average white reader. As another passage reprinted on the first page puts it,

> The Delany sisters are a national treasure. Their well-lived lives will show readers a slice of black America seldom seen and a history seldom read. They are remarkable members of a remarkable American family – succeeding against all obstacles, and persevering against odds which would have conquered most. (Delany and Delany, *Having Our Say* np)

What is interesting to note here, apart from the notion of color-consciousness and colorblindness to which I will return, is the idea of the Delany sisters as a "national treasure." There is a curious form of temporality in the marketing of centenarians' autobiographies. In fact, the reference to the centenarian authors of an autobiography as "national treasures" can be read as a form of eulogy: What is so curious about the marketing of centenarians' autobiographies is that the marketing blurbs seem to eulogize centenarians during their lifetimes. This premature eulogy is mirrored by the front cover of *Having Our Say*, which curiously enough evokes a tombstone. In the middle to the cover, there is an oval-shaped hole; through this whole, framed in a blue oval picture frame, we see the sisters' photograph on the page beneath it. On one level, this can be a metaphor for the genre of the centenarian's autobiography itself, which provides us with a window into, and inside view of, the centenarian sisters' lives. At the same time, however, there is a sense in which the cover design evokes the image of the photograph of

a deceased family member on a mantel piece or, at worst, a tombstone. There is hence a complex temporality at work in centenarians' autobiographies: If indeed these centenarians are mirrors to our future selves, or the selves we hope to become, then the temporality of centenarians' autobiographies is that of future anterior: by the time we have happily lived into extreme old age, we hope, we will remember them as role models for our own successful aging. They are role models, then, even in their lifetime, and yet, their presence, in the cultural imaginaries of centenarians' autobiographies, is curiously tinged with a nostalgia for a presence already gone. There is a sense, then, to evoke Gerald Vizenor's term, in which this is an instance of the "vanishing centenarian": The sisters are being eulogized, in the marketing of their autobiography, as living role models who will soon fade away. Given their extreme old age, the reason for this fragile temporality may at first glimpse be obvious: Many authors of centenarians' autobiographies do not live to see the publication of their book. Yet, my point is that there may be other, more complex mechanisms at work in this form of future anterior, mechanisms deeply tied to our own investment in reading these life narratives.

One idea which runs through *Having Our Say* is in fact a certain "whitewashing" of the narrative: Even as I argue throughout this study that the politics of representing extreme old age at the turn of a new millennium revolves around a politics of black and white and of racial surrogacy, *Having Our Say* insists that it is indeed a colorblind narrative. What is being represented here, the text implies, is not an African American narrative but an American one: "The Delany creed centered on self-improvement through education, civic-mindedness, and ethical living, along with a strong belief in God" (Delany and Delany 5). It is also interesting to note, however, that color-consciousness is explicitly dismissed by the narrative; and it is dismissed in the preface to one of the chapters written in the sisters' voice. Curiously enough, the chapters which serve, as it were, as an introduction to the chapters written by Bessie or Sadie or both sisters have no heading; in these cases, the authorial voice is attributed to no-one in particular. Yet, what would it imply that a chapter which has obviously been written by Amy Hill Hearth, the sisters' white co-author, would stress that color-consciousness is an aberration? Moreover, the possibility of color-consciousness, of paying attention to race and to racial inequality, is dismissed by the narrative as "cliquishness"; it is a cliquishness, moreover, which is attributed not to white Americans but to African Americans instead:

> The Delanys had to face some surprising detractors. Sadie and Bessie recall that lower-class blacks at times viewed achievers as being cliquish or arrogant, and that some cautioned that families such as the Delanys set impossibly high standards for other black Americans of that era. Their success, some felt, set up the larger black community for criticism by white America: If they can do it, why can't the rest of us? (Delany and Delany, *Having Our Say* 4–5)

There is an interesting intersection here between race and class. The "cliquishness" attributed to black Americans is defined in terms of both race and class; the Delanys' stressing of their own success – in what is after all, a narrative they co-authored with a white, middle-class co-author – is seen as a form of "treason" to the black community. What is interesting to consider here, however, is that the same idea of the Delany sisters as being role models might also apply to the question of aging successfully: The narrative of *Having Our Say* implies that not only could the sisters rise to middle-class status and achieve a college education at a time when few African Americans were able to do so, but they also succeeded in aging well and living to one hundred at a time when African Americans often fail to live into old age. Yet, what are the reasons for this failure? In this as in many instances, I would suggest, the narrative views aging well as an individual achievement, and altogether dismisses factors of social inequality.

At the same time, the references in the praise to the Delany sisters' life narrative as a "forgotten" part of American history refers to the fact that these are members of the African American middle class. The achievement which the life narrative chronicles, then, is that of two African American women who were able to become professionals at a time in which segregation made the rise of the black middle class next to impossible. In *Having Our Say*, then, the sisters' success – both in achieving middle-class ideals and aging well – is depicted as a quintessentially American narrative: "Today the Delanys are no longer concentrated in Raleigh or Harlem. As in most American families, the younger generation – among them teachers, entrepreneurs, physicians, attorneys, and other professionals – is scattered from coast to coast" (5).

Where *Having Our Say* clearly adheres to the credo of color-blindness, moreover, is in its reference to the meritocratic ideal of American society. In this as in many other instances, the neoliberalist rhetoric of aging successfully may converge with a similar neoliberalism when it comes to race. As Bessie notes,

> Today, I know they have this thing called Affirmative Action. I can see why they need it. There are some places where colored folks would *never*, not in a thousand years, get a job. But you know what? I really am philosophically against it. I say, "Let the best person get the job, period." Everybody's better off in the long run. (156)

Where the narrative is clearly neoliberal in its distrust of Affirmative Action and its distrust of the welfare system, then, is in its declaration that the centenarian sisters, in an entire century of their life, have never once been dependent on welfare. Crucially the following passage is implied to be a rejoinder against the Ku Klux Klan's rant about black people's dependency; yet, productive as it may be in this regard, it is nevertheless problematic in its dismissal of welfare as such: Precisely because, by virtue of having become a celebrity of old age, the centenarian

assumes an authority in things other than aging, this passage is particularly disturbing. Bessie states,

> I have never taken a handout from the government in my life. I am the kind of Negro that most white people don't know about. They either don't know, or maybe they don't *want* to know, I'm not sure which. . . . [Clan member] David Duke doesn't think there are Negroes like me and Sadie, colored folks who have never done nothin' except contribute to America. Well, I'm just as good an *American* as he is – better! (230–231)

If *Having Our Say* is a narrative about racial "uplift," and the perseverance of two African American women under segregation, it is also, conversely, a highly disturbing account both of African American poverty and of the role of poor whites. It is hard not to view instances like these as a form of "middle-classness." As Sadie recalls,

> Among my students in New York City there were plenty of children, white and colored, who had problems. There was one girl who comes to mind . . . . All the girls made fun of her because she had this mark, like a dark ring, around her neck. Well, it was obvious to me that it was just plain old dirt! When there were no other children around I asked her about it, and she said, "My mama says it's a birthmark." So I said, "Child, I don't think it is. Would you like me to try and fix it?" . . . Soap and water didn't get it off, so I rubbed cold cream in it, and I rubbed and rubbed until I got it all off. The next day, she came in and said, "Miss Delany, my mama said to thank you so much for cleaning up my neck." Now I think that's kind of funny. Imagine not knowing that your child's neck is duty. Well, there are a lot of people who weren't raised properly themselves, so how can they teach their children right? Sometimes it's neglect, sometimes it's just ignorance." (Delany and Delany 260)

What is so disturbing here is that the conditions of poverty disappear from view. Precisely because the centenarian sisters are being positioned as African Americans who made their way from the Deep South into an upper-middle class elite, there is a sense here that those who do not lift themselves up by their bootstraps deserve their own fate. What is so debatable here is that the text itself is being positioned as the narrative of two griots, as African American storytelling. If storytelling is an alternative to college learning, however, this form of empowerment is completely absent from the depiction of poor blacks in these instances in the narrative. Folk wisdom and the power of storytelling, in *Having Our Say*, is only at the command of the middle-class authors of their own autobiography; the poor, on the other hand, know neither to tell their own story nor to wash the necks of their own children. Here, it is not just, to refer to Loïc Wacquant (2009) and to paraphrase Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray, Americans who "love to hate the poor" (1996), but black centenarians as well.

Aging narratives such as *Having Our Say* and *Life Is So Good* can be said as reinforcing stereotypes about rugged individualism, or about America's "lov[ing]

to hate the poor" (Newitz and Wray 1). Where centenarians' narratives like George Dawson's may be so problematic, I believe, is in their portrayal of narratives by poor individuals who hate the poor: If anything, George Dawson can be said to embrace, or to laugh off, his own poverty; he does not mind that his grocery money usually runs out before the end of the month, because he has so many neighbors who bring him food (*Life Is So Good* 47). As George Dawson puts it,

> I pay my bills first and all the money I have left is for groceries. Usually I go shopping right then while I'm at the store. I buy my groceries once a month. When the money is gone, it's gone. I try to keep a little left over if I can. That way if a peddler come by selling vegetables I might get something fresh. Or if somebody has an emergency, I can help them out with bus money and such. The money usually be gone on one trip and I don't want to spend all my days shopping anyway. Fresh food goes first, but I got a garden. I might catch some fish. Besides, people come by to visit. They know that I like to eat a lot of fruit so they might bring me something. One day the cupboard is almost bare and the same afternoon, someone might bring some fruit or a cabbage or eve a jar of honey. (*Life Is So Good* 247–248)

In this instance and in many others, the narrative could not be more neoliberal. Moreover, the neoliberalist attitude to being poor – as not being in need of the system – blends into the neoliberalist attitude of the "proper" way of becoming older without becoming a burden to the system. It is thus important to read *Life Is So Good* as well as *Having Our Say* in terms of both race and class. What is so disturbing here is that in the US as much as in many European countries, old-age poverty is highly pronounced. What would it mean, in this context, to celebrate an African American centenarian who has worked every day of his life and who at age one hundred, is still tending his own garden? Seen from this perspective, *Life Is So Good* would be, at best, a dismissal of statistics on old-age poverty.

Moreover, we might pause here and reflect on a number of aspects at the core of these collaborative autobiographies of extreme old age. First and foremost, what would it mean in the light of passages such as this one that the copyright to centenarians' narratives such as *Life Is So Good* should lie with the co-author rather than the centenarian himself? One idea that the narrative never entertains, then, is whether the centenarian, too, could have benefitted substantially from the publication of his autobiography, not only in ideational, but also in financial terms. To evoke Couser's notion of "vulnerable subjects," we might ask to what extent these collaborative autobiographies address the need for benefit-sharing at all. As Couser puts it, "Since published life writing is, after all, a commodity – in today's market, often a valuable one –, is it necessary, or at least desirable, to share any proceeds with one's subject?" (xi).

Second, not only can this passage be read as dismissal of old-age poverty, but it uses this poverty as a stepping stone for its depiction of the centenarian's resilience. As Dawson goes on to say, "It's been this way for all these years now. It

wouldn't have helped one bit if I had set to worrying about it. I don't worry. I know that things always work out. I just keep it simple" (*Life Is So Good* 248).

At first sight, George Dawson's account may be very different from that of the Delany sisters. Where Dawson has led a working-class life, the Delanys are both middle-class and highly educated. However, it is significant that both *Life Is So Good* and *Having Our Say* emphatically dismiss the notion of welfare or social security.

Where *Having Our Say* is highly problematic in its neoliberal agenda is in its depiction of black communities' poverty and their ignorance when it comes to nutrition choices. As Bessie remembers,

> The food we ate at Boardman was about the worst diet I have ever been on. I have always been a slim thing, but honey, I got fat while I was there! . . . Those people didn't know the first thing about vitamins or minerals. They were so poor and ignorant . . . . Mama was worried about me, and she would send me these little care packages . . . . Well, Mr. Spudge Atkinson had never seen a grapefruit before. He said, "Miss Delany, what is that ugly-looking piece of fruit?" (Delany and Delany 126–127)

Once again, there is no mention here of the systemic level. In this as in many other instances, the focus is on autonomy, and on individual autonomy. Black centenarians' narratives serve as role models for individual autonomy, and they curiously disregard both race and systemic inequality. The Boardman populations inadequate diet is put down to the community's ignorance, not to any form of systemic injustice or inequality. What is the function of the centenarian here? I believe that there is a risk here of African American centenarian women functioning as a surrogate for neoliberal, presumably color-blind politics of individual autonomy. What happens, then, if we were to read not only what is present in the centenarians' narrative, but also what is absent from it? At the same time, the passage quoted above is as much about class as it may be about race. What I am trying to argue here is that the neoliberalist rhetoric at the heart of the centenarian narrative can be seen as a dismissal of both race and class issues. If the centenarian, by virtue of having "made it" by living into extreme old age, becomes a stand-in for the dominant culture, she also becomes a ventriloquist for neoliberal messages. As Wray and Newitz have argued, "America loves to hate the poor" (1): Where centenarians' narratives can be so misleading is that this white neoliberal rhetoric is now being voiced by an African American centenarian. Her centenarianness entitles the speaker in *Having Our Say* as an arbiter of healthy living. From this vantage point, in turn, she berates the poor for being poor and for "not knowing any better." The point is not, to belabor my point, that there is a system in place which withholds from poor black (and poor white) communities the very knowledge about healthy living, and the means to afford a healthy diet; it is, rather, that the responsibility for being poor lies with

the poor themselves (Wacquant 2009). The point to be made about this passage, I believe, is not only that the Delany sisters happen to be middle-class, educated African Americans; it is, rather, the question of what happens on account of the mixture between middle-classness and centenarian status, particularly as this mixture enters the framework of a centenarians' autobiography which is then being widely circulated. In the passage quoted above, the poor black man is the butt of the middle-class educated centenarian's joke: He cannot tell a grapefruit from a watermelon.

As I argue throughout these chapters, race thus intersects in many different ways with notions of aging and longevity. What is so curious about *Having Our Say*, I would suggest, is that, to use Anthony Appiah's and Amy Gutman's phrase, the autobiography is both colorblind and color-conscious (1996). As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 9, this tension may or may not be due to the fact that this is the autobiography of two African American centenarian sisters co-written by a white co-author. What is striking with regard to the notion of color-blindness, then, is that colorblindness may serve as a form of resilience, a transcendence of social inequality. Seen from this perspective, race and age may be mutually reinforcing. From the way that the life of the Delany sisters is narrated in *Having Our Say*, it would seem that they have been resilient not only about life in general, but about racial inequality as well.

At the same time, however, and this idea of colorblindness and the overcoming of inequality notwithstanding, there is nonetheless a sense that racial inequality *is* being talked about in *Having Our Say*. In the depiction and the presence of African American centenarians, then, there is also the possibility that these autobiographies may be seen as "Trojan horses" that bring the concept of race, of racism and of social inequality into the discourse of longevity. Precisely if the interest in longevity by the general reading public is ubiquitous in the present moment, readers wanting to read about age may come to simultaneously read about race when opening the pages of autobiographies such as the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say* or Ann Nixon Cooper's *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name*. In this context, we may once again want to return to the relationship between "nobody memoirs" and "somebody memoirs" (L. Adams np). The day the centenarian turns one hundred, arguably, they turn from "nobodies" into "somebodies." At the same time, however, it is by virtue of turning 100 that the centenarian who tells their story is now being listened to. In other words, before Sarah "Sadie" Delany turned one hundred and became famous, with her sister Elizabeth "Bessie" Delany, as the Delany sisters, the two African American centenarians, she was also an educator and human rights pioneer. The same is true of her sister Bessie, who is now being remembered on the website of Columbia University. On the website of "C250 Celebrates Columbians Ahead of Their Time," there is an entry on Annie Elizabeth "Bessy" Delany:

> Bessie and Sadie Delany came to New York during the First World War from Jim Crow-era North Carolina, where they were educated at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh. Bessie became one of only 11 women, and the only African-American woman, out of 170 students in the 1919 entering class of the Columbia School of Dental and Oral Surgery. She earned her DDS degree in 1923, and was soon the second black woman dentist licensed in the State of New York. During Harlem's heyday, Bessie looked after the teeth of such luminaries as nightclub owner Ed Small, civil rights leader Louis T. Wright, and author James Weldon Johnson. Widely known throughout the community as "Dr. Bessie," she treated the rich and poor equally, and performed thousands of free children's dental exams. In 1994, Columbia's School of Dental and Oral Surgery awarded her its Distinguished Alumna Award for "her pioneering work as a minority woman in dentistry." ("Annie Elizabeth 'Bessie' Delany")

Crucially, the entry on Elizabeth Delany starts with a reference to the fame she was awarded once she had become a centenarian:

> A mainstay in the Harlem community for much of the twentieth century, "Bessie" Delany came to broader public attention only after the age of 100, when she and her sister, Sarah "Sadie" Delany (1889–1999), a retired teacher, were approached by *New York Times* reporter Amy Hill Hearth. Following the publication of a newspaper story by Hearth, the threesome collaborated on *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*, a best-seller acclaimed as a portrait of a century of African-American life and a self-portrait of pioneering black professional women. It was adapted for Broadway in 1995. The sisters, two of 10 children born to a former slave who became the first African-American Episcopal bishop, witnessed the growth of New York's African-American community from the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance through the civil rights era and into the modern age. ("Annie Elizabeth 'Bessie' Delany")

The point which could be made here, then, is not only that as a highly complex and multi-faceted genre, the centenarian's autobiography may also function as a book of advice, a diet manual or a fitness guide. Rather, it is also that the genre of longevity guide may serve as a door opening for stories about race and social inequality. Even as I argue throughout this study that there is a sense in which most of these autobiographies, many of them co-written by black centenarians and white co-authors, downplay systemic inequality, it is nonetheless striking that issues of racism in US-American history are being addressed in these narratives. Bessie and Sadie's father, Reverend Henry Beard Delany, was the first African American to be chosen as Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Similarly, his daughter Sarah Delany also became a pioneer in her fight for racial inequality: She became the first African American who was allowed to teach domestic science at high school level. On the same Columbia University website, there is an entry on Sarah Louise "Sadie" Delany:

> Sadie Delany was a nonagenarian when she found fame in 1993, after a joint oral history of her life and that of her sister Bessie became the best-selling book *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*. One of ten children born to a former slave who became the first

> African-American Episcopal bishop, Delany was educated at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, N.C. She left the Jim Crow-era South in 1916 to move to New York, where Bessie joined her less than two years later. In 1923 Delany became the first black woman to teach home economics (then called domestic science) in New York City public schools, at Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx. Over the years she also taught at P.S. 119 and both Girls' and Evander Childs High Schools before retiring in 1960 . . . .
>
> Delany enrolled in Teachers College in 1918 after graduating from Pratt Institute, then a two-year college. As a student teacher, she insisted on doing her training at a city public school instead of at the "Negro settlement" on Henry Street, and earned her undergraduate degree in 1920. While studying at Teachers College for the master's degree she would receive in 1925, she ran a side business making and selling the candies she called "Delany's Delights." ("Sarah Louise 'Sadie' Delany")

There is a curious tension here, it could be argued, between the lives of these two women as Civil Rights pioneers and black professionals, on the one hand, and their fame as centenarians. What would it imply, in other words, that the Delany sisters entered history not as Civil Rights pioneers, but as centenarian sisters? Sadie and Bessie Delany became famous, then, only when they published their autobiography *Having Our Say* in 1993, when the sisters were aged 104 and 102, respectively. Their fame, it could be argued, thus derives from a cultural moment in which we have to celebrate longevity as an achievement in its own right. The fascination with extreme longevity, and with successful aging in particular, thus bestows fame on Sarah and Elizabeth Delany. However, as outlined above, it is when entering a story about age that readers will also, unwittingly, enter a narrative about racial justice. From a praxeological perspective, we might thus argue that *Having Our Say* is "doing race" (Hirschauer 2020) as much as it is "doing age."

As I have tried to show in this chapter, centenarian's autobiographies follow a particular choreography that runs through all of the narratives discussed in this study. In this narrative choreography, the centenarian's 100th birthday is both an apex and a beginning: Within the narrative, it is seen as the "crossing of a finish line," as McBurney puts it; it is the apex of an exceptionally long life. Outside the pages of autobiography, the crossing of the line to one's 100th birthday, however, is at once the beginning of public and scientific interest in the centenarian. It is only after their birthday, or sometimes on the day of their birthday, that centenarians are being recruited as subjects for autobiographies and as subjects for life sciences research. It is the 100th birthday, then, that turns the centenarian from a "nobody" into a "somebody." Yet, as I have suggested above with regard to the Delany sisters, this change in importance it in itself questionable: As Civil Rights pioneers, the Delany sisters may not have been "nobodies" but "somebodies" long before they reached their 100th birthday. Thus, the fact that it is their age and not their anti-racist activities that made them famous, tells us something

about the cultural capital of extreme old age; conversely, it may also imply the lack of cultural capital of discussions of anti-racist work in the wider public.

In this as in the other chapters of this book, it is thus important for me to think about what is being said as much as what goes unsaid or unnoticed. What if we resisted the narrative choreography of the 100th birthday as the "finish line"? And what if someone reached this birthday and did not want to write or talk about it? What we may want to resist, then, is the idea of successful aging that is once again embedded in the notion of the 100th birthday as a "finish line" to a long and happy life. A life that may have ended before the finish line, we might want to emphasize, may be a life as fulfilling and as successful as a centenarian's life. A life lived with disability or a moment in which the centenarian crossed the finish line but did not speed across it, may be equally fulfilling. Centenarians' autobiographies in tandem with the notion of successful aging may run the risk of becoming master narratives of aging, then, because they are themselves a "Bestenauswahl," as I have argued in Chapter 2. For every centenarian who is being recruited by a co-author or a gerontologist, there is at least one other centenarian who may be reluctant and skeptical about such recruitment. To us as readers, the challenge may hence be this one: How can we celebrate the lives of centenarians, how can we admire their crossing of the "finish line," without implying that no other finish lines exist, and that there is no other way to cross these lines? In the following chapter, I will now turn to the moment of recruitment itself: the moment in which the centenarian enters the space of public visibility because they agree to making their stories heard or written.

4 Recruiting the Centenarian: Of Willing and Unwilling Subjects

In the choreography of centenarian research, one moment seems to loom particularly large. In order for centenarian research to begin, quite simply, there has to be a centenarian subject willing to engage in such research. The subject's refusal to entertain questions, on the other hand, will signal the end of centenarian research before it has even begun. In this sense, the "material" which will be discussed in the following pages – from gerontological studies to life writing narratives – implies the notion of default: The "sample" described needs to work by default, since it necessarily excludes all the narratives which could have been told, many of them potential alternatives to the "successful aging" delineated by centenarians' autobiographies. As I will try to illustrate in this chapter, these alternatives may to some extent be inferred by reading centenarians' autobiographies against the grain; and they may be pointed to by other genres – in particular, genres by people with dementia – which posit very different forms of aging, but forms which must by no means be seen as "inferior" to the "successful aging" described in many centenarians' autobiographies.

As a rule, all centenarians' autobiographies begin at some point with the act of recruitment. The co-author appears at the centenarian's door, or in his kitchen, and begs the centenarian to let him or her write their "autobiographies." What, then, about the instances where the act of recruitment *failed*? My point here is that we may learn about the processes and politics of recruitment underlying centenarians' autobiographies as much by the "staging" or retelling of such processes in centenarians' autobiographies as by looking for instances or descriptions in which such recruitment failed. To be sure, gerontologists routinely refer to the centenarian subjects who were unwilling to enroll in their study. By the same token, we may wonder about the centenarian who refuses to become the subject of a centenarian's autobiography. This, then, may be the "road not taken"[5] of centenarians' autobiographies; it may be these narratives which may reveal, however, the particular choreography of the centenarians' autobiographies which do get written. By contrast, centenarians' autobiographies like Dawson's or that of the Delany sisters *stage* the moment of refusal only to then cherish the fact that the centenarian finally accepted the co-author's offer.

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5 I am using the title of a poem by Robert Frost here to look at how centenarians' narratives can occur in multiple genres and can take multiple forms.

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4.1 The Road Not Taken: The Musings of a Reluctant Centenarian Subject in Santa Pi's *Revering, Reminiscing, Recordando*

One of the aspects that the present study explores is whether the idea of "successful aging" exemplified by centenarians' autobiographies has become a "master narrative of aging" (Holstein and Minkler 787). Yet, in order not to fall into the trap of such a normalizing of age, it is important to consider what narratives fall outside the scope of successful aging. In this context, it may be indicative to consider Santa Pi's *Revering, Reminiscing, Recordando: Bilingual Muses of a Centenarian* (2009). It is important to note on the outset that while George Dawson, the Delany sisters or Ann Nixon Cooper have become famous through the writing and publishing of their autobiographies, Santa Pi, despite also having published a book that mentions the "centenarianness" of its author, has come to hold no such fame. While there have been TV specials, newspaper articles, and, in the case of the Delany sisters, even a feature film about the "other" centenarians portrayed in this study, Santa Pi neither has a webpage in her own name nor is she mentioned on the website of "Gerontology Wiki." This website, in turn, may itself serve as an indication of the fact that longevity has become a form of cultural capital: the web address where Gerontology Wiki can be located is "gerontology-fandom.com."

Beyond the fact of Santa Pi's having reached her 100th birthday, then, little public information is available on this centenarian. As I would like to illustrate in this chapter, 100 may only be a number; Santa Pi's life may thus be longevity without its narrativization. What happens, in other words, if the centenarian crosses the finish line but there is no-one there to talk about it? What if, even more importantly in the case of Santa Pi, the centenarian herself refuses the terms, the choreography that have been designed for the "telling" of extreme longevity? As I will show below, then, Santa Pi resists precisely the link between a centenarian's life narrative and the discourse of successful aging; and it is this resistance that may make her narrative so interesting and in its own particular way, compelling.

As a centenarian narrative, Pi's account seems to defy virtually all the dictates of the master narrative of extreme longevity which autobiographies such as George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*, the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say*, or Ann Nixon Cooper's *The Day the President Called My Name* exemplify. First and foremost, Pi's book is not an autobiography, even though her poems are in fact autobiographical. Second, it is an account not by an African American centenarian, as all the above-mentioned autobiographies are, but a book written by a Puerto-

Rican American poet. Third, the book is not a co-written account. Unlike virtually all of the centenarians' narratives discussed in this study, it is hence not based on a dialogue between a centenarian and an interviewer cum co-author. The list of discrepancies between this unusual account by a Puerto Rican centenarian and the centenarians' autobiographies analyzed in this book is a long one. Remarkably, the poems contained in Pi's volume are in large print. This aspect may be crucial when it comes to potential readership. As I argue throughout this book, the implicit audience envisioned by centenarians' autobiographies are middle-aged readers. Pi's account, by contrast, may also address an older readership; in any case, its print gestures towards inclusivity.

In the preface entitled "Revering" (3), Pi discusses the issue of migration. Having migrated to New York from Puerto Rico, she was faced with loneliness and isolation. In complete contrast to the centenarians' narratives discussed in this book, then, Pi's is not a colorblind narrative: it refuses to reconcile itself to what is implicitly described as American racism:

> I was born in 1908 on the beautiful island of Puerto Rico. My parents gave me a love for verse and literature very early in my life . . . . The following years found me in New York City – homesick and heart broken – when in my native language of Spanish I began writing poetry to ease my pain. (3)

The preface then explicitly shifts to the period of old age and the idea of retirement. Here, too, Pi's account is at odds with the centenarians' autobiographies examined throughout these chapters. George Dawson, the Delany sisters and R. Waldo McBurney unanimously insist that they would never consider retirement. It is in this instance, too, that they are emblematic of the concept of active and "successful aging." Pi's narrative breaks with this implicit norm of perpetual activity. Instead, it invokes the idea of retirement in connection to reminiscing. Moreover, while the centenarians' narratives discussed here reiterate that "life is so good" and that "it is well with [the centenarian's] soul," as the title of Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's autobiography has it, Pi concedes that many of her memories are sad:

> The retirement has brought me serenity and time to admire the Creator's world which I have expressed in many of my English poems . . . . Yet to me [the poems also reveal] that, even in my present peaceful state and deep reverence for the Supreme Being, I still have sad memories which bring me to tears. (3)

Even as Pi's narrative shares with autobiographies such as the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say* and Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's *It Is Well with My Soul* the centenarian's deep religiosity, it differs from the other aspects inherent in the pattern of successful aging evinced in these latter narratives. Pi's memories are not predominantly defined by resilience, but they admit to the sadness and loneliness

that accompanies the loss of one's loved ones. Throughout this book, I argue that the contemporary fascination with longevity is not only with centenarians, but more importantly, with happy centenarians. It is this desire for hearing stories about centenarians who are not lonely but happy and resilient that books such as John Robbins' *Healthy at 100* and Steve Franklin's and Lynn Peters Adler's *Celebrate 100* speak of. If, as I argue in Chapter 8, centenarians' autobiographies can be read as ethnographic accounts, not just any native will do: Instead, the ethnographer needs a native subject who will confirm his expectations, hopes and projections about what it means to live to one hundred. It is these expectations that Santa Pi's poetic reminiscences defy. Pi's narrative constitutes a centenarian's narrative "off the beaten path" (MacCannell 1973, 594) of the contemporary tourism into the country of extreme old age.

No wonder, then, that no-one may have bothered to recruit Santa Pi for an account which confirms the master narrative of successful aging. Her poems defy such recruitment, because they defy the logic which underlies this master narrative. To borrow an expression from the domain of African American literature, in the words of Langston Hughes, Santa Pi refuses to "sing America": If the African American centenarians whose stories this book discusses happily rejoice in the logic of colorblindness that these co-written accounts emphasize, Pi describes herself as a mute poet who refuses to sing of happiness. As she writes in "How Shall I Sing?,"

> I want to sing of happiness, but my harp is
> mute
> I cannot sing of things that I do not know
> I can only sing of things that I have seen
> Or of things that are within me
> Which are things of sorrow.
>
> I shall sing of pain, of parting, of absences
> Of solitude, hunger and poverty,
> Of anxieties, doubts and insecurities
> O the hopelessness and loneliness. (7)

Throughout these chapters, I argue that there is a certain sensationalism inherent in centenarians' narratives co-written by African American centenarians and white co-authors. As a rule, these accounts stress that the centenarians managed to live to one hundred despite the dire poverty, social inequality and racism that many of them were faced with. These black centenarians sing America – or they are made to sing America by their co-author. Pi's narrative refuses to erase memories of "poverty" and "pain"; instead, her poems can be read as an indictment of a country in which, in the twentieth century, immigrants like herself were not welcome.

As I have argued in Chapter 3 in particular, there is a fixed choreography and narrative pattern to the centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this book. All of these narratives center on the writing subject's 100th birthday as the "finish line," to use R. Waldo McBurney's words. It is hence all the more remarkable that Pi's account of her own life should also defy this requirement inherent in the master narrative of "successful centenarianness": In the first part of her book, she writes not about her one hundredth, but her ninety-sixth birthday. Unlike Ann Nixon Cooper who danced the electric slide when she turned 104 (Cooper and Bates 2014, 188), Pi's memory of her ninety-sixth birthday is marked by loneliness:

> On my 96th year:
> My Birthday Song
> . . .
> Then I want to sing and sing and rock
> On my rocking chair back and forth
> And forget the sorrows,
> The age and lonely life.
> The Lord, I thanked with all my heart and mind. (9)

Crucially, I propose in this book that in centenarians' autobiographies such as *Life Is So Good* and *It Is Well with My Soul*, the system gets off scot-free. There is no indictment of the social system – the absence of health care, the persistence of social inequality – because these narratives reiterate the fact that, if it is possible for all these African American centenarians to live to one hundred and beyond, there is nothing wrong with the system. It is this myth, also, that Santa Pi's poetry refutes.

If, as I am trying to prove in this study, there are fixed requirements that centenarians' autobiographies have to fulfill in order to satisfy the public's desire for a particular image of longevity – the image of being healthy and happy at 100 –, Pi's nonconformity to these dictates is remarkable in one more respect. In fact, other than the fact that her book is called the "bilingual muses of a centenarian," there are in fact few traces of centenarianness in the book. If, as I suggest in Chapter 8, centenarians' autobiographies can be read as ethnographies into the bizarre, somewhat freakish world of (black) centenarian subjects, then it is also symptomatic of Pi's unruliness as a centenarian subject that she defies such ethnography. Her poetry does not invite the reader into the centenarian's life or home. Instead, she returns the reader's gaze in a gesture that is not conciliant, but almost hostile:

> If you ever wonder
> Why my words
> In prose and in verse
> Have been written and read
>
> Try to empty your soul
> of all bitterness,
> By pouring it out
> Onto paper or space,
> When you are alone and tired
> And there is nothing else. (15)

What this image of the centenarian's life reveals is the complete opposite of centenarians' autobiographies such as the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say*. In the Delany sisters' narrative, co-written with Amy Hill Hearth, the reader encounters two African American centenarians, happily going about their lives as if unobserved. Their life is portrayed as the hustle and bustle of ordinary life; the account stresses the fact that the sisters are neither idle nor lonely. It is in these aspects that they confirm the idea of "successful aging" in each and every way. By contrast, Santa Pi speaks of a life spent in loneliness, where reminiscing becomes the sole occupation.

It may be little wonder, then, that Pi's poetic remembrances should have been published by AuthorHouse, not by Random House, where George Dawson's *Life Is So Good* appeared. AuthorHouse, by contrast, is a self-publishing service. Santa Pi's poetry, even though she, too, is a centenarian, has not been considered material for a bestseller, because it defies all the mandates of the master narrative of successful aging. In the context of the present study, however, accounts such as Santa Pi's are all the more important because unless we include such narratives into the study of extreme longevity, we will fall into the trap of acquiescing with the master narrative of successful aging. The logic of successful aging is circular: Each of these centenarians' autobiographies confirms that it is indeed possible – and perhaps even probable – to live to one hundred healthily and happily, if only we follow the proper rules, such as exercise and a good diet. In this context, life writing and life sciences go hand in hand: centenarians' life writing confirms that Rowe and Kahn were indeed right to speak of the possibility of "successful aging." Yet, this circular logic is deeply misleading: The discourse of centenarianness in both the life sciences and in the domain of life writing has tended to exclude narratives that do not fit this mold. In this context, it may once again be useful to reconsider the title of the book of interviews with centenarians from across the globe written by Brinkbäumer and Shafy. The title of their book, *Das kluge, lustige, gesunde, umgebremste, glückliche, sehr lange Leben: Die Weisheit der Hundertjährigen*, is completely at odds with Santa Pi's account of her own

life as a centenarian: Pi's life, as it is recorded in her poetry, is anything but "lustig" or "ungebremst"; instead, it is a life defined by loneliness and sometimes also despair.

Accounts such as Santa Pi's poetic memoirs fall outside the scope of the study of centenarianness, because Pi is a reluctant centenarian at best. Yet, her account shows the picture book world of successful aging to be a myth. This picture, I suggest throughout these chapters, may be a projection which is needed by both the middle-aged co-author of these centenarians' narratives and an equally middle-aged readership. It is hence as important to look at the narratives included in the discourse of successful aging and happy centenarianness, I suggest, as it is crucial to look at the roads not taken or considered by this discourse, and the narratives not included.

4.2 The Challenge of Recruiting a Centenarian

The refusal to be recruited, in fact, becomes a teaser for the centenarian's autobiography itself: the feat of recruitment is all the more laudable because the centenarian is made to change her mind under the co-author's friendly but determined *persistence*. This persistence, as a rule, is said in the narrative to be purely altruistic on the part of the co-author. What emerges at this juncture is an economic industry of centenarians' autobiographies as a form of serial literary production which carefully veil their economic undercurrent.

At the same time, the idea that the centenarian has to be "recruited" is itself emblematic of the politics of representing extreme old age which informs centenarians' autobiographies. In the process of recruitment, the ethnographic desire of both the co-author and his audience converges with the need for centenarians' narratives born of the riddle of longevity. If looking for the solution of what makes extreme old age possible has becoming the hunting for the grail of the new millennium, each new centenarian's narrative may turn out to provide the final piece to the completion of the puzzle. Crucially, the hunt for centenarians fit enough to tell their story links gerontologists to journalists and prospective co-authors of literary autobiographies. This parallelism suggests that the domain of the life sciences can no longer be separated from the domains of literature and journalism. Each of these domains, rather, may inform and respond to the other. The hunt for centenarians and for their narratives as a potential solution to the riddle of longevity is thus characteristic of a given moment in time, a moment which defines research in gerontology and the social sciences as much as it sparks off a proliferation of newspaper articles and the production of literary autobiographies.

In its hunt for and recruitment of centenarians, for instance, the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie, proceeded as follows. First, it identified its main research question. Why should we study centenarians in the first place? Put in more abstract terms, each "study" of centenarians hence has to legitimate itself. In order for such legitimation to be successful, it has to carefully define its relationship to the centenarian. Underlying this necessity for legitimation, it can be argued, is the idea that centenarians are "vulnerable subjects" (Couser xii). They are vulnerable in many different senses, all of them as central to life sciences research as they are to the politics of autobiography. As Thomas Couser has argued with regard to the writing of autobiographies, a subject is "vulnerable" to the extent that she cannot tell her own story. Couser notes, "I am especially concerned here with the representation of subjects who are vulnerable to misrepresentation or betrayal because of some disadvantaged condition, particularly certain kinds of disability" (7). It could be argued, then, that to the extent that they are unable to author their own story or approve of the finished product, the actual autobiography, centenarians may also be vulnerable in this sense. What is particularly noteworthy here is that Couser should identify "extreme age" as one of the factors that may make subjects vulnerable to misrepresentation by others. He writes, "Conditions that render subjects vulnerable range from the age-related (extreme youth or age) and the physiological (illness and impairments, physical or mental) to membership in socially or culturally disadvantaged minorities" (xii).

The telling of this story by a "proxy" thus has to be legitimated and carefully justified. It can be justified, for instance, if a given account of the vulnerable subject's life makes available to the public a story which would otherwise have remained untold. Thus, it may be important for an author to write the life, for instance, of a person living with Down syndrome in order to claim equal rights for the Down Syndrome community. This biography, authored by someone else, may hence serve to drive home to the public the needs and desires of a person with Down syndrome. This is a claim made by Michael Bérubé in writing the biography of his son Jamie in *Life as We Know It* (1998). Yet, it must be noted in this context that this telling of someone's life in lieu of this person himself must always emphasize that this speaking for another person will always remain incomplete. Each biography, in this sense, must always point to the need for autobiography. This kinship between biography and autobiography, and the necessary hierarchy between the two, is vividly illustrated by the different editions of Bérubé's *Life as We Know It*: In later editions, the book included Jamie's own voice (Bérubé 2016). The co-author's presence, in this context, may be necessary, but it has to be carefully negotiated against the presence and voice of the biography's subject. For such poli-

tics of justification to be successful, it could be argued, the co-author has to make herself visible in the text.

At the same time, the subject of such a biography is vulnerable in yet another sense. To the extent that this subject cannot author her own narrative due to mental or physical impairments, she may be equally unable to read the account which has been written about her life (Couser 2003). Yet, this possibility of approval in which the subject of the narrative voices her consent to what has been written about her may be central to the author's or co-author's legitimacy. The vulnerable subject's approval of the text is the ultimate proof of these text's "authenticity." In the absence of such approval, we are left with the co-author's truth claim, with the claim that the narrative was written *as if it had been written by the vulnerable subject herself.*

What does this mean for the politics of recruiting a centenarian? In order to understand the representational politics, which surround centenarians' autobiographies, Couser's description has to be modified. It is important to note that in many of the accounts of how the eventual centenarians' autobiography came into being, it is not really clear who recruited whom: Did the co-author recruit a centenarian or vice versa? The co-author's recollection of his first meeting with "his" or "her" centenarian often seems to remain deliberately vague. In virtually all instances, however, it is striking that it is the co-author who hunts for the centenarian, never the centenarian himself who looks for co-authors to write down his life's narrative. Seen from this angle, the centenarian is as much the object of his narrative as he is its subject. As in Couser's account of biographies written about the lives of "vulnerable subjects," it is the prospective author of these biographies who identifies a need for their production. What is central in this context, on the other hand, is the relationship between altruism and self-interest. Authors of biographies of the lives of "vulnerable subjects" stress the fact that they are writing in the interest of a larger public, which needs to learn about the condition and quality of life of, for instance, a person with disability in order to grant to this person, equal rights and the possibility of social participation. The extent of the author's self-interest, his particular stake in writing another person's autobiography, on the other hand, often remains invisible. This may be particularly true of centenarians' autobiographies.

How, then, does the Heidelberg Centenarian Study justify its own claim that studying the lives of centenarians is a necessity for the larger public? In this longitudinal study, researchers begin with stressing the fact that the group of the oldest old is the fastest growing group in contemporary Western societies (Wetle 1159). This demographic shift, they argue, makes it important for states to revise their social policy programs; in these programs, the oldest old – their needs, life circumstances, and desires – are said to have been blatantly underrepresented (Wetle

1159). What is crucial in this context is that the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie, conducted by gerontologists and social scientists, centers on centenarians' own accounts of their situation. A social group's needs are thus no longer described by others but formulated by members of this group themselves. This shift in representation could not be more central: As a rule, previous studies of the oldest old centered on research about, rather than with, nonagenarians and centenarians, and mostly represented old age as an inevitable process of decay. The Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie, taking its cue from the New England Centenarian Study, broke with both these assumptions. It set out to prove that sickness, disability or frailty, as well as mental impairment, do not always accompany extreme old age; and it set out to prove this claim by turning to the narratives of centenarians themselves. These centenarians were recruited, then, within a given geographical region, the region surrounding the city of Heidelberg. Once centenarians living in the area had been identified, centenarians had to be contacted. This contacting, researchers indicate, often turned out to be impossible because as a rule, centenarians did not respond to letters and often had no telephone. In addition to these pragmatic and material obstacles to contacting the centenarians, however, there was yet another barrier to be squared. Researchers had to assess whether the centenarians were able to tell their story, and to answer the researchers' questions; and whether, if such ability was the case, they were willing to participate in the study. This is an instance which may lend itself to a comparison between longitudinal studies of centenarians in the life sciences on the one hand, and centenarians' autobiographies on the other. In both gerontologists' studies and centenarians' autobiographies, there is little to no record of the centenarians who were unwilling to talk to the researcher or potential co-author about their own lives. Little is known, moreover, about the reasons for centenarians' unwillingness to participate in these studies, aimed ultimately at solving the riddle of longevity. To what extent, then, do centenarians refuse to be treated as enigmas, or to become celebrities? Which door remains closed to the eager gerontologist or literary author standing on the centenarian's doorstep?

One aspect in which the Heidelberg Centenarian Study and centenarians' autobiographies seem to differ at first glance is the extent to which they included the centenarian's own narrative. In keeping with their social science agenda, the Heidelberg study was based on questionnaires, which aimed, first and foremost, to assess the degree of their subject's mental fitness. Fully fledged interviews with the centenarian, researchers note, could be conducted only in one-fourth of the cases. Even in the case of these interviews, however, the results were recorded in questionnaires. A questionnaire, then, is vastly different from an autobiography, or so it would seem. Yet, a number of questions arise in this context which are central to understanding the representational politics surrounding the publication of cente-

narians' autobiographies. First, it remains unclear from these co-written autobiographies what and how much the centenarian actually said. He may simply answer "yes" to a long and complex question asked by the co-author, or he may proceed to tell the co-author a complex narrative of his own. The difference between the social scientist's questionnaire and the literary author's autobiography, seen in this context, may not be so vast, after all. Secondly, it is important to note that both the Heidelberg study and centenarians' autobiographies resort to a "proxy" through whom the centenarian's life narrative can be corroborated. In the case of the Heidelberg study, centenarians identify a proxy – usually a relative or close friend – who is asked by researchers to verify the centenarian's claims, or to provide information where the centenarian is unable to do so. This approach is similar in other centenarian studies. As MacDonald et al. write, "The goals of this study were to uncover the criteria by which centenarians, proxy/caregivers, and interviewers rated centenarians' mental health. Often proxy and interviewer reports are obtained in studies of the oldest-old and become a primary source of information" (1).

In the case of centenarians' autobiographies, on the other hand, it could be argued that the co-author herself serves as a proxy. In this case, however, the politics of the proxies are more complicated than in the Heidelberg study. In the case of centenarians' autobiographies, the legitimacy and self-legitimation of the proxy are themselves highly complex. Similarly to the Heidelberg study, the proxy can be said to fill in the blanks left in the centenarian's narrative; in both instances, it is impossible to know where the centenarian's narrative ends and the proxy's begins. In the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie, on the other hand, centenarians themselves identify relatives or close friends as proxy. In centenarians' autobiographies, the co-author herself identifies as a proxy. In fact, the process of recruitment is itself significant of the politics of the proxy here. When she appears on the centenarian's doorstep, the prospective co-author does not identify herself except as a person who would like to write down the centenarian's story. It is important here that the "identity" of this person is left deliberately unclear: as a prospective co-author, she may want to become a literary author in her own right, with the centenarian's autobiography paving the way for her own literary career; as a lay researcher into the riddle of extreme old age, she may write for the benefit of the public; and as a spokesperson for the oldest old, she may write a book contributing, in small part, to the drawing up of new social policies. What is central to the politics of the proxy, however, is that regardless of which of these identities apply, the prospective co-author sets out to become the centenarian's friend and confidante. Many of these narratives stress, usually from the perspective of the co-author, that in the process of writing the centenarian's autobiography, the co-author and the centenarian became close friends; in time, the co-author is looked upon by "his" centenarian as "family," or so the narratives would have us believe. While in the

Heidelberg study, centenarians can identify their own proxy, in the case of centenarians' autobiographies, they are stuck with a co-author who self-identifies as a proxy and close friend.

In many of these narratives, one of the central climaxes in the narrative trajectory is the moment of the would-be proxy appearing on the centenarian's doorstep. Inevitably, this moment of the first encounter is told from the co-author's perspective. Crucially, the narrative never begins with the co-author standing on the centenarian's doorstep, but rather, with a detailed description of the co-author's own professional or personal life and his motives for contacting the centenarian. There is a passage of rising action and suspense, then, as we hope, standing in the co-author's footsteps, that the centenarian will not simply slam the door shut in this white stranger's face.

Part of the politics of legitimation which undergird centenarians' autobiographies as a whole is the process through which the co-author wins the centenarian's trust. This is done with a mixture of self-identification and the stressing of the co-author's altruism. Moreover, in centenarians' autobiographies co-written by white co-authors or "proxies," race is first described as an obstacle to co-authorship and then transcended through the mutual "friendship" between the co-author and her centenarian, as Richard Glaubman puts it in the title of one of his books about centenarian George Dawson, *More than a Book: A Story of Friendship* (2008). The politics of the proxy, then, serve to reinforce the argument that these centenarians' autobiographies are transracial in the sense that they overcome, through the close tie between co-author and centenarian, the barriers of race and racial identity. In fact, many of these narratives are choreographed in such a way that the initial refusal by the centenarian to reveal her life's secrets to the stranger on her doorstep serves only to emphasize the closeness and transracial "kinship" that subsequently develops between the co-author and her subject. The recruitment process is complete, then, once the centenarian emphasizes, allegedly in his own words, that he has come to trust his co-author. As George Dawson says – or is said to have said – in *Life Is So Good*,

> I've never been that keen on visiting, but lately I been talking a lot about my [early] days . . . with this man that be coming to see me now. His name is Richard. He has lots of questions, thinks he wants to write a book. He comes with a tape recorder and we just sit and talk all day. He's different than other people that I know. I don't mean because he's white or because he's younger than me. Most folks that I know don't read so much and don't have great book learning. This man Richard is different that way. He's read a lot of books and knows about things I never heard of. At the same time, for all his reading, he didn't even know what chitlins is. I had to tell him. He didn't even know how to slaughter a hog. I had to tell him how to do that too. So, at the same time, I know about somethings he is ignorant of. (Glaubman and Dawson 49)

For an understanding of the politics of collaborative life writing, this passage is significant in different ways. First, it describes, allegedly in the centenarian's own voice, the first encounter between the centenarian and his co-author. The fact that the narrative should use "black English" here can be said to stress the "authenticity" of this passage. It is really, the narrative implies through this choice of register, the black centenarian who is speaking here. Second, the narrative seems to be at pains to stress that there is by no means a hierarchy at work between the co-author and "his" subject, the centenarian: He, Richard Glaubman, may have "book learning," but the centenarian knows how to slaughter a hog. The notion of mutuality here serves to establish what is portrayed as a genuine form of collaboration, with neither of the parties benefitting more than the other from the writing of the book.

The fact that in dust-jacket blurbs and interviews, co-authors refer to "their" centenarians only heightens this claim to the kinship between the centenarian and their co-author. There is a sort of proprietary interest which each co-author seems to have in "his" centenarian. What is curious, then, is that this proprietary interest is never said to clash with the co-author's altruism in telling the centenarian's life to a public that needs to know, or with his own interest in economic terms. The co-author, after all, makes a living writing the centenarian's "autobiography."

What seems so intriguing to note in this context is that co-written centenarians' autobiographies seem to go out of their way to stress that this is not a collaboration between strangers, but between friends or family. As Thomas Couser has noted in his discussion of "vulnerable subjects," the distinction between a professional and a trust-based cooperation is crucial in assessing life writing narratives. According to him, "Of primary importance is intimate life writing – that done within families or couples, close relationships, or quasi-professional relationships that involve trust – rather than conventional biography, which can be written by a stranger" (xii). The point to be made about centenarians' autobiographies is that they could in fact be regarded as rather conventional biographies. When the co-author appears on the centenarian's doorstep, he is in fact a stranger to them. Why, then, would the narratives go through such pain to assert that they are in fact "trust-based" collaborations, as if between friends or relatives? I believe that this question is at the core of collaborative centenarians' autobiographies, and the politics of aging they invoke. As I propose throughout these chapters, many of the aspects that make for the fascination of these life writing accounts require a narrative scenario that is "intimate" rather than professional: In their strife for "authenticity," these narratives have to provide us with a glimpse behind the scenes; they have to portray the centenarians in backstage rather than frontstage encounters, as I will elaborate in Chapter 8. Moreover, these accounts hinge on the concept of altruism: the idea that the co-author does not write or publish the

story for their own gain, but that of humanity. If, on the other hand, the act of collaborative life writing was revealed as a business transaction – which in fact it may be –, all of these claims would come to nil.

4.3 Recruitment as a Moment of Conversion in the Delany Sisters' *Having Our Say*

In the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say*, the moment when the centenarian subject – or, in this case, the centenarian subject*s* – are being persuaded to let a prospective co-author, Amy Hill Hearth, write their autobiography, takes an even more complex turn. In this narrative, the moment of recruitment can even be said to be a moment of conversion. In this conversion process, the centenarian sisters are turned, by virtue of successful persuasion, from unwilling subjects into willing ones. It is interesting to consider here that the effect of this dramatization – the persuasion of a centenarian who is unwilling to participate in a social scientific study, or to be interviewed for a co-written autobiography – may have on the reader. There is a sense here in which the narrative politics of a centenarian's autobiography are also spatial ones. If the centenarian, for both the life sciences and the general public, is an enigma and holds the key to the secret of extreme longevity, then the spatial format which may follow from this characteristic is that of inside and outside. At the beginning of the "project" of a co-written centenarian's autobiography, the co-author finds herself on the outside of the centenarian's life, figuratively conveyed by this co-author's standing on the centenarian's doorstep. The co-author, like the general public, is begging to be let inside, for it is inside the centenarian's home that the secret of longevity may be revealed. If indeed one of the clues to the enigma of longevity is the centenarian's lifestyle, this lifestyle can be deduced from the décor of the centenarian's home. It is for this very reason that the movement, in centenarians' autobiographies, from the doorstep into the kitchen or the living room is such a crucial one.

Another question which arises with regard to the politics of recruitment is that of motivation. What, exactly, makes the prospective co-author appear at the centenarian's door? It is this motivation, the reasons for the co-author's wanting to embark on this particular project, which may be at the heart of unraveling centenarians' autobiographies as a phenomenon of our time. In the case of Amy Hill Hearth's preface to *Having Our Say*, it is significant that self-interest should be downplayed to the utmost extent. Rather, what emerges is a tightly knit net of connections between journalism, publishers, and the general public. If journalists constantly have to be on the lookout for new stories, it is particularly noteworthy here that Hearth was on an "assignment" for the editor of the newspaper she was

working for at the time. This assignment, in turn, may be an indication of the general interest in and fascination with longevity, which may fuel newspaper coverage of centenarians' lives as much as it prompts the writing – or rather, the co-writing, of centenarians' autobiographies. In the case of Amy Hill Hearth, journalism and the co-authoring of autobiographies of extreme old age are closely intertwined: "When I met Sadie Delany and her sister, Bessie, in September 1991, I was on assignment for the *New York Times*, hoping to write a story on these two older but reclusive sisters who had just celebrated their one-hundred-and-second and one-hundredth birthdays" ("Preface" xiii). At the same time, it is significant here that it is implied that *The New York Times* as the prospective co-author's credential, provided by a highly respected newspaper, may not suffice in persuading the centenarian sisters to embark on either writing or co-writing their autobiography. In order to win the centenarian's trust, then, there has to be a mediator, whose approval may be much more valuable to the centenarian than a note from *The New York Times*. In the case of Amy Hill Hearth, this reputation was vouched for by a neighbor: "In my hand, I carried a letter written by their neighbor in Mount Vernon, New York, who had extended an invitation to come by and meet them" ("Preface" xiii). Crucially, the nature of the letter as a potential proof testifying to the appropriateness of the prospective co-author, Amy Hill Hearth, is highly ambivalent here. For the letter itself does not even pertain to Hearth's character or person, but is, rather, an invitation of the sisters by their former neighbor. What signifies as a gesture of trustworthiness, however, is the fact that said neighbor was willing to hand the letter to Amy Hill Hearth and thus to trust her as a mediator.

In the dramaturgy which leads up to the actual centenarians' narrative, it is important for Hill's narrative to dwell on potential obstacles which had to be overcome. The more dramatic the obstacle, it can be argued, the more "precious" the actual narrative may be. To the extent that the co-author is able to demonstrate the initial reluctance by the centenarian subjects, she will be all the more successful in demonstrating the depth, authenticity and legitimacy of the "bond" which she has subsequently formed with her narrative subjects. As Hearth goes on to say, "I was prepared to be turned away" ("Preface" xiii).

Once the door opens, moreover, the obstacles to the prospect of a co-written autobiography increase rather than decrease. The person who meets Amy Hill Hearth at the door is not a meek, passive or malleable older lady, but a potential opponent: "I knocked on the door. I waited and raised my hand to knock again, when suddenly the door swung open. The woman who answered, with her head held high, her eyes intense and penetrating, extended her hand in formal greeting. 'I am Dr Delany,' she said elegantly" ("Preface" xiii–xiv). This passage is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, because it serves to illustrate that Bessie

Delany is anything but a passive subject. Conversely, demonstrating the centenarian subject's agency may be one of the most central tasks of establishing the legitimacy of a centenarian's autobiography. Implicitly or explicitly, the narrative has to make sure that the centenarian whose life narrative it pretends to be does not come across as what Thomas Couser has called a "vulnerable subject" (7). In order for the co-written autobiography to work as an *autobiography*, then, the subject whose life is being told must be an able-bodied, able-minded one. (I will return to the problematic implications of such terminology as this chapter progresses.) This assurance is necessary, I would argue, in order to strictly delineate a co-written autobiography from a ghostwritten narrative, or a narrative which is actually written by the co-author in its entirety, with the centenarian being a mere prompter, a token presence in what is then marketed as her life narrative. Such a representation of the centenarian's life by someone other than the centenarian, in turn, would be problematic in two aspects in particular: It would establish the dominance, by a middle-aged co-author, over the life of the person whose life narrative she proposes to write. Secondly, on the level of race, it would symbolize the dominance, by a white co-author, of the life of a black centenarian subject.

In the description of the Delany sisters' recruitment, class serves as another layer which is used to defuse the potential assumption that the co-author has any form of mastery or discursive dominance over her older subjects. After all, Sadie Delany is not only elegant but holds a PhD. As the description of the initiation of the actual interview between the co-author and the Delany sisters progresses, the idea of dominance is dispelled or refuted in one more sense. If anything, this initial encounter, as it is *portrayed* in Hearth's preface, seems to inverse potential power constellations in favor of the two centenarian sisters, as I will elaborate below. Here, age is implied to result in gestures of dominance: Because of her age, Hearth is a mere "child" to the centenarian sisters. Finally, the very title of the narrative, "Having Our Say" may function as dismissing any suspicion that the co-author might hold power over the actual narrative. "Having Our Say" implies, as I will illustrate in further detail below, not only that the Delany sisters are outspoken in matters of race and refuse to mince words when it comes to racism, but that they will also not be subdued or in any form cater to the co-author's desires. All these aspects, of course, serve to establish the legitimacy and authenticity of the actual narrative: this narrative, it is implied, is in fact the "actual" narrative told to the co-author by the centenarian subjects. It is at this point that, given the very genre of co-authored autobiographies, we arrive at an impasse: From the written text, it is impossible to disentangle the co-author's voice from the voices of the Delany sisters. We may thus have to take the co-author's word that she was almost absent from the narrative. Conversely, these reiterations of the Delany sisters' agency may be mere truth claims on the part of the co-author, who is at pains to efface her own presence in the narrative.

The reference to *The New York Times*, however, may actually be misleading. As it turns out as the preface progresses, Hearth's assignment at the time was only to write an article, not a fully-fledged autobiography. Yet, because the assignment is mentioned at the beginning of her co-written autobiography of the Delany sisters, it may remain deliberately vague how far the assignment may carry.

As the story opens, then, the sides seem to have been reversed: It is not, this passage implies, that the co-author wants to recruit the centenarian subjects who, potentially, possess less agency than Hearth, a professional journalist sent by the *New York Times*. Rather, the following anecdote serves to imply that at the beginning of their relationship, the two centenarian sisters are having a good laugh at this strange woman who has suddenly entered their house:

> She ushered me into the house, and from across the room, another elderly woman said sweetly, "Please, come in child. Won't you sit down?" This was the elder sister, Sadie Delany. I must have hesitated for a moment. "Go on, sit down. We won't charge you rent." Then they laughed uproariously at this little joke. ("Preface" xiv)

This passage is certainly remarkable given the power dynamics of centenarian autobiographies as such. In this situation of first encounter, it is the sisters who are in charge, making fun of this strange white woman's uneasiness in the home of two middle-class, centenarian sisters. Moreover, it is she, the much younger woman, who is addressed as a "child" by these women, who are clearly in charge of the encounter. As will become clear throughout the narrative, Sadie and Bessie Delany thrive on their good companionship and sisterly love and understanding. The fact that this autobiography, even if it is being co-authored, is the narrative of two centenarian sisters, thus implies from the outset that the interviewees rather than the interviewer will be in charge. This is further emphasized by the choice of title, "Having Our Say." The inverse power dynamics, which puts the centenarians in charge of their middle-aged guest, further extends to the politics of race in the passage cited above. The pun about charging the guest rent for overstaying implies that the sisters may be the African American hosts of a white woman tenant. This implication, at the risk of overinterpreting the joke, would also be in line with the overall narrative's outspoken race politics, in which Sadie and Bessie Delany's outspoken resistance to racial inequality reigns supreme.

As the preface progresses, however, it becomes clear that the mastermind, who can describe moments of inverse power relations if she chooses to, is the co-author herself. Once the article on the two centenarian sisters is published, Hearth writes, readers are enamored with these two older black women. In this description, the sisters are turned from "landlords" into curiosities, and endearing curiosities at that. "'When my piece was published,'" Hearth notes, "'reaction was swift. Readers fell in love with the Delany sisters'" ("Preface" xiv).

The decision to write a fully-fledged autobiography of Sadie and Bessie Delany, then, is said to be the editor's, not the impulse of the co-author herself. As the preface goes on to inform us, "Among those who read my article, were editors at Kodansha America, Inc., who felt that the Delanys' story deserved to be a book" ("Preface" xiv). What emerges here, I would argue, is what I would call a "centenarian industry": newspapers, publishing houses and co-authors each stand to gain from writing and publishing centenarians' life narratives. What is equally significant in this passage, and symptomatic of centenarian autobiographies, however, is that the co-author herself tends to disappear from view. At no point does the narrative refer to Hearth's own career, and her motivation in writing the Delany sisters' autobiography.

How, then, does the co-author coax the centenarian subject into wanting her story written in the first place? One aspect is particularly significant in the context of *Having Our Say*: On the one hand, the narrative insists, time and again, that the relationship between Amy Hill Hearth and the Delany sisters is colorblind, that race plays no role whatsoever in what will eventually be a close relationship, even friendship. On the other hand, it is clear from the outset, as Hearth's preface indicates, that the narrative will be marketed as a story about race as much as about age and longevity:

> At first the sisters demurred, unsure that their life stories were sufficiently interesting or significant. But they came to see that by recording their story, they were participating in a tradition as old as time: the passing of knowledge and experience from one generation to another. The daughters of a man born into slavery and a mother of mixed racial parentage who was born free, the sisters recall what it meant to be "colored" children in the late nineteenth century in the South. ("Preface" xiv–xv)

In this as in many other instances in *Having Our Say*, it could be argued that race is actually at odds with age in the telling of the centenarians' narrative. The point, I would argue, is not so much that race is absent from the Delany sisters' autobiography, but rather, that the fact that they lived to one hundred in what is, after all, a racially biased society, testifies possibly, to the idea that racism may not be as detrimental as we think it is, or, alternatively, that the sisters' resilience is such that they lived into extreme old age against all odds. In neither of these cases is the "system" itself at fault. As Bessie Delany puts it in *Having Our Say*, "Oppressed people have a good sense of humor. Think of the Jews. They know how to laugh, and to laugh at themselves! Well, we colored folks are the same way. We colored folks are survivors" (Delany and Delany 25). There is a disturbing implication, in narratives like the Delanys', of "laughing off" oppression: As Bessie Delany phrases it, "You see, I have enough confidence in myself that these things don't bother me. I could laugh" (Delany and Delany 25). Despite the emphasis on race which seems to char-

acterize *Having Our Say* as much as George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*, autobiographies by African American centenarians may actually be less about a critique of racism than the transcendence of race through colorblindness. This transcendence, in turn, may be directly related to the idea of centenarian's autobiographies as guidebooks for middle-aged readers. In order for these narratives to work as advice literature, they have to be "whitewashed" to a certain extent. As Amy Hill Hearth writes in her preface, "Their story, as the Delany sisters like to say, is not meant as 'black' or 'women's' history, but American history. It belongs to all of us" ("Preface" xiv). This may well be an instance where a centenarian's autobiography, from the co-author's perspective, is weighed against all the alternative genres that it could have become. *Having Our Say*, Hill Hearth is well aware, could have become a story about race, or about feminism. As it is, however, it has been decided that both these elements – which could be read as the potential political edge of the Delany sisters' narrative – have been toned down. Yet, one of the particularities of co-written autobiographies emerges here with a vengeance: The point may well be that it is the co-author herself who decided that this would not be a story about either race or gender, but about extreme old age instead. Even as the idea of intersectionality constantly looms in the background, then, *Having Our Say* as a narrative stops short of exploring, for instance, the intersection between race and age, or between age and gender.

What follows from this downplaying of intersectionality, it may be argued, is the proximity of life writing to life science perspectives. To the extent that life writing narratives downplay the particularities of their subjects (the ethnic group that the centenarian belongs to, or her gender), there is a universalist assumption which may allow us to focus on general qualities or aspects which may contribute to aging successfully. As I have outlined above, longitudinal studies such as the New England Centenarian Study (NECS) view centenarians as "escapers," as individuals who have lived into extreme old age without a substantial impairment of either their physical or their mental abilities. It is this idea of "escaping" all the "deficiencies" which have usually been associated with extreme old age which *Having Our Say* also sets out to explore. As Hearth writes in the preface, "Over the next three hours, I was charmed by their vivaciousness and playfulness. They seemed to have conquered old age, or come as close to it as anyone ever will" ("Preface" xi). The point I would like to make here, however, is that universality and particularity do not have to be mutually exclusive. What would have happened, in other words, if the sisters' personal secrets, their own explanation for their extreme longevity, had been allowed by the narrative fabric (or the co-author) to co-exist with an intersectional perspective on black aging?

One of the ideas which this book sets out to explore is the idea of what may be called the "fabrication" of centenarians by a cultural industry surrounding

them.[6] In Amy Hill Hearth's preface, a number of possibilities seem to compete with one another. On the one hand, *Having Our Say* could well have been or become a narrative about black aging, or about female aging. Rather than stressing the sisters' individual resilience, such a narrative could easily have faulted US society for disadvantaging both ethnic minorities and women. Yet, the narrative does not really espouse this option. Rather, as Hearth puts it, the idea was to portray these two older African American women in all their "lovability." In order for the general public to "fall in love" with the Delany sisters ("Preface" xii), how political can the narrative be? It is important to note, then, that the narrative carefully balances any critique that the sisters might have about US racism, against the individual resilience that the sisters possess. Even as on the surface, the narrative pretends to be about race, *Having Our Say* is hence less a book about racism than a story of individual resilience. Conversely, a critique of the universalism of *Having Our Say* may well coincide with critiques of resilience studies as such (Cretney 2014). In this as in many other instances, life writing – in the genre of centenarians' autobiographies – converges with life sciences research on extreme longevity. Both stress individuals' resistance rather than exploring the social factors which interfere with individual health and well-being. At the same time, both life sciences research on longevity and what I call a "centenarian industry," an entire cultural industry revolving around the centenarian as its subject – are dependent on recruiting centenarians for their studies or books. It is hence significant that the preface of *Having Our Say* should dramatize the Delany sisters' conversion from unwilling to willing subjects. In fact, the ethics of *Having Our Say* depend on the fact of this conversion. Quite literally, there can be no centenarian's autobiography without a centenarian. As I try to demonstrate throughout these pages, this is by no means a truism. Rather, the emphasis on the centenarian's willingness to tell his story serves to dispel all suspicions which may well loom in the background: To what extent, for instance, is this story being told not by the centenarian but about him? To what extent is this the co-author's story and not the centenarian's? In the case of Amy Hill Hearth as much as Richard Glaubman, the co-author of George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*, I am thus interested in instances in the text where the co-author's presence is deliberately effaced, disguised, or hidden. It is for this reason, I believe, that Hearth should stress the role of the editors, or the (eventual) willingness of the Delany sisters to tell their story. The co-author, these examples seem to imply, is only a passive vehicle who enables the telling of these stories. What this book sets out to argue, on the other hand, is that this myth of the co-author's invisibility or unimportance is precisely the truth

6 I am indebted to Tobias Boll for this idea.

claim of what I call centenarian industries. In this vein, one of the central questions which this book tries to explore is whether or not the centenarian is indeed a "vulnerable subject" (Couser 7). To the extent that the centenarian is vulnerable to the co-author's telling of her life's story, it may actually be more fruitful in the reading of a given centenarian's autobiography to explore, not the role of the centenarian, but that of the co-author.

At the same time, it is important to unpack, not just the politics which surround the intersection of race and age, but also of age and class. Especially in comparison to George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*, which I will discuss in more detail below, it is significant for trying to assess the power dynamics surrounding *Having Our Say* that the Delany sisters are not only centenarians, but highly educated centenarians. In their relationship to their white, middle-aged co-author, Amy Hill Hearth, they may hence be watchful when it comes to approving the narrative that is written about them. Seen from this perspective, the title *Having Our Say* may be seen not only in terms of race – with the Delany sisters' speaking up about white racism, but also in terms of class. Unlike George Dawson, the uneducated centenarian who would learn to read and write only at age 98, the Delany sisters may not be "vulnerable subjects" in the hands of a co-author who is both educated and a professional journalist.

The question of authorship is thus deeply related to what may be termed the cultural imaginary of aging and longevity. What if, I would like to ask in this book, centenarians' autobiographies are less the life stories of centenarians than the stories which we, as middle-aged readers, would like to tell ourselves about extreme old age? Seem from this perspective, the co-author's narrative strategy – his machinations and schemes of remaining invisible in what may in fact be his own narrative – may actually fall on fertile ground. The point may be not so much that this co-author is indeed invisible in the text but that in our desire to have our own imaginaries of extreme old age confirmed, we simply refuse to look at the obvious. In this as in many other instances, centenarians' autobiographies may thus be more about their readers than they are about their purported subjects: the centenarians themselves.

For the truth claim of the centenarian's autobiography to succeed – the claim that this is indeed the autobiography of an extremely old person –, different co-authors may employ different strategies for remaining invisible in the narrative. Yet, it is important to note that despite the differences in strategy, their goal may in fact be the same. The success of the centenarian industry, woven around the centenarian's autobiography, thus depends to no small extent on the centenarian's presence and the co-author's purported absence. This absence can then take different shapes: It can appear in the guise of the co-author's working on behalf of someone else (the editor, the publishing industry), as in the case of Amy Hill

Hearth; or in can be reiterated by the co-author's stressing, not his own economic interest in writing a centenarian's life, but his altruism or his friendship with the centenarian. It is to this latter option that I will now turn.

4.4 "More than a Book: A Story of Friendship": Recruiting the Centenarian in George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*

The path from stranger to proxy, friend, and close "relative" is also played out in Richard Glaubman's co-written autobiography, with George Dawson, *Life Is So Good*. What is curious to note here is that Glaubman's self-description, on his own web page, makes no secret of the fact that before becoming Dawson's co-author, his professional life seemed to fail. On his homepage, he writes about himself in the third person, describing himself in these terms:

> Having graduated with no plan in mind, Glaubman surprised himself when he responded, "I'm going to be a writer." For three decades the rewards were not forthcoming and he held numerous jobs in restaurants, fished commercially in Alaska, planted trees in British Columbia and worked in the construction industry. He now teaches elementary school. After reading an article about George Dawson, a 98-year-old man just learning to read and write, Glaubman began making regular visits to Mr. Dawson. The resulting collaboration led to the book, *Life Is So Good*, published by Random House. ("Richard Glaubman")

This description serves to highlight the "cathartic" nature of the co-written centenarian's autobiography. Before Dawson agreed to have his life written by Glaubman, Glaubman was, to use Toni Morrison's phrase, an "artist with no art form" (121), he was a prospective writer without a subject to write about. Like many of his fellow co-authors, Amy Hill Hearth and Patricia Mulcahy among them, Glaubman vividly recalls the first time he learned about George Dawson. Like Hearth and Mulcahy, he refers to this moment as an event which was meant to be. What emerges here is a historical context in which gerontologists and newspaper journalists alike search for centenarians. Reading the morning paper, Glaubman recalls, changed his life. As he recollects in an interview,

> I remember Sunday morning, in February, I think it would be February of 98, reading the Sunday paper, and . . . my wife passed over this article, and said, you ought to read this, you ought to take this down to school. And I looked at that article and thought, wow. It showed this picture . . . of George Dawson, standing on his front porch, holding a book bag in his hand. The picture itself was, sort of mysterious, but it spoke volumes. He was a hundred years old at the time the article went on, he was having his hundredth birthday party, at his school, and I think reading his birthday cards for the first time in his life, because he had just started school at age 98. ("Books at the Berkshire," 02:52–03:51)

The centenarian’s autobiography, then, follows the newspaper article. Importantly, however, this close connection between newspaper article and co-written autobiography never gives rise, in the co-author’s own recollection, to the idea of sensationalism. Co-authors, in stressing their difference to journalists, go out of their way to insist that their “hunt” for centenarians is never akin to sensationalism. It is here that the “seriality” of centenarians’ autobiographies recurs. By stressing the close link between the centenarian and the co-author, even before the actual writing of the autobiography begins, the co-author emphasizes the uniqueness of his bond to the centenarian. Reading about George Dawson’s life, Glaubman recalls, opened a window to his own. This cathartic presence of a black centenarian in a white elementary school teacher’s life takes place on two levels. First, Glaubman sees himself as a literary author trapped in an elementary school teacher’s body; second, having lost his father a few years earlier, Glaubman is searching for a form to express his own mourning and grief. Dawson, in this sense, becomes a stand-in for Glaubman’s own father, a black surrogate for the father which Glaubman has lost. In *Life Is So Good*, Glaubman tells George Dawson about the end of his father’s life (251): about how there were so many questions that had remained unanswered when his father passed away. It is in this context, then, that we might speak of a politics of surrogacy in the co-authoring of centenarians’ autobiographies. Glaubman asks George Dawson, the black centenarian, the questions that he had not been able to ask his own father: “Maybe there were questions to be answered, but I don’t even know what the questions would be” (251).

The emphasis, in the co-author’s recollection of his initial encounter with the centenarian, of the uniqueness of their relationship serves to counter the charge that centenarians’ autobiographies are serial productions. Dismissing the fact that theirs is only one of many other co-authored centenarians’ autobiographies, each of the co-authors stresses the fact that the centenarian’s autobiography is unlike any other. Seriality and uniqueness can thus in fact co-exist.

Glaubman’s decision to contact George Dawson, then, is said to be deeply personal rather than economically motivated. It is this motivation, in turn, which is used as the way to the centenarian’s heart. What emerges at this juncture of the co-author standing in front of the centenarian’s door is a moment that centenarians’ autobiographies share with studies about extreme longevity in the life sciences. The co-author is both a “researcher” into the riddle of longevity and the prospective proxy of the centenarian whom he is hoping to interview. Yet, like the gerontologists of the Heidelberg study, he approaches the moment of this first encounter with trepidation. If the centenarian chooses not to participate in the study, there will be no study, and no centenarian’s autobiography. The centenarian’s slamming the door shut in the researcher’s face, within the choreography of the narrative, serves only to prepare the reader for the “intimacy” which will

eventually develop between the centenarian and his co-author. Yet, conversely, it could also be argued that the act of slamming the door constitutes a signature moment of agency on the part of the centenarian. Once he has opened his door, he will no longer be able to control his narrative. Instead, the narrative will have become the co-author's own, or at least there will be no possibility, for the reader, to disentangle the centenarian's voice from that of his co-author.

The moment of recruitment, and the success of the co-author's trying to contact and interview a centenarian, is thus of signal importance not only for (public) knowledge of longevity, but also and especially for the co-author's own career. In the case of Amy Hill Hearth, the writing of a centenarian's autobiography as a career choice is made especially explicit. Hearth, for instance, had a career as a newspaper reporter for *The New York Times* before she decided to be the Delany sisters' co-author. This is the success story as it is described on Hearth's website:

> **Timeline of Events:**
> Summer 1991: Amy Hill Hearth, a journalist, hears about the reclusive sisters and arranges to meet them, hoping for an interview. She interviews them for three hours and writes a 1200-word feature story.
>
> September 22, 1991: Her feature on the Delany sisters is published in *The New York Times.* A book publisher reads her article and asks if she will expand the story into a full-length book.
>
> Fall 1991 – Spring 1993: The Delany Sisters and Ms. Hearth work together to create the book, an oral history which they call *Having Our Say*.
>
> September 19, 1993: *Having Our Say* is published by Kodansha America in New York on Sadie Delany's 104th birthday.
>
> Fall 1993: The book becomes a *New York Times* bestseller for a total of 117 weeks, first in hardcover, then paperback. The book lands on the bestseller lists of other national newspapers as well, including *The Washington Post* and *USA Today.* The sisters get a kick out of their late-in-life fame.
>
> April 1995: The Broadway play adaptation of the book opens at the Booth Theater in New York. Ms. Hearth works as an advisor on the production and takes the sisters to see the play on Mother's Day.
>
> April 1999: The telefilm adaptation of Having Our Say airs on CBS, starring Ruby Dee, Diahann Carroll, and Amy Madigan. The film is directed by Academy Award winner Lynne Littman. Ms. Hearth is an advisor on the production and keeps the sisters informed. The sisters, however, do not live to see the film.

> Present-day: The book was translated into seven languages and is still read around the world. It remains a favorite in high schools and college classrooms across the U.S. and beyond. (“Amy Hill Hearth”)

As in the case of Richard Glaubman, the newspaper article precedes the autobiography; Glaubman notes in his preface that it was a newspaper feature about the life of George Dawson, the Texan centenarian who learned to write at 98, which sparked his interest in contacting Dawson. In the case of Amy Hill Hearth, however, the journalist who wrote the newspaper article and the person who sets out to co-author the autobiography of two centenarian sisters are one and the same person. It is crucial to note, however, that both Glaubman and Hearth describe their choice to co-write a centenarian's autobiography not as a career choice, but a personal decision. As she mentions on her homepage,

> I was raised in a family that cherishes its elders. Perhaps this is why I love older people and their stories. My paternal grandmother died in 1997 at the age of 101. My great-grandma lived into her 90s. Several great-aunts lived to their late 90s and past the century mark. I grew up knowing that older people deserve respect and attention. I understood (in a way that many people apparently do not) that older people were not, in fact, always old. Indeed, they were once young. And middle-aged. And they had many stories to tell. (“Amy Hill Hearth”)

This passage is significant for a number of reasons. First, the co-author refers to her “credentials” for co-writing a centenarian's life narrative not by mentioning her previous career experiences, but her “respect” for older people. Moreover, as I will elaborate as these chapters progress, there is a sense in which the co-authors position themselves as the centenarian's relatives or at least as their soulmates. In this context, what would it imply that Hearth should emphasize the fact that extreme longevity also runs in her own family? The implication of the co-author's kinship with the centenarian is thus also emphasized in the passage quoted above. Just like Hearth's own relative, it is implied, the Delany sisters “had [a story] to tell”; just as she would have done for her own grandparents and great-aunts, then, Hearth proceeds to co-author the autobiography of the Delany sisters. The motive, these passages emphasize, are not economic, but ideational.

Here as elsewhere, the “ethics” claimed by the co-author about the centenarian's autobiography are characterized by an explicit dismissal of economic factors. This dismissal is even more pronounced in the case of Patricia Mulcahy. In interviews, the co-author of *It Is Well with My Soul* has stressed the fact that she put her career on the line in order to co-author Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's autobiography. Not only is the economic gain associated with writing a centenarian's autobiography disputed, but the act of co-authorship is described as a sacrifice.

The public, it is claimed, needs to know about the exceptional life of the centenarian, and, even though she may not know it yet, the centenarian herself needs her life to be written. As Patricia Mulcahy, co-author of Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's *It is Well with My Soul*, describes herself on her homepage,

> I love storytelling in all its forms. This translates to a flair for working with memoirs and novels in particular. Growing up, I always wanted to be an investigative journalist, and in my current role I combine a love of wordsmithing with a desire to get to the core of any client's story in collaborative work as a "book doctor" and ghostwriter. ("Patricia Mulcahy")

The idea of a "book doctor" is an evocative one here. In this passage, Mulcahy positions herself as a person who helps other people's stories come into the world: through her intervention, the "core" of a person's life story may shine through to the fullest extent. It is significant, however, that in this passage, the distinction between these different genres – between "memoirs and novels," for instance – should be erased. This is especially significant when it comes to centenarians' autobiographies. As I argue throughout this book, these life writing narratives pivot on the "autobiographical pact" (Lejeune 4), on the idea that these are indeed the centenarian's own words. It is only through this reference to genre, I would claim, that as readers, we can "witness" the centenarian's presence of mind. This very idea of witnessing the centenarian's mental "fitness," however, is counteracted by statements such as Mulcahy's. As this passage implies, the "wordsmith" and mastermind of the centenarian's autobiography may in fact be the co-author.

The claim that the co-author sacrifices her own career in order to write the life of a centenarian serves to reinforce the argument that such literary "research" into extreme longevity is entirely altruistic. This insistence, by the co-author, on her own altruism is curiously at odds with the role of the publishing houses that are often key players in the eventual publication of centenarians' autobiographies. Amy Hill Hearth, for instance, was commissioned by a publisher to write the autobiography of the Delany sisters, as noted above. As a consequence of the success of the centenarian's autobiography, however, the co-author soon becomes a celebrity himself. It may be paradigmatic of the representational politics of centenarians' autobiographies that often enough, the co-author is invited to give an interview in radio shows or TV appearances, even if there is no centenarian to accompany him. The true celebrity involved in the writing of centenarians' autobiographies may thus be the co-author himself, as I will elaborate in Chapter 9. In order to understand the politics of representation which underlie centenarians' autobiographies, then, it is important to unpack the different personae of the co-author. Not only is he an ethnographer and gerontologist, but he is also the manager of "his" centenarian. The co-author is the centenarian's public face and her media liaison. Serving as a go-between shuttling between the pub-

lisher and the centenarian, and the centenarian and the press, the co-author’s self-proclaimed goal is to “protect” the centenarian from too much media attention. It is in this context that the co-author may emerge both as the protector of centenarians in the privacy of their homes and as their manager. Amy Hill Hearth recalls in her preface to *The Delany Sisters’ Book of Everyday Wisdom*,

> Great efforts have been made to protect their privacy. Yet, while the sisters enjoy living quietly, they have thoroughly enjoyed the excitement created by the success of *Having Our Say*. “We’ve had a ball,” Bessie likes to say. And the Delany sisters are thrilled, yet overwhelmed, by the mail they’ve received. (“Preface” ix–x)

This is a media attention, on the other hand, which the co-author herself has created. Had she never appeared on the centenarian’s doorstep, the centenarian would never have had to defend herself against too much media attention. It is here, moreover, that the ethnographic gaze so common to many centenarians’ autobiographies recurs in yet a different light. In fact, the co-author’s stressing time and again that the centenarian hardly knows how to use a telephone serves only to reinforce the claim that the centenarian direly needs her co-author. If it were not for this co-author, the centenarian, a mere remnant of another time, would be lost. As Amy Hill Hearth notes about co-authoring the Delany sisters’ *Having Our Say*, “I had written it for the sake of history, knowing that if I did not write the book, the stories would be lost forever” (*Strong Medicine* xi).

This form of “protectiveness,” on the other hand, brilliantly conceals the fact that many of the co-authors have long created their own media industry around “their” centenarian. After writing the Delany sisters’ autobiography, for instance, Amy Hill Hearth was an adviser in the production not only of a Broadway play, but also of a feature film (*Strong Medicine* xi). If some centenarians’ autobiographies are only the beginning of a series of media representations (another autobiography, a Broadway play, a feature film, a book of advice literature or a cookbook), centenarians’ autobiographies are characterized by an increasing shift of agency from the centenarian to her co-author. If at the initial stage of the encounter with the prospective co-author, the centenarian still has the power to say no, such power is lost once the co-author has set her miniature industry about the centenarian’s life going. The act of assuming authorship over the centenarian’s life has legitimated the co-author’s doubling as the centenarian’s manager; as a manager, however, she rarely has to ask the centenarian’s *consent*. This consent, in turn, is crucial for understanding the power dynamics between the centenarian and her co-author; yet, it is an approval of the co-author’s representation of the centenarian’s life which is often veiled, or waived, both within the autobiography and with regard to subsequent media representations of the centenarian’s life.

As I have tried to show in this chapter, the recruitment of the centenarian – the obtaining of their consent on having their life narrative written – is one of the pivotal moments in centenarians' autobiography. If indeed, the centenarian is seen as holding the key to the secret of extreme longevity, then this moment of recruitment may function as a form of open sesame: The treasure box that the centenarian opens when they tell us about their exceptionally long life may contain the cue to our own potential future of aging successfully. Moreover, I argue in this book that the moment of recruiting the centenarian may be common both to life sciences and life writing. In order to conduct quantitative studies such as the Heidelberg Centenarian Study (HH-100) or the New England Centenarian Study (NECS), researchers have to "recruit" centenarians who are willing to enroll in their study. In quite a similar manner, prospective co-authors have to find centenarians who are willing to have their life narrative told and published.

Despite these striking parallels between gerontological studies and centenarians' autobiographies, however, neither of these forms of inquiry refers to, or even seems to be aware of, the other. Reading each in conjunction with the other, on the other hand, may point to the characteristics of a historical moment in which the desire to unravel the mystery of extreme longevity has gripped the life sciences and the domain of life writing with equal force.

5 Centenarians’ Autobiographies as Advice Literature

If centenarians’ autobiographies can themselves be read as self-help books on successful aging, the curious feature that many of these centenarians’ life narratives are the beginning of *serial* productions reinforces this claim. Both George Dawson’s autobiography *Life Is so Good*, co-written with Richard Glaubman, and the Delany sisters’ autobiography *Having Our Say*, co-authored by Amy Hill Hearth, were followed by sequels: Glaubman proceeded to turn “his” autobiography of Dawson into a play, and published a manual on how to write a centenarian’s narrative. Amy Hill Hearth went on to co-write *The Delany Sisters’ Book of Everyday Wisdom*, co-produce a film based on the original autobiography, and co-author another autobiography with Sarah Delany once Delany’s younger sister Elizabeth had passed away. As the book is described in its marketing blurb, “The co-author of the long-time best-seller, *Having Our Say*, reflects on life without her sister, with whom she shared the twentieth century, in an uplifting journal illustrated with color paintings of Bessie’s favorite flowers” (Delany and Hearth 1998). This advertising can be read in two different ways. First, it may be seen as a form of mourning; writing her story with the help of Amy Hill Hearth, Sarah Delany shares her grief with a wider audience. Seen from this perspective, *On My Own at 107* becomes a book of advice about how to cope with the loss of a loved one. At the same time and secondly, however, there is a way in which the book uncannily resembles a poetry album, complete with “color paintings of Bessie’s favorite flowers.” Finally, there is a sense in which even a book about grief can fuel the centenarian industry. Not incidentally, *On My Own at 107* is marketed with reference to the bestselling centenarians’ autobiography *Having Our Say*, which had similarly been written with Amy Hill Hearth as co-author. The politics of “publishing” extreme old age, then, may emerge from the dialogue between these different genres: from autobiography to self-help book to cookbook, feature film and Broadway play, and even to a book about mourning.

Precisely because centenarians are framed, both in gerontological research and in the pages of autobiographies, as “paragon[s] of positive aging” (Robine and Vaupel v), centenarians’ autobiographies can also be read as a form of advice literature. This, incidentally, is a factor which distinguishes the gerontologist’s questionnaire from the pages of a co-authored autobiography. Even as the questionnaire will address issues such as lifestyle, diet, or the development of successful coping mechanisms, to describe any of these aspects in detail would exceed the scope of the study. The obverse is true of centenarians’ autobiographies: Here, the interviewer cum co-author can dwell on each and every detail in the centenarian’s life.

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This attention to, even obsession with, detail can be read on a number of levels. First, it is strikingly in keeping with an ethnographic paradigm: An outsider to native culture, the ethnographer has to observe, in minute detail, the native's everyday life. To the extent that his goal is to unveil the working logic of native culture, each of these details may be meaningful, and the connection between them will only be revealed at the end of the research. This notion of an attention to detail is at the core of "thick description" in Clifford Geertz's sense (3).

What complicates this mode of searching for the secret to longevity in the thick descriptions of centenarians' lives, however, is precisely the seriality of centenarians' autobiographies. To be sure, these narratives may follow a strikingly similar pattern, which may be due to the ethnographic undertone underlying the study of the oldest old. In many of these narratives, the co-author enters the centenarian's kitchen, and the reader goes with him to catch a glimpse of the centenarian's favorite recipe. Yet, what complicates the search for clues to longevity is precisely the difference between centenarians' lives. Precisely because each co-author strives to outdo the others in finding a centenarian whose life is even more peculiar than that of his peers, the "secrets" which these centenarians tell, in terms of diet, exercise, or lifestyle, could not be more diverse. One centenarian swears that a dinner of chicken broth is the secret to longevity, in other words, while the other insists on collard greens. To read one centenarian's autobiography after another, then, is to become aware of the ultimate absurdity of searching for the key to longevity in the thick descriptions of centenarians' lives. Rather, what the difference between these narratives and between the centenarians' lifestyles suggests is that longevity is necessarily multifactorial: There may be in other words, no single key to longevity; there may be only factors to attaining extreme old age. What may be puzzling in this context, however, is that despite the fact that each narrative's dietary advice is *contradicted* by others, the framework through which we continue to read these accounts – the framework of advice literature – nonetheless persists. We try to emulate the centenarians' life, in other words, even if we know that this emulation is ultimately senseless.

Moreover, it is, of course, impossible to emulate every single aspect of the centenarian's life; thus, since any of these aspects can be the key to longevity, we are bound to fail. What this implies, then, is that our reading centenarians' autobiographies as advice literature is deeply embedded in the logic of longevity research at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is for this reason, also, that the rhetoric of centenarians' autobiographies resonates to such a high degree with that of life sciences research into extreme old age. The idea that centenarians are "paragon[s]," then, recurs throughout gerontological literature as much as it informs the pages of autobiographies in which middle-aged co-authors write the lives of centenarians. In the domain of life sciences research, for instance,

Shaffer has drawn attention to the "Nun Study," where centenarians like Sister Matthia were seen as role models for "healthy aging":

> The Nun Study (Snowdon, 2003) combined annual evaluations of cognitive and physical function with postmortem neuropathologic evaluations. The "gold standard" for healthy aging, Sister Matthia, continued to be "happy, productive, and vivacious" to the end of her life just weeks short of 105, having "enjoyed more than 100 years of dementia-free life." (2)

In both life sciences discourse and forms of life writing, the same notions of "healthy" and "successful aging" recur. In both domains, centenarians have indeed become the "gold standard for healthy aging" (Shaffer 2).

At the same time, however, the politics which underlie centenarians' autobiographies may themselves verge on aporia. Even as the centenarian embodies the "gold standard" of aging well, neither gerontologists nor co-authors know how this standard may be achieved. Centenarians have thus become role models, but it is not entirely clear – neither to scientists nor to co-authors – which aspects of their lives we need to emulate if indeed we, too, would like to live to 100.

By virtue of having lived to one hundred, these politics imply, the centenarian holds the secret to success. The key to longevity is in the centenarian's hand; it is just that neither the centenarian nor the co-author knows what this key is. Centenarians' narratives emerge in a climate when modern biomedicine seems to be closer than ever to finding out the secret of immortality; and the centenarian is as close to immortality as it gets. Yet, neither the gerontologist nor the co-author of a centenarian's narrative nor the centenarian himself know what the secret to extreme longevity really is: it is for this very reason that each one of them has to immerse himself in the thick description of the centenarian's life. In this climate, every centenarian becomes a celebrity in her own right: If each and every centenarian holds the key to the secret of extreme longevity without even knowing it, there is in fact a scramble for centenarians which has gripped gerontologists, journalists and prospective co-authors alike. If the secret to longevity is to be found in the thick description of centenarians' lives, one centenarian may be more eloquent than another in describing his life and thus revealing the secret to longevity. What distinguishes centenarians' autobiographies from ethnographies of native cultures, for all their apparent similarities, is a peculiar sense of temporality. There is, it could be argued, a certain breathlessness to the search for centenarians. If any centenarian may be the one whose narrative finally reveals which of the trivial details in the life of the oldest old is the secret to success, each gerontologist or journalist or co-author must outrun the others in getting to this centenarian's door.

What is common to all these narratives and genres about centenarians' lives is that centenarians have now become celebrities. As Amy Hill Hearth puts it in the preface to *The Delany Sisters Book of Everyday Wisdom*,

> Charming and candid, and oh-so-wise, the Delany sisters struck a chord in 1993 with their critically acclaimed memoir, *Having Our Say*: *The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*. (Twenty-eight weeks on The New York Times best-seller list – not bad for two old inky-dinks over one hundred years old!" Bessie Delany is fond of joking). (Delany and Delany ix)

Centenarians' autobiographies, this book argues, are unique in their seriality, as paradoxical as this may seem. The uniqueness of each centenarians' life is at odds with the fact that not only have centenarians' autobiographies proliferated since the turn of the century, but they have so many features in common that it would not seem far-fetched to speak of "serial literature" (Kelleter 2012). At the turn of a new millennium, centenarians have become celebrities and paragons at the same time. They are interviewed by newspaper journalists and recruited by co-authors and surprised by the sudden media attention. Prospective co-authors, in turn, outdo each other in their "hunt" for new centenarians whose lives have not yet been written. This hunt may itself be indicative of the politics informing our imagination of the oldest-old: Until the riddle of extreme longevity has been solved, each centenarian's autobiography, however trivial it may seem in its depiction of the centenarian's daily routine, will bring us one step closer to unravelling the enigma of old age. To read about each of these centenarians' life, in turn, is to make sense of our own.

Closely connected to the idea of a ghostwriting industry of centenarians' autobiographies, there is the notion of seriality. To what extent are these autobiographies, paradoxically, *serial* autobiographies? The concept of "serial autobiography," of course, constitutes another paradox; for at the core of the notion of autobiography, especially in the Western sense of the genre, there is the notion of individuality. What happens to the notion of individuality, however, when the autobiography of the centenarian intersects with an aging industry always on the lookout for new examples of successful aging? Here, too, the genre expectations of the autobiography may serve as a form of make-believe. To the extent that each centenarian becomes a role model of successful aging and longevity, she is less an individual than a type, a generic example of longevity, albeit with specific features which may then again be generalized.

I would like to argue that the curious lack of emplotment, so typical of other autobiographies, may in fact be one of the defining characteristics of centenarians' autobiographies. How else might we account for the seemingly endless enumeration, in these autobiographical narratives, of dietary advice and fitness facts? It is this curious enumeration, also, which may account both for the trivial-

ity and the seriality of centenarians' autobiographies. At the same time, there is a sense in which the apparent randomness of what is told – the reference to food, to the quality of resilience exemplified by a centenarian's coping with the death of a loved one – points to a much deeper logic at the heart of what may be termed "centenarian research." Centenarians are so fascinating both to researchers and the general public because they may in fact constitute an enigma: the riddle of longevity. Precisely because medical science, longitudinal studies such as the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie notwithstanding, has not yet been able to causally determine the factors contributing to longevity, both the autobiographies and the interviews conducted by gerontologists seem to be groping for causes, even if such causality, let alone mono-causality, seems far-fetched.

This book sets out to argue that the seeming triviality of centenarians' autobiographies as they currently proliferate is inversely proportional to the emergence of centenarians' autobiographies as a phenomenon at the intersection between the humanities on the one hand and the life sciences on the other. What makes these autobiographies so interesting, I argue, is the multiple readings which we bring to them, and with which they can in fact be seen to be in dialogue. This book is hence concerned with two questions: First, the question whether centenarians' autobiographies may constitute a genre in its own right; and second, whether these autobiographies can in fact be seen as a form of *Zeitgeschichte,* of contemporary history.

5.1 From Autobiography to Cookbook in David Mazzarella's *Always Eat the Hard Crust of the Bread: Recollections and Recipes from My Centenarian Mother*

While this book argues that centenarians' autobiographies may have emerged as a sub-genre of autobiography, it is important to stress that this new sub-genre does not originate in a void. Rather, centenarians' autobiographies are surrounded by a multiplicity of different, but related genres, all of which have "discovered" the centenarian and their subject. In photography, centenarian portraits have emerged and are exhibited across the globe. Thus, a 2018 exhibit in Frankfurt entitled "Grey is the new pink" featured portraits of centenarians. As the curators described their vision,

> When and where is a person old? And can one face the "challenge of age" optimistically? Aging plays an important role for the individual as well as with respect to social and cultural processes. But every generation ages differently and every culture also differs in how it defines old age. ("Grey is the New Pink")

This passage, as I will try to show as this book progresses, bears a striking resemblance to the framework which also characterizes autobiographies by US-American centenarians. To be sure, the Frankfurt exhibit acknowledges that age is a cultural construction. This may have important consequences for how we define old age, as well as for determining when "old age" may begin in the first place. At the same time, there is an emphasis in the passage quoted above on "aging optimistically." The curators' interest, in other words, lies in the association between extreme longevity and happiness. What undergirds the exhibit's account, then, is particular mold of longevity. This mold, I show throughout these chapters, is closely related to the idea of "successful aging" (Rowe and Kahn 1997). The centenarians envisioned in the life writing accounts I examine, almost inevitably, zoom in on the aspects of health and happiness. Health, in turn, is understood both with regard to physical health and mental health.

Generally, the portrayal of centenarians, both visual and narrative, is often framed through the dichotomy of remembering and forgetting. Both memory and forgetting loom large in a variety of discourses about longevity, with centenarians' autobiographies chief among them. There are two aspects in particular which seem to inform the portraiture of centenarians in the context of remembering and forgetting: First, centenarians figure in these narratives – or photographic portraits – as witnesses of a bygone era, as keepers of wisdom. Second, however, what underlies these narratives is the emphasis on the centenarians' presence of mind. Centenarians' memories, their ability to remember and to share their own stories, function in many of these discourses as an antidote to the widespread fear of dementia. In fact, the emphasis on just how well these centenarians remember their own past – and that of society as a whole – may be an indication of just how widespread the fear of dementia actually is. As Texas centenarian George Dawson puts it in *Life Is So Good*,

> I'm one hundred and one years old now. But I still remember. Though that was over ninety years ago, I see it in my mind like I was there today. I can't let loose of my memories, even if I wanted to. Yeah, I've seen it all in these hundred years, the good and the bad. My memory works fine. I can tell you everything you want to know. (Glaubman and Dawson 13)

At the same time, there may be in these photographs of centenarians a certain sensationalism: What does the face of an extremely old person look like? As I will argue in more detail in Chapter 8, there is a proximity here between centenarians' narratives and photographic portraits, on the one hand, and the genre of ethnography on the other: If indeed centenarians figure in the interest of the general public as guides to the future and unknown territory of extreme old age, then they also become "native informants" about this foreign culture of longevity. Seem from this

perspective, centenarians' portraits may also figure in the domain of the unknown, the exotic and the (potentially) sensationalist.

Moreover, centenarian "portraits" loom large in the biographies, autobiographies or documents of their relatives, particularly their children. Thus, a cookbook by David Mazzarella portrays the author's centenarian mother as the keeper of secrets and cooking recipes. Given the ubiquitous interest in the centenarian's every word, it is symptomatic of what I am reading as a form of "centenarian craze" that David Mazzarella's book about his mother should be titled *Always Eat the Hard Crust of the Bread: Recollections and Recipes of My Centenarian Mother*. This, it could be argued, is "centenarianism" in a nutshell. First, the book doubles as "book of advice" and cookbook. Mazzarella's book thus converges with centenarians' autobiographies, as counterintuitive as this may at first seem. Autobiographies such as the Delany Sisters' *Having Our Say* or George Dawson's *Life Is So Good* also describe the centenarians' eating habits; and, as I argue below, they describe these eating habits in such a way that they almost verge on being cookbooks. It is in this sense that it is so remarkable that the Delany sisters have co-authored with Amy Hill Hearth not only *Having Our Say*, but also *The Delany Sister's Book of Everyday Wisdom*. As I suggest in this chapter, there is thus a striking convergence between centenarians' autobiographies, on the one hand, and "books of wisdom" and cookbooks, on the other hand. Mazzarella's tribute to this mother could well serve as a description of the Delany sisters' book of wisdom: "*Always Eat the Hard Crust of the Bread* shares a wonderful tribute to a tough matriarch and inspiring cook through entertaining anecdotes, personal foibles, unforgettable sayings, and practical recipes that share one woman's secret of how to live a long and happy life" (184). At the same time, it is also significant that Mazzarella's book about his mother's lifestyle bears striking resemblance to Rowe and Kahn's notion of successful aging. As the advertising blur notes, "Benigna Preziosi Mazzarella led a life that seemed the epitome of ordinariness, except that it also embodied a perfect storm for longevity: amazing genes, adherence to a Mediterranean diet, and almost compulsive physical activity" (184). In her "almost compulsive physical activity," then, Benigna Mazzarella seems to mirror R. Waldo McBurney who "never stopped running" (22). Despite the fact that Benigna Mazzarella was Italian and McBurney is an American centenarian, their advice clearly converges; or rather, what converges is that there can be no centenarian's narrative without dietary advice.

There is also another facet about Mazarrella's cookbook that converges with the "making" of centenarians' autobiographies. Mazzarella's book, given both its title and its outline is also a sort of "as-told-to-autobiography": It is the son who collects his mother's "recollections and recipes." The book can thus be read as a son's tribute to his mother's wisdom; but it might also be observed that it is the son who gains cultural and "material" capital from publishing his mother's wis-

dom. As I will argue in more detail in Chapter 9, this idea is closely related to what I am reading as a centenarian industry. In many different cases discussed in this study, the co-authors position themselves as the centenarian's "kin"; and they proceed to benefit substantially, both in a real and a metaphorical sense, from making the centenarian's story "heard."

Finally, Mazzarella's book converges with both the life sciences and centenarians' autobiographies in the interest in the centenarian's diet. The point that Mazzarella makes is not only what his mother eats, but also how she eats it: In other words, there is in the metaphor of "eating the hard crust" the idea of hardship and of endurance. Centenarian resilience, both Mazzarella and centenarians' autobiographies argue, often emerge from hardships, from lives of drudgery and even poverty and want. As the advertising notes, "David Mazzarella, a journalist and the son of Benigna, shares a cooking, eating, and lifestyle guide based on his mother's philosophies that a lifetime of hard work was not bad, that laughter was even better, and that the only enemy in her life was fat" (Mazzarella 184). What is so crucial about both Mazzarella's book and many of the centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this study is that in celebrating centenarians' resilience, many of these accounts may verge on "poverty porn." They zoom in on a life of hardship and want, only to highlight the fact how centenarians emerged from these conditions triumphant, healthy and happy. R. Waldo McBurney's autobiography, too, can be seen as a dismissal of the effects of poverty on longevity. He emphasizes, "WEALTH? Very handy! But it cannot produce good health. We lived many years on poverty-level income, but we ate as well or better than the wealthy, thanks to our home garden" (84). Read against the grain, this would seem to be a blatant dismissal of the effects of poverty on an individual's health. Moreover, there is a sense here in which McBurney's is a specifically rural narrative: His garden, as he reiterates time and again, accounted for this extreme longevity. What about urban poverty, however? For the communities living in urban ghettos, often people of color and poor whites, a garden would, of course, be a luxury.

As these considerations indicate, centenarians' narratives seem to dismiss the notion of class. Poverty, it would seem, is almost glorified as these accounts reiterate that it was by no means an obstacle to healthy aging and extreme longevity. By the same token, even as autobiographies such as the Delany sisters' are accounts by middle-class centenarians, they, too, pay little attention to the privileges that such social status would be accompanied by.

To return to Mazzarella's culinary account of his mother's extremely long life, then, poverty, or at least financial hardships, is in fact seen as being conducive to good health and healthy aging. It is these factors that Mazzarella "reports" about his mother's life. Like Amy Hill Hearth, the co-author of the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say* and *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, moreover,

David Mazzarella is a journalist who becomes the author of his mother's biography cum cookbook. Like *Having Our Say*, his cookbook is both a lifestyle guide and a diet manual. This is where the metaphor of "eating the hard crust of bread" yields yet another reading: Uncharacteristically for an Italian, Mazzarella notes, his mother loathed eating any kind of fat. Disgusted even by what was inside a loaf of bread, she resorted to eating only its crust. Mazzarella writes,

> Known as a wizard in the kitchen, Benigna possessed uncharacteristic dislikes for a lady who exclusively cooked Italian food-she had little use for garlic, oregano, unpeeled tomatoes, wine, and the insides of bread. Mazzarella offers a glimpse into a typical day in his mother's kitchen along with the recipes of her most sought-after dishes, including one made with a mysterious herb. (184)

This passage is also remarkable because it capitalizes on the idea of "mystery." As accounts both in the life sciences and in life writing reiterate, there may be a secret key to the miracle of longevity, a key the centenarian may hold – if only we knew what exactly it was. It may well be, Mazzarella suggests in a narrative twist that is sure to boost the sales figures of his book, his mother's "mysterious herb." As I argue throughout this chapter and throughout this study as a whole, it is this age-old search for the key to longevity and ultimately, to immortality, that may fuel our interest in centenarians' life narratives. Moreover, the centenarian's nutritional wisdom also serves as a side blow against communities that are not as well-versed in dietary science. Just as the Delany sisters are scornful about African Americans living in poverty who are oblivious to the importance of eating right, Mazzarella's book implies that his mother detested "ordinary" Italian dishes laden with garlic and fat.

Benigna Mazzarella can hence be seen as a trailblazer of the anti-fat industry; and her son's account testifies to her resilience also in that he stresses that an extremely long life and a life lived in poverty may by no means be mutually exclusive. Similarly, many centenarians' autobiographies discussed here make the point that growing up, centenarians struggled to make ends meet. As McBurney writes in his own autobiography in a chapter titled "Starving America" (19), food was not always there in abundance in a family with six children. What is crucial about McBurney's use of this metaphor, however, is not only that his family was able to survive despite economic hardships, but also that Americans may starve even in the age of plenty. In other words, he admonishes his readers that "eating right" may in fact be a substitute for medicine. He notes,

> My father had a stroke in 1914 and another one in 1916. He was treated for several months by his brother, Dr. M.R. McBurney, in California, who was a medical doctor and a chiropractor. When my father came home, he didn't come with pills and prescriptions. He came teaching us that we should eat lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grain cereals and beans. He

> lived over 30 years after his stroke, to age 88. This gave me a high respect for good nutrition. He came home with a book, *Starving America*, written by Alfred W. McCann, published in 1912 . . . . This book emphasizes the harm done by removing most of the minerals from wheat and feeding that part of the kernel to livestock. (19)

McBurney's autobiography thus reiterates the same motto that is also at the heart of the Delany sister's *Having Our Say* and George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*: That if only we eat right and exercise enough, there will be no need to consult a doctor. As I argue throughout this book, this may be both seductive and problematic given the fact that many Americans, especially in poor communities and communities of color, do not have access to adequate health care.

In Mazzarella's book *Always Eat the Hard Crust of the Bread: Recollections and Recipes from My Centenarian Mother*, two discourses converge: the notion of a mother's wisdom, and the newly emerging discourse which can be called "centenarian memory." The question which we may ask, then, is what the discourse of longevity adds to those discourses which preexist it, such as the general reference to the wisdom of older people. I believe that given the current interest in and the representation of centenarians, the reference to extreme longevity serves to heighten the intensity and potential sensationalism inherent in these representations. Thus, the potential impact (and selling power) of the cookbook with the family's secret recipes is enhanced by adding that these are a centenarian's recipes – given the extreme old age of the recipes' source or keeper, then, these recipes are on the brink of disappearing. Crucially, as I will suggest in more detail in Chapter 8, what is at stake here is the image of the "disappearing centenarian." Here, too, there is a close proximity, even kinship, between centenarian representation and the discourse of ethnography. In ethnography as well, the "native" is said to be about to disappear; this makes the ethnographer's endeavor of *recording* each and every detail of the native's life all the more valuable and important.

A third genre which has been proliferating in the context of centenarian representation is that of interviews with centenarians, such as Jim Heynen's *One Hundred over 100: Moments with One Hundred North American Centenarians*. It is tempting to argue that the number one hundred serves as a form of incantation here: Since it remains unclear which of these centenarians holds the key to the open sesame of extreme longevity, it may be useful to interview no fewer than one hundred individuals who have "reached the finish line," as R. Waldo McBurney puts it. The point that the present book is trying to make is that there is a continuity between all these different genres, between interview collections, biographies, autobiographies or youtube videos. What unites all these narratives is a growing fascination, by both the life sciences and a general public, in the enigma of extreme longevity.

For the present study of centenarians' autobiographies, the genre of the interview is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it is important to ask who the interviewer is. What are their credentials? Are they experts in gerontology or lay persons, are they related to the centenarian or, if they are not, how did they come to know their interviewee? Secondly, it is important to inquire into the interviewer's motive: What made them want to document the centenarians' life? What questions did they ask in structuring the interview? And what is the overall message of the finished collection? In this context, it is important to note that the number "100" is almost used as an incantation in the framing of the narratives. Why else should a collection of centenarians' interviews be called "One Hundred Centenarians"? It is interesting to note here that, as I have proposed in more detail in Chapter 2, extreme longevity currently remains an enigma even to the life sciences. To the extent that the reason and secret to extreme old age is not yet clear, the "magic" surrounding descriptions of centenarians may in fact linger on. It is this magic, the unexplainable nature of extreme longevity in the era of biomedicine, that incantations such as "One Hundred Centenarians" may evoke. This logic of centenarian lives as an "enigma" for the life sciences, in turn, has long filtered into the genre of life writing. Not incidentally, the opening chapter of Brinkbäumer and Shafy's book of interviews with centenarians from all over the world is titled "Des Rätsels Lösung" ("The Solution to the Riddle") (11). It is interesting to note in this context, however, that this "solution to the riddle" cannot stand on its own; rather, the chapter is called "The Solution to the Riddle, I" and is only one of many solutions to the riddle of extreme longevity that can be found in the book. This logic, I would suggest, is at the core of the contemporary production of centenarians' narratives. Each of these accounts is marketed, by the interviewer or the publisher, as if it were the definitive and final solution of the enigma of longevity. Yet, the hope of this solution is evoked only to be modified in the next minute: What may seem like the ultimate solution to the riddle has only turned out to be a temporary, partial solution. It is this constant interplay between promise and deferral, I suggest in this book, which also fuels what I see as the serial production of centenarians' autobiographies. In this riddle, moreover, the centenarian himself is at once part of the riddle and its solution. He himself may be as much at a loss to account for his longevity as those who ask him for the secret to his success. As R. Waldo McBurney writes, "The true answer to continued strength is manifold. It includes not only exercise and nutrition, but psychological attitudes, spiritual faith, rest, inherited genes, care of physical and mental stresses, and abstinence from harmful substances, and other influences" (preface, np). There is a paradox here between the list and its open-endedness. On the one hand, McBurney tries to account for the secrets to his healthy old age by singling out the factors that may have been responsible for this success; on the

other hand, there is a sense in which he himself also admits to being clueless. It is this guessing game of the secrets to extreme old age, and successful old age, which may be key to the fascination with centenarians' autobiographies. McBurney goes on to invite the reader to be part of this guessing game: "As you read my life's story, you may make up your mind as to some of the important things that have contributed to my athletic and occupational strengths which my friends describe as 'phenomenal,' 'great,' 'incredible'" (preface, np).

As I suggest in this study, there may hence be a continuity between centenarians' autobiographies and other genres which similarly revolve around centenarians' lives. Apart from autobiography and advice literature, one more genre has been key in representing centenarians – or the phenomenon of what I would call "centenarianness" to the general public: popular science. The representation of centenarians has been central not just in gerontological research or volumes with interviews, but also in books written and published in the framework of journalism and popular science. Crucially, popular science is itself a hybrid of fields. As Belas writes,

> One of popular science's primary functions is to make what would otherwise be inaccessible, specialist knowledge accessible to the lay reader. But popular science puts its imagined reader in something of a dilemma, for one does not have to look very far to find bitter argument among science writers . . . (1)

What interests me throughout this book, is what I view as the close affinity between the representation of centenarians, on the one hand, and popular science on the other. It is one of the central characteristics of centenarian representation in the current moment, I believe, that the very question of "expertise" is up for grabs when it comes to representing the centenarian. Thus, it is curious to note that those interviewing centenarians, for instance, derive their "expertise" or legitimacy from what they portray as their genuine, altruistic interest in the centenarian. This interest, what is more, is less professional or economic than it is personal. As they grow old and observe their own parents and grandparents grow old, the interviewers or writers observe, they become interested in the centenarians who may be the guide to both their parents' future and their own. In both cases, the centenarian's narrative becomes a form of reassurance: If only the future of the authors' parents or grandparents, as well as their own old age, will be as happy and fulfilled as that of the centenarians that they interview, all will be well – or so the narratives suggest.

What is key to all these representations, I would like to argue, is a juxtaposition of two concepts which at first sight may not automatically be related to one another. It is this linkage which can also be traced in a popular science book which I have already referred to above: *Das kluge, lustige, gesunde, ungebremste, glückliche, sehr lange Leben: Die Weisheit der Hundertjährigen*. Written by two

journalists, Klaus Brinkbäumer and Samiha Shafy, this book collapses two concepts into one: the notion of a full life (*gelingendes Leben*) and the idea of centenarianness. What is at the core of these centenarian narratives, then, is not only to ask how these individuals succeeded in living up to one hundred, but also what made their lives successful. The question is not only, to put it differently, how to become one hundred, but how to become one hundred happily. As the title of the series of photographies of centenarians described above puts it, the interest – both that of the photographer and the general public – is how to become "Glücklich 100." Yet, one of the central questions which this book sets out to ask is whether this juxtaposition of the idea of a full life with an extremely long life is really imperative. There is a sense, I would argue, in which the current proliferation of centenarians' narratives, like the discourse of "successful aging" on which they draw, run the risk of becoming new master narratives of aging. Why, in other words, would a life lived to one hundred automatically be a full life? And what would the implication be of this juxtaposition? The underlying hypothesis may not only be that a life lived, for instance, with physical impairment or dementia would be a form of aging which is less "successful," but that a life lived only to, say, sixty, is automatically a "failed" life, a life which has stopped short of its potential. It is in this context, also, that if not the terminology, then at least the implication of life sciences discourse recurs: As I will suggest in more detail below, life sciences representations of centenarians suggest that it is they, the extremely old, who have lived up to the full potential of human nature.

5.2 *Healthy at 100*: Reading Centenarians' Life Narratives through Dietary Advice

If I have claimed above that centenarians' autobiographies are a contested and highly ambivalent genre, there is yet another twist to this ambivalence. Given their minute depiction of the centenarian's diet or fitness habits, these autobiographies often verge on advice literature. This feature, in turn, intersects with an idea which has already been outlined in the introduction, namely, that modern biomedicine is yet at a loss to account for the reasons of extreme longevity. Not only do these narratives enumerate dietary tips, recipes and suggestions for physical exercise, but they can also be seen as a call to action. Implicitly, these narratives exhort their middle-class readers to do as the centenarians do, otherwise these readers may die before their time. This exhortation by centenarians' narratives mirrors the tone of the New England Centenarian Study, which has already been discussed in Chapter 2: Thus, the New England Centenarian study defines centenarians as "wonderful models of aging well"; those centenarians in particu-

lar who have "no clinically demonstrable disease" are called "escapers" in the study. This, it may be argued, is the ultimate advice which is implicitly given by centenarians' autobiographies. If only the readers heed the centenarians' advice, it is implied, they too might eventually become "escapers."

It is in this sense, moreover, that centenarians' autobiographies may also function as a form of self-help literature. However, as I will argue in more detail below, this idea is curiously ambivalent when understood in a particular context. Cynically speaking, in a country which is about to dismantle its health care system, readers may have access to centenarians' autobiographies even if they do not have access to medical care. The function of centenarians' narratives as advice literature, too, plays into the hands of a neoliberal rhetoric which constantly reminds us that our bodies are our capital. As Wendy Brown argues in an interview in the film *Take Your Pills*, "The problem today isn't that jobs are scarcer or that positions in school are fewer, it's that we live in a hypercompetitive order where the competition is not just for arriving but the competition is never-ending. Every human being is now required to understand themselves as a little bit of human capital" (Klayman 06:46–07:06).

There is a complex narrative arc here which is implicit in the idea of centenarians' autobiographies as advice literature. First, these life writing texts spell out in minute detail, what the centenarians eat, how they exercise, and how many hours of sleep they get each day. Second, however, the advice given by far exceeds fields which actually stand in direct connection to longevity. Quite on the contrary: The advice which centenarians are being asked for seems to have less to do with aging than with life itself. It is this curious proliferation of meanings with which the present study is concerned: What are the cultural circumstances in which centenarians become oracles not just for the meaning of extreme old age, but life in general? What may be so interesting about centenarians' narratives, then, is not so much the answers they give us as the questions we bring to them. As the title of another centenarians' book by Kerstin Schweighöfer, this time on the German book market, has it, *100 Jahre Leben: Hundertjährige geben Antworten auf die großen Fragen*. Why, my own study sets out to ask, should we turn to centenarians to ask and re-ask these major questions of life? Why should the *Sinnfrage* be directed at centenarians in particular? This chapter will hence be concerned with the many repercussions and interconnections between the kinds of advice provided by centenarians' narratives. While some of them may be obvious, others are not.

One of the points that I am trying to make in this study, then, is that the concept of successful aging, as it is promoted in centenarians' autobiographies, is also present in countless other narratives and in countless other genres. As I will suggest in this chapter, there is a striking continuity between centenarians' narratives, on the one hand, and manuals on the intersection between diet, lifestyle and longevity. The

age of "100" – and the desire by a general public to reach this biblical age – has thus become a marketing mantra through which any form of advice literature – from business planners to fitness books – may sell. Throughout this study, I am thus interested not only in how the phrase "successful aging" has become an entire discourse, but also in how this discourse feeds into an entire industry. In his autobiography, R. Waldo McBurney suggests that one is never too old to start running. This motto, which undergirds all the centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this book, is strikingly in keeping with the title of John Robbins' *Healthy at 100: How You Can Dramatically Increase Your Life Span and Your Health Span* (2007). Arguably there is a certain sensationalism inherent in both centenarians' autobiographies such as McBurney's *My First Hundred Years: A Look from the Finish Line* (2004) and in manuals such as Robbins' book.

In what I am reading as an implicit conversation between Robbins' lifestyle manual and McBurney's autobiography, a number of aspects are apparent. First, there is in Robbins' title an explicit address. His aim in the book, its title promises, is to tell us how *we* can "increase [our] life span and [our] health span" (*Healthy at 100).* This stylistic device of openly addressing the reader as the recipient of this dietary and health advice may thus lead us to read centenarians' autobiographies in a new light. To what extent, we may ask, is there also an implicit form of address embedded in centenarians' autobiographies? In what sense, in other words, are these autobiographies also addressed to us as readers, but also as mentees who are guided by our centenarian advisors into a healthy old age?

Moreover, there is the question of just who the authors of such a book of advice may be. What would it imply that John Robbins, the author of *Healthy at 100*, should not be a medical doctor but the founder of an NGO called EarthSave? I would contend here that there is an intricate link between the authorship of books about how to achieve longevity, on the one hand, and the discourse of successful aging, on the other hand. As I suggest throughout these pages, successful aging has long migrated into the cultural sphere; it is a medical concept – emerging from the field of gerontology, among other disciplines – that has been translated into a fully-fledged cultural discourse on lifestyle, diet and resilience. To the extent that such a discourse is already in place, it could be argued, an author's academic or disciplinary credentials will cease to matter. Because *Healthy at 100* is embedded in a discourse which has migrated from the domain of medicine into that of lifestyle, paradoxically, its author does not have to hold a degree in medicine. One of the questions that I am exploring in this book, then, is precisely what form of expertise co-authors of centenarians' narratives may possess. To the extent that the idea of "healthy at 100" has become ubiquitous and is no longer confined to the realm of medicine, practically anyone may be an author of a book about healthy longevity. John Robbins, incidentally, is the son of the founders of

Baskin-Robbins; he has founded the organization EarthSave to talk about the connectedness between human health and environmental sustainability. Even more appropriately for the purpose of a study about the secrets of longevity, he is also the author of the book *Diet for a New America* (1987). This connection between a dietary guide and a book about the secrets to longevity may itself be intriguing. For part of the discourse of successful aging, in the life sciences, is that nutrition may play a significant part in aging well and living to 100. As an "expert" about the diet that the "new America" may need, then, Robbins automatically becomes an expert on the topic of longevity. My claim here would be that unless an entire discourse of longevity is already in place, such an "expertise" would in fact be unthinkable. At the same time, there may be a particular irony inherent in the fact that the heir of Baskin-Robbins, known for its ice cream, now becomes an expert on healthy living and a good diet. Yet, in this instance as in countless others, longevity has become a sales strategy. Not incidentally, Smuckers, known for its jam, also ran an ad on longevity (Velten 60). One of the aspects that is also striking about Robbins' *Healthy at 100*, that can only be mentioned in passing here, is the question of how advice literature on longevity is being marketed. John Robbins may not be an M.D. himself, but on the cover of his book, there is a blurb by Dean Ornish, M.D.: "Read this book! Healthy at 100 is a masterpiece" (np). What this implies, then, is that the cultural discourse of successful aging is still being underpinned by the medical sphere. In other words, *Healthy at 100* may have "migrated" into the realm of culture and lifestyle, but its discourse is still being tied back to the domain of medicine. John Robbins may not hold a degree in medicine, but his work being praised by a medical doctor such as Dean Ornish ensures us that his "medical" expertise is clearly sound. As I am arguing throughout this book, then, the discourse of successful aging abounds with authors and co-authors whom, in any other fields, we might not be ready to accept as experts. As long as the "key" to extreme longevity has not yet been found, there is a void or search space that experts of any kind might be able to fill.

One aspect that I am discussing throughout these chapters, then, is the strikingly formulaic quality that seems to connect life writing narratives by centenarians to manuals about longevity. These formulae, in turn, seem to go back to gerontological research, that I have discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. The topics that have been raised in the Heidelberg Centenarian Study (HH-100) as well as the New England Centenarian Study (NECS) are thus taken up by centenarians' autobiographies, and they form the chapters of longevity manuals such as *Healthy at 100*. *Healthy at 100*, in turn, bears striking resemblances to Shavy's and Brinkbäumer's journalistic study *Das kluge, lustige, gesunde, ungebremste, glückliche, sehr lange Leben: Die Weisheit der Hundertjährigen*. Seen from this per-

spective, all these narratives are in conversation with one another; each of these texts transcends the particular genre it seems to be moored in at first glance and participates in other genres. In this sense, *Healthy at 100* is at the same time a form of popular science (not incidentally, it is "marketed" by Dean Ornish, M.D.), a diet manual and a guide on how to prevent Alzheimer's. At the same time, *Healthy at 100* takes its cue from Rowe and Kahn's original study "Successful Aging" (1997) by implying that we are the masters of our own aging process. Chapter headings such as "Keeping Your Marbles: Simple Things You Can Do to Prevent Alzheimer's" (Robbins 190) or "What's Love Got to Do with It: The Healing Power of Relationships – New Evidence that Stunts even the Skeptics" (Robbins 217) are strikingly similar to centenarians telling their readers, in their autobiographies, how they coped with the death of their loved ones or how they managed to keep their minds active.

I would argue that it would be too simple to argue that these are questions – the most fundamental questions – that we ask about life in general and that we now direct towards the centenarian as the epitome of wisdom. Rather, I would suggest that there is an entire discourse on successful aging which informs all these narratives – from diet manual to fitness guide and life-writing narrative –, and which accounts for the fact that these narratives, regardless of the genre that they may inhabit, are so similar to each other.

Finally, John Robbins' manual how to be *Healthy at 100* also establishes a connection that I have not addressed so far: the connection between successful aging and healthy aging (Kaeberlein et al. 2015). Both of these paradigms have informed recent approaches in gerontology, especially the "new gerontology." At the same time, it could be argued that "healthy aging" has always also been implicit in the notion of successful aging (Wong 2018). As I suggest throughout these chapters, this is a convergence that, seen from a cultural perspective, would seem highly controversial. By implication, a life lived with illness or disability would not be taken to be quite as successful and would hence fall outside the scope of successful aging.

At the same time, *Healthy at 100* can also be seen as being part of an entire "industry" of centenarianness. For this very reason, it is in dialogue not only with centenarians' autobiographies, such as the dietary advice of the Delany sisters that I am going to discuss below, but it is also in conversation with David Mazzarella's *Always Eat the Hard Crust of the Bread: Recipes and Recollections from My Centenarian Mother*. Just as Mazzarella's mother swears by a fat-free diet as the secret to longevity, John Robbins is convinced that a "plant-based diet" (*Diet for a New America* 137) is the key to healthy aging. Even more strikingly perhaps, Robbins also goes on to connect environmentalism, sustainability and longevity: The key to our future as individuals may be a healthy diet that enables us to live to

one hundred; the ideal diet for the future of the planet, on the other hand, needs to be "plant-based" (*Diet for a New America* 137). Not incidentally, John Robbins is also the founder of EarthSave and has previously written books about environmentalism. What is remarkable in this context is that the centenarian, as the epitome of healthy living, can in fact be seen to participate in a "green industry." Yet, in this as in many other instances, this may be the image of centenarianness as a form of successful aging that is being projected by the author of the manual about longevity, not by the centenarian themselves. What unites all these narratives about extreme longevity, however, is one central assumption: the idea that there is a key to extreme longevity and successful aging, if only we were able to find it. This search for the fountain of life, as Stephen Katz has suggested, is as old as humankind itself; yet, it takes a particular form at the turn of the twenty-first century. This new form of an age-old search, I suggest in this book, is encapsulated in the idea of successful aging.

5.3 Centenarian Narratives and the Business World

Rather than asking what topics can be found in narratives about centenarians, as much as in narratives by centenarians, it could be argued, we might ask what topics *cannot* be found in these narratives. At the turn of the new millennium, the centenarian is perceived as the answer to *any* question, whatever its nature may be. What is striking in this context is the idea that before the "boom" of centenarianness, these questions – about life, love, happiness or the meaning of life – might have been asked to any older person; wisdom would have been seen to increase over the life span. In what I am reading as the "age of centenarianness," on the other hand, 100 has come to be perceived as a magic number: It is by crossing the "finish line" – as alluded to in the title of McBurney's autobiography – of their 100th birthday that centenarians are being endowed with the aura of infinite wisdom. To use Lorraine Adams's phrase, they have turned from "nobodies into somebodies" (np). Crucially, however, this can also be seen as a devaluation of "normal" aging: As a nonagenarian, strikingly enough, there is nothing to celebrate; the celebration starts only when the finish line has actually been crossed. As I argue throughout these chapters, this idea of centenarianness as a magic threshold that one does not simply have to cross, but to run across, also completely dismisses the circumstances under which such extreme longevity has been achieved. It disregards the structural features that may undergird the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle; it dismisses the existence of structural inequalities for those who are unable to eat right, to keep fit or keep their calm even in the face of adversity. The central element of successful aging is that it is an individualist paradigm. The centenarian, as he is viewed by the

paradigm of successful aging, is unique in his achievement. This achievement, in turn, is not seen as being embedded into a community or a society; it is the individual alone that counts. It is at this point that successful aging is so closely akin to the politics of neoliberalism (Brown 2015).

In keeping with this neoliberal agenda, it may be small wonder that centenarians should also be seen to hold the key to business success. It may be significant to note in this context that John Rowe, who co-authored *Successful Aging* with Robert Kahn, is both a physician and a businessman. Until his retirement, Rowe was the CEO of AETNA Inc., a health insurance company. In 2005, Rowe was named "Manager of the Year" by the magazine *Businessweek*. One of the questions that the present study of centenarians' autobiographies sets out to ask, then, is whether there is not in fact an entrepreneurial quality to these life writing narratives. At the core of Rowe's tenure as the CEO of the AETNA insurance company, there was hence the management of health. What is so striking, then, is to investigate the relationship between Rowe's work as a health manager, on the one hand, and his co-authorship of *Successful Aging* as a manual, arguably, about taking charge of one's aging process. To the extent that centenarians' autobiographies are stories of successful aging, they, too, may contain an entrepreneurial element: In his life narrative, the centenarian may become an entrepreneur managing his own aging process.

In this as in many other instances, the centenarian's life, in its public representation, is overdetermined by the questions that we bring to it. In Steve Franklin and Lynn Peter Adler's *Celebrate 100: Centenarian Secrets to Success in Business and Life*, the metaphor of being "money wise" (75) comes to be metaphorical of this overdetermination. It is not only that we ask the centenarian questions that are "money wise," that is, that are related to financial advice; it is also that, by the mere fact of having crossed the finish line of their 100th birthday, centenarians are seen to hold the key to economic wisdom. As I will argue in more detail below, the same questions also seem to permeate centenarians' autobiographies. Interestingly enough, the relationship between the centenarian and their co-author may in fact be similar to other authors writing about centenarians' secrets: from David Mazzarella who goes in search of his mother's kitchen secrets to John Robbins' looking for centenarians' health and dietary advice to Franklin and Adler. In each of these texts, the centenarian is surrounded by people who want to interview them. If there is a secret to longevity, then the centenarian may hold the key to the mansion of extreme old age. The role of the interviewer, in turn, is to get the centenarian to reveal the secret, to find the key. The questions asked by all these authors, in turn, are strikingly in keeping with the questions also asked by life scientists. Life sciences and life writing thus blur into each other; and both fields bear striking resemblance to books of advice such as *Healthy at 100* and *Celebrate 100*. In Franklin and

Adler's *Celebrate 100*, the chapter headings read: "Lifestyle Choices" (42), "Healthy Diet" (43), "Attitude" (134), "Faith" (139), "Exercise and Activity" (142), "Family" (147), "Clean Living" (144) and "Genetics" (150). In all of the centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this study, each of these aspects is also at the core of centenarians' life narratives. Ann Nixon Cooper's *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name*, for instance, includes chapters such as "Faith Will Get You Through" or "Getting Back Up Again" (Cooper and Bates 119; 137), as well as detailed descriptions of Cooper's meeting of her husband, their courtship, their marriage, the birth of their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Despite the differences in genre, then, centenarians' autobiographies converge with advice literature precisely in the formulaic quality of all these narratives. It is not incidental, then, that one chapter in Franklin and Adler's *Celebrate 100* should be titled "A Formular to Longevity" (195).

Precisely because they are aimed at a larger public and are part of the genre of self-help books and advice literature, books such as *Celebrate 100* or *Healthy at 100* may reveal, through their sensationalist rhetoric, aspects about centenarians' autobiographies that might otherwise have been overlooked. Yet, as I argue throughout these chapters, a certain form of sensationalism prevails both in advice literature and in centenarians' narratives. The discourse of successful aging, then, may be used more unabashedly in success manuals such as *Celebrate 100* than in centenarians' life writing narratives. One chapter in Franklin and Adler's book is tellingly titled, "Catch the Spirit: Forget Aging Gracefully – Age Excellently!" (192). This chapter heading is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it can be seen to demonstrate that "successful aging" has turned into a master narrative of aging as such; it has become ubiquitous in the discourse and representation of aging, permeating all genres and walks of life. Second, it seems disturbing that "aging gracefully" and "aging excellently" should be put in direct opposition to one another. In the first case, there is a sense in which the aging process is germane to the individual themselves; each of us in their own specific way, we may age in a way that seems in keeping with our self-image and self-perception. The concept of "aging gracefully" is strikingly in keeping with Nussbaum's and Levmore's concept of "aging thoughtfully" (Nussbaum and Levmore 6). As Nussbaum and Levmore write, "To age is to experience, to gain wisdom, to love and to lose, and to grow more comfortable and to grow comfortable in one's own skin, however much it might be loosening" (1). In the context of Nussbaum's and Levmore's definition of "aging thoughtfully," it seems interesting to recall the "aging mirror" with which Margaret Morganroth Gullette begins her book *Aged by Culture*. Nussbaum and Levmore acknowledge that as we age, our skin "might be loosening" (1). However, they also point to all the factors that may increase with age and that may actually deepen our life experience. Most importantly, the

idea of "growing comfortable in one's skin" seems to be the exact opposite of the anti-aging industry, with its emphasis on permanent youthfulness.

What is at the core of both the concepts of "aging gracefully" and "aging thoughtfully" is that we may each of us have a different sense of what it means to age in grace; a sense that is individually felt rather than judged by others. In the notion of "aging excellently," on the other hand, the obverse is true: The aging process is now a process that is judged and commented on by others: In the eyes of others, we may have aged more or less successfully. Moreover, there seems to be a universal yardstick with which this aging marathon can be measured: The title of "successful" or "excellent" aging, crucially enough, is not something that we can bestow on ourselves because it feels appropriate to us, but it is, rather, a value judgment for others to pronounce and for us to hear or bear.

What is at stake in the context of *Celebrate 100*, moreover, is the way in which these manuals of advice about longevity are being framed. In the case of *Healthy at 100*, as I have suggested above, the book's author was not a medical doctor, but his expertise was vouched for by Dean Ornish, M.D. In the case of *Celebrate 100*, a similar mechanism may be at work. *Celebrate 100* is a book about centenarians' secrets to business success. However, it is a book written by Steve Franklin, who holds a PhD, and Lynn Peters Adler, J.D. If successful aging has become a title that is bestowed on some and not on others, we may come to wonder who the experts are who are able to bestow that title. In each of these cases, the title of successful aging is no longer limited to the domain of medicine; rather, *Celebrate 100* implies that it may have migrated from medicine to other domains. In this context, too, however, a businessman writes a foreword (Franklin and Adler xi) to vouch for the fact that the business advice that Franklin and Adler extract from centenarians' narratives is sound. The foreword, written by S. Truett Cathy, frames the book as follows:

> My good friend Steve Franklin and his colleague Lynn Adler have written books, articles, and given speeches all over the world, and *Celebrate 100: Centenarian Secrets for Success in Business and Life* is their best work ever . . . . I hope you will all embrace and practice the centenarian secrets about money, work, and life as you enjoy their interesting stories, witty comments, and observations from over a century of dynamic change and living life to the fullest . . . . If you do, you just might make it into the Centenarian Club, too. I'm planning on it! (Franklin and Adler xi)

What is significant here is that even though it may at first seem that *Celebrate 100* is remote from Rowe and Kahn's original article on Successful Aging, there are striking parallels between the two. *Celebate 100* equates taking charge of your business life with taking charge of your life span; S. Truett Cathy, too, is "planning" (Franklin

and Adler 2013, xi) on living up to 100. Moreover, he writes that Steve Franklin and Lynn Peters Adler are experts on such longevity advice, by virtue of having written countless books and articles on centenarians' lives. The point that I would like to make here is not only that the paratexts (forewords, dust jacket blurbs, marketing slogans) may be as important as the texts inside these books themselves. Rather, I am interested in how the centenarian is being *fabricated*: through the titles that are bestowed on them as much as through those who feel entitled to judge when the aging process is successful and when it is not. The one question that is not being asked, I contend in this book, is whether the centenarian themselves would like to be included in the "Centenarian Club" (xi). Rather, as I have argued in Chapter 4 with regard to the recruitment of the centenarian and Jonas Jonasson's remarkable novel about a reluctant centenarian, this may be a club that others have formed for the centenarian, and in whose formation the centenarian themselves may have had no say. In Jonasson's novel, the centenarian realizes that others are using his example as a pretext for celebrating themselves. The same, I would argue here, might be said of the countless books that make up the centenarian industry. "Experts" and co-authors may in fact be said to congratulate each other on their astute description of the centenarian; the centenarian's own opinion, however, may be of lesser importance. Expertise, moreover, may simply be construed here as being part of the centenarian industry. How exactly, we may ask, would S. Truett Cathy be a business expert? What would be his credentials? The book simply informs us that he is the Founder and Chairman of Chick-fil-A. This, we might argue, is a generic appellation: It marks him as a successful businessman, even if to readers, Chick-fil-A may not quite be as familiar as Baskin-Robbins. Chick-fil-A is a chicken sandwich chain; here, too, the owners of food manufacturing companies are ubiquitous when it comes to marketing centenarians' lifestyles. Centenarians' narratives, then, may serve as a marketing device for the food industry. Precisely because we may tend to associate centenarians with a healthy diet, promoting centenarians' life narratives may in fact "rub off" on Chick-fil-A, too. This is a form of dietary advice, in turn, that can be found not only in business manuals such as *Celebrate 100*, but also inside the pages of centenarians' narratives. Not incidentally, George Dawson loves fried chicken. As he writes in his autobiography, "If I want fried chicken, I eat fried chicken" (Glaubman and Dawson, *Life Is So Good* 244). As I will elaborate in more detail below, this is when we may have come full circle in the centenarian industry: George Dawson has lived to one hundred by eating, among other things, fried chicken; it may thus only be logical that a book about centenarians' secret to "excellent aging" should include a foreword by the founder and chairman of Chick-fil-A.

5.4 From Yoga to Yoghurt: The Delany Sisters' Lifestyle in *Having Our Say*

What is interesting to consider here is that in the attention paid to the centenarian's diet, there is a striking convergence between life sciences and life writing. In life science research, the centenarian's lifestyle, with dietary habits being chief among them, is one of the central elements of gerontological research. As Franceschi et al. observe,

> Individuals capable of reaching the extreme limit of human life such as centenarians are characterized by an exceptionally healthy phenotype—that is, a low number of diseases, low blood pressure, optimal metabolic and endocrine parameters, and increased diversity in the gut microbiota—and they are epigenetically younger than their chronological age . . . . Interviews with centenarians and historical data on the nutritional and lifestyle habits of Italians during the twentieth century suggest that as children and into adulthood, centenarians lived in an environment that was nonobesogenic, but at the same time the environment did not produce malnutrition. Centenarians appear to be creatures of habit, and we argue that their habit of eating meals at the same time each day favored the maintenance of circadian rhythms, including their sleep cycle. (Franceschi et al. 329)

What is striking here, I would argue, is that the aspects investigated by scientists correspond in minute detail to the questions asked of the centenarian by their co-author: Just what do they eat? How much to they sleep? In this as in many other instances, there is thus a convergence between life science and life writing when it comes to tracing the "secret" of extreme longevity. At the same time, however, there is some variation in centenarians' life writing narratives when it comes to nutrition. Most importantly, there is the sheer discrepancy between centenarians' lifestyles. In both life sciences studies and centenarian's autobiography, the dietary advice given by the respective centenarians is completely contradictory: While some stress the necessity of eating fresh fruit – a piece of advice which is entirely in keeping with nutrition science –, others insist that what is good for the "soul" will also be good for the body (Glaubman and Dawson, *Life Is So Good* 244). What may emerge from this contradiction is that life writing as a genre may borrow specific features or categories from the life sciences – such as the emphasis laid on the centenarian's diet – without, however, conforming to the content of life sciences research. The parallel between life sciences and life writing, in the context of dietary inquiry, may thus be in form and structure more than in content. At the same time, the complete contradictoriness between one centenarian's account and that of another may point to the fact that in the structural requirements of centenarians' narratives, the category which must be catered to overrides any plausibility in terms of a causal relation between the centenarian's diet and his longevity. The point to be made here may be not so much that eating

pork will increase one's longevity, but that at least in this particular case, greasy food and lots of meat did not interfere with the centenarian's health. What remains as a structural feature, however, is both the emphasis on the centenarian's diet and the way in which it is linked to his longevity: Centenarians' autobiographies, after all, position themselves as guidelines and manuals for middle-aged readers wanting to "age successfully" as well.

At the same time, there is a certain sensationalism which may undergird centenarians' narratives particularly when it comes to pieces of advice which, in the light of nutrition science, seem rather bizarre. George Dawson's description of pig's knuckles, then, is in keeping with the idea that centenarians' narratives resist rather than confirm the medicalization of extreme old age. A diet made up of pig's knuckles seems to run counter to the advice commonly given by nutrition studies. Just as the narrative insists that George Dawson has never needed a doctor in his life, neither does he have any use for the dietary advice given by the life sciences. Rather, eating what the narrative implies to be "soul food" (with what can be read as a conscious reference to a specifically African American diet), is said by the narrative to be key to extreme longevity. As Dawson tells his co-author Richard Glaubman in *Life Is So Good*,

> I eat what I want and when I want. If it's two in the morning and I want some beans and potatoes, then I have beans and potatoes. If I don't feel like cooking the potatoes, I might eat them raw. You've been here a lot and seen what I eat. If I want fried chicken, I eat fried chicken. If I want to cook some ham hocks and cabbage then I will do that. Matter of fact, maybe I'll make us some cornbread right now. (243–244)

Even as in many instances, life sciences approaches to extreme longevity converge with those of life writing, the arena of diet and nutrition may be one where they are completely at odds with one another. The fact that George Dawson's dietary advice is completely at odds with that of the Delany sisters, moreover, may point to two different aspects in our understanding of centenarians' autobiographies. First, it implies that for one hundred centenarians, there may be at least one hundred pieces of dietary advice. Second, it may also point to the fact that dietary regimes may be a matter of class. As middle-class professionals, the Delany sisters strongly subscribe to nutrition advice provided by the life sciences. George Dawson, by contrast, despises book learning. As he tells Richard,

> But look at all these books [people] buy just to figure what to eat. People worry too much. Look at this one. Carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, calories. You know that all that will do to them?
>
> Improve your nutrition, help balance your weight?
>
> Maybe. Most likely, though, it will just make a person worry. (*Life Is So Good* 243)

In this instance, as in many others, it may be the contradictory advice given by centenarians' autobiographies that may keep the fascination going. While George Dawson favors intuition over nutrition science, another centenarian, R. Waldo McBurney, swears by honey and lots of exercise: "Why I have been able to run and produce thousands of pounds of honey is a question people tend to answer in their own way. The answer, I think, is too simplified, like, I can still run because I eat honey, or I can run because I keep on running" (22). One of the reasons for the boom in reading centenarians' autobiographies, this book suggests, is that the reader may inevitably look for patterns. If the same dietary and fitness advice is given by not one, but two centenarians, perhaps emulating it in middle age is worth a try? Seen from this perspective, it may be indicative that the Delany sisters' advice about the benefit of exercise converges with R. Waldo McBurney's emphasis on the usefulness of running. As McBurney observes not without pride, "Gold medals in ten track and field events in national and world competitions until I was past 100 are evidence of special training in other basics beside exercise" (np).

In *Having Our Say*, the Delany sisters' centenarians' narrative can alternatively be read as yoga promotion and a testimony to the possibility of lifelong learning. At the same time, however, it must be noted that yoga is a medical philosophy in India, not just a Western lifestyle choice. Here as in many other instances, centenarians' autobiographies may hence be paradoxical. As Sadie notes, "I kept doing my yoga exercises, even after Mama died. Well, when Bessie turned eighty she decided that I looked better than her. So she decided that she would start doing yoga, too. So we've been doing our exercises together ever since. We follow a yoga exercise program on the TV" (202). The image of two African American sisters doing their morning yoga is hence intriguing on a number of levels. First, it is a sign of what may be termed successful aging; at the same time, it is also a passage which speaks to a power of yoga as an age-old medical form similar to Ayurveda (Mishra et al. 2021). Third, centenarians' autobiographies are indeed a tribute to the discourse of life-long learning. Thus, there is a way, despite their neoliberal undertone on the cultural level, that it is also possible – and important – to read centenarians' narratives in dialogue with the life sciences. Thus, the life sciences testify to the potential of life-long learning: the brain, being flexible, is never too old to learn; even as learning gets more difficult with age, it is nonetheless possible. Fourth, both the Delany sisters' narrative and the idea of successful aging serve to turn the idea of "age appropriateness" on its head: No one, this passage implies, is ever too old to do yoga. In this instance, too, the autobiography *Having Our Say* is in conversation with advice manuals such as *Healthy at 100*: John Robbins tells us that we "can – *at any age* – dramatically increase [our] life span" (np; italics original). By the same token, the Delany sisters ensure us that they only began practicing yoga after turning 80 years old.

At the same time, the Delany sisters may be seen as the best example that advice literature works. There may be a circular logic at work here: Thirty years ago, long before they ever became centenarians, the centenarian sisters might have been reading advice literature about diet and fitness regimes; now that they are centenarians – which is implied to be proof that advice literature works –, they are writing their own guidebooks about successful aging. In this way, the centenarian sisters are both readers and authors of advice literature; they are proof, within their own texts, that advice literature makes sense. Sadie notes,

> Exercise is very important. A lot of older people don't get exercise at all. Another thing that is terribly important is diet. I keep up with the latest news about nutrition. About thirty years ago, Bessie and I started eating much more healthy foods. We don't eat that fatty Southern food very often. When we do, we feel like we can't move! (*Having Our Say* 289)

In a manner that may be quite uncanny, it is there that *Having Our Say* converges with David Mazzarella's cookbook about the kitchen secrets of his centenarian mother. Just as Benigna Mazzarella only eats "the hard crust of the bread" (14) to avoid the fatty interior of a bread loaf, Sadie Delany abhors "fatty Southern food" (*Having Our Say* 289). Yet, seen from the perspective of life science approaches, there may be a logical impasse here. The life sciences, it could be argued, have proven that too much fat in one's diet may have disastrous consequences. Seen from this angle, it would hardly be a coincidence that so many centenarians describe their fat-free diet. If it had not been for this diet, we may argue, they might never have become centenarians in the first place. Yet, from the perspective of cultural studies, there would be a counterargument to this logic: First, the Delany sisters' dietary advice is contradicted by George Dawson, who swears by fried chicken. Second, I am interested in the way in which dietary advice is narrativized in centenarians' autobiographies. There is an argumentative deadlock here: As life scientists admit, the explanation of extreme longevity is multi-factorial; a healthy diet may be conducive to healthy old age, but it may only be one factor among many. What I am more interested in in this study is how one and the same narrative may function both as a diet manual and an autobiography, and how the discourse of the life sciences migrates into a life writing text.

What is interesting to note here, then, is that the dialogue between life sciences and life writing is actually woven into the centenarians' narrative itself. As the author of her own piece of life writing, Sadie notes that she has mapped out her life and her diet and fitness regime in line with the information provided by the life sciences; this information is then written into the narrative itself. Life writing, in centenarians' narratives as much as in many other forms of discourse, is thus a form of disseminating, to a wider public, knowledge generated by the life sciences. At the same time, there is a curious mixture, in *Having Our Say*, be-

tween the latest knowledge generated by the life sciences, on the one hand, and "pieces of everyday wisdom" generated by folk medicine, or just personal belief. Centenarians' narratives may thus blur the lines not only between genres – oscillating between, for instance, popular literature and autobiography –, but also between different types of knowledge:

> We eat as many as seven different vegetables a day. Plus lots of fresh fruits. And we take vitamin supplements: Vitamin A, B complex, C, D, E, and minerals, too, like zinc. And Bessie takes tyrosine when she's a little blue. Every morning, after we do our yoga, we each take a clove of garlic, chop it up, and swallow it whole. If you swallow it all at once, there is no odor. We also take a teaspoon of cod liver oil. (289)

In terms of their diet, many centenarians insist that neither coffee nor alcohol is conducive to healthy living. Sadie Delany observes, "Generally, we stay away from liquor. Except once in a while, we make Jell-o with wine . . . . It'll relax you, but you won't get drunk. The truth is, I have never been *drunk* in my life (*Having Our Say* 26). As role models, the centenarian sisters are too good to be true: They have a healthy lifestyle, they exercise, and they could never be imagined watching soap operas. Even their TV diet is educational. At the same time, or especially for this reason, theirs is an autobiography in the genuine sense of the term. Like Benjamin Franklin, they seem to be model citizens. But what is the country they have their citizenship in? If indeed centenarians' autobiographies can be linked to the discourse of citizenship, is there a citizenship of old age? It may be argued in this context that successful aging has become a master narrative, and a master narrative which links the culture of neoliberalism to the discourse of the life sciences.

What is at stake in both contexts, it could be argued, is the idea of what Nayan Shah has termed "potential citizen[ship]" (Shah 203). In the age of neoliberalism, where everyone is said to be responsible for the capital that is their own body, these centenarian sisters prove that extreme old age need not be a burden to the state (Velten 2022; Overall 2005). Instead, the image conveyed here is that they are aware that their bodies are their capital, and they tend this capital well. Here too, there may in fact be a tension between a cultural and a scientific reading of a centenarian's narrative. On the level of the life sciences, it is clear that achieving old age, and especially extreme old age, is partly based on healthy living. On the level of the cultural construction of age, however, the same emphasis on an individual's responsibility for their own health – with a complete disregard of the system that this individual happens to be living in –, the same idea may in fact be problematic.

As I am trying to argue throughout this book, centenarians' autobiographies may provide the reader – and the literary critic – with a riddle. Because, despite

their apparent simplicity both in style and content, these texts are multi-layered, their messages are often at cross-purpose from one another. I am thus concerned, throughout this study, with how we read these texts, and what other texts, from what other fields, we bring to this reading. For all their resemblance to popular fiction, I would argue, it may also be worthwhile, and deeply important to situate texts like the Delany sisters' *Having Our Say* in the tradition of Franklinian autobiography. It is by virtue of having become centenarians, then, that the Delany sisters are able to aspire to their own form of statesmanship in the kingdom of the oldest old. What is remarkable in this context, once again, is a dilemma which runs through every page of this book. On the one hand, there is something clearly empowering about the importance that is currently being ascribed to narratives of aging. Precisely because in aging societies, people try to make sense of what it will be like to live into extreme old age, there is a market – and a desire – for narratives about aging. This market, in turn, has hierarchies of its own: the story of a centenarian, we might say, is infinitely more marketable than that of a 98-year-old. The privilege of extreme old age, moreover, seems to be a *Gleichmacher* in which class and race have ceased to matter; it is for this reason that a black women's narrative may actually be on par with the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin.

There are two aspects at the heart of the sisters' lifestyle in *Having Our Say*. First, they can be seen as a testimony to the fact that successful aging is made easier by a rigorous routine. In this sense, too, they can be seen in the Franklinian tradition. Sadie observes, "These days, I do most of the cooking, and Bessie does the serving. We eat our big meal of the day at noon. In the evening, we usually have a milk shake for dinner, and then we go upstairs and watch 'MacNeil Lehrer' on TV" (290).

At the same time, however, the narrative clearly stresses that especially for Bessie Delany, aging well can be seen as a project, a form of constant self-improvement. This book is concerned, throughout these pages, with the idea of successful aging having become a master narrative which is being perpetuated, among others, by centenarians' autobiographies. Each master narrative, of course, has to dismiss its opposites, those "unruly" narratives of aging which do not fit the premise of aging successfully. It is for this reason that throughout these chapters, I am trying to supplement what I see as a one-sided view on aging proposed by centenarians' autobiographies through other narratives which locate a good life also, for instance, in disability or lives lived less autonomously. I believe that the American myth of rugged "individualism" may be at the core of the idea of successful aging as well (Paul 369), and it is certainly at the core of the autobiographies of US centenarians. One of the ideas which may be needed in order to dethrone the master narrative of successful aging, I believe, is to turn to different forms of autonomy, such as "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie and Stoljar 4). It is in this context, in search for alternative

ways of being autonomous, that we may turn to a number of fields and contexts: To postcolonial studies in their emphasis on community, to African American studies with their emphasis on solidarity and kinship, to disability studies with their questioning of normalcy, or to studies about mental impairment, genetic difference (such as autobiographies by authors with Down Syndrome) or to studies on the cultural framework and the self-definition of people with Alzheimer's disease. I believe that all of these narratives are being dismissed by the rationale of centenarians' narratives. What is so remarkable in this context, is that Bessie, as a "character" in her own autobiography, should be such an unruly subject: a subject who should not celebrate, but fret about the fact that she has lived into extreme old age. Yet, I believe that on the level of cultural construction, this one unruly voice is "permitted" within the framework of the narrative, because there is Sadie's voice to balance it. Sadie, within the master narrative of successful aging, is clearly a role model, and it is against this backdrop that Bessie, as the unwilling centenarian, may be allowed to appear. The point I would like to make here, however, is not that these two centenarians' narratives – framed within their sibling autobiography – cancel each other out; it is, rather, that Sadie's voice and subject position conforms to the master narrative of successful aging, which is being confirmed rather than disrupted by Bessie's unruly words. As Sadie observes, "And [Bessie] opens her eyes and says, 'Oh, Lord, another day?!' I don't think Bessie would get up at all sometimes, if it weren't for me. She stays up late in her room and listens to these talk-radio shows, and she doesn't get enough sleep" (Delany and Delany, *Having Our Say* 188).

For even if Bessie has become a centenarian in spite of herself, the very fact that she has lived into extreme old age by having been made into her sister's project confirms the *veracity* and the effectiveness of the discourse of successful aging in the first place. If unruly voices are permitted within the framework of successful aging, then, they nevertheless need to be contained. What I am trying to argue throughout this book, then, is that successful aging is deeply desirable, it is the fantasy of extreme old age to which we may all want to subscribe. What is problematic, however, is the fact of successful aging having become a master narrative. The project of this book is twofold, then: By looking at centenarians' autobiographies, I want to inquire into the cultural construction and dissemination of this master narrative. At the same time, however, my aim is to pit these narratives against other, alternative narratives about aging: narratives which, from the vantage point of successful aging as a discourse, would be implied to be failed versions of aging, or forms of failed aging. What happens, I ask, when we read these two discourses in dialogue with each other? Seen from this perspective, narratives of "failed" aging would point to the blind spots in the depictions of successful aging; and they would reveal its agenda in becoming a master narrative of age in the culture of neoliberalism. The instances in which I am questioning cen-

tenarians' narratives as models of successful aging, then, are not meant as belittling these centenarians' achievement, but only to remind us that *lives lived less autonomously are by no means less successful.*

5.5 *Having Our Say*: Companionship as the Secret to Longevity

At the same time, many aspects of centenarians' narratives seem to confirm findings which have also been made in life sciences research, as well as in research, for instance, in psychosomatic medicine. All of these studies stress, as has research in resilience studies, that an individual's embeddedness in a functioning social structure is key to their health and well-being (Ungar 2011). In this context, once again, the fascination of centenarians' narratives may be increased by the fact that they confirm, in the domain of life writing, what we may already know from the circulation of life sciences research. However, from the perspective of life writing research, it is also important to note that life writing narratives are never a mere mouthpiece for the life sciences. Rather, they give their own spin to the abstract data and figures provided by life sciences research.

In this vein, *Having Our Say*, the Delany sisters' joint autobiography, spells out the meaning of such social embeddedness by focusing on the close companionship between these two sisters. Neither of them would still be alive, the narrative reiterates, without the help of the other. The Delany sisters' secret to extreme longevity, *Having Our Say* points out, is their companionship with each other. What is especially remarkable here is that this narrative of black centenarians is embedded explicitly in the context of mythical narratives of extreme old age. Thus, centenarians' autobiographies can be seen both as a new genre which booms at the turn of the new millennium and a literary form which harks back to the age-old discourse of human immortality. This mythical quality, what is more, is evoked here in biblical terms. As Sadie Delany puts it,

> Bessie and I have been together since time began, or so it seems. Bessie is my little sister, only she's not so little. She is 101 years old, and I am 103. People always say they'd like to live to be one hundred, but no one really expects to, except Bessie. She always said she planned to be as old as Moses. And when Bessie says she's going to do something, she does it. Now, I think Moses lived to 120. So I told Bessie that if she lives to 120, then I'll just have to live to 122 so I can take care of her. (7)

A number of aspects are remarkable here. First, there is something endearing to the idea that despite their biblical old age, Sadie and Bessie still refer to each other as "big sister" and "little sister," respectively. At the same time, this insight which the narrative provides into the sisters' close relationship to each other conv-

eys the idea that the reader of this centenarians' autobiography is indeed permitted an insight into their most private lives. In this sense, the narrative establishes a form of kinship between the centenarian sisters and the reader. This kinship is further enhanced by the fact that the Delany sisters are referred to by their first names throughout the narrative. This is in marked contrast to *Life Is So Good*, the centenarian's autobiography of George Dawson, where the first name is rarely used. This difference may be due as much to what may be a different relationship between the centenarians and their co-authors as it may be due to the difference in class. As an uneducated black man from Texas, George Dawson may be fundamentally different from both his co-author and white, middle-class, middle-aged readers.

In terms of the genre of centenarians' autobiographies, this form of kinship may actually be crucial. If this book argues that centenarians' autobiographies serve as a form of advice literature, this advice can take different forms. It can function as an advice given to the visitor of a foreign country by a native, as I will argue in Chapter 8; or it can be given by one human being to another. *Having Our Say* thus oscillates, from the very beginning, between difference and sameness: The sisters may be unusual and strange in their extreme old age and their particular way of life, but they are also, the narrative implies, deeply endearing. Third, moreover, the portrayal of their close companionship also serves as a form of advice literature. One of the central functions of the centenarians' autobiography, I argue throughout this book, is that it attempts to solve the riddle of extreme longevity. In *Having Our Say*, one such explanation is the close emotional relationship between Sadie and Bessie. As Sadie notes,

> Neither of us ever married and we've lived together most all of our lives, and probably know each other better than any two human beings on this Earth. After so long, we are in some ways one person. She is my right arm. If she were to die first, I'm not sure I would want to go on living because the reason I am living is to keep *her* living. (8)

This passage, in a number of different ways, seems to be the epitome of what readers may desire about extreme old age. One of the most problematic aspects of growing into extreme old age, for middle-aged readers, may be the idea of living in loneliness. This is a fear which is explicitly taken up in *Having Our Say*: "We've buried so many people we've loved; that is the hardest part of living this long. Most everyone we know has turned to dust" (8). What is crucial to note, however, is that *Having Our Say* seems to illustrate the idea of "successful aging" by stressing what is implied to be the sisters' resilience. If resilience is defined by the ability to cope successfully with the experience of losing one's loved ones, the sisters' narrative testifies time and again to their ability to do so. At the same time, the narrative stresses the relevance of the centenarians' narrative as being itself a secret to lon-

gevity: The sisters keep on living, the narrative implies, because they want to see this book in print: As Sadie puts it, "That's why we agreed to do this book; it gives us a sense of purpose. If it helps just one person, then it's worth doing" (8). This passage is striking for a number of reasons. First, the book is seen as being central to the centenarians' sense of self-worth. The co-author's presence disappears in this reference, since the centenarians' autobiography is said to be not in the interest of the co-author or the publishing industry, or that of the aging industry surrounding it, but solely in the interest of the centenarian sisters themselves. Moreover, this passage also implies that the aim of the centenarians in telling their story is a form of comfort and advice given to the middle-class readers making up most of their readership.

If one of the Delany sisters' secrets to longevity is their close companionship and sibling love for each other, another is the fact that they never married. In this context, life writing clearly corresponds to the findings of the life sciences. Statistically, there is a significant number of centenarian women who are in fact unmarried. Centenarian autobiographies can thus be seen as confirming, in the domain of life writing, some of the tenets of scientific centenarian research. Conversely, precisely because the subjects of centenarians' autobiographies of course, are real, this correlation between life writing and life sciences seems only natural. Yet, what may be remarkable is that because centenarians' autobiographies are based on the centenarians revealing the secret to their longevity, Sadie and Bessie Delany view in their marital status one of the secrets to their own longevity. According to Sadie Delany, "Well, here I am an old maid. Ooops, I shouldn't say 'old maid,' 'cause it makes Bessie mad. Bessie says we're 'maiden ladies.' Well, whatever we are, I have no regrets about it. I think Frank would have worried me to death. I've had a good life, child" (120).

5.6 Outliving the "Rebby Boys": Centenarians' Narratives as Racial Critique or the Sensationalism of Extreme Old Age?

One idea which permeates virtually all of centenarians' narratives is the question of resilience. In the context of the life sciences, longevity research has been closely linked to resilience studies (Martin et al. 2010). One moment which recurs throughout these narratives is the question how extremely old individuals cope with loss. This is a question, once again, which links gerontologists' questionnaires to the questions asked of centenarians by their co-authors. To the extent that stress is a risk factor in terms of health and well-being, the development of successful coping

mechanisms may be one aspect which may underlie extreme longevity (Martin et al. 2008). It may thus come as no surprise that in many of these narratives, centenarians describe how they got over the death of a loved one. Invariably, the centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this book emphasize the centenarian's resilience and their ability to cope with adverse life circumstances. As R. Waldo McBurney puts it, "STRESS MANAGEMENT? Stress not handled properly is a killer. I have tried to put my trust in the Lord" (84).

In autobiographies by African American centenarians, however, the idea of resilience may acquire a different turn. One feature which is striking in especially *Life Is So Good* and *Having Our Say* is the overt, explicit depiction of white racism in the autobiographies of these African American centenarians. Two readings may emerge here which may in fact be mutually exclusive. On the one hand, it is remarkable that these narratives get away with a depiction of white on black racism which may leave white readers cringing with guilt. Why, I would like to ask, would these narratives revel in the portrayal of white injustice and the victimization of black lives? Thus, we might argue, on the other hand, that one of the reasons for the blunt description of white violence against African Americans in the course of the twentieth century may consist in the intersection of race and class. The achievement in becoming this old, for black centenarians, may lie precisely in the fact that they managed to persevere, mentally, physically and psychologically, against all odds. What emerges here is a scenario in which each new form of adversity in fact serves to set in relief the achievement itself: Seen from this perspective, racial violence is conducive to aging successfully in stimulating resilience, and, cynically speaking, to aging at all. This may well amount to a certain sensationalism of extreme old age. Aging well, we might argue, is all the more sensational if it has been performed under the most extreme of circumstances. The more dramatic these circumstances are, the more sensational the achievement becomes.

Yet, there is a double edge to this argument which may well be worth pursuing here. For there would well have been an alternative to the portrayal of the intersection between race and age here. What would have happened, we might want to ask, if the blunt description of the racial violence which black communities had to endure throughout the twentieth century had not only been related to centenarians' singular achievement of aging successfully under these circumstances, but had also led to a critique of race relations as such? There is a sense here, then, in which the white community gets away scot-free. It is this absolution from guilt, moreover, which may account for the fact that centenarians' autobiographies, despite their overt depiction of racist violence and microaggression, do not antagonize their audience. It may be the fact of aging and of aging successfully, then, that takes the edge off the racial critique. As George Dawson recalls in *Life*

Is So Good, he once worked for a white woman who expected him to eat with her dogs, out on the porch:

> But what hit me was that she expected I would eat out on the porch with her dogs. I didn't have to eat in their dining room, but back in their kitchen would have been all right. I told myself that I was good enough to eat a meal with people, not dogs. I set the bowl back on the shelf. Being hungry, that wasn't so easy. It was even harder with the biscuit, but I set that down too. (Glaubman and Dawson 212)

Moreover, as I have argued above, the fact that these stories of violence are being told to the white co-authors of the centenarian's narrative may further serve to mitigate the bitterness with which these narratives might otherwise have had to grapple: Because of the narrative framing of centenarians' autobiographies – the idea that these are stories told by black centenarians to a white co-author –, both the centenarians and the co-author look down, in a figurative sense, on the overt racism of those who do not know any better.

What would happen, on the other hand, if we were to read centenarians' narratives *with* the grain? I believe that it is here that the solace of the paradigm of *biological humanities* may lie. For a straightforward humanities reading would stress, as I have done above, the problematics inherent in what may be a sensationalism of extreme old age. One idea which such a reading would not take into account, however, is perhaps the most obvious reading of all. For the autobiographies of these black centenarians – George Dawson and Bessie and Sadie Delany – can also be read as a recognition of the remarkable achievement of black men and women. Far from sensationalism, these narratives may thus be a form of singular recognition; they may be stories of the Lebensleistung, the lifetime achievement, of extremely old African Americans at the turn of the new millennium. One question which emerges in centenarians' autobiographies, not only those co-authored by white co-authors and African American centenarians, is in what relationship the depiction of age stands to those achievements in the centenarian's life which have nothing at all to do with their age. Age, or rather, centenarians' autobiographies as narratives of extreme old age, may serve to credit achievements which might otherwise have gone unnoticed. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in their article about centenarians across the globe, scientists and journalists have interviewed both centenarians and near-centenarians (Cheng et al. 2019). To an increasing extent, the book market has thus discovered not only centenarians' narratives, but the life stories of near-centenarians as well: Ellen Shuster publishes *Mom's Musings: Poems by a Near Centenarian*, and Harald Laufman speaks of *One Man's Century with Pen, Brush, Fiddle and Scalpel: Confessions of a Near-Centenarian with Five Lives*, as mentioned above. In turning both to centenarians and near-centenarians, these books have asked precisely this question:

When does a life become remarkable? How does the framework of a centenarian's narrative make us see the most ordinary of human actions as suddenly remarkable?

It is this question, also, which may account for some of the fascination now accrued to centenarians' autobiographies. These narratives may become a mirror of our own lives not only with regard to our desire to age successfully, but also in having the trivialities and minor successes of our own daily lives recognized. *One of the central aspects in centenarian research, or rather, in the cultural dissemination of centenarians' narratives, may be the counterintuitive realization that what makes these narratives remarkable has nothing at all to do with age*. Rather, the prism of age and of extreme longevity may cause us to value what we already have. Seen through the retrospect of a very long life, we may come to value, in foresight, as it were, what we may already possess. Seen in Shakespearean terms, we may come to value that most which we must leave ere long. Centenarians' autobiographies may serve as a reminder to value in our own life what the centenarians, given the fact that they may soon pass away, are about to lose. It is in this sense, also, that the centenarians may function as a mirror to our own lives. Through the depiction of their lives, we may come to reframe, or ask in a different manner, one of the most fundamental questions of human life: What makes a life worth living? It is thus a signature feature of centenarians' autobiographies, I would argue, that they ask the question of *gelingendes Leben*, of a full life, with a twist. This may well be a paradox, however: Why should one and the same question – what makes a life a full life? – attain a different meaning if it is being asked in another context? It is this question, I believe, which may be crucial to understand the current fascination with centenarians' narratives. One of the central paradoxes of these narratives is that they depict as a categorial turn a shift which may not be categorical at all. What precisely changes when someone turns from 99 to one hundred? It is this shift, also, which is chronicled in centenarians' responses about suddenly having become celebrities.

In *Having Our Say*, then, there is a sense in which the longevity of two African American sisters is celebrated as black women's ultimate victory over a racist society. As Sadie and Bessie Delany put it at the end of their autobiography, they have simply "outlived" the racist "rebby boys":

> All those people who were mean to me in my life – all those *rebby* boys – they have turned to dust, and this old gal is still here, along with sister Sadie. We've outlived those old rebby boys! That's one way to beat them! That's justice! They're turning in their graves, while Sadie and me are getting the last word, in this book. And honey, I surely do love getting the last word. I'm having my say, giving my opinion. Lord, ain't it good to be an American. (298)

Just like other instances in centenarians' narratives, this passage is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, as this passage implies, there is something deeply empowering in the idea that by virtue of having lived to one hundred, an African American woman like Bessie Delany is now "fit" to become the author of her own autobiography, with a wide readership who is fascinated by her life's narrative. The idea of a black woman's centenarians' autobiography as a form of revenge against white bigots now turning in their graves is clearly worth relishing; and it may be all the more reason for rejoicing that this narrative, in its blatant indictment of white people, should have been co-written by a white co-author. At the same time, however, race may be in a tension with age here: Even if this narrative, seen in this context, is clearly an indictment of racist structures, it must be noted that these are the structures of the past, not the present; precisely because centenarians' narratives are mostly framed as a retrospect of the centenarian's life, nothing is being said in *Having Our Say* about the racism of the present. Particularly in the time of Black Lives Matter, this omission or paradox seems to be particularly glaring. Moreover, there is something deeply disturbing in the idea that the survival, by a black centenarian, of a system which set out to destroy black lives, should then be said to be the tale of an American life. Where the narrative could have succeeded as a racial critique of an unjust system, it folds back into the myth of colorblindness in the end (Williams 1997). For all the narrative's potential, then, it is whiteness which may be said to have the last word.

At the same time, there is nonetheless something deeply reassuring about the centenarian sisters' irony. *Having Our Say* as a narrative is thus characterized by a profound sense of irony, an irony which at once reinforces the idea of the centenarians' mental fitness. Just as Sadie and Bessie Delany have triumphantly outlived the racists who, in the century of their lives, often set out to make them miserable, they have also triumphed over the economic system. As Sadie puts it,

> When I graduated in 1918, it cost $2.50 a year to be a member in the alumni association, or $25 for a life membership. Well, I did what I always do when it comes to money: I thought about it carefully and then figured I should go for the life membership. It would be a good deal over the long run. So I bought that life membership and they've been sorry ever since. (150)

It is in this instance, too, that *Having Our Say* may converge with Franklin and Adler's idea, supported by the chairman of Chick-fil-A, that centenarians may in fact provide shrewd business advice. In Sadie Delany's account, the centenarian has "outlived" not only racism but also the calculations of businessmen. For centenarians, Sadie Delany reminds us, a lifetime membership is always a good investment.

Moreover, in the study of extreme old age, the concept of "resilience" has loomed large. According to Borras et al., centenarians are "an excellent example of resilience for successful aging" (1). What is remarkable in *Having Our Say*, as well as in George Dawson's *Life Is So Good*, is that resilience is portrayed both in individual and in structural terms. Invariably, centenarians' autobiographies convey how the centenarian has mastered life's hardships, especially the death of loved ones and family members. Centenarians' secret to successful living and successful aging, both the life sciences and the advice manuals assure us, is that they are able to rise above such circumstances. As the Georgia Centenarian Study puts it, "There is some evidence that the oldest old are more likely to accept that some problems are beyond their control" (Martin et al. 98). In *Having Our Say*, then, this individual resistance also takes a structural turn. The Delany sisters, their autobiography tells us, have not only risen above individual losses – such as their parents' death and the death of their brother Huby –, but they have also survived systemic racism, epitomized by the "rebby boys" (10).

5.7 African American Centenarians' Narratives and the Black Lives Matter Movement

Centenarians' autobiographies help us imagine what it may be like to live into extremely old age, and they may help dispel fears that longevity is inevitably defined by frailty, illness, or disability. Yet, it is crucial to note that they do so in highly specific, and often problematic, terms. By providing us with role models of successful aging, they implicitly bedevil forms of unsuccessful or failed aging. This failure to age successfully, by the same token, is ascribed to the individual's own lack of capability; it is a failure which is never attributed to factors of social inequality, but only to the individual's alleged squandering of her own resources. It is for this reason that the current ubiquity of centenarians' narratives, the presence of a new genre on the American book market – centenarians' autobiographies – is all the more disturbing. There may be a boom for centenarians' autobiographies, but there is no such "boom" for narratives which describe *alternative* forms of aging. Ultimately, these autobiographies map the debate on what makes a life successful (an idea which, in German, is called "gelingendes Leben") onto the canvas of extreme old age (Velten 2022).

Most importantly, centenarians' autobiographies imply that only a life lived into extremely old age is a successful one. Anyone who fails to live up to one hundred, in other words, is said to have died before their time. What this logic neglects or even dismisses, on the other hand, is the idea that a full life, and a fulfilling one, may be entirely independent of the life span itself. Can a life lived

to seventy, in other words, be as fulfilling and as successful as one lived to one hundred? It is this question which invariably, centenarians' autobiographies answer in the negative. In so doing, these narratives reinscribe both the logic of biomedicine and the idea that any frontier of human life can be transcended or at least transformed, and the neoliberalist tenet that our bodies are our capital (Lemke 2007).

In an aging society, centenarians' autobiographies help us make sense of what it means to be extremely old. In so doing, they cater to the need for a particular form of knowledge about aging. As Michael Meuser and Reiner Keller have outlined, accounts of aging have recently shifted from a pre-fabricated knowledge of old age to an emphasis on what it feels like to be old. This can be seen as a shift from knowledge to experience, or rather, as a redefinition of knowledge as experiential knowledge. In this context, Reiner Keller and Michael Meuser refer to the notion of "Körperwissen" (9), knowledge about one's own corporeality. They observe,

> From their immediate biographical experience of lived life, individuals gain a private and intimate knowledge of their own bodies, their internal or external states and processes, life course changes, performance capabilities and limitations, their injuries and potential stigmas, their sensations of pain and pleasure, their situated and situational dealings with taboos and demands of human corporeality, bodily "tendencies toward stubbornness," and their more or less successful strategies for outwitting their own corporeality. (9; my translation)

In this context, the emphasis on experience as knowledge, and the turn of the twenty-first century interest in memoir converge. Life writing narratives by centenarians can be located precisely at this point of intersection.

If in contemporary rhetoric, aging is configured both as the final frontier and an unknown territory, then centenarians' autobiographies may help assuage such fears. Not only do they enable the reader to immerse herself into the experience of aging and of living into extreme old age, but they provide examples of successful aging. The experience of extreme old age, in these narratives, is almost invariably positive: These are success stories of aging, whose titles link the metaphysical with the economic: What do titles such as *It is Well with My Soul* or *Life Is So Good* imply? The economic metaphor of successful aging, ultimately a concept which life writing narratives borrow from economics, converges with spiritual notions and references to religious faith in which centenarians are said to be deeply at ease with their life, sound in body and spirit. As the Delany sisters write about their childhood in *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, "God was the center of our Christian home. We had prayers morning and evening, and every night before Mama bathed us, we'd go into Papa's study and he'd read to us from the Bible" (44).

At this juncture, however, it is essential to read these narratives of successful aging against the grain by wondering what questions they do not ask. What other

forms of aging do these narratives implicitly pit against their centenarian role models? To the extent that, in the logic of biomedical studies such as the New England Centenarian Study (NECS), they conceive of centenarians as "paragon[s] of positive aging" (Robine and Vaupel v), they implicitly conjure up the negative foil of unsuccessful aging. What do these role models of aging successfully imply about, for instance, living with dementia or disability? Arguably, these narratives create a gap between successful and unsuccessful aging. They function as advice literature and self-help narratives to the extent that they contain both an exhortation and a threat: To the extent that the reader fails to live up to the advice given in these autobiographical narratives, following the centenarian's example, he is doomed to live a life which these "escapers" (NECS) have successfully transcended. This is truly a doomsday imagery of old age: Either one succeeds in "escaping" the trappings of old age, as the New England Centenarian Study puts it, or one is condemned to living out the rest of one's life in the pit of normal, or worse, of unsuccessful aging. In creating this doomsday scenario, centenarians' autobiographies create a rift between aging and disability. It is important to note in this context that the difference between successful and unsuccessful aging is portrayed as absolute, not as a sliding scale. The ability to follow these narratives' every advice is implied to be a safeguard against unsuccessful aging; those who have not heeded the suggestions of this advice literature, on the other hand, are pictured as the "detritus" of aging societies, dependent as they are on health insurance and measures against social inequality. The centenarian, on the other hand, is an up-by-the-bootstraps figure, who has transcended not only social inequality, but even the trappings of corporeality itself. Arguably, centenarians' autobiographies map the notion of the "self-made man" onto the terrain of aging. As Heike Paul points out,

> The term [self-made man] can be considered as yet another neologism of the early republic that speaks to specifically US-American cultural and economic patterns and is deeply intertwined with various aspects of American exceptionalism. There are contradictory forces at work in this notion, as it includes both aspects of self-denial (education, hard work, and discipline) and self-realization based on an ethic of self-interest that aims at the sheer accumulation of property, recognition, prestige, and personal gain without any concern for others. (369–370)

Even as "successful aging" seems to have become a universal concept, then, we may nevertheless wonder whether there is not also something uniquely US-American to this notion. As Paul notes, the "myth of the self-made man" (or woman; Paul 2014, 367) implies that the individual is the master of their own fate; this strongly resonates with Rowe and Kahn's idea that one can indeed become the "master" of one's own aging process. Moreover, it is intriguing that part of the myth of the self-made

man is, as Paul observes, a practice of "hard work and discipline" (369). Both these notions can clearly be found in centenarians' narratives. The Delany sisters, for instance, specify their daily yoga routine and their eating many different fruits and vegetables each day. Furthermore, if the "classical" understanding of the self-made man involves the "accumulation" of wealth (369), then what the centenarians as models of successful agers accumulate is a form of social prestige: this prestige, ultimately, is both recognized and enhanced through centenarians' autobiographies. What may be more complex, however, is the question about self-interest. In whose self-interest does extreme longevity lie? Arguably, there may be a tension at work here. While centenarians, particularly African American centenarians, stress their embeddedness in a community, the narrative itself seems to emphasize the notion of individual achievement. As I suggest throughout these chapters, there is a tendency in co-written autobiographies to distance the centenarian from their friends and family, with the co-author assuming the role of a relative or best friend. At the same time, the focus shifts from aging in a community with others towards a self-directed process of "successful aging." Successful aging, then, is a deeply individualist concept. Precisely because Rowe and Kahn, as well as countless other narratives and books of advice, provide a manual on how to age successfully, the emphasis is on the individual perfecting their own aging process. This notion of the "self-made man (or woman) of successful aging" can be mapped onto a number of levels. Through the logic of successful aging at the heart of centenarians' autobiography, the centenarian is shown to have mastered and perfected their own aging process, entirely by themselves. Second, within the autobiography, the co-author positions themselves as someone who is willing to learn from the centenarian, following their advice and hence in their turn trying to age successfully. Finally, the reader may come to look upon a centenarian's autobiography as a sort of how-to manual. They, too, may want to age successfully. In all of these instances, however, there is an emphasis on individual effort: on the self-made person of successful aging.

What would happen then, if we were to read centenarians' narratives through the movement of Black Lives Matter? It would mean that contemporary African Americans may have problems other than the making of soap, which Sarah and Elizabeth Delany describe in such detail in *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* (44). Read from this perspective, to speak of soap making at the turn of the twenty-first century may actually be blatantly cynical. Even more disturbingly, the function of these black centenarian sisters as "griots" would be deeply misleading. The proponents of "Black Lives Matter" have stressed the need for African Americans to draw attention to the value and visibility of black lives; to the complex politics of black lives which exceed, refute and contest the ubiquitous statistics of black violence, drug use and incarceration. In this climate, then, black youth may need, more than ever, the advice of black griots. What black centenarians' narratives give us, on the

other hand, are narratives in which white co-authors mastermind the framework of "black" griots, and in which an African American youth direly in need of alternative role models is told to make their own soap and use birth control. Even as the centenarian sisters' book of wisdom is directed at a general readership, it seems to contain specific advice for black youth, even if this audience is not explicitly addressed. On the sisters' list titled "A Word for Young People" (Delany and Delany 1994, 80), this is the first piece of advice: "Don't have babies before you're ready – and 'ready' means being married! Raising children is the hardest work you'll ever do. It's selfish to deny a child its best chances in life, and it's foolish to deny yourself a future" (Delany and Delany 1994, 80).

In this sense, then, centenarians' autobiographies such as both *Having Our Say* and *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* are deeply apolitical; they capitalize on the alleged "timelessness" of centenarians' advice but may turn out to be highly conservative instead.

6 The Role of Death and Dying in Centenarians' Autobiographies

This chapter[7] is concerned with the role which life writing narratives, and autobiographies in particular, can play for coming to terms with death, dying, grief and mourning. What is at stake here is the significance which cultural practices can have for coming to terms with one's own mortality, or the loss of a loved one (cf. Bruin-Mollenhorst 2018). As such a cultural practice, literature can serve important functions. Reading literary texts can be a cultural ritual since reading literature creates the feeling of a shared community. Even as, unlike in religious ceremonies, theatrical performances and other contexts in which all members of the community are simultaneously present, this readership is dispersed and each act of reading is hence necessarily a solitary one, literary texts – especially if they succeed in reaching a mass audience – can help a given society come to terms with death at a given point in time. What Janieke Bruin-Mollenhorst has demonstrated for the function of musical eulogies, may hence also apply to literary narratives in which the idea of coming to terms with loss is expressed. In this context, centenarians' autobiographies may serve a particular function: Because of their sheer age, it is imagined that centenarians come to terms with a death which may not be that far off at the point that they are telling their life`s narrative to the larger public. In fact, as Alfred Hornung has argued, the secret subject of autobiography may be death itself. The writing of one`s autobiography may thus itself be part of a process of coping with the transience of one`s own life. Writing itself, from Shakespeare onwards, has been linked to the dream of human immortality. As Shakespeare once wrote in one of his love sonnets, Sonnet 18, "so long as men can breathe or eyes can see / so long lives this / and this gives life to thee." Literature and autobiography in particular may hence be particularly attuned to discourses both of dying and of immortality. As the present chapter sets out to illustrate, this apparent paradox – the opposition between death and immortality – seems to be encapsulated in the genre of centenarians' autobiographies.

Far from being irreconcilable opposites, death and immortality seem to be inextricably linked in these narratives. Moreover, if the publishing and the reading of literary texts can serve as a cultural practice which helps us to come to terms with death, this may be particularly true of texts of what has been called "popular literature." It must be noted that centenarians' autobiography can be located half-way between literature and popular fiction; they can be classified both

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as autobiographies and as serial fiction (Kelleter 2012) in which the genre – the telling of the life of a particularly older person – is more important than the identity of the person whose life story is being told. This chapter will hence explore the role of death in centenarians' autobiographies, and it will do so by paying attention to three levels of analysis: First, the context in which centenarians' autobiographies are being published; second, the process of recording a life's story and the role of co-authorship; and third, the politics of race and religion as they may inform the centenarian's attitude towards death and dying.

It is this desire of immortality, of prolonging one's life span beyond what was hitherto seemed possible, that many centenarians' narratives allude to. The Delany sisters describe in their autobiography *Having Our Say* that it may be "sheer determination" that keeps them alive (7). What seems to be common to all the narratives discussed in this study is that death is nowhere in sight in these centenarians' narratives or in the discourse surrounding centenarians. This, it must be noted, is deeply paradoxical: For while death itself seems to be a side note in centenarians' narratives, especially in the autobiographies by centenarians which will be examined in more detail in this chapter, it is nonetheless paramount to the discourse surrounding the publication of these life narratives. More often than not, co-authors and editors of centenarians' autobiographies stress that "getting the book out" is a race against time. Given the centenarians' extreme old age, it is possible that they may not live to see their life's narrative go into print.

This chapter argues that it may be short-sighted to note in centenarians' autobiographies only the striking absence, or quasi-absence, of death. Rather, in the pages that follow, I will read centenarians' life narratives as complex ways of helping a middle-aged readership cope with the specter of death and dying. Centenarians' autobiographies, I argue, may derive their fascination, for an ever-increasing readership, precisely from the tension between the absence and the presence of death in these narratives. They fuel the human desire for immortality, while at the time assuring the reader, in the centenarians' own voice, that death is not to be feared.

In this context, three aspects in particular seem to be significant. First, most centenarians' autobiographies are written in the co-authorship between a middle-aged co-author and a centenarian who tells them their life narrative. This narrative framing provides to the narratives the quality of "as-told-to-autobiographies," in which the co-author seems only to record what they are being told by the centenarian. This appearance notwithstanding, however, the co-author's own voice or subjectivity may in fact intrude into the narrative itself. This process has been well documented, for instance, in the case where historically, in the nineteenth century, Native Americans told their life story to white authors who then wrote them down and subsequently published them

(Krupat 1994). Second, what is particularly noteworthy in the US American context, is that in a number of cases – and especially with regard to centenarians' autobiographies who headed the New York Times list of bestsellers –, centenarians' autobiographies featured an African American centenarian and a white, middle-aged co-author. The politics of age and race, and sometimes of age, race and class, are deeply interwoven into the writing of centenarians' narratives and their subsequent publication. Third, the black centenarians whose life narrative is published are portrayed as deeply religious, while neither their white, middle-aged co-author nor the majority of their readership are.

6.1 Centenarians' Autobiographies and the Civil Religion of Dying

In what relationship, then, may these three aspects – the co-authorship of the narratives, the politics of race, and the role of religion – stand to the question of death and dying in centenarians' narratives? This chapter proposes that centenarians' narratives may in fact be said to fill a void which has been left by the absence of religion in secular societies. Leget recalls, "Working in [a] highly secularised . . . context, one of the first discoveries was the absence of any language related to religion or philosophy of life in everyday health care" (280). Leget has suggested that the less religious Western societies become, the more need there is for substitute rituals related to dying, death, and mourning. As he goes on to say, we need new ways of coming to terms with dying, "not only at the individual level, but also as a culture that seeks to integrate the many dimensions of the dying process" (279). My aim in this chapter is to relate centenarians' autobiographies to this question of substitution.

It can be argued that in lieu of religious ceremonies, cultural practices may assume a significant role. Leget describes how in secular societies, state and private institutions take over the functions previously served by religious rituals. He argues that the medical model has superseded the spiritual one: "One of the biggest changes in North Atlantic culture is the transformation of the dying process from a spiritual event into a medical procedure . . . . From the time medicine became increasingly prominent and influential, more and more this framework was replaced by a medical model" (279). Leget suggests that we need secular rituals to come individuals come to terms with dying, death, and the loss of their loved ones. One question which arises from this context, however, is the function that literary or autobiographical texts may serve in filling this void left by religion. This chapter claims that the practice of reading can serve as an important guideline in this context. I locate centenarians' autobiographies at precisely this

nexus between a general fear of death and the absence of religious coping mechanisms. In the paragraphs that follow, I will show how centenarians' autobiographies address all of these questions: the question of immortality, the idea of dying at the end of a life well-lived, and the attempt to come to terms with the loss of a loved one.

To return to Carlo Leget's idea of secular rituals for death and dying, we can thus investigate the function which centenarians' autobiographies may serve in this context. Reading a centenarian's autobiography, for a non-religious reader, may hence be a substitute for religion itself. I argue that reading a centenarians' autobiographies may help readers to come to terms with their own mortality and that of their loved ones on three levels: First, the act of reading it itself significant as a practice of reflection and self-reflection with regard to mortality. Second, it is noteworthy here that these co-written centenarians' autobiographies center on the dialogue between a religious centenarian and a secular co-author. This dialogue within the narrative may be seen as a mirror of the larger dialogue between these books and their (secular) readership. Third, given the context of American history and race relations, it is significant that a large number of best-selling centenarians' autobiographies should have been written by African American centenarians. As Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has argued (Morrison 1992), African Americans have been seen as surrogates through which a white mainstream society tried to come to terms with its deepest anxieties and fears. This latter point raises a larger question: If as individuals and societies trying to come to terms with our own mortality, whom do we look to as role models for living and for dying? One line of inquiry opened up by centenarians' autobiographies is that each society may have its own rituals for coping with these questions. In each society, anxieties may be projected onto different contexts and different social groups.

In the following pages, I will read centenarians' autobiographies on all these levels: the idea of coping with the fear of dying through the practice of reading; the relationship between a religious centenarian and a secular co-author; and the role of African American centenarians as role models for living and dying. I would first like to turn to the question of death in secular societies.

It is in this sense that centenarians' autobiographies may confirm what Carlo Leget has noted about the role of death and dying in Western secular societies. He argues that in many Western societies, religious belief has been on the wane. In the absence of religious belief and the ceremonies which help believers to make sense of death and dying, Leget suggests, new, secular forms of dying and of mourning have become necessary. As Leget puts it,

> Without an appropriate spiritual care model, it can be difficult to discuss existential questions about death and dying with people who are confronted with life-threatening or incurable diseases. This book offers a simple framework for interpreting existential questions with patients and helping them to cope in end-of-life situations, with illustrative examples from practice . . . . Building on the medieval Ars moriendi tradition, the author introduces a contemporary art of dying model. It shows how to discuss existential questions in a post-Christian context, without moralising death or telling people how they should feel. (dustjacket)

In the context of the current American book market and the contemporary US American discourse around death and dying, centenarians' autobiographies can be said to fulfill this paradoxical function. They, too, may serve as a substitute religion, as a way of coping either with the death of a loved one or one's own eventual passing.

I would now like to map these considerations onto an analysis of a specific centenarian's autobiography. In *Life Is So Good*, the life narrative of the African American centenarian George Dawson co-written with Richard Glaubman, the relationship between the centenarian and his co-author is particularly significant. Towards the end of the narrative, Glaubman reveals to Dawson that his own attempt to come to terms with his father's death is what may have prompted him to co-author a centenarians' autobiography in the first place. In the narrative, Glaubman tells Dawson about when he first thought about writing down a centenarian's life narrative, having read George Dawson in a newspaper which ran an article about a 98-year-old man who had gone back to school to learn his alphabets. Reading about George Dawson, Glaubman recalls, made him remember his own father: "It was approaching a year since my father had died. I thought about him some, but at the same time, the images were fading" (*Life Is So Good* 250–251). The pages that follow are in fact a meditation about the ways in which people mourn the passing of a loved one. For Glaubman, there is a sense of regret, of time having run out to soon when he had had so much more to tell his father:

> There were some good memories and we had always talked about going camping or on a trip, just the two of us, father and sone. We didn't make it . . .
>
> I spent a few weeks with him. That was toward the end of his life and I helped to take care of him. He told me to watch closely and I could learn something. He was really sick then. But at the end, he told me it was the best visit we ever had. In a way it was. But still, I could see his life was ending and I wanted to talk about that. And I thought maybe there was something else he had been waiting the tell me. It didn't happen. Life went by too fast and we ran out of time. I was there to help him and maybe I wanted too much for me. I wanted to hear his life story. (251)

It is in this context of unanswered questions that Dawson, the African American centenarian, may become a sort of surrogate father to Glaubman, who is still in

mourning for his own father. One of the aims of writing this book, the text implies, is that Glaubman turned to Dawson, an African American centenarian whom he hardly knew, with the questions that he did not have time to ask his own father. For understanding the question of death and mourning, this passage is deeply significant. For Glaubman, the co-author, Dawson, the centenarian, seems to fulfill a number of functions at once. First, he becomes a substitute father: Glaubman can come to terms with the loss of his own father because he can finally ask Dawson all the questions that he was unable to ask his own father. Second, the centenarian assumes the function of a role model for coming to terms with mortality as such. For Glaubman, writing a book about a centenarian's life becomes the ritual through which he mourns his own father's passing. In his own reflection about mortality, he turns to Dawson, the African American centenarian for an answer about how to cope with loss. But as the centenarian himself tells him, "Son, I've seen death lots of times, but I ain't got no answers" (*Life Is So Good* 251).

This passage may actually be indicative of the politics of centenarians' autobiographies as such. One reason which may fuel the publication of such narratives may be that we project onto the persons of centenarians the questions we need to be answered most. The most existential questions about human life thus come to be asked of centenarians. Because of these persons' extreme longevity, it is implied or assumed that they of all people would have the answers to these questions (Paterno and Walisch 10).

The conversation that takes place *inside* the narrative – the dialogue between Glaubman and Dawson about how to deal with mortality and loss – may be mapped onto another level: It can serve as a blueprint for the relationship between the African American centenarian whose life is being told and a readership which, like Glaubman the co-author, is eager for answers to these existential questions. On amazon's review page, Karen, who self-identifies as "white" writes: "I originally bought 2 copies and am now ordering 9 more copies. There is so much wisdom in this book. It is a primer on life" ("Customer Review"). It can thus be argued that being a "primer on life", centenarians' autobiographies like George Dawson's *Life Is So Good* are both primers about a life well-lived and about coping with death and dying. Readers, like the co-author himself, may project onto the African American centenarian their own fears about dying or losing a loved one.

In this process of projection, Glaubman's own position may in fact be highly similar to that of his readers. These readers may turn to the published book – *Life Is So Good* – for much the same reason that Glaubman set out to write it in the first place. The readers of Dawson's autobiography, like Glaubman himself, may seek to come to terms with losing a loved one. The act of reading, for both Glaubman and the reader, may be an act of mourning. This in turn sheds light on potential reasons

for the current boom of centenarians' narratives. Just as Glaubman sets out to write Dawson's autobiography as an act of mourning his own father's passing, readers may turn to centenarians' autobiographies for much the same reasons. Reading centenarians' narratives may also be a way to mourn the death of a loved one.

It is highly significant that Glaubman's motives for wanting to co-author a centenarian's autobiography are not hidden from view but come center stage as the autobiography progresses. This has far-reaching consequences for thinking about how we cope with loss: *Life Is So Good* suggests that talking about our emotions and sharing our grief even with strangers is an essential component of coming to terms with loss. It is significant here that Glaubman, the co-author, reveals to Dawson his central motive for wanting to co-author the story of a centenarian's life; but it is equally significant that Dawson should accept this role assigned to him by his co-author: He agrees to become a surrogate father to this man in search for answers.

As he admits to Dawson, Glaubman wants to be in communion with his deceased father through writing the story of another man's life. This blurring of lines – between the father of a white, middle-aged, highly educated co-author and an African American centenarian from Texas who learned to read and write only at age 98 – is deeply significant here. There is a sense here in which Glaubman, who feels the loss of his father all the more deeply when his writing of Dawson's life narrative is about to come to an end, is almost being "adopted" by the African American centenarian. This is further corroborated by the appellations used in the texts. While Dawson addresses Glaubman as "son" or "Richard," Glaubman himself uses the more formal address of "Mr. Dawson" (*Life Is So Good* 243; 226).

One of the larger questions which *Life Is So Good* raises with regard to coming to terms with mortality is the role of education. The narrative suggests that for all his education, Glaubman has fewer answers about this dilemma than Dawson, a man who learned to read only in his 90s. In a way, this seems to confirm Carlo Leget's observation that despite an increase in educational standards, Western societies have been at a loss to deal with the questions most fundamental to our humanity. The co-author may have an education, *Life Is So Good* implies, but he is completely at a loss when it comes to coping with death and the passing of a loved one.

Similarly, what Leget has noted about Western *secular* societies also seems in evidence here. Without religion, Glaubman seems to be at a loss for ways to make sense of his father's passing. Seen from this perspective, there is something deeply reassuring in this politics of adoption. In a complete reversal of social hierarchy, Glaubman, the white secular co-author, is being comforted by the uneducated, deeply religious centenarian who assures him that death is not to be

feared, neither the death of a loved one nor one's own death. As Dawson writes, "People asked me what did I do [when my daughter got sick]. I just went on. Everybody has their time, and it ain't up to me when that will be. At those times, my faith helps me to keep going. I've been a member of the same church since 1928" (*Life Is So Good* 220). It is this faith, the narrative of *Life Is So Good* implies, which the African American centenarian George Dawson describes to his white co-author, Richard Glaubman. There is a sense here that even though Glaubman, as a character in the centenarian's autobiography which he co-authors, is being comforted by a religious faith he himself may not share. Dawson writes,

> On Sunday, I took Richard to church, the Holiness Church of God, with me, not to convince him of nothing but so that he could see it my way too. Being the only Anglo, people could figure who he was, but when Reverend Williams introduced our visitor as "Brother Richard, the man who is writing a book about the life and times of Mr. Dawson," I felt proud, for him and me. (223)

A number of aspects may be significant in this passage. First, Richard, the middle-aged, educated Anglo-American co-author is being comforted by George Dawson, the uneducated, African American Texan centenarian. Secondly, there is a sense here that in this African American religious community, Richard comes to share in a solidarity which he himself has not quite known. Moreover, there is a notion of kinship which is invoked here through the appellation of "Brother Richard," which at the same time serves to make his race and ethnicity forgotten.

6.2 Centenarians' Autobiographies as Models of Resilience

In the context of American social history and race relations, it is highly significant that in search for ways of coping with human mortality, a mainstream American audience should turn to African American centenarians as role models. Throughout American history, as Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has argued, African Americans have fulfilled a paradoxical function for the white dominant culture. They were seen as what Morrison calls a "serviceable presence," a foil onto which white fears, desires and anxieties could be projected: "These speculations have led me to wonder whether the major and championed characteristics of our national [self-definition] . . . are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" (5). This form of surrogacy, Morrison stresses, in fact revealed more about the white self who did the projecting than it did about African Americans themselves. As Morrison goes on to state, "the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive" (17). If we apply this argument to centenarians' autobiographies such as *Life Is So Good*, this adds

another dimension to the conversation between Richard Glaubman and George Dawson. From the very beginning, African Americans have served a key role for white American psychology, as Morrison argues. Historically, white families' children were being raised by black servants, so-called "mammy figures." As Lynn Kennedy has noted, "Like a white mother, the quintessential black mammy was skilled at nurturing her white charges both physically and mentally" (32). The idea of African Americans as nurturing figures is thus deeply ingrained in the American imagination. It is hence deeply significant that for coming to terms not just with the beginning of life, but also the end of life, white readers – like Glaubman, the white co-author – should turn to African American centenarians as role models. This further corroborates the view that African Americans serve as surrogate figures helping white Americans to come to terms with life's most existential questions.

At the same time, this perspective may run the risk of obfuscating another key quality at the core of centenarians' autobiographies: the idea of resilience and of a life well lived. Centenarians' autobiographies may serve as role models not just for coping with death, but also for living. Not incidentally, George Dawson does not only give Richard Glaubman advice about how to deal with the loss of his father, but he also tells him how he, too, might live to one hundred. Seen from this perspective, centenarians' autobiographies can also be read as manuals providing middle-aged readers with clues about how to live into extreme old age. Not incidentally, *Life Is So Good*, contains dietary advice, even if this advice at first seems somewhat unusual. As Dawson tells Glaubman, he eats what he wants and when he wants, be it fried chicken or cabbage (243–244). This passage contains an implicit criticism about the role of education not just with regard to dying, but also to living. As the narrative of *Life Is So Good* implies, for all his education, Glaubman was at a complete loss for ways to cope with his father's passing. In much the same vein, the passage quoted above implies that Glaubman is much too preoccupied with reading about healthy nutrition than following his own intuition about what he might want to eat.

In this context, the centenarian becomes a role model for living and for living into extreme old age. Central to this idea of living a well-lived life is the concept of resilience. It is significant here that at this point, there is a clear overlap between centenarians' autobiographies and studies in the life sciences about centenarians' lifestyles. These latter studies have investigated the concept of resilience. They have asked whether individuals living to one hundred have been particularly successful in dealing with loss and have found ways of coming to terms with adversity. In this context, it may be useful to look not only at *Life Is So Good*, but also at other centenarians' autobiographies, which were similarly co-written by African American centenarians and white co-authors: *It Is Well with My Soul*, co-

written by Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson and Patricia Mulcahy, and *Having Our Say*, the autobiography of the Delany sisters. If indeed centenarians' autobiographies serve as secular way of mourning or a form of the "civil religion"[8] of aging, the Delany sisters' ritual of remembering their loved ones is a paragon of resilience and of coping successfully. As Sarah and Elizabeth Delany observe, it is memories which keeps one's loved ones alive:

> We talk about folks who turned to dust so long that we're the only people left on this Earth with any memory of them. We always find ways to celebrate our memories of our family and friends. Why, we still have a birthday party for Papa, even though he's been gone since 1928. We cook his favorite birthday meal, just the way he liked it: chicken and gravy, rice and sweet potatoes, ham, macaroni and cheese, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, turnips, and carrots. For dessert we'll have a birthday cake – a pound cake – and ambrosia, made with oranges and fresh coconut. (*Having Our Say* 25–26)

In *Having Our Say* as much as in *Life Is So Good*, the African American centenarians are deeply religious. Just as they cope successfully with the passing of their loved ones, they assure their co-author that their own death is nothing that they fear.

This chapter has discussed the function which centenarians' autobiographies may have as cultural practices which may help a mass readership come to terms with death, dying and loss. It has argued that centenarians' narratives such as *Life Is So Good* and *Having Our Say* seem to be characterized by a coexistence between successful aging and the absence of a fear of dying. As the narratives illustrate, the apparent serenity with which centenarians speak about the possibility of dying, as well as their recollection of having had to come to terms with the loss of a loved one, indicates that in these centenarians' lives, religion is a powerful antidote to depression at the end of the centenarian's very long life. For readers who may not be religious, this chapter has argued, reading centenarians' autobiography can serve as a "civil religion of dying," in which readers may draw from the centenarians' religious certainty even as they themselves may not be religious at all. Finally, this chapter has suggested that centenarians' autobiographies may hark back to a racial genealogy in which historically, African American subjects have served as a foil onto which white anxieties about existential changes in human life were projected. If death and dying are among the most existential questions of human life, then, answering these questions may be both universal and culturally specific. In any given society, particular communities may serve as a foil onto which anxieties experienced by the dominant culture are being projected.

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8 This term originally goes back to the work of Robert Bellah, who argued that in American political life, religious rituals were being transformed into secular practices. In this chapter, I am adapting this concept to models of coping with death and dying.

At the same time, however, minority communities, given their history of oppression and the necessity of close-knit communal ties, may often be better equipped for coping with existential threats or experiences. Seen from this perspective, it may be no coincidence that the African American centenarians whose life stories are being told in these autobiographies stress the role which communities – both racial and religious – play both for their everyday well-being and for their attitude towards death and dying. In this vein, autobiographies by African American centenarians would corroborate findings by social psychology as well as the growing field of resilience studies. Thus, resilience researchers have studied why, under the same existential circumstances or in the face of the same adversities, some individuals succumb to despair while others do not (Theron et al. 2015). Researchers like Linda C. Theron, Linda Liebenberg and Michael Ungar have emphasized that family and communal ties may be among the most significant "protective factors" here: "until researchers and theorists account for the complex relationship between resilience and culture, explanations of why some individuals prevail in the face of adversity would remain incomplete" (v). To the extent that they possess more protective factors when it comes to dealing with loss, with mourning and the reality of their own mortality, African American centenarians, as they are portrayed in centenarians' autobiographies, may thus have infrastructures at their disposal which white Americans may not.

The proliferation of autobiographies by *African American* centenarians may thus be indicative that the majority of American readers may currently be experiencing an existential crisis brought about, perhaps, by a change in demographics. If we live in aging societies, mere demographics suggest that we may do well to come to terms with the possibility of living into extreme old age. At the same time, regardless of demographics, coming to terms with death has always been one of humanity's most existential questions. To the extent that centenarians' have emerged as the role models of the new millennium, then, they may come to function not only as models of living, but also of dying well.

7 Earning Citizenship in the Country of Extreme Old Age

Societal debates about age, it could be argued, have a medical and a cultural underpinning, but they also have an economic dimension. To the extent that old age is seen to be accompanied by the inevitable onset of illness and disability, it may also come to be associated with being a financial burden on the health care system, and thus, ultimately, society at large. It is in this sense that the desire to live into extreme old age may come to be construed as a selfish desire; individual self-fulfillment, from this perspective, will be seen as an act that ultimately strains the solidarity of the health care and social system (Katz 13). As Higgs and Gilleard observe, the representation of "aging societies" has often been accompanied, in both political rhetoric and cultural imagination, with an "apocalyptic" rhetoric. In a study of Canadian newspapers, they write, it could be observed

> how "the apocalyptic demography / intergenerational conflict theme was manifested in the discussion of seniors in the role of clients of the health care and social security systems. The older the seniors of both genders were, the more likely they were to be portrayed as dependent on the social security system. Similarly, concern about the sustainability of an adequate health care system highlighted the 'tough choices' necessary to deal with the needs of an aging population." (58)

As I will elaborate below, this debate has resulted in the implicit and shocking assumption that, as far as the social community is considered, there may indeed be a "duty to die." In this context, some have argued for applying the notion of apoptosis to human societies: An organism, it is implied, can only continue to live if some cells die in programmed cell death, and this is where renewal, regeneration and growth can take place (Zimmermann et al. 2016). On the level of cultural imagination, this idea of older people sacrificing their lives for the sake of future generations and hence agreeing to die sooner rather than later has given rise to science fiction narratives and dystopias.

Crucially, it could be said that the paradigm of successful aging may be an intervention into this debate, which has often been deadlocked. By refuting the idea that age is inevitably a process of disease and decline, successful aging stresses the fact that older people can be a highly productive part of society. In the paradigm of successful aging, the individual is urged to take charge of their own aging process, which is in turn said to enable forms of "healthy aging." As a healthy, active and "fit" member of society, then, the aging person will no longer be construed as a burden, but rather a benefit to society. What this implies, however, is once again a neoliberal notion of aging: The individual is said to be in

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charge of their own fate; they are told to rely on their own faculties rather than the social system. As I try to show in this book, this is a form of reasoning that centenarians' autobiographies, too, seem to subscribe to.

One question that may be asked in the context of centenarians' narratives, then, is the extent to which these autobiographies can themselves be seen as providing proof of the "civic fitness" of older people. If indeed autobiographies by centenarians can be seen as a testimony that the oldest-old are by no means inevitably a burden to society, these narratives can be seen to prove, on many different levels, that older people deserve to be seen as full members of the social fabric. In this chapter, then, I will read centenarians' life narratives through the discourse of citizenship. In how far could we speak of a "citizenship of old age" when it comes to theorizing old age and its presumed lack of productiveness? And conversely, in how far can centenarians' autobiographies be seen as petitions for full citizenship by the oldest-old?

7.1 Centenarian Lives versus the "Duty to Die"

The aim of this book is thus to read centenarians' autobiographies and the discourses that surround them both with the grain *and* against the grain: to trace the desires which may surround the writing and publishing of centenarians' memoirs and memories, while at the same time pointing to the implications which such desires may have and the master narratives of aging they may entail. If indeed centenarians' autobiographies can be seen as guidebooks to the foreign country of extreme old age, this is a country that we would all like to travel to. Dreaming of extreme old age, and ultimately, the age-old dream of immortality, is a human desire, and it is a desire that is at once deeply human. As philosopher Christine Overall has argued, at the heart of a wish to live into old age, there may be a desire to spend more time with one's loved ones. The desire to attain extreme old age is thus by no means necessarily a selfish one. Overall suggests, "'like most goods, this [life] can be multiplied by time: more is better than less'" (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 16).

In their public circulation, centenarians' autobiographies may thus be part of a larger societal debate about the role of older people in today's societies. At a time when age is often seen to be a burden to the health care system, these autobiographies assure us that, if only we observe a good diet and exercise enough, this does not have to be the case. In keeping with neoliberal implications, these autobiographies may in fact reinforce the argument that old age may indeed be or become a burden on the social system, unless readers follow the centenarian's model to eat right and start doing yoga. In *On My Own at 107*, Sarah Delany ob-

serves that even after her sister has passed away, when she is grieving and living on her own, she still does her yoga exercises. In fact, she writes about her decision to try to live into the twenty-first century, and therefore to increase her fitness routine. Holding an imaginary conversation with her sister, Sarah muses,

> Bessie, something just occurred to me. If I live just a few more years – to the year 2000 – I will have lived in three different centuries! Well, if I'm going to make it to the year 2000 I figure I had better increase my stamina. So I've been climbing the stairs at least once a day, even if I don't need to. And when I'm lonely and I can't sleep, I'll do an extra set of my yoga exercises, even if it's in the middle of the night. (72)

The discussion about the relationship between longevity and the health care system has given rise to an ethical debate that, from some perspectives, may seem bizarre. Would older people not in fact have a "duty to die" in order to leave room for others? Should there be a form of social apoptosis in which the system can remain healthy only if older people do not clog up the system of exchange and renewal? Overall notes that the discussion on human longevity, in the context of philosophical and ethical discussions, has given rise to a heated debate between so-called apologists and prolongevists (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 16): Apologists suggest that for a variety of reasons, it may be better for individuals to voluntarily pass away at the age of, say, 75. Overall notes,

> American bioethicist David Callahan is a clear and unambiguous example of apologism. He writes, "It should be the aim of medicine to assist people in successfully passing through the different stages of life, from birth to maturity to old age . . . . There is no good reason why this cycle needs to be any longer, on average, than it now is in the developed nations: namely, seventy-five to eighty-two years . . . . Any future increases in average life expectancy (which surely there will be) should be encouraged to come about only as the natural by-product of healthier lifestyles and the consequent reduction of illness in old age, not as the result of deliberate efforts." (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 16; changes mine)

Apologists' opponents, on the other hand, suggest that it is a fallacy to speak of a "duty to die" – the idea that the individual, particularly in the Western world, should pass from this world in order to help ameliorate the problem of overpopulation, for instance. Speaking from a perspective of normative philosophy, Overall argues that such an argument seems misguided for a number of reasons. First, it suggests that after a certain time, an individual's life has run its course and there is now "nothing new under the sun." According to Overall,

> Another standard reason for not seeking a longer life is that the present human life is long enough: human beings will run out of things to do. This claim is related to the biblical aphorism that there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:19) . . . . According to this view, life's enjoyments and gratifications are fixed and limited; if we live too long, we will have

> no choice but to simply repeat what we have already done. (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 37)

As I will argue in the course of this study, centenarians' autobiographies set out to prove the exact opposite: George Dawson, after all, learned to read and write only when he was 98. As Oprah Winfrey puts it in her introduction of George Dawson, "he's the grandson of a slave and he just learned to read. It's great example of . . . how it's never too late for any of us to change" ("Oprah Winfrey Show"). Referring to apologists and the idea of the "duty to die," Overall goes on to note that this argument may contain a gender and class bias: While those who are affluent may have been able to fulfill their dreams and desires for most of their life, never having to take care of others (children or aging parents, for instance), this possibility may not have held true for others to the same extent. Particularly for women, as Overall suggests, the possibility of fulfilling their own dreams may not offer itself until later in life, after, say their children have graduated from high school. Thus, the time that these individuals have at their disposal will necessarily be shorter than the time-span available to men, who may not have had to adapt their career plans to raising their children. In this context of radically different biographies, Overall asks, would it really be fair to speak of one's duty to die at age 75? Moreover, she suggests that Callahan's ideas about the quality of life may also have an elitist tinge. By claiming that after age 75, there is nothing new under the sun, he may be implying that worthwhile occupations at this age would be, for instance, learning a new language or going back to college, all of which, he suggests, individuals have already done. Moreover, Callahan stresses the fact that these individuals may not be productive in an economic sense and would fail to be beneficial for the larger national good. Overall counters this argument by countering its implicit elitism and its assumptions of what a full life may be. She writes,

> Even if he were correct (and at the very least I think he lacks evidence) that such an extension would not lead to, collectively, to a "greater economic productivity" or "a richer cultural and scientific life," such an argument unjustifiably ignores the potential advantages and benefits for individual elderly people, who just might want, as individuals, to live longer. If an eighty-year-old woman wants to continue to remain alive simply in order to spend time with her children and grandchildren, read books, watch television, and enjoy the sunshine on a warm spring day, I defy apologists such as Callahan to show that such a desire is unreasonable, unjustified, or immoral. (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 51)

Moreover, the idea that one should better die at 75 in order not to contribute to the world's overpopulation or not to be a burden on the health care system, seems puzzling with regard to the cut-off date as well. Why should we draw the line at 75, as Callahan suggests, and not earlier or later? When do we argue that a

human life has “run its course”? What is key here is that Overall argues that apologists’ arguments about why people should die at age 75 are in fact ageist in nature. As Overall goes on to ask, “We could say that, with respect to this issue [the quality of life], apologists are pessimists, whereas prolongevists are optimists. I am suggesting that the apologists’ pessimism is founded, at least in part, on implicit ageism” (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 44). Apologists may thus project onto old age their own assumptions of what this old age may be like, and conclude from this that this may not be a life worth living.

In the context of these debates, what role might centenarians’ autobiographies be said to play? It could be argued that centenarians’ life writing narratives emphatically side with the group of prolongevists here. These autobiographies suggest that there is, indeed, much that is new under the sun. Centenarians’ narratives testify to the idea of lifelong learning, and to the idea that life at one hundred can be as exuberant, optimistic, and dynamic as at age twenty-five. As Overall describes the outlook of prolongevists in general, “Just consider all the areas of the world that you have not yet explored; the people whom you have not yet encountered; the capacities, talents, and interests you have not yet developed; the hours you have not yet passed with your parents, siblings, children or grandchildren, your lover and your friends . . .” (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 45).

It may be argued that this is what makes for the fascination of centenarians’ autobiographies as a genre: the idea that even at age one hundred, the curiosity about life and about what each new day may bring has not waned. The autobiographies which are discussed in this book illustrate just that: they describe future centenarians who have turned to yoga at age eighty, and who go back to school at 98. As Oprah Winfrey describes George Dawson, who remains one of her favorite talk show guests to date,

> At the age of 98, George Dawson had never been to school and had never learned how to read or write. He told Carl, a local education recruiter, that he was determined to change and began taking classes from him.
>
> The grandson of a former slave, George started working full time when he was just 8 years old and never even learned the alphabet. By the time his classmates threw him a surprise 100th birthday party, George was able to read his own cards for the first time.
>
> Watching Mr. Dawson learn to read has been one of the greatest experiences of my life,” Carl said in 1998. “Mr. Dawson was determined he was going to learn how to read, and that determination filled one of the most outstanding quests for knowledge that I’ve ever seen. It has been a fantastic miracle.
>
> (“*The Oprah Show*’s Greatest Lessons”)

Seen from this perspective, centenarians' narratives are a deeply held affirmation of life and the idea that life is worth living at *any* age. The particular function of centenarians' autobiographies, in this context as in many others, may lie in the fact that centenarians have become a canvas onto which we project our own fantasies, desires, and inquiries about the meaning of life. Even in aging societies, where reaching the age of one hundred may no longer be an impossibility, the fascination of an individual's one hundredth birthday has lost none of its fascination: To return to an idea proposed in the introduction of this study, when the Swedish birthday song imagined such a biblical old age, the idea of ever attaining it still seemed an impossibility. Even as today, this is no longer the case, the desires and questions which revolve around human longevity may not have changed. In all these projections, however, one question remains: If indeed one were to live to one hundred, would this be good or bad news? In other words, we may all want to live to one hundred, but only provided that by then, we will all still be healthy and happy. This after all, is what book titles such as *Das kluge, lustige, gesunde, ungebremste, sehr lange Leben: Die Weisheit der Hundertjährigen* suggest. One of the most fundamental questions which is being asked of centenarians' autobiographies is what it is really like to be one hundred years of age. It is in this sense that centenarians' narratives, for all their ubiquity on the contemporary book market, may remain enigmatic.

This book claims that centenarians' autobiographies may have an overt message and a covert one. On one level, they seem to be an exuberant celebration of life itself: a celebration of the human brain which can adapt even in extreme old age, a celebration of the fullness of health even at age, say, 101. On the other hand, however, I believe that just as the secret subject of autobiography may be death (Hornung 2010), the secret subject of centenarians' autobiographies may also be human immortality. As Christine Overall puts it, "To die at seventy or eighty or ninety seems better than dying at thirty or forty or fifty. If so, could it be even better to die at 100, 110, or 120?" (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 13). Centenarians' narratives may be so fascinating because they fuel a desire that, as human beings, we cannot not have: Who, as Freddie Mercury once asked, does not want to live forever? One of the claims I am making in this study is that centenarians' autobiographies tap into one of the oldest discourses of humanity, namely the dream of immortality; yet they do so in a manner that is decidedly novel. If the dream of immortality is timeless, centenarians' autobiographies "infuse" the dream with the underpinnings of our contemporary society. They integrate the discourse of neoliberalism and the promise of modern biomedicine to assure us that immortality may (almost) have come to be within reach.

7.2 Towards the Citizenship of Extreme Old Age?

As examples of the paradigm of successful aging, centenarians' life narratives assure us that age, even extreme old age, is anything but a "'waiting room for death'" (Kunow 2009 quoted in Velten 2022, 24). Centenarians' autobiographies are so fascinating, I argue in this book, because they center on the notion that life, even at or beyond one hundred, can be deeply fulfilling; that one can indeed be happy and healthy at 100 (Brinkbäumer 2019).

One question which may be asked in this context is the extent to which centenarians' narratives can actually be read in the context of citizenship studies. Citizenship studies, it can be argued, are located at the intersection between nation and community on the one hand and the rights and obligations of an individual on the other. One idea which has been central to citizenship studies, especially in the context of race and migration, is the idea of "civic fitness": To what extent, it is asked in this context, is an individual deserving of American citizenship? Thus, critics such as Nayan Shah and Natalia Molina have outlined for the beginning of the twentieth century, immigrant communities especially in the nineteenth century were seen as unfit or undeserving of American citizenship (Shah 2001; Molina 2006). Similarly, African Americans were often seen as "unfit" for citizenship. According to Gunja SenGupta,

> In order to preserve the "public good," republican citizens had to exercise civic virtue; this attribute was a function of self-sacrifice, discipline and, most importantly, economic independence, which guaranteed sovereignty from the political domination of others. Furthermore, the attributes of civic virtue were, as Matthew Frye Jacobson has suggested, "racially inscribed in eighteenth-century Euro-American thought," so that "the republican ideal of the 'consent to be governed' became inextricably linked to its unfortunate shadow, the gendered, almost always racial question of 'fitness for self-government.'" (36)

But what would this discourse on civic fitness have to do with aging societies? My contention here is that the logic in which the role of older people in society is being described is not far from this discourse of citizenship. To the extent that the old are seen as "burden" for the health care system, they, like the immigrants described by Shah, Molina and SenGupta, must prove their fitness for citizenship. What is so intriguing to note, then, is that the ways in which nineteenth-century immigrants set out to prove *their* civic fitness is quite similar to the "sites" of civic fitness and respectability "visited" by centenarians' autobiography. In these narratives, too, what is at stake is the centenarian's "economic independence" (SenGupta 36): Invariably, these centenarians reiterate that they have never once depended on the system, work as they did well into their eighties and nineties. Moreover, books such as *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* testify to

the centenarian's moral virtue, as well as their strong belief in God. Ironically, as Ian Haney López has observed, "in much White supremacist ideology Whiteness and Christianity are nearly synonymous" (75). Just as immigrant petitioners could thus refer to their Christian faith in their claim to US citizenship, the centenarian's religiosity may attest to their status as a fit civic subject. It is in this context that it seems highly significant that Sarah Delany should describe her daily prayer routine in such detail. As Sarah tells her sister Elizabeth in an imaginary conversation,

> I'm still praying for you. I've put your name at the top of my prayer list ahead of Mama and Papa and everyone else. I say, "Dear Lord, please bless and keep Bessie, Mr. Miliam and Grandma, Mama and Papa, Lemuel, Julia, Hap, Manross, Lucius, Hubert, Laura and Sam . . . ." The list, as you well know, goes on and on. I try not to neglect anyone. I think I've got everybody covered. Grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, and so on. Folks are always asking me to add them to my prayer list and of course I always say yes. How could I say no? (*On My Own at 107* 47)

Another factor in which the discourse about old age is quite similar to the rhetoric of civic fitness in the field of immigration law, is the idea that civic fitness had to be inspected. In the nineteenth-century, as Nayan Shah has suggested, it was the health inspector who went to Chinatown to inspect the living rooms of Chinese immigrants and hence their potential as what Shah calls perfectible or "potential citizens" (203). Seen in this light, would it be a wonder that centenarians' autobiographies, too, lead the reader into the centenarian's living room? The culture of ethnography which seems to underlie centenarians' autobiographies, as I will argue below, is thus closely connected to the notion of "civic inspection."

There is, however, a fine line to be upheld here between civic inspection on the one hand, and the fascination with the centenarian's "oddity" on the other hand. As I will illustrate in the following chapter, Chapter 8, centenarians' autobiographies can also read as tourist narratives, in which middle-aged readers (and co-authors) are granted access into the country of extreme old age. There is a distinction, however, between oddity and uncleanliness: The centenarian's living room, these autobiographies maintain, may be quaint and somewhat bizarre, but it is impeccably clean. In *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, morality, modesty and cleanliness go hand in hand. As their co-author Amy Hill Hearth describes them, "People always ask me if the sisters have changed (or been spoiled) from all of the attention. The answer, quite simply, is not one bit! What can you say about two celebrities who still insist on making their own soap and whose main preoccupation is getting into Heaven?" (*Everyday Wisdom* ix).

It may at first seem unusual, then, to apply these questions about citizenship to the context of extreme old age. At the same time, however, some of the discussions which have been led about longevity and the role of older people in a given

society seem to be closely related to the question of rights and responsibility, which have also loomed large in the citizenship debate. This concerns, for instance, the idea of the centenarian being a burden on the health care system (Katz 13). For this reason, it may actually be intriguing to link aging studies to citizenship studies. What, we may ask, is the citizenship of extreme old age? To what extent are centenarians, as the New England Centenarian Study puts it, "models of aging well" and thus models for the citizens of the nation? As I would like to argue in this chapter, this is where the politics of neoliberalism seem to flow into the politics of citizenship. To the extent that citizenship is not something which is given but which needs to be earned by the individual through a particular form of good conduct, the centenarians, as potential role models of neoliberalism, may also be paragons of what may be termed the citizenship of extreme old age. In order to map out this narrative trajectory, I will first discuss the politics of neoliberalism, and then go on to focus on citizenship studies more particularly.

7.3 Writing Extreme Old Age in the Age of Neoliberalism

Centenarians' autobiographies appear at a specific historical moment which is marked not only by millennial rhetoric and the "memoir boom" (Rak 43), but also by the unbroken presence of neoliberalism. As American politics have shifted towards a possible dismantling of Obama care, narratives by centenarians stress the fact that one can become extremely old, and successfully old, without ever having seen a doctor. It is here that many of the strands motivating centenarians' autobiographies converge. First, the claim made throughout these narratives that extreme old age and successful aging can be achieved even in the absence of medical care plays into the hands of neoliberalism. There is no need to retain Obama care, in other words, if centenarians assure us that we can live to 100 without medical assistance. In her memoir *On My Own at 107: Reflections on Life without Bessie*, Sarah Delany describes her sister's skepticism of doctors: "Truth is, Bessie, you were a very bad patient. That time you fell and broke your hip proved that once and for all. You were as naughty as you could be. You said, "I'd rather go to the cemetery than the hospital! I ain't going to no hospital!" (67).

Second, the absence of medical discourse in centenarians' narratives converges with these autobiographies' ethnographic bent. This absence may at first glance seem counterintuitive. The study of aging and of extreme old age in particular has long been a domain of the medical field; modern age studies, as sociologist Stephen Katz has noted, was marked by an increasing medicalization of old age (Katz 2005). Centenarians' autobiographies, on the other hand, provide a counterbalance to this medicalizing of age by making medicine and medical care

conspicuously absent from their accounts. This conspicuous absence of medical care, in turn, may reinforce the idea that centenarians' lives are substantially different from our own. In this context, too, the narrative provides us with a glimpse of the centenarian's natural environment, thus catering to the ethnographic desires of a middle-aged audience for the alien space of extreme old age. The alien quality of this space, its complete difference to the life-worlds of the reader, however, is increased by the absence of modern medicine. As in nineteenth-century visits to the slave quarters as a stock feature of minstrel shows, this is a visit to a space which has remained curiously untouched by new developments in biomedicine. One of the most central and most problematic lacunae in these accounts of centenarians' lives is the question of who has access to medical care in the first place. Working class centenarians like George Dawson, given their economic situation, did not have access to medical care in the first place; what does it mean, then, for the narrative to stress the fact that he did not need medical aid, not once in his life? There is a central paradox here. Modern biomedicine has made it possible to extend human life in ways hitherto impossible. Yet, the centenarians whose life is told in these narratives insist that their own achieving of extreme old age has nothing at all to do with modern biomedicine. The reaching of extreme old age is thus seen as the accomplishment of the individual, who has pulled himself up by the bootstraps to live to 100 even under the most adverse of circumstances. The well-established from rags to riches story which has been characterized by a profound – and highly debatable – disregard of race, class or gender is thus mapped onto the politics of aging.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, age has become the new social frontier. As societies age and their demographics change, radically, it is argued that the so-called "oldest old" as well as their slightly younger counterparts, pose a challenge to the societies they live in. More often than not, they are said to be a challenge particularly to the health care system (Overall 2005). At the same time, however, the oldest old becomes "paragon[s] of positive aging" (Robine and Vaupel v); to the extent that they are examples of what has been termed "successful aging," they become role models especially for the middle-aged who have begun to think about aging (to an extent that the young, arguably, have not), and are now looking for paragons to model their aging on.

In this context, it is crucial to note Stephen Katz's analysis of the triumphalist rhetoric that sometimes informs centenarians' autobiographies. What is at stake, then, in the achievements which these narratives celebrate about the lives of the "oldest old"? What is at stake if a near-centenarian such as George Dawson learns to read at the age of 98 or when the Delany sisters still do yoga at the age of 102 and 104, respectively? As Katz emphasizes, this celebration of older people's *abilities* should not be discounted as a commodification of self; rather, these narratives

may at first glance serve to counter what Katz terms an “alarmist demography” (13). For a long time, and well into the 1990s, which saw the emergence of long-term studies about centenarians in Heidelberg and Boston, discourse about the oldest-old tended to stigmatize older people as being a “burden” to society. Katz writes,

> More often than not, older people are being blamed for threatening the viability of social security systems. At the same time, gerontological expertise and funding are affiliated with and remunerated by governmental projects to reward a new senior citizenry that cares for itself, rather than depends on the state. (13)

This passage is crucial for a reading of centenarians’ autobiographies for a number of reasons. First, centenarians’ autobiographies also serve to redefine an “alarmist rhetoric” of older people as a burden to society because centenarians’ autobiographies, too, focus on the amazing physical and mental abilities of the people whose autobiographies, supposedly these narratives are. There is a sense, then, in which these centenarians’ autobiographies can be read as narratives of self-empowerment. At the same time, however, it is here that the emphasis, recurring throughout these centenarians’ autobiographies, on the fact that these black subjects have turned one hundred without ever having seen a doctor, functions as the carte blanche of a privatized health care system par excellence. What happens, then, when such centenarians’ autobiographies boom under the presidency of the first black president of the US, who, at the time of their publication is trying to get Obama Care under way? Not only are these centenarians “fit” rather than “disabled” oldest old, but they have taken the *care* of their bodies and minds into their own hands. This, too, is where the genre of self-help or advice literature may emerge in yet a different light. To the extent that conscientious readers follow the centenarians’ advice to stick to a healthy diet and exercise regularly, these readers may also cease to become a burden to the health care system, or so centenarians’ autobiographies would have us believe. As Sadie Delany puts it in *On My Own at 107*, holding conversations with Bessie in her head,

> Folks ask me why I’ve lived such a long and happy life and I always say the Lord deserves the credit. Another factor I’m sure, is that it runs in the family. Why, Mama lived to be ninety-five years old with no medical intervention whatsoever. Another reason is the way we live – exercise, eating lots of fruits and vegetables, no smoking, things like that. (52)

There is a double bind, then, between reading these centenarians’ autobiographies as narratives of self-empowerment and as narratives of neoliberalism. Sadly, these narratives by black centenarians can be read as “proof” that Obama Care is not really necessary. Moreover, in those passages in the “autobiographies” by black middle-class centenarians where the “authors” do allude to needing occasional caregivers, it remains unclear how these services are provided or who

pays for them. Yet, given the emphasis in narratives like *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name* or *It Is Well with My Soul* on financial independence, they may in fact be advertising the privatizing of health care.

This, too, may be paradox, however: how can we reconcile the assumption that old age is a mere extension, ad infinitum, of middle age with the emergence of "best agers" as a consumer group? How can older people be middle-aged and constitute a specific market segment at one and the same time? Katz states, "elderhood has been reconstructed as a marketable lifestyle that connects the commodified values of youth with body techniques for masking the appearance of age" (33). Yet, this is a paradox which perhaps cannot quite be resolved: Older people may emerge, both in their own narratives and in the narratives written about them, as both older and younger, as both older and middle aged, as a specific consumer group and part of the ever-growing population of the "middle-aged."

What, then, is the relationship between the centenarians' autobiographies investigated in this book and the politics of a market economy which has discovered the oldest old as the newest consumer group? This relationship, too, is riddled with paradoxes. Here, too, postmodern accounts of extreme longevity can have their cake and eat it, too: In these accounts, the centenarians are "marvelous" in their extreme longevity; in this extreme longevity, they are described by the co-author cum ethnographer in their specific and sometimes bizarre habitat. Yet, the occasional references to their lifestyle – as in the Delany sister's reference to their yoga exercises – also allude to the fact that they do participate in consumer culture. This consumer culture, what is more, may cater to middle class consumers by using the oldest old as paragons, for instance, of the benefits of doing yoga. Thus, as this example illustrates, centenarians can "be" both very old and middle aged. Yet, it must also be noted that in many of these accounts, the ethnographic paradigm trumps the consumerist one. In order to uphold the illusion of the secluded, quaint or bizarre habitat of the oldest old to be upheld, the centenarian must never be caught going shopping. Rather, centenarians like the Delany sisters seem to step out of the market economy by making their own soap instead of shopping at Walmart (Delany and Delany 1994, 44).

There are two dimensions in which citizenship debates may inform centenarians' autobiographies. First, from the nineteenth century onwards citizenship debates have hinged on the concept of "civic fitness" (Jacobson 1999); this fitness, in turn, was often defined in terms of personal and civic morality, but also in terms of personal hygiene. As Natalia Molina points out about late nineteenth-century Los Angeles, health inspector Lindley focused on Chinatown as a "rotten spot" (15):

> When he focused part of his inaugural report on Chinatown – that "rotten spot" – he exhorted the city council to take action. If allowed to fester further, the area could tarnish the image of Los Angeles as a health resort . . . . Public health officials would also help sustain the pristine image of Los Angeles by tracing the origin of all social problems to marginalized communities, beginning with the Chinese. (15)

One of the claims that could be made in this context is that the inspection of the centenarian's living room may serve a number of purposes. The fear of old age in aging societies, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, is accompanied by different associations: the fear of physical and mental impairment, the fear of being dependent on others. As readers, we enter the centenarian's living room by opening the pages of an autobiography. To what extent, I would like to ask, are we scared of what we may find? Chinatown, to once again evoke the nineteenth-century discourse of citizenship, was both a "rotten spot" and "cesspool" and a site of fascination. By the same token, the centenarian's living room may be potentially disgusting and a fascinating sight. When George Dawson invites his co-author for dinner, Richard Glaubman tries not to notice the colony of ants that has migrated into the flour used by the centenarian to make biscuits (*More Than a Book* 18). As I will elaborate below, then, the fact that these narratives reiterate, time and again, how tidy the centenarian's living room is, may at once be related to testifying to the centenarian's civic fitness. At the same time, there may be a class dimension here: Unlike George Dawson, for instance, the Delany sisters are middle class; Ann Nixon Cooper, by the same token, can afford domestic help. It is in the context of hygiene as an unspoken or explicit requirement for civic fitness, then, that it may not seem trivial that in *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, the centenarian sisters describe the making of soap in such detail. In the sisters' account, thriftiness and cleanliness are closely intertwined. As Sadie says in *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*,

> Living cheaply isn't a burden to us at all. It takes a little more time, but there are some things – like store-bought soap – that cost a lot and just aren't as good as homemade. Why, I've never bought a bar of soap in my life! I made my own, and we use it in the bath, for the laundry, and even to wash our teeth! (44)

Arguably, and seen through the prism of the citizenship debate, the sisters' book of wisdom contains both moral advice and concrete suggestions about how to put this advice into practice. On the next page, there is the recipe for "Sadie's Soap" (45): "Collect grease from cooking until you have about 6 pounds (or render it from fat bought from a butcher)" (45).

Centenarians' autobiographies can thus be said to take up this citizenship debate on a number of different levels. First, their protagonists embody the neoliberal creed that each individual is responsible for her own health; that our health is our "capital," and it is damaged or squandered only at our own expense (cf.

Reinhardt and Schober 2020). As Ulf Reinhardt and Regina Schober suggest, in the age of neoliberalism, "the body has become central to practices of self-tracking and self-improvement" (Reinhardt and Schober 8). Second and in keeping with this logic of self-improvement, one of the key tenets of centenarians' autobiographies is centenarians' fitness, both physical and mental.

Implicitly and explicitly, these narratives thus serve to counter the argument that older people are a burden to the health system and to society in general, that they do not produce anything, but are merely a drain of resources. This argument, of course, is cynical, and it dismisses some of the most important aspects of older people's participation in society (Overall 2005). Yet, what would it mean in this context that invariably, the centenarians should abhor the very notion of retirement? As Sarah Delany writes in *On My Own at 107*, "I don't see why folks should retire at sixty-five. I retired at seventy myself and, looking back on it, I bet I could have kept teaching for a long, long while yet. Of course, they make you retire" (123). There is a twofold argument to be made here. Gerontological studies have found that continued activity may serve to stem off physical and mental decline. At the same time, however, centenarians' proclaiming the absence of retirement as the key to successful aging seems to fly in the face of the progress that labor unions have called for over the last fifty years.

At the core of centenarians' narratives seems to be an idea that may be termed "perfectible humanity." As Nayan Shah has argued, nineteenth-century debates were defined by a discourse in which immigrants had to prove their right to naturalization. In this logic of what Shah calls "potential citizen[ship]" (112), immigrant petitioners had to prove to the judges that their values and behavior were compatible with that of the dominant culture (112). Is there a sense that the logic of civic "perfectibility" may link the discourse of immigration and that of aging, as counterintuitive as this may at first seem? Arguably, immigrants had to prove their "fitness" to attain citizenship. Older people, by contrast, may have to prove their right to retain their citizenship, in the sense of social belonging. What unites both these areas, I would argue, is the idea of social productiveness. Immigrants had to prove that they would be productive members of society, compatible with the culture of the host society. Older people, in much the same vein, may have to prove that they *continue* to be productive. At age 107, Sarah Delany contemplates hiring a gardener: "I tried to hire a gardener, but I couldn't get anyone to do it as nice as you did" (*On My Own* 46). Even as a centenarian, then, Elizabeth Delany took care of her own garden, with her sister Sarah doing the cooking. If, as SenGupta has outlined, independence is key to civic fitness, then these passages may well be read in the logic of citizenship.

The logic of "perfectibility" is itself intriguing here. From this perspective, individuals can be seen as raw material which can be turned into civic "material."

At the core of this process is the element of self-perfection: Immigrants have to constantly scrutinize their lives and reshape their daily routine and environment – including even their living rooms – in the image of the dominant culture. It is this dominant culture, in turn, which assesses whether an immigrant is fit enough to be naturalized. Here, too, a form of ethnography emerges, as "inspectors" (missionaries or health inspectors) invade the immigrant's living room to make sure that his adaptation to mainstream society is not a mere façade. As Shah elaborates, immigrants could be turned into citizens by demonstratively abhorring their Chinese-style living room; the moment that this immigrant home was "converted" into an American living room thus marked the entry of the Chinese immigrant into US American citizenship. According to Shah,

> The moment of conversion was marked by the intolerance of the Chinese woman for dirty habitations and signified by the cleansing and redecoration of her apartment. In conversion narratives the movement from "darkness" to "light" consciously mixed spiritual and medical meanings. (112)

What turn, then, does the idea of "perfectible citizenship" take in narratives of the oldest old? As I will argue in more detail in the next chapter, there may be a similar "inspection" of centenarian living rooms – and of centenarian kitchens – in centenarians' autobiographies. These apartments, I would like to propose, serve as tokens of the centenarians' economic, mental and physical independence. To the extent that they are still able to "keep house," centenarians can be said not so much to earn their citizenship – as in the case of immigrant petitioners to naturalization –, but rather, they are seen as worthy of keeping their citizenship. In both cases, that of the immigrant and that of the centenarian, the moment of inspection is central. The inspector, moreover, must be a representative of the norm: In the case of immigration, it is whiteness and hygiene that is at stake; in the case of extreme longevity, the inspector must of course be middle-aged. There is a sense, then, in which an immigrant inspector of immigrant homes and an older inspector of a centenarian's home would defeat the purpose. I would like to argue, then, that in centenarians' narratives, it is the co-author who may function as the inspector here: It is they who testify, through the co-written narrative, to the fitness not only of the centenarian themselves, but also of their home.

I would argue that in the pages of these narratives, "perfectible citizenship" turns into "perfectible humanity": As the New England Centenarian Study (NECS) suggests, anyone has the potential to live into extremely old age; conversely, anyone who fails to do so is culpable of willingly having squandered their life's resources. The centenarians portrayed in these texts, on the other hand, are said to have lived exemplary lives, especially in the sense that they have taken good care

of the capital that is their body. In centenarians' narratives, I argue throughout this book, the concept of "fitness" attains many different meanings: that of physical, mental and civic fitness. The centenarian's fitness regime, by the same token, may be a sign of their "perfectibility" as good citizens.

In this context, we may want to reconsider the notion of the body as capital. In the era of neoliberalism, as Reichardt and Schober have proposed, the quantification of the body – what we eat, how much we exercise, how much we sleep – has taken center stage: "This quantified data of the self is instrumental in unlocking the body's potential as a laboring body, and, in turn, disciplining the individual according to market demands and biopolitical agendas" (8). Centenarians' autobiographies, it may at first seem, appear to be the very opposite of our digitalized world of self-tracking devices: the Delany sisters, for instance, do not even have a phone. Yet, the technological aspect notwithstanding, it could be argued that centenarians' autobiographies are inextricably connected with the idea of "self-tracking" and "self-improvement." The life writing narrative as an analogous device, we may argue, becomes a self-tracking device that connects the centenarian and their readers. For the centenarian, the autobiography is the record of self-tracking; for the reader, it is the gold standard of successful aging that they may come to compare themselves to.

By virtue of having turned one hundred, these individuals have lived up to the ideal of "perfect humanity," and their narratives can be read as advice literature about how each reader's life, too, lends itself to perfectibility. As in any form of advice literature, there is a moral undertone to the advice provided by centenarians' autobiographies. To the extent that the reader does not strive to perfect his own body and lifestyle, he departs from the logic of perfectibility, and may ultimately turn out to be unfit for citizenship as well. It is here that the discourse of perfectible humanity and the idea of older people being a burden on society converge: Only those individuals are a burden on society, these narratives imply, who have failed to perfect their own humanity.

In keeping with a logic of neoliberalism where everyone has to fend for themselves, centenarians' narratives go out of their way to emphasize both their subjects' fitness (physical and mental), and their self-sufficiency. In the rare instances where centenarians do need domestic help, as in the case of Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson, there is no mention of how this assistance can be afforded. In the case of Johnson's narrative, the emphasis is on the black subject's thriftiness and foresight: The implication is that over the years, she has saved enough to be able to afford domestic help in her old age (4). Moreover, the economic underpinning of having domestic help is downplayed in the narratives as a form of companionship. As Sarah Delany writes, "Dawn, that Jamaican girl who has been keeping me company, used to sleep in your bed right after you left us but said she

can't sleep there no more" (*On My Own* 24). Two aspects may seem worth noting here. First, Sarah Delany seems to have hired a domestic help after her sister Elizabeth passed away. Second, the help is referred to as a "Jamaican girl" (*On My Own* 24), which only so much as hints at the fact that immigrant labor may be less expensive. Third and most importantly, however, this domestic help is described more as a companion to the supercentenarian than as an employee.

The concept of health insurance or state assistance, then, is completely absent from centenarians' narratives. Moreover, in narratives such as *It is Well with My Soul*, the economic aspect is replaced through a reference to *friendship*. Just as the co-author is said to be related to the centenarian not in terms of economic interest, but kinship, centenarians like Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson and the Delany sisters emphasize the fact that they do not pay for domestic help but are instead helped by friends and family. As the Delany sisters note in *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, "There's a young boy who helps us with chores who just never could bring himself to look at us . . . . So Sadie and I decided to make him our little project. We started telling him 'Stand up straight' . . . . And especially, of course, we'd say to him, 'Look me directly in the eye'" (44). This passage is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, the fact that the "young boy" helps the centenarian sisters with "chores" is mentioned only in passing. Second, it remains unclear whether the youth (who remains unnamed) helps the Delany sisters out of altruism (he may be part of their community, a neighbor's son, perhaps), or whether he is being paid. Third, the focus in this passage is on how today's youth is in need of education, especially with regard to manners. It is crucial to note here that the idea of the centenarians' potential dependency on others entirely disappears from view. It is in this way that the notion of the "self-made centenarian" can be upheld. Even as this passage clearly indicates that the Delany sisters are in need of the occasional helping hand or practical support, this aspect seems to be downplayed in the narrative. What emerges in this instance, as in many others, is the focus on individual autonomy rather than "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Holstein and Minkler 2003).

In this as in many other contexts, centenarians' autobiographies thus shy away from addressing issues of social inequality, conforming instead to metaphors of self-reliance and financial and social independence. In this sense, too, narratives of black centenarians written by white co-authors downplay the issue of race. What emerges instead is a universal concept of successful aging.

What is disturbing about centenarians' autobiographies, then, is that they do not point to the shortcomings of the argument that the oldest old are a mere burden to society but instead provide proof of centenarians' own productiveness and physical and mental fitness. At age 107, Sarah Delany is still doing her own accounting. In *On My Own at 107*, she writes, "One thing I've begun to see is that I

had become very self-sufficient in the past few years. I'm the one who was paying the bills, writing letters, and getting the taxes ready of the accountant. Things like that" (74).

Crucially, this implicit differentiation between being successfully and unsuccessfully old confirms the argument outlined above. It implies not that the logic of viewing older people as a drain to social resources is flawed but argues instead that older people do not have to be a burden on society if only they take good care of their bodies, follow their diet and get enough exercise. Third, centenarians' autobiographies play into the logic of the citizenship debate outlined above by reinforcing the idea that citizenship requires moral autonomy.

As Martha Nussbaum has argued, the citizenship debate has often hinged on the idea of individual autonomy as the key to civic fitness (Nussbaum 2006). This, as Nussbaum goes on to say in her study aptly titled *Frontiers of Justice*, further disenfranchises, for instance, persons with disability (Nussbaum 2006). According to Jean Chambers, "Nussbaum claims that people with disabilities, citizens of other nations, and non-human animals have thereby been banished by contract theorists to the frontiers of social justice. People with disabilities may not be free or independent; and those with severe mental disabilities may be unequal" (Chambers np).

The logic of citizenship discourse thus implicitly pits the civically fit against those who are seen as unfit to exercise their citizenship rights. This is a dualism which centenarians' narratives can be said to take up: Not only by stressing the centenarians' mental fitness, but also by revolving around their determination to exercise their citizenship rights, these narratives set up "their" centenarians not just as paragons of old age, but also of civic virtue. The climax in narratives such as *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name* or *It Is Well Within My Soul* is the scenario in which centenarians go out of their way to vote in the presidential election. To be sure, this moment of voting in an election is seen as an act of performing blackness; both narratives stress that the election of the first African American president in US history was a historic moment also in the black centenarian's own life. As Cooper recalls, "when President-elect Obama came onstage with his beautiful wife and their two pretty little girls to address all those people gathered in Grant Park, in Chicago, I was so proud" (Cooper and Bates 5). What remains unclear in this passage is whether Cooper is proud that for the first time in US history, an African American was elected president, or whether she is looking forward to having her own name mentioned in his victory speech. Even so, it seems to be significant for the narrative that the president "who called her name" in his victory speech is black. Nevertheless, precisely because virtually all centenarians' autobiographies, especially those written by white co-authors, insist on colorblindness, the act of voting in the presidential

election can be seen not only in terms of ethnicity, but also and especially of civic fitness.[9]

7.4 Voting at 100 in Ann Nixon Cooper's *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name*

The point to be made about centenarians' autobiographies, then, is not only that the oldest old have to earn citizenship, but that they have to prove themselves as deserving to keep it. At the beginning of Ann Nixon Cooper's *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name*, many different aspects of both centenarianness and successful aging converge. Crucially, Cooper's narrative begins with stressing the centenarian's agility and social embeddedness. Not incidentally, the first chapter of Cooper's autobiography is called "Out and About" (1). As she notes in this chapter, Cooper still vividly remembers that the day Barack Obama called her, she was out with her friends (1). This memory is indicative of the logic of successful aging in multiple ways. As Rowe and Kahn state, "lifestyle and other psychosocial factors" (xi) are key when it comes to aging successfully. Cooper is thus represented as a paragon of aging in that she is both physically agile ("out and about") and securely bound up in a close network of family and friends. Even at age 100, the narrative indicates right at the outset, she is keen on fulfilling all her "social obligations" (1). It can also be argued that these references to the centenarian's busy social life also imply mental fitness: In order to keep up with a busy schedule of meeting friends and family, there has to be mental agility, the ability to keep up contacts (through phone calls or correspondence) and a self-structured routine. In keeping with the logic of citizenship and of citizenship discourse, then, all of these aspects would also imply individual independence and "self-government" (Jacobson, *Whiteness* 5). The centenarian is at the center of social life, and she is the mistress of her own timekeeping. What is important to note here is that this notion of self-government that Cooper's description of her social life alludes to is closely tied to the exercise of civic duties. In citizenship discourse, individual self-government and civic fitness go hand in hand.

This civic fitness, in turn, is attested to in the narrative through the centenarian's exercising the right to vote. Cooper's autobiography starts with the day that she got a phone call from none other than Barack Obama; however, the actual narrative may have begun much earlier than that. Ann Nixon Cooper was a woman whom the newly elected president mentioned in his acceptance speech as one of

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9 I am indebted to Julia Velten for this point.

his oldest voters. Obama phoned Ann Nixon Cooper, then, to ask her whether he could refer to her in his acceptance speech. The subsequent passage in Barack Obama's speech can be read both on the level of age and of race. In his speech, Obama testifies to Cooper's civic fitness because she exercises her right to vote even at age 100. Part of Obama's speech is reprinted in Cooper's autobiography:

> *This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations. 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 and six years old.* (5; italics original)

While I have already discussed Obama's mentioning of Cooper in the preceding chapters, I would like to return to Cooper here in the context of civic fitness. In the context of Cooper's autobiography, but also implicitly in Obama's acceptance speech, the description of a super-centenarian's exercising her right to vote is not only a story about age, but about race as well. This passage holds particular significance in the context of the history of voting rights for African Americans. As Steven Friedland points out,

> The disenfranchisement of minorities in the 1990's, particularly African-Americans, appears to be more than a matter of ancient legal history. The failure of African-Americans to exercise their right to vote and to elect African-American officials is well-documented and remains disproportionately greater than that of the counter-part majority. The causes of this failure to exercise voting rights can be attributed to social, economic, political, and psychological impediments. Yet, the genesis of the psychic and practical alienation of the African-American community to voting in the 1990's can be traced to the misuse of legal rules and principles. (685–686).

As many critics have argued, to this day, structural inequities are such that many African Americans are still being kept for voting (Alexander 2012); in fact, one of Obama's major accomplishments was not only voter mobilization, but black voters' devising ways to resist and overcome infrastructures that had been designed to keep them from exercising their right to vote (Shaw et al. 2021). This structural inequality is something that Ann Nixon Cooper herself is well aware of. She writes,

> My friend James Davis and I arrived back after a couple of hours out, and there was this lovely message on my machine from the presidential candidate – a long one, too! He said that he had seen the story of me voting for him on CNN, and he wanted to thank me. That was nice. You could have knocked me over. I was so tickled . . . . 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 years later – I wanted to walk into that little booth and pull the curtain around me and vote. In person. For Barack Obama. So that's exactly what I did. I put on my coral pink suit

> and my good-luck gold charm bracelet – the charms include numbers of my age from ninety-nine on up . . . . (2)

Even before the president-elect calls her, then, Ann Nixon Cooper has already become a celebrity: There has already been a CNN feature about her going to vote in the presidential election. It could well be argued that this is a counter-narrative to the idea that older people or the oldest-old are unable to exercise their right to full citizenship. The CNN feature, arguably, celebrates age as well as race: It is well aware that being a registered voter and then going on to vote for one's candidate in person is an accomplishment at Cooper's age:

> At 107 years old, Cooper said she always believed she might live to see a black man sworn in as president of the United States.
>
> "I had that in mind all the time – all the time – hoping for a great change that would happen in my day," she said, a charm necklace with a gold "107" around her neck.
>
> I was hoping that it would happen in my time.
>
> This moment in history, she said, marks one of the greatest days of her event-filled life. (Drash np)

Cooper's setting out to vote in the presidential election, then, is a tribute to her civic fitness in many different ways; and it connects the notion of civic fitness to that of successful aging. First and foremost, it implies that Cooper has kept up with politics, and that she knows exactly what candidate she is going to vote for in the presidential election. At the same time, however, this ability to "keep up" with political affairs implies her mental fitness. As a centenarian, Cooper is a "paragon" (Robine and Vaupel v) of successful aging also in the sense that she has grown into extreme old age without dementia. Moreover, she goes to the elections in style. The outfit that Cooper wears to the presidential election is in itself remarkable: She dons a "coral pink suit" (Robine and Vaupel 2). Cooper is thus confident not only as a voter and as a woman who is determined to exercise her citizenship right, but also as a woman. At age 107, she still "dresses up"; this passage clearly plays on the fact that attractiveness and old age are by no means mutually exclusive. In the above-cited passage, there is hence also a gendered dimension to successful aging. At the same time, however, there is also a class dimension inherent in Cooper's narrative. Cooper's persona is squarely middle-class; her coral pink suit may be as indicative of this social status as her gold charm bracelet. Cooper is thus highly self-confident of herself as a woman, in a way that subverts the idea that for women in particular, the aging process is inevitably conceptualized as a decline of physical attractiveness. It is this decline that Susan Sontag has called the "double standard of aging." Sontag writes,

> But men rarely panic about aging in the way women often do. Getting older is less profoundly wounding for a man, for in addition to the propaganda for youth that puts both men and women on the defensive as they age, there is a double standard about aging that denounces women with special severity. ("The Double Standard of Aging" 31)

In the following passage, Cooper hence emphatically defies this "double standard of aging": "There was also a handsome young newsman, an anchor person for CNN named Don Lemon, who guided my wheelchair into the polling site. I like being escorted by handsome young men – always have" (3). In this passage, Cooper toys with established notions of both age and disability. The fact that she goes to the election in a wheelchair does not at all detract from her self-confidence in describing her young, handsome escort, Don Lemon. Even as this passage is clearly also doused with self-irony, it can nonetheless be read as a defiance of the idea that for women in particular, disability will result in a decline of attractiveness. As McRuer and Mollow put it, "*Sex and Disability:* the title of this book unites two terms that are, if not antithetical in the popular imagination, then certainly incongruous. The assertation that able-bodiedness is the foundation of sexiness might seem self-evident. After all, the sexiest people are healthy, fit, and active . . ." (1). It is significant to note that both Cooper's narrative as well as, for instance, Sarah Delany's *On My Own at 107* dwell on the idea that the centenarian, even well beyond her one hundredth birthday, *feels* attractive. In the passage quoted above, Cooper jokes about her penchant for young, attractive men. In quite a similar vein, Sarah Delany remembers her younger sister Bessie, who even as a supercentenarian, flirted with Bill Cosby. As Sadie recalls,

> Right up until the end, you were eying gentlemen. I remember how we had Bill Cosby up to the house just two months before you left us, and the two of you carried on like I couldn't believe. He put his hand on your knee and I thought for sure you would push it off but you didn't! His wife, Camille, who is one of the producers of our play, was there, too, and I said, "Mrs. Cosby, you'd better keep an eye on your husband 'cause I think my sister is about to run off with him!" (87)

This passage hints at the Delany sisters' fame, with Bill Cosby's wife being a producer of the centenarian sisters' Broadway play; but it also toys with the notion of old age and attractiveness. At the intersection of age, disability and attractiveness, these passages seem highly ambivalent. On the one hand, they may seem to unsettle the idea that old age and physical attractiveness are mutually exclusive. On the other hand, however, these passages are tinged with self-irony: Invariably, the centenarian seems to be well aware that while she may *feel* sexy, she will not be perceived as such. There is one element, however, which may be even more disturbing in this context. In the texts' highlighting the fact that the centenarian is not afraid of donning high heels even at her age, does it matter that these are

black women centenarians? In other words, does the stereotypical idea of a black woman as "hypersexual" also seem to linger in centenarians' autobiographies? These considerations notwithstanding, there seems to be an evocation in centenarians' autobiographies of the notion of "fitness" on multiple registers. Emblematic of successful aging, the centenarian is either physically fit or emotionally resilient; at any rate, she is an engaged, sociable, and "proper" civic subject.

A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name thus clearly emphasizes the centenarian's claim to full citizenship. At first glance, Cooper embodies many of the traits that historically, have been used to exclude communities from the right to full citizenship: Gender, age and disability. It is against the background of such discourses of these communities' allegedly being "undeserving" of citizenship that Cooper's detailed description of her trip to the voting booth can be seen. The point that is made in the above-mentioned passage is not only that the centenarian has become a celebrity overnight (through the simple fact of having turned 100), but that she may well use this fame to become a spokesperson for the communities of older people, the black population, and the disabled.

Moreover, Cooper is accompanied to the polls not only by the handsome anchorman, but also by the Mayor of Atlanta: "Atlanta mayor Shirley Franklin, who has been a friend for several years, came to meet me at the Fulton County Government Center, where the early voting was being held. She'd offered to meet me there to show her support that someone as old as me was determined to do her civic duty" (2). It is particularly significant here that Cooper should explicitly refer to her "civic duty" in this passage. The centenarian's life narrative can thus be said to be conscious of the counterarguments that may be leveled at them, implying that they may have lost the right or at least the ability to exercise their citizenship. In this as in many other instances in centenarian autobiographies, the centenarian is implicitly being held up as a role model to others: If a 100-year-old woman in a wheelchair can make her way to the polls, these narratives imply, what might we say about those who would need much less determination to make it to the voting booth, and still do not exercise their right to vote?

At the same time, however, Cooper's autobiography seems to stand out from the other centenarians' autobiographies discussed in this study. In the passages discussed above, there is clearly a suggestion that there has been systemic inequality that may have kept African Americans from voting; Ann Nixon Cooper's emphasis on her determination not to be kept from the polls says as much. Moreover, the reference to her wheelchair – and the defiant nonchalance with which she highlights her attractiveness in a "coral pink suit" – seem remarkable in that Cooper's narrative does not pit disability and successful aging against one another. Where George Dawson stresses the fact that he does not need a cane and where R. Waldo McBurney is proud of running across the "finish line" of his 100th

birthday, Cooper's narrative seems to imply that to use a wheelchair is by no means to age unsuccessfully. *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name* can thus be said to stand out from the other centenarians' narratives analyzed in this study. Interestingly, it is also the only narrative about a black centenarian's life that was co-authored by an African American writer. As I will argue in Chapter 8 in particular, there is no possibility that we can disentangle, in these narratives, the co-author's voice from that of the centenarian. It may at first seem daring, then, to imply that it is the co-author's background that may make Ann Nixon Cooper's narrative so different from other black centenarians' autobiographies such as George Dawson's *Life Is So Good* or Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's *It Is Well with My Soul*, that were co-written by white co-authors. Even so, however, it does seem noteworthy that where other autobiographies such as *Having Our Say* seem to revolve around the notion of colorblindness, as I have argued in Chapter 3, *A Century and Some Change* stresses the notion of color-consciousness (Gutman and Appiah 1996).

A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name is remarkable also in yet another way. As I have argued in the introduction, there is a danger of "successful aging" becoming a master narrative, in whose wake all other forms of aging may be dismissed as not quite successful, or even as forms of "failed aging." There is in Cooper's narrative a sense of what has been called "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). Not only does Cooper's narrative note that the centenarian went to the voting booth in a wheelchair, but there is also mention of the centenarian's caregiver:

> At ten o'clock on election night the phone rang. It was someone form the president-elect's office. Mr. Obama was going to use my name in his speech in an hour or so and ask if it was ok with me. My answer was "Yes, of course!" I had the gentleman speak with Katrinka, my caregiver . . .! (4–5)

A number of things are remarkable in this passage. First of all, the centenarian, Ann Nixon Cooper, is once again shown in her "civic fitness" as she watches the election results on television, surrounded by friends (5). At the same time, she is fully capable of making her own decisions when the president's office calls her to ask her permission for Barack Obama's mentioning her in his victory speech. As I argue throughout this chapter, there is an undertone to these centenarians' narratives in which they defy arguments that imply that the oldest-old are incapable of making their own decisions. Cooper's acceptance of Obama's reference to her in his acceptance speech, then, shows that she is capable of representing herself, not only in her narrative but also in legal terms. This personal and mental independence notwithstanding, however, there is a reference to Katrinka, her caregiver. This implicit dialogue between the centenarian and her caregiver, it could

be argued, is a prime example of relational autonomy: The point made in the narrative is that relational autonomy does not mean the absence of autonomy; rather, it is only a different kind of autonomy. As Mackenizie and Stoljar illustrate, there may be a difference between what they call "static autonomy" and "dynamic autonomy":

> Static autonomy . . . arises from seeing others as a threat to the self, from insecurity about the self, and from fears of dependency and loss of self-control, leading to patterns of domination and control over others . . . . Dynamic autonomy revolves both relatedness to, and differentiation from, others. It promotes a sense of agency in a world of "interacting and interpersonal agents" and a sense of others "as subjects with whom one shares enough to allow for a recognition of their interdependent interests and feelings – in short for a recognition of them as other subjects." (5)

This distinction between "static" and "dynamic" autonomy, it could be argued, is at the core of centenarians' autobiographies. Time and again, these narratives insist that one can grow old, even extremely old, without becoming dependent on others; it is thus the model of "static" autonomy that they propagate. However, there are instances in the texts in which such a static model may "slip" to reveal at least an inkling of "dynamic autonomy." The above-cited passages in *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name* indicate that there is a way of narrating centenarians' lives in a way that it does not automatically become a master narrative: Ann Nixon Cooper, the autobiography implies, is both independent *and* has a caregiver, Katrinka. At the same time, however, this form of relational autonomy clearly implies a class dimension: Cooper is wealthy enough to be able to afford a caretaker.

7.5 Morality and Citizenship

In keeping with the logic of the citizenship debate, moreover, centenarians are held up to be role models not only of civic participation and mental and physical fitness, but also of morality. To be sure, morality was also at the core of nineteenth-century discourses of citizenship and naturalization. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has outlined in his memorable study *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998), immigrants needed to provide proof of their moral compatibility with the dominant culture in order to become naturalized American citizens. In nineteenth-century naturalization cases, immigrant petitioners could be turned down if their way of life was considered immoral and hence incompatible with the mores of the dominant culture. In one particular case, *Ex parte Shahid* (1913), the court asked the claimant whether he

believed in polygamy. As Ian Haney López points out, however, it ultimately remained unclear whether Shahid really subscribed to the practice of polygamy, or whether he simply failed to understand the question:

> The court also noted that Shahid "writes his name in Arabic, cannot read or write in English, and speaks and understands English very imperfectly . . . . His answers to the questions of whether he is a polygamist or a disbeliever in organized government were in the affirmative, and he could not be made to understand in English the purport of the questions asked." (72)

The question of linguistic fluency notwithstanding, what stands out here is that the claim to citizenship is closely tied to the notion of morality. It is in this context, I would like to propose, that the relevance of the centenarians' morality and moral fitness is so central. Centenarians' autobiographies, then, can be seen not only as narratives in which extremely old individuals prove that they are by no means a burden to society, but in which they function as role models to the nation as such.

The central difference between these other models of "earning citizenship," especially in the context of immigration and naturalization (Banerjee, *Color Me White* 107), is that immigrant petitioners apply for the right to be naturalized, whether older people may call for the retention of a citizenship right which they used to have but may have lost. In other words, as long as they were middle aged, older people did in fact possess full citizenship; it is only when they entered the aging process, conceived as this process used to be as a process of decline, that this citizenship began to be called into question. The relationship between old age and citizenship, then, may be at once similar to and different from other discourses of citizenship. Seen from this perspective, centenarians' autobiographies may be read as a way to call for the reinstating, or rather, the retention of citizenship.

What I propose to do in this chapter, then, is to superimpose the paradigm of citizenship studies onto discussions about extreme old age. What does it mean, in other words, to prove one's "civic fitness" through an autobiography authored by a centenarian? As I try to show in this chapter, the aspects that centenarians address in their life narrative bear a striking correspondence to other petitions for citizenship, for instance, in the realm of immigration and naturalization. What qualities, what capabilities do these petitioners have to prove in order to earn their right to citizenship and naturalization? Two of the central tenets of citizenship debates, in nineteenth-century discourse, were self-governance and moral fitness. What, then, would these two concepts involve when it comes to proving the citizenship of the oldest-old?

I would like to argue, then, that centenarians' autobiographies do not simply evoke the idea of the oldest-old as sources of wisdom, but also of moral guidance.

There is a sense in which centenarians' autobiographies almost function as jeremiads of a secular kind. Just as they may provide a form of civil religion (Bellah 1967) in the face of shifting demographics, they may admonish the nation to change its wasteful ways. Precisely because the centenarian is held up in the marketing strategies surrounding her autobiography as a modern-day "griot" (Delany and Delany, *Having Our Say*, cover), she is also a spokesperson for a morality which the nation seems to have lost. At this juncture in the reading of centenarians' autobiographies, there are two forms of reading this exhortation. First, there is a way in which the moral advice provided by African American centenarians is directed especially at their own community. Precisely because centenarians' autobiographies are marketed as color-blind narratives, and as the accounts of African American lives written by white co-authors, the moral advice that they provide are by no means restricted to black communities. In the genre of a centenarians' jeremiad, the speaker admonishes the nation to mend its ways. Centenarians' autobiographies are hence deeply embedded in the discourse of "family values." As Bessie suggests in *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, "I'll tell you what I cherish most from the past: our family traditions, all those little rituals that bind you together. Folks today tend to be so busy and independent that they abandon the daily habits, like eating meals together, that keep you close" (19).

Here, too, the politics of enshrinement recur: To the extent that centenarians are held up as role models and guides to successful living, any advice they provide, however trivial it may be, seems to be carved in stone. It is in this sense that the ambiguity and complexity which defines centenarians' autobiography as a genre is particularly powerful here. Since these accounts function as autobiographies, as advice literature and as keys to living into extreme old age, their ideological agenda often remains hidden. Under the guise of providing advice to healthy living, they may in fact convey moral messages; under the pretext of a narrative about aging, they may in fact inscribe a middle-class narrative about the necessity of family values. As Sarah and Elizabeth Delany assure their readers in *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, "Just about every problem you can think of in this world could be solved in the home if folks were brought up right. There is nothing more important than having a good mama and papa, loving but strict" (69).

What, then, is the advice which centenarians' autobiographies give us? And in what genre do they give us this advice? Once again, the jumbling of genres which is so particular to centenarians' accounts is key here. As has been outlined above, centenarians' autobiographies themselves can be read as advice literature; how, then, do they differ from sequels to these autobiographies which more openly function as advice literature or self-help narratives? What is interesting to

note here is that the co-author as the manager of the centenarians' lives, from the very outset of their collaboration, has seriality in mind. As Amy Hill Hearth notes, in the case of the collaborative writing of *Having Our Say*, it was a conscious decision to leave out the yoga tips and save them for the sequel, *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*. As Hearth elaborates in the preface,

> One day it occurred to the Delany sisters that in lieu of answering the fan mail, we could do another book together. Only this time, we would not tell the story of the sisters' lives, but the secrets of old age. Fortunately, I had kept a journal during the past few years, where I had jotted down the words of advice, parables, and amusing anecdotes that the sisters had passed on to me. (x)

As I have suggested in the Chapter 5, this distinction between autobiography and a "book of wisdom" is more apparent than real. The fascination that accompanies centenarians' autobiographies, I propose throughout these chapters, is that it is both a life writing narrative and a "book of advice." This turns the logic of seriality on its head and confirms it at the same time: *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* can be read as a sequel to the advice that is also contained in *Having Our Say*; and yet, it is more explicitly a manual than the autobiography is. In keeping with the idea that the distinction between autobiography and book of wisdom may be misleading, this is how the latter narrative begins: "We are the children of a slave. There aren't too many of us left these days. We were born more than 100 years ago and have lived together all of our lives" (*Everyday Wisdom* 3). With regard to the genre of centenarians' autobiographies, it may thus be more productive to read all of these texts as forms of life writing. This genre convention – the reference to life writing – would serve to transcend the distinction between different forms of life writing: *Having Our Say* may be closest to the genre of autobiography, even if it was co-written with Amy Hill Hearth; *On My Own at 107: Reflections on Life without Bessie* is both Sarah Delany's autobiography (a narrative of grieving over her sister Bessie) and a biography of Bessie's life; while *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* is a manual to aging well that nonetheless contains autobiographical features.

What, then, is the centenarian sister's "everyday wisdom"? What is remarkable here is that this is a form of wisdom which participates in an anti-intellectual tradition deeply ingrained in American history. It is the wisdom not of African American intellectuals, but it is instead a form of common sense. As in the myth of the self-made man (or woman), centenarians' narratives map onto the terrain of extreme old age archetypical or mythical narratives which are already inherent in the nation's cultural imagination (Paul 2014). This is a common sense, moreover, which is reinvigorated through the discourse of extreme longevity. Thus, accounts of centenarians' lives can be seen to elevate, rediscover or even revive forms of

discourse which have fallen into oblivion. At the turn of the new millennium, two decades after the Reagan administration, the narratives of black centenarians written by white co-authors revive the tradition of trickle-down economics and family values by admonishing African American youth to mend their ways (*Everyday Wisdom* 80). In this sense, too, narratives such as *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* are doubly coded. First, they are in line with the Franklinian tradition of frugality (Horwitz 596), thus once again illustrating the proximity between self-help literature and autobiography. This is how in *Having Our Say*, Sadie Delany describes her daily routine: "These days, I am usually the first one awake in the morning. I wake up at six-thirty. And the first thing I do when I open my eyes is smile, and then I say, 'Thank you, Lord, for another day!'" (188). As remnants from a past in which Americans knew the value of frugality and self-sufficiency, the Delany sisters teach their middle-aged, middle-class readers how to make their own soap (*Everyday Wisdom* 44). Second, however, the narrative may be seen to speak not only to a white or colorblind audience, but also to the African American community specifically. In a cultural climate where African Americans continue to be economically and politically disenfranchised, the Delany sisters' wisdom narrative exhorts their fellow African Americans to thrive on what they have. There is a sense here in which the centenarian's autobiography may imply the possibility of either romanticizing poverty or of suggesting that in the end, every individual, if only they are resilient enough, can triumph over poverty. They, the Delany sisters emphasize time and again, grew up poor and nonetheless lived to be one hundred. The implication of such a statement, it can be argued, is that poverty and structural equality can not be all that bad; the individual, like the Delany sisters, can rise above their circumstances out of their own power. The sisters write, "We didn't have one penny – not one penny – when we were growing up, but we had a blessed childhood" (*Everyday Wisdom* 3). From a different perspective, however, it could be argued that in the face of mass incarceration (Alexander 2012; Wacquant 2009) and widespread injustice against young black men in particular, the African American community may have problems other than the making of soap.

What is so paradoxical about centenarians' narratives, then, is that centenarians are being asked to give out advice not only about how to age successfully, but also on matters which have nothing at all to do with age. In this context, the purpose of the present study is twofold. First, it looks at centenarians' narratives as narratives about aging, and about successful aging in particular. Second, however, it wonders about a shift in narrative function, and in narrative competence. What other discourses do these centenarians' narratives take on? In what other functions, far beyond extreme old age, do centenarians become our counselors? It is in this sense, I believe, that centenarians' narratives can become Trojan horses, where by virtue of being extremely old, these centenarians assume an au-

thority in counseling their readership about anything from sexual morality to politics. In this sense, centenarians' narratives become multi-functional. Age may be a pretext, a reason for the bestowal of an authority which far exceeds questions of aging. In this sense, centenarians' narratives become a foil, a canvas onto which questions other than age are being projected, a prism through which other questions and discourses are being refracted: What, indeed, is a good life? Why else should we ask a centenarian about whether or not Affirmative Action is a useful tool? In this as in many other instances, centenarians become surrogates, ventriloquists and spokespersons for a highly neoliberal agenda. In a chapter titled "Doing for Yourself," Sarah Delany remembers that when early on in her career as an educator, she was hard pressed for money, she simply started her own business by manufacturing "hand-dipped fondant chocolates" (*Everyday Wisdom* 43). She recalls,

> I charged two dollars a pound, and I made quite a nice little profit! But then the Depression came and I had to shut down my business because no one had money for luxuries like candy. Still, that candy kept me going for a long time! It showed me that no matter what happened, I'd never have to be beholden to anyone. Why, I've never needed a handout in my life! (*Everyday Wisdom* 42)

At the same time, the idea of centenarians' narratives being a prism of our own lives may account for the fascination they may currently have for our culture. The idea with which this book began – that centenarians may be mirrors of ourselves – can thus be looked at from different angles. First, as I have argued in the introduction, they may be mirrors of our future selves, or of the selves which we hope to become. At the same time, however, because we may bring to these centenarians not only questions regarding age, but about life in general, they may also become mirrors of our current selves. These narratives may be used to remind us, in the present, of what makes our own lives meaningful. This may be particularly true of these narratives' depiction of love and companionship. At the same time, this passage may be indicative of what may actually be the difference between Germany and the US, between the genre of American centenarians' autobiographies and interviews conducted, in Germany, with centenarians. In *Das kluge, lustige, gesunde, ungebremste, glückliche sehr lange Leben – Die Weisheit der Hundertjährigen* (2019), there is an emphasis less on successful aging than on the hardships which may be connected to being old. In US centenarians' narratives, there seems to be a sense, in keeping with American myths, that obstacles need to be overcome, and that they need to be overcome through the individual's own resources. In *Das kluge, lustige, gesunde, ungebremste, glückliche sehr lange Leben – Die Weisheit der Hundertjährigen*, on the other hand, there is more of an emphasis on the role played by the

centenarians' children, their relatives, or their caretakers; the emphasis on autonomy, in other words, seems to be less pronounced.

Centenarians' narratives, then, are meeting points between different disciplinary cultures. To the extent that it is as yet unclear what makes some people live longer than others, gerontologists investigate the *lifestyle* of the oldest old. This investigation, in turn, may be one of the reasons why interviews have become central to gerontological research in the case of centenarians. It is through centenarians' own accounts of their past life, and the information gleaned from their proxies, that their lifestyle is revealed. Here, too, centenarians' autobiographies and gerontological research converge in a veritable obsession with the everyday life of centenarians.

8 Centenarians' Autobiographies as Ethnographies of Extreme Old Age

In many different ways, centenarians' autobiographies are exemplary of the culture of late modernity. All of these narratives insist that it does not suffice to talk about extreme old age only in demographic terms. What matters, rather, is the *experience* of longevity. This relevance of experience, in turn, ties in with the search for authenticity outlined above. As Reckwitz characterizes the culture of late modernity from which these life writing narratives arise,

> The singularization and valorization of the everyday world is a project of authenticating life. In general, the late modern subject strives for experiences of the authentic when dealing with the world. In short, it is now true that if something is good, then it must be authentic, and if it is authentic, then it is good. (293; my translation)

The reader's desire to immerse themselves into a unique, almost otherworldly culture, the life of the oldest-old, can be appeased only to the extent that the narratives provide truly "authentic," first-hand accounts of what it is like to live to one hundred. Experience hence becomes paramount: Reading about extreme old age, in the culture of late modernity, becomes the next best thing to being one hundred. This emphasis on lived experience, in turn, has several consequences. First, it may account for the peculiar lack in these narratives of eventfulness. We observe the centenarians' everyday routine, so to speak, in which nothing ever happens. Yet, this lack of eventfulness is not experienced by the reader as a disappointment. Rather, it is not eventfulness that readers of centenarians' autobiographies may look for, but an immersion in the centenarian's everyday experience, his routine, even banal everyday life. This immersion and the emphasis on the experiential may once again tie in with the politics of ethnography as it pervades these narratives. These accounts of the lives of the oldest old are truly meant as "thick descriptions" in Clifford Geertz's sense (3). As such thick descriptions, they cater to a hunger for experience which takes a specific turn in the culture of late modernity.

The justification for writing and publishing a centenarian's autobiography, on the part of the co-author, may also lie in a certain ethnographic concern. To the extent that the ethnographer not only studies but also "preserves" cultures that are both foreign and potentially on the verge of extinction, they may justify their representation of these other culture as purely altruistic. Where in other scenarios, we might speak of the "vulnerability" of certain groups to misrepresentation, the ethnographic concern may serve to counter the notion of such vulnerability. It is thus

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crucial in this context that Thomas Couser, in his study of vulnerability in life writing, should have evoked precisely this ethnographic scenario. He notes, "I distinguish among scenarios in which cooperative life writing occurs – such as the 'celebrity' scenario or the 'ethnographic' scenario – and identify ways in which subjects or writers may become vulnerable to exploitation in different scenarios" (xiii). What is noteworthy here is that centenarians' autobiographies seem to qualify for both "scenarios" at one and the same time. In these accounts, centenarians are described as having become "celebrities" the moment they reached their 100th birthday. By the same token, precisely because they have come to inhabit the country of extreme old age, they may now have become fitting subjects for ethnographic accounts.

It is the ethnographic bend of centenarians' narratives, moreover, which may account for their curious eventlessness. No-one expects a cookbook, in other words, to have a storyline, and neither does a poetry album need to have a climax. At the same time, the excess of detail provided by centenarians' autobiographies and advice books converges with a general need for deceleration. What Andreas Reckwitz has called a "society of singularity" ("Gesellschaft der Singularitäten") and a widespread distrust of generalization (Reckwitz 2019) also converges with a call for deindustrialization; what is desirable at the turn of the twentieth century is not mass production, but individual, hand-made craft. Reckwitz observes, "The taste density of the food, the versatility of the destination, the specialness of the child with all their talents, the aesthetic design of one's own home – everything revolves around originality and interestingness, versatility and difference" (293; my translation).

In an uncanny way, centenarians' advice about making your own wine may hence covertly participate in contemporary "slow food" movements. What is noteworthy here is that the emphasis, in the life writing narratives by centenarians, on food may serve two purposes at once. First, the centenarian's diet may turn out to be the key to the enigma of longevity. Second, it can also be seen as a particular kind of cuisine, that of the oldest-old. As Reckwitz notes about the culture of late modernity, there is an insatiable desire for uniqueness, for *Singularität*. This, he writes, crystallizes in the desire for local cuisines; yet, as I would like to propose here, it can also encompass the food culture of different subcultures, even that of the oldest-old. In this way, we may argue, Burmese street food and centenarians' traditional cuisine can be seen to converge. Reckwitz suggests,

> Local cuisines – Vietnamese as well as Italian, South African as well as Caribbean, Middle Eastern as well as French, etc. – singularize food; they are unique because of their specific intrinsic complexity of typical ingredients, preparation methods and dishes, sometimes even their presentation forms and eating techniques. (311; my translation)

It is precisely this "spezifische Eigenkomplexität," the complexity and identity that is peculiar to centenarians in their old-fashioned lifestyle, that caters to the reader's desire for culinary uniqueness in late modernity.

Yet, the slow food that the centenarians advocate is also characterized by a very specific temporality, a slowing down of the busy lifestyle of the middle-aged. Who, we may ask, has the time to allow cake dough to rise for three days or for soap ingredients to cool down for hours? As the Delany sisters emphasize in their description of the recipe for "Sadie's Soap," "Start by dissolving the lye in the 2 pints of water in a porcelain container. Set aside and allow to cool until the mixture is just warm. This may take a few hours" (*Everyday Wisdom* 64). This, too, is emblematic of the particular and peculiar temporalities of centenarians' life narratives. Seen from the perspective evoked in these narratives, centenarians seem to inhabit a temporality of their own, they seem to have fallen out of time. The politics which seem to surround these representations of centenarians' slow food are reminiscent of one particular image: that of dinosaurs. As remnants from another time, centenarians are reminiscent of another, bygone era; in their memory, they retain memories of soap-making which the rest of the nation has long forgotten. These recipes, in turn, are family recipes. In this sense, too, black centenarians may help a white, middle-aged readership to recover family traditions or, in the absence of such traditions, adopt black families' traditions as their own. Once again, the co-author may figure in these narratives not only as a writer, but also as a reader: Just as Richard Glaubman gets to sleep over at "his" centenarians' house, white readers may come to share black families' recipes about soap and wine making. Who, we may ask, has ever heard of "watermelon rind pickles" (*Everyday Wisdom*, 60),? In this particular recipe shared by the Delany sisters in their book of everyday wisdom, food culture and thriftiness converge. As Sadie notes,

> We never waste a thing – not even things like corn cob or watermelon rinds. We use them to make wine or the best pickles you have ever tasted . . . . First, soak the rinds in salt water. After a few hours, peel the rinds. Then soak the rinds overnight in fresh water, in the icebox, in a covered pot. (*Everyday Wisdom* 59–60)

What is at stake, then, is not only the idea of the black centenarian as providing the white co-author with a surrogate family, but also with surrogate family traditions, complete with a repertoire of secret family recipes. In this sense, too, centenarians' narratives may hark back to accounts of the role which black people played in white families' lives. As in the stock character of the "mammy figure" features in many racialist depictions particularly of Southern history, black women were seen as and reduced to aspects of nurturing: They provided both the nutrition and the stories on which white children would thrive. This is an idea that I have discussed

in more detail in Chapter 6. To an extent, then, white children would be socialized through black women's stories, and would get a glimpse of their recipes. *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, for instance, reveals the recipe for "Sadie's Pound Cake" (86). Like the other centenarian's recipes, this one, too, requires time: "An hour or so ahead of time, take all of the ingredients out of the icebox so that they are room temperature when you start" (86). Yet, one claim that could be made here with regard to centenarians' autobiographies is that the politics which apply here are as much about race as they are about age. At the same time, it does seem striking that virtually all the centenarians' autobiographies which proved to be bestsellers were written by African American centenarians.

In what way, then, may current narratives of black centenarians be similar to such politics of nurturing? If indeed, the possibility of living into extreme old ages generates fears of what it will be like to be that old, then what may emerge at this moment in present-day history is the *need for a new form of socialization*. There is a sense, particularly in narratives such as Richard Glaubman's co-written *Life Is So Good*, in which the middle-aged co-author succumbs to a sense of infantilization: He seems to be dwarfed by the colossal achievement of a black man's living into extreme old age, and of living into extreme old age so *successfully*. Just like a child sneaking into the black woman's kitchen, then, the white co-author may enter the black centenarian's kitchen in search not only of homemade food, but also of spiritual advice. There is a curious split in the co-author's role here: He is both infantilized in his need for the centenarian's advice about what it will be like to live into extreme old age, and he is in control of the narrative at one and the same time. Centenarians' autobiographies may hence be characterized by a constant form of role-taking: As the co-author is in control of the politics of the narrative, the co-author may infantilize "his" centenarian, whose life narrative he commands. Yet, as a middle-aged person who is both fearful and in awe of the centenarian's achievement, he may be a child listening to the centenarian as a surrogate father and advisor on the secrets of extreme longevity.

Throughout this book, I locate centenarians' autobiographies at the intersection of different developments: from the "society of singularity" (Reckwitz 11), in which each individual aspires to uniqueness, to the idea of successful aging. I also argue that centenarians' narratives can be seen as guidebooks to an uncertain future. Here, too, the riddle by the Wizard of Oz can be evoked: If the wizard asks us whether living to one hundred is good or bad news, it may be a good idea to visit the land of the future before we have to live there for good. If indeed, as I have suggested in the introduction, we see the centenarian as a potential mirror of our own future selves, our relationship to this mirror is nonetheless complicated. The centenarian is a person whom we at once would like to become and

fear of becoming. It is in this complexity, I suggest, that centenarians' autobiographies become guidebooks, advice literature, and travel accounts all at once.

I suggest throughout this book that the power and the seductiveness of centenarians' autobiographies lies in the fact that they invite us to read them as potential manuals to our own future, or to the futures we would like to have. In this aspect as in many others, centenarians' life narratives are similar to the "successful aging" paradigm evoked by Rowe and Kahn. Rowe and Kahn suggest that we can indeed take charge of our own aging process: that we can "sculpt" the person we would like to become as we grow into old age (1997). In order to become the sculptors of our own future selves, however, we must take advantage of all the manuals we can get: We must carefully peruse guides for nutrition, fitness handbooks, but also first-person accounts by those who have reached the country of old age that we would one day like to visit ourselves. It is in all these senses, I argue throughout this book, that the paradigm of successful aging can be said to fuel the centenarian industry. The point to be made, I suggest throughout these chapters, is not just that we read life narratives by centenarians, but *how* we read them, the meanings and desires we bring to them. It is this multi-purpose agenda, I argue, that, for all their apparent simplicity, makes these centenarians' narratives so fascinating to read.

Yet, it is here that we may once again evoke, with Christine Overall, the Wizard of Oz. All dietary and fitness advice notwithstanding, we cannot quite be sure whether living to one hundred, if indeed we will eventually manage to do so, is good or bad news. For this very reason, reading centenarians' autobiographies as a form of traveling into the country of extreme old age, can be seen as a form of literary tourism. This literary tourism, in turn, is potentially fraught with danger and sensationalism: We can never be quite sure what we will encounter. Because these centenarians' narratives are framed as emblematic of successful aging, however, there is a double bottom to our journey of extreme old age: Some of the encounters we may make on our journey may seem bizarre, in other words, but we can be sure that we will not be forced to encounter illness, despair, or disability. This, I suggest throughout this book, is what makes centenarians' narratives so fascinating and so problematic at one and the same time.

In this chapter, I will explore what I see as the proximity between the "age culture" described in centenarian narratives, on the one hand, and the ethnographic paradigm on the other. Even if the centenarian's face is a mirror which we both desire and fear to look into, it may be easier for us to remind ourselves that we have not yet reached the country of extreme old age. Like the co-authors who write these "autobiographies," the readership of centenarians' narratives may in fact be middle-aged. At the same time, as I suggest in this chapter, the ethnographic paradigm is closely related to the idea of tourism. The difference between age and, for

instance, race lies in the distinction between sameness and otherness: While we know that we will not automatically or biologically change into another ethnic group, we do know that, if all goes well, we will live into old age, perhaps even extreme old age. This certainty makes for the fact that the country of extreme old age may still be unfamiliar to the middle-aged tourist-ethnographer, but it is nonetheless a country that he himself may eventually belong to. Seen from this perspective, the ethnographic or touristic framework that the narratives evoke may at once serve as a form of self-assurance: To the extent that the visitor stresses his role as tourist and ethnographer, he also makes sure that he has not yet come to live in this country for good.

Part of the fascination of centenarian autobiographies, for a middle-aged reading public, may thus be the tourism of extreme old age. The very idea of tourism as a conceptual framework may be significant here: The tourist is never here to stay; at the end of his sojourn, he will certainly go back home. At the same time, the form of tourism that I will explore in this chapter coincides with Reckwitz' description of the "society of singularity": In the age of individualism rather than conformity, we travel "off the beaten path" (MacCannell 594): We are no longer interested in package tours, but in custom-made travel. According to Reckwitz,

> Destinations, for example, can no longer be content with being monotonous destinations of mass tourism. Rather, it is the uniqueness of the place, the special town with an authentic atmosphere, the exceptional landscape, the special local everyday culture that now attracts the interest of the tourist gaze. (9; my translation)

My argument in this chapter is that reading centenarians' autobiographies fulfills precisely this desire. We travel into the land of extreme old age to find the answer to the riddle posed by the Wizard of Oz: the question whether becoming one hundred is good or bad news. In this chapter, I will show how closely connected centenarians' life stories are to the ethnographic paradigm: I will ask who the guide is, and who assumes the position of the native. In order for this paradigm to "work," moreover, the country of extreme old age has to be genuinely foreign. This foreignness, in turn, is at once tantalizing and comforting: The more remote this territory seems from our own life worlds, the more secure we will be that we are not yet becoming older. The centenarians we encounter in these travel narratives, I suggest in this book, are both like and unlike ourselves. The fascination which emerges from these life stories lies in this curious mixture between sameness and difference.

8.1 Visiting the Native in Their Kitchen: Backstage Encounters

It is curious to note that virtually all of the centenarian narratives discussed in this book follow the same pattern. Their climax lies in gaining access to the sanctuary of the centenarian's most private spaces: the space where the centenarian is most fully himself. I argue that this desire to move into the "authentic" space of centenarianness is in keeping with both the ethnographic paradigm and the "society of singularity" (Reckwitz 2019). The goal of individualized tourism, unlike the package tour, is the idea of "discovery." In this context, it can once again be argued that the co-author becomes a surrogate for the reader. The reader discovers the foreign land of extreme old age through the tourism of the co-author. Like the co-author, the reader, too, becomes a tourist in the country of extreme old age. This discovery, moreover, must not be simple: rather, the very choreography of individualized travel, of traveling "off the beaten track," as Dean MacCannell calls it, requires the overcoming of hardships and obstacles.

After he has flown all the way to Dallas to meet George Dawson, the black centenarian, Glaubman is suddenly overcome with self-doubt: "I don't do things like this. I live a normal life. I go to work. I have a family. I have a dog. What compelled me to get on a plane to talk to an old man that I had never met?" (Glaubman, *More Than a Book* 10). It is passages like this, arguably, which serve to heighten the suspense and make the discovery of uncharted territory – the country of extreme old age – even more spectacular. The tourist whom Dean MacCannell describes finds a pristine, previously undiscovered landscape only once he has strayed from the path and ventured out into the wilderness. According to MacCannell, "There are vulgar ways of expressing this liberal sentiment, the desire 'to get off the beaten path' or 'in with the natives.' Some tourists do make incursions into the life of the society they visit or are at least actually allowed to peek into one of its the back regions" (593).

Similarly, the tourism described in centenarians' narratives is not without risk. In this context, it is intriguing to inquire into different degrees of dangerousness, and different degrees of singularity. It may in fact be argued that the centenarian's autobiography – like George Dawson's *Life Is So Good* - is already a travel narrative; but the singularity it portrays is exceeded by Glaubman's writing about the writing of the autobiography itself. In *More Than a Book: A Story of Friendship*, he describes in full detail the hardships he had to overcome to win access to the centenarian's most authentic space: his kitchen. In keeping with MacCannell's description of individualized tourism, the journey may in fact be even more spectacular than the reaching of the actual destination. What matters, in other words, is not so much Richard Glaubman's being in the centenarian's kitchen, than the feat it took to get there. What I am interested in here, then, is

the choreography of the actual travel. Like any journey, Glaubman's begins with only reading about his unlikely destination:

> As I drove from the airport, a sign said, "Welcome to the Dallas/Ford Worth Metroplex." The Dallas suburbs had an air of wealth and prosperity to them that continued as I approached the high rises of the downtown financial district. However, the moment I pulled off the freeway that air of prosperity vanished. I drove past vacant storefronts and quiet neighborhoods with run down houses. I was in the South Dallas ghetto, a world away from downtown. (*More Than a Book* 7)

The convergence between MacCannell's idea to go "off the beaten track" and Glaubman's description could not be more striking here. In order to go "off the beaten track" on his journey into the country of extreme old age, Glaubman "pulls off the freeway": he goes where few of his kind have gone before. This, literally, is uncharted territory; it is this idea of undiscovered land that marks the fascination of centenarian autobiographies, or so this book argues. The point to be made here is twofold: First, the idea of discovery needs to be unpacked: The point is that this "country" of poverty and desolation, this landscape made up of "vacant storefronts" has never been seen by a *white* eye. In Glaubman's case, this form of tourism is marked by three discrepancies: First, it is defined by the discrepancy between white and black America; second, by the difference between wealth (epitomized both by the Dallas suburbs and Glaubman's own middle-class status) and disenfranchisement; and third, by the difference between middle-age and extreme old age. Thus, the journey which Glaubman has embarked on ventures into unknown territory in a number of different senses.

The desirability of this outlandish space – the living quarters of the centenarian – is inversely proportionate to how easy or difficult it is to get there. Here, too, we catch a glimpse of the culture of singularity: Glaubman is set to go where no one has gone before. Ironically, this is the paradox or contradiction inherent in centenarians' autobiography: In marketing each of these narratives, the publishers refer to other centenarians' autobiographies previously written; and hence, there is a sense evoked by the narratives that each of them is surely unique. The paradox then, is that there is a whole *culture* of straying off the beaten track. This contradiction, it may well be argued, is inherent in the very concept of individualized tourism: There is a clash here between the idea of individualization (a form of tourism that is tailored to the individual who embarks on their voyage) and the fact that this form of tourism, too, falls into a pattern. As one option among many, it is, after all, another form of tourism; for all its dissimilarity to package tourism, it is still tourism.

The centenarian's living quarters, I suggest in this book, are outlandish in a number of ways: they are outlandish because they are located in the country of

extreme old age; and they are outrageous because they are located in the poor, black neighborhood of the city. There is thus a certain primitivism that comes in here, as I will elaborate below. What is striking in this context is that Glaubman's description of his first encounter with George Dawson, the African American centenarian from Texas, is that it converges first, with the ethnographic paradigm and second, with the framework of tourism. In both scenarios, the first meeting between the ethnographer-tourist-discoverer and the native is central. In order to fit the framework, moreover, the appearance of the native must be genuinely different. Upon first meeting George Dawson in person, Glaubman writes, "The other man I recognized from the photo. It was George Dawson who barely stood five feet tall even with his pork pie hat on. The whole class had stopped their work to look at me. As I looked around, I realized that George Dawson, the teacher and all the students, were black" (*More Than a Book* 8). This situation is familiar from a large variety of ethnographic descriptions. As the only white man in foreign territory, the ethnographer is made to feel out of place. It is he who does not belong. This moment of strangeness, in turn, marks the encounter as genuine, and as genuinely ethnographic. The discovery of the strange land is one side of the coin where the strangeness of the discoverer is another. At the same time, this scene is bizarre for a number of reasons. For why should the centenarian be sitting in an elementary school classroom? One of the reasons why Glaubman sets out to right George Dawson's story is that he read in the newspaper that, having been illiterate for most of his life, Dawson decided to go back to school at age 98. Dawson muses, "I had questions too. How could he have the courage to start school at the age of ninety-eight? How did he learn to read?" (*More Than a Book* 7). In this as in many other instances in centenarian autobiographies, the centenarian is both freak and role model; he is stared and marveled at at one and the same time.

In keeping with an ethnographic paradigm, the encounter between the co-author and the centenarian is marked by the co-author's attempt to win the centenarian's trust. At the heart of the ethnographic encounter, of course, there is the native himself. Without the native, the journey to the outlandish space or foreign territory will necessarily remain incomplete. What is important in this context, however, is that the native will appear before the tourist at his most authentic: What the tourist wants in the age of singularity, in other words, is not the performance, but the *real*. As MacCannell notes, ethnographers were long convinced that once they had been able to go "backstage," to see what the natives really live like, they believed in the authenticity in what they saw. MacCannell writes,

> These writers base their comments on an implicit distinction between false fronts and intimate reality, a distinction which is not, for them, problematical: once a person, or an ob-

> server, moves off the stage, or onto the "setting," the real truth begins to reveal itself more or less automatically. (592)

It could be argued that this scenario is no different from Richard Glaubman's journey into the "authentic" space of extreme old age. My contention in this context is that centenarians' narratives such as Glaubman's *Life Is So Good* are so obsessed with the idea of winning the centenarian's trust because once they have assured themselves of this trust, they are secure that what they will now see of the centenarian's life is real, not fake or performed.

At the same time, the paradigm that centenarians' autobiographies evoke – precisely because they are co-written narratives –, is that of participant observation. If indeed he can be seen as an ethnographer of the country of extreme old age, the ethnographer has to win the native's trust. In order for this scenario to unfold its full potential to the reader, however, the ethnographer has to describe the obstacles he had to overcome in order to win the native's approval. It is thus by no means coincidental that in his description of the first encounter with the centenarian, Glaubman should stress the centenarian's distrust:

> My relief was short lived when Mr. Dawson turned to his teacher and asked out loud: "What should I do? I've never talked to a white man before." Uh oh. I sensed that things were quickly going from bad to worse. Ignoring me, [the teacher] Mr. Henry said, "Mr. Dawson, what do you mean? You've worked for white people all your life." "That's right, Son. But whatever the question was, I played it safe and I always answered, "everything is just fine, Sir." I ain't never really talked to a white man in my whole life." (*More Than a Book* 9)

One of the most problematic aspects in the narrative is that descriptions such as this one never give rise to a critique of racial and economic inequality. What is striking is precisely that within one and the same city – Dallas, Texas – there should indeed be two countries; that there should be a Third World within the First. In fact, this passage is strikingly in keeping with the concerns of Black Lives Matter. The narrative may describe George Dawson as a remnant from the past, as a fossil left over from the last century; yet, it does not go on to mention that his "freakishness" also emerges from the fact that to a white, middle-class eye, black Dallas may be as foreign as another continent. The recent events surrounding the killing of innocent black youth, such as Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice, have shown with dramatic clarity that white eyes may see a blur of blackness wherever they may go. They may see and fear only "black predators." The point to be made here, then, is that Dawson's strategy of keeping a low profile as a black man in what believes itself to be a white country may be as much a matter of the past as of the present.

All of these considerations, however, are absent from Glaubman's own description of the encounter. What the narrative turns to instead is the celebration of colorblindness: "Although there was a huge gulf between us consisting of age,

race, religion and geography, our need to share a story was great enough to overcome the challenges" (*More Than a Book* 3). This is in fact the catch in the idea of ethnography. In order for the ethnographic paradigm to continue into the future, the foreign country must never lose its foreignness: The tourist or ethnographer may bemoan the devastating circumstances he encounters on his journey, but he may not actively work towards their amelioration. To the extent that the Third World becomes the First, cynically speaking, it will cease to be an outlandish tourist location. What this suggests, then, is that *More Than a Book: A Story of Friendship* – Glaubman's book about writing George Dawson's autobiography – is as much a story about race as it is a story about age. As I argue throughout this book, race and age are deeply interwoven in centenarians' autobiographies.

In keeping with the ethnographic paradigm, the interchange or first encounter between the tourist and the ethnographer proceeds through the exchange of food. Richard Glaubman is out of place in what his narrative describes as an all-black space. Moreover, he, the elementary school teacher, does not know what to pack for lunch, or rather, did not think to bring his own lunch box when visiting George Dawson at his elementary school. It is in this context that the centenarian offers half his sandwich to the man who will eventually co-author his autobiography:

> He unwrapped the huge sandwich and then pulled a large jackknife from his pocket. He locked the blade and cut the sandwich in half, barbecued beef on thick slices of white bread. A man, who clearly enjoyed his lunch, he turned and pointed to my little package of cookies and said, "Is that all you gonna eat for lunch?" (*More Than a Book* 9)

In the ethnographic scenario, of course, food looms particularly large. The lunch encounter becomes the first in a series of exchanges between the ethnographer and co-author to be and the native, the centenarian himself.

One of the central aspects of venturing "off the beaten track," then, is the overcoming of dangers and obstacles. Individualized tourism differs from the package tour precisely in the hazards it holds: As the tourist or ethnographer "goes native," he is no longer safely cocooned in his own white, middle-class, urban space, but has to brave the vagaries of the field. When he is finally invited to the centenarian's home, Glaubman is suddenly taken aback:

> That afternoon when we opened the door to Mr. Dawson's house, it was like an oven inside. The house was closed up tight to prevent break-ins, but it also kept the heat in. It seemed to have no effect on Mr. Dawson who threw his book bag on the couch and proceeded towards the kitchen. (*More Than a Book* 17)

This scene of the ethnographer's entering the space of the native, then, is at once marked by fear and desire. Entering the centenarian's home, Richard Glaubman has finally been permitted access to the native's "authentic" space; yet, the narra-

tive also makes clear that this is a space which usually, Glaubman would never have entered. The tourist or ethnographer always finds himself in the same dilemma: He wants to go native, but this also means that he will have to brave the obstacles that come with the field. Both in *Life Is So Good* and *More than a Book: A Story of Friendship*, the move from the hallway into the kitchen is itself significant. It is here, the narrative implies, that the centenarian is at his most private; that the performance of extreme old age is at its most authentic. However, here, too, the privilege of being able to enter this sanctuary, for the ethnographer, comes at a price: "I would have thought that to be impossible, but small and exposed to the sun, the kitchen was even hotter" (*More Than a Book* 18). The climax of the kitchen scene, of course, is the actual sharing of food. For the ethnographer as much as for the tourist who has left the beaten track, there is no turning back here: If indeed the native offers his food to the outsider, this is an offer that cannot be declined. Glaubman watches in horror as Dawson decides to prepare dinner: "Seems like a good day to make cornbread," Dawson tells him.

> With the oven on, the kitchen had become even hotter, but he didn't seem to notice. He pulled a sack of flower off the shelf and poured some into a big mixing bowl. Little ants were crawling all over the yellow cornmeal. In that climate it wasn't surprising. I would have thrown the flour out, but I watched in fascination, waiting to see what he would do. After filling the bowl, he put the sack on the table and started flicking the ants out of the flour. (*More Than a Book* 18)

Once again, this scene is strikingly in keeping with the ethnographic paradigm. As Edward Said has written about Western observations about the Orient, this foreign space is invariably looked upon as a spectacle:

> The Orient is watched, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of what the *Description de l'Egypte* called "bizarre jouissance." The Orient becomes a living tableau of queerness. (103)

What, then, is the "bizarre jouissance" of extreme old age as it emerges from centenarians' life writing narratives? In the case of Glaubman's co-written account of the life of George Dawson, the narrative itself seems to be aware of a certain ambivalence here. The ants only make the scene more authentic; the space that the tourist-ethnographer finds when he has gone off the common tourist trail is as bizarre as he had hoped it would be. And yet, two interpretations clash in Glaubman's mind as he watches the centenarian flick out the ants from his flour. It is never quite clear whether this gesture of ant-flicking is part of culture or of poverty. As Glaubman goes on to admit, "Or . . . Maybe I earned enough money to throw out flour that had insects in it" (*More Than a Book* 18). Yet, it is symptom-

atic of the narrative, and the ethnographic bent of the narrative, that this critique of the centenarian's poverty – or rather, of the circumstances that surround black lives in Dallas, Texas – seems half-hearted. Once again, a fully-fledged critique of class inequality would have meant the eclipse of the ethnographic paradigm. Glaubman's capital as a writer, it could even be argued, depends on sensationalizing rather than critiquing this poverty:

> While he stirred, I was on the lookout for drowning ants. I took the small black specks to be such but said nothing when he poured the batter into the pan and put it into the oven. When the cornbread came out of the oven, we took it into the living room. I looked for baked ants. Little spots were there, but I couldn't tell for sure. The cornbread had a crunchy taste and, I had two helpings, and not just to be polite. (*More Than a Book* 19)

The tasting of native food, then, becomes the ethnographer's ultimate test, the last obstacle in his succeeding to go native. Glaubman, it may be argued, passes this test with flying colors. The cornbread, it may even be argued, is more authentic with the ants in it; after all, it does have a "crunchy taste" (19). This passage is strikingly in keeping with Dean MacCannell's description of ethnography:

> [Another] . . . version of this connection among truth, intimacy, and sharing the life behind the scene is found in descriptions of the ethnographic method of data collection. Margaret Mead has written, "The anthropologist not only records the consumption of sago in the native diet, but eats at least enough to know how heavily it lies among the stomach . . . ." (592; changes mine)

What is at stake here is the relationship between observation and experience: For the tourist-ethnographer, it is not quite enough to observe the native food; he has to taste it as well. There is a certain thrill here: the more outlandish the native diet appears, the more complete the experience will be. The ants in the batter of a centenarian's cornbread are hence not incidental, but they are essential props of the *authentic* experience sought after by the tourist. As MacCannell goes on to say, "Touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences . . ." (593). At the same time, the space in which this cornbread encounter takes place is by no means accidental. MacCannell writes that the tourist-ethnographer's journey into authenticity can also be described in spatial terms. Evoking the work of sociologist Irvin Goffman, he observes,

> Paralleling a commonsense division, Goffman has described a structural division of social establishments into what he terms "front" and "back" regions. The front is the meeting place of hosts and guests or customers and service persons, and the back is the place where members of the home team retire between performances to relax and to prepare. Examples of back regions are kitchen, boiler rooms, and executive washrooms, and examples of front regions are reception office, parlors, and the like. (600)

It is hence no coincidence that in Glaubman's account of his journey into the country of extreme old age, the climax in his encounter with the centenarian should take place the kitchen. To the reader, this spatiality, the idea of an intimate, *unstaged* encounter, evokes the idea of the authenticity of this encounter. As MacCannell goes on to note, "a touristic experience is always mystified, and the lie contained in the touristic experience, moreover, presents itself as a truthful revelation, as the vehicle that carries the onlooker behind false fronts into reality. The idea here is that a false back is more insidious and dangerous than a false front . . ." (599).

It can be argued that the truth-claim of the centenarian's autobiography lies precisely in its claim to authenticity. I would argue that the narrative choreography of these narratives about extreme old age centers on the dichotomy between front-stage and backstage. While newspaper accounts may have revealed only the front story of the centenarian's life, the co-author seeks access to the kitchen. The reporter may have remained in the parlor, but the co-author will be able to move into the kitchen, into the unstaged, intimate spaces of the centenarian's life. Yet, as MacCannell notes, there is a danger inherent in this choreography: How can we be so sure that this performance of extreme old age is real and not staged? It is this insoluble dilemma, I propose in this book, that lies at the heart of the centenarian's autobiography. The dilemma is in fact similar to the crux of ethnography itself: All we have is the account of the ethnographer, never the voice of the native. Precisely because centenarians' autobiographies are co-authored narratives, on the verge between biography and autobiography, it is impossible to disentangle the voice of the ethnographer from that of the native.

Arguably, then, the narrative framework at the core of *Life Is So Good* is made up of an implicit hierarchy between a white co-author and "his" black centenarian, between a school teacher and a man who has been illiterate for most of his life, between a middle-class professional and a working-class man, and between an urban American and a centenarian from the countryside. The scenario of a white co-author prompting a black centenarian into telling his story by giving him newspaper articles which until recently, the centenarian was unable to read, thus serves to undo the idea of a balanced collaboration between the co-author and his subject. It is in this context that the framing of the narrative as "autobiography" may in fact serve to obfuscate the power dynamics which inform this text. To refute the title of Glaubman's book, "More than a Book: A Story of Friendship," this symbiotic relationship between the co-author and the centenarian seems fraught with social inequality; it is thus much more than and quite different from "a friendship."

At this point, centenarians' autobiographies may be similar to "as-told-to-autobiographies" that, in the nineteenth century, were co-written by white au-

thors and Native Americans. Here, too, the ethnographic paradigm converged with, and at the same time contradicted, the autobiographical model. As Susan Bernardin suggests, "Even though many of these 'as-told-to' narratives were solicited, translated, edited and published by Euro-Americans, they have enjoyed enduring popularity among a reading public eager to gain access to its notion of 'the real thing'" (157). Subsequent research has revealed that the voice emerging from these "collaborative" autobiographies was the co-author's rather than the native's. The same imbalance may be characteristic of centenarians' autobiographies: Here, too, it is impossible to disentangle the centenarian's account from that of his co-author.

From here, it may only be a small step to revisiting the history of ethnography itself. One of the most central catastrophes in this history of ethnography, arguably, was the publication of the diaries of Bronislaw Malinowski, an ethnographer who had done field work in the Trobriand Islands. A highly renowned and respected ethnographer of his time, Malinowsky was undone by his own diaries. While his ethnographic accounts of the Trobriand natives stressed his own distance, even detachment from his subjects and hence the scientific "objectivity" of his description, his diaries revealed that the obverse was true. They revealed Malinowski's gaze on native women to be anything but disinterested. As Peter Redfield and Silvia Tomaskova write,

> When published in 1967, well after his death, Bronislaw Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* caused quite a scandal. Its pages, laboriously translated from a scribbled Polish sprinkled with other tongues, revealed a master figure of anthropology, the mythic father of ethnography, had had impure thoughts. Amid his recounting of daily routine in his field site in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski recorded his memories of the lives he had left behind in Poland, England, and Australia, his shifting tides of passion and lust, his longings for civilization, . . . his anxieties about his work, his petty irritations, and his occasional revulsion for the people he was studying. (71)

The ethnographic narrative, like the as-told-to-autobiography, was hence defined by the projection, on the part of the ethnographer, onto the native's body. What was framed as an account of native culture was in fact the ethnographer's own idea of the natives. What would happen, then, if this framework were similar in the case of centenarians' autobiographies? To what extent are these autobiographies, too, a mere projection by a white co-author of the "culture" of "his" black centenarian?

Moreover, in this power dynamic between "white" authorship and "black" subject matter, there is a parallel between race and age. The difference between the co-author and the centenarian lies not only in race and class, but in age as well. *Life Is So Good* is also an as-told-to autobiography told by a centenarian to a

middle-aged co-author. At the core of this narrative, I suggest, there may be a projection about race difference as much as the difference of extreme old age.

8.2 The Space of the Parlor in the Delany Sisters' *Having Our Say*

It can thus be argued that the framework of centenarians' autobiographies can be described through Goffman's distinction between front and back spaces. They are hence ruled by the idea of an outsider gaining access to the centenarian's life. If in Goffman's and MacCannell's reading, the "intimate," backstage space of the kitchen is distinguished from the front-space of the parlor, what does it mean that in *Having Our Say*, the co-author is allowed to go no further than the living room? In this context, we may in fact wonder about the centenarian's agency. In *Having Our Say*, there is not one but two centenarians; the co-author is clearly outnumbered. Moreover, what emerges as a blatant class difference between the co-author and the centenarian in *Life Is So Good* is absent from *Having Our Say*: The Delany sisters, whose life the co-written autobiography traces, are middle-class African American women. In this sense as in many others, they are clearly "having their say" when it comes to the power relation between themselves and the woman who wants to become the co-author of their life's story. As the Delany sisters recall in the preface to the sequel to *Having Our Say*, *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*,

> Then the funniest thing happened. We were discovered! This little gal named Amy Hill Hearth wrote a story about us for *The New York Times*. A book publisher read Amy's article and approached the three of us about doing a book together. Well, we thought we weren't special enough, but Amy convinced us. (8)

The fact that they tell their life to Amy Hill Hearth in their living room rather than their kitchen, may thus imply that this is an official story that is being told about extreme old age. It is a performance of extreme old age rather than a tale of unfiltered experience. As MacCannell writes, "[the] touristic way of getting in with the natives is to enter into a quest for authentic experiences, perceptions, and insights. The quest is marked off in stages in the passage from front to back" (602). What is interesting to note in this context is that MacCannell, too, evokes the idea of stages: Rather than a clear-cut dichotomy between front and back stages, he evokes a spatial scale, with many spaces in-between. Even as for Goffman, the "parlor" is clearly a front stage, MacCannell suggests that we inquire more deeply into these spatial distinctions. From this perspective, we may well investigate the journey that the co-author takes into the lives of the Delany sisters

in spatial terms, and in terms of spatial in-betweenness. The journey begins, after all, on the Delany sisters' doorstep. Moreover, even within the parlor, there is a complex spatiality: At first, after Amy Hill Hearth has finally gained access into the sisters' living room, she is told to sit on the sofa, with the sisters watching her every move. Arguably, there is an inkling of intimacy in the fact that the sisters should leave her alone in the living room, where she is free to peruse the family photographs on the mantlepiece. At the same time, these framed photographs are clearly a sign of staged, official family history; they are no glimpses of intimate family life. Moreover, the film *Having Our Say*, based on the Delany sisters' autobiography, itself replays Goffman's dichotomy between front and back spaces. As the sisters quarrel over what they should do with the white woman in their parlor, they leave the living room to withdraw into the kitchen: in this scenario, the kitchen is clearly the most private, intimate space in which the "natives" decide about and then prepare their performance: the performance which will begin once they have returned to the living room. To cite MacCannell's description of Goffman once again, the kitchen is a space "where members of the home team retire between performances to relax and to prepare" (590). Yet, as in any ethnographic encounter, the logic evoked here is circular: We have to take the ethnographer-co-author's word for the fact that she was eventually allowed access not only to the parlor, but also to the kitchen. Moreover, the narrative perspective is itself significant here. Through what is in fact an omniscient narration, we know what is going on in the kitchen: Even as the narrative shows how Amy Hill Hearth is barred access to the kitchen, we at the same time witness what happens when Hearth is no longer on the scene; and yet, the narrative which shows to us what is going on back stage has itself been scripted by Amy Hill Hearth. As I argue throughout this book, this insoluble dilemma is at the core of centenarians' autobiographies They blur the lines between biography and autobiography, between front stage and backstage, even as they continuously evoke the distinction between these categories.

Moreover, the centenarian's admitting a white stranger into his kitchen is the ultimate proof, emphasized in the narrative, that their relationship has transcended the boundaries of race. In the living room, the Delany sisters were still suspicious of the strange white woman who had knocked on their door; in the kitchen, they spill their hearts to her as race has ceased to matter. Finally, it is in the kitchen that the prospective co-author has succeeded in her mission to become the centenarian's proxy. The politics of the proxy take on one more twist in this context. In the case of the Heidelberg study, two "stories" are being told, one by the centenarian and one by the proxy. In this study, however, there was a researcher (a gerontologist or social scientist) who was able to compare both stories. (In their discussion of the results, the researchers note that the centenarian's

account of his own situation was mostly more favorable than the proxy's.) Yet, it is important to note that in the case of centenarians' autobiographies, the researcher doubles as the proxy. There *is* no third party through whose eyes we are able to separate, and to assess, the two different accounts of the centenarian's life. The moment the co-author becomes the centenarian's proxy by being admitted into the kitchen, all possibility of validation is lost. If the co-written autobiography functions as a form of life writing, it is no longer possible for the reader to determine *who* writes the centenarian's life, or to determine who is the author of the published autobiography that she is holding in her hands.

Seen from this perspective, centenarians' autobiographies provide insights not just into how it must feel to be extremely old, but rather, about ourselves as potential readers of these narratives. It may be an ethnography of the reader more than of the subject. If we are Malinowsky, what would our diaries have revealed about us? The point which is at stake here is thus not so much or at least not only that centenarians' autobiographies can be read as ethnographies of extreme old age, but that the very concept of ethnography may be reversed here: What if these texts are an ethnography of reading as much as they are about writing extreme longevity? Successful aging may thus not only be in the (centenarian) subject but also in its object: the reader herself. These may be narratives of success as much as of desire. In this context, Eric Lott's idea of fear and desire may hold. As middle-aged readers, we may fear living into extreme old age; and we may desire to age as "successfully" as the centenarians have, if indeed we can trust their autobiographies. What Toni Morrison has written about race in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, may hence also be true about our vision of extreme old age, or about the desires we bring to this vision: "The subject of the dream," Morrison writes, "is the dreamer" (9). The aim of this book, then, is to adapt Morrison's idea about race to the concept of age: What if indeed, the subject of these "dreams" about extreme old age is us? What if these "autobiographies" are in fact projections of our own fears and fantasies about extreme old age? To what extent, I ask in this book, have the centenarians whose life is allegedly being told in these age narratives been turned into "serviceable presences" for our own sake?

If the kitchen table is an indication that the co-author has moved from being a stranger to being a "friend," the publication history of the Delany sisters' autobiographies adds one more stage to this development. In the progress from co-authoring the Delany sisters' first autobiography *Having Our Say* to their second publication *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* to the autobiography in which Sarah Delany mourns the passing of her sister Elizabeth (*On My Own at 107: Reflections on Life without Bessie*), Hearth has moved from stranger to friend to relative or at least confidante. After Elizabeth Delany's passing, Amy Hill

Hearth was there to help Sarah Delany cope with her loss. As Hearth writes in her foreword to *On My Own at 107*,

> At first, the loss of Bessie seemed unbearable. At the time, Sadie Delany had just turned 106 and was on her own for the first time in her life. Always known as one-half of a pair, her identity forged since birth as one of the Delany sisters, Sadie suddenly found herself, unwillingly, an individual. One of her first reactions, however, revealed her resilience. When an interviewer asked her what she would do now, after the death of her sister, she said, "Another book!" Then she turned to me and said, "If that's okay with you, Amy." I laughed and said, "Of course," delighted at this powerful indication that Sadie had hope for the future. ("Foreword" xvi)

This passage remains vague about where and when this interview occurred. What we can glean from it, however, is that in Sarah Delany's process of mourning, the co-author was always by her side. This passage once again points to the "resilience" that is often attributed to centenarians, by gerontologists and co-authors alike. Once again, however, the perspective from which we learn that the co-author has long become the centenarian's *relative* or close companion, for all their difference in race and ethnicity, is the co-author's own. This, then, may be the ultimate justification of the centenarian's narrative and alleged proof that there is by no means an unequal power relationship at the core of co-written autobiographies. As Amy Hill Hearth stands at Elizabeth Delany's grave, it has ceased to matter that she happens to be white, or that she has made a career writing the autobiographies of two black centenarian sisters and turning one of these autobiographies into a feature film. It is here that the politics of recruitment is portrayed as a form of adoption. The act of writing a black woman's autobiography, from this perspective, becomes a white woman's coming home. The politics of black and white which undergird centenarians' autobiographies, at this point, appear in yet a different light. If the white co-author has experienced a lack of religious faith and strong family ties in her own life, the centenarian's nurturing and caring family takes her in. Just has George Dawson becomes Richard Glaubman's black surrogate father, the Delany sisters "adopt" Amy Hill Hearth as one of their own, or so Hearth's narrative wants to make us believe. In the case of Richard Glaubman, the politics of age may take an especially unusual twist: Not only is *Life Is So Good* a collaborative autobiography written by a white, middle-aged man about a black centenarian, but in the process of being adopted as kin by the centenarian, Dawson goes on to decrease in age: he becomes a boy wanting to sleep over at his adoptive father's house. At the close of *Life Is So Good*, the book describes the centenarian and the co-author waking up together and having breakfast: "We got our breakfast: white bread and hot chocolate for me, brown bread with butter on it and coffee for Richard. He even cut up some cantaloupe

for us that he got at the market. Even so early in the morning, not even light yet, he has questions in his brain" (257–258).

What is striking in this context is that the dichotomy between front stage and backstage is also translated into the relationship between the co-authors and "their" centenarians. In *Having Our Say* and *Life Is So Good*, both Amy Hill Hearth and Richard Glaubman have moved from strangeness to intimacy with their centenarian subjects. They started out as strangers standing outside the centenarians' door; they were then allowed to move into the living room, and eventually found themselves in the kitchen. Yet, in this case too, we have to take the co-authors' word for the veracity of this description. They themselves describe how they have moved from stranger to friend; if the centenarians confirm this view, this confirmation takes place only inside the narrative written by the co-authors themselves.

8.3 From Friend to Stranger: The Ethnographer at Home with the Native

What is interesting to note here is that the logic of backstage encounters translates directly into the relationship between the co-author and the centenarian, or so the narratives would have us believe. Both Amy Hill Hearth and Richard Glaubman stress, both in their preface and in the main text, that they have long moved from stranger to friend. By winning the native's trust, in other words, the ethnographer has become family; he is no longer outside, but inside the native's circle. Once again, ethnography and tourism can be seen as being akin here; the ethnographer may start as a sightseer, but his ultimate aim is to go native. According to MacCannell, "Sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives . . ." (592). One of the central puzzles in centenarians' autobiographies, then, is the almost complete absence of the centenarian's relatives. I would argue in this context that this absence is due to a particular form of displacement. Even if the narratives mention in passing that the centenarian has friends and relatives, these persons are no-where to be seen inside the narratives; they are mere extras on the margins of the story written by the co-author. My claim here is that the sole aim of the co-author in this narrative she herself has masterminded is to displace the friends and relatives, and to assume herself the role of kin. I argue that this displacement may itself serve as the ultimate proof of the *authenticity* of the narrative. Authenticity, for MacCannell, is the ultimate goal of the tourist encounter. The tourist has to be convinced that the native's action is not staged, but real; he acts as if the tourist were not there at all. This, I suggest, is in keeping with the idea of authenticity in centenarians' narratives. If indeed the co-author has be-

come kin, the centenarian behavior as he describes and observes it is really unstaged. As MacCannell notes, "Touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences, and the tourist may believe that he is moving in this direction, but often it is very difficult to tell for sure if the experience is authentic in fact" (597). In this sense, the narrative ensures both the co-author himself and the reader that what is described here is real, not fake. In order for this reality effect to be maintained, however, the true kin or friend has to be constantly displaced, has to be written out of the narrative.

The central question which we might ask of centenarians' co-written autobiographies, then, is precisely who may call the co-author's bluff. If indeed these narratives are masterminded by the co-author, not the centenarian, who may be in a position to falsify this claim? It is for this reason that the centenarian's relatives and friends may actually play a key role in the relationship between the centenarian and the co-author; it may be for this reason, also, that their presence has to be neutralized by the narrative.

Crucially, however, these relatives may be the *true* proxies who could have co-authored the centenarian's narrative. Not incidentally, in gerontological studies such as the New England Centenarian Study (NECS) or the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie, it is a centenarian's relative or a close friend who serves as a proxy. In the case of centenarians' autobiographies, however, it is the co-author who assumes this position usually reserved to a close friend or relative. For this very reason, then, there is no space for the centenarian's own social circle to appear in the published autobiography. In fact, it is these relatives or close friends who might call the co-author's bluff. It is they who might reveal his presence, and his written narrative about the centenarian's life, as *il*legitimate. In order for its truth claim to work, and in order to legitimate the co-author's presence, these close friends or relative have to be written out of the text, their presence has to be neutralized. The centenarian's acknowledgments, to be sure, would have been dedicated to the people who might have served as his proxies. It is these proxies, then, who might have appeared at any time during the process of producing a centenarian's autobiography to expose the co-author as an imposter. The co-author can become the centenarian's proxy only to the extent that other candidates for this position are either entirely absent or turn out not to be as legitimate as the co-author himself. These alternative proxies thus either have to be made absent from the narrative or contained in another fashion. One of the most obvious aspects disqualifying them for the position as proxy cum co-author, then, is the fact that these friends or relatives usually do not happen to be literary authors. The centenarian's autobiography, after all, is (or claims to be) a literary text. In a gerontological study, the proxy does not have to be highly educated because, like the centenarian himself, he has only to tell a story which is then

turned into data by the gerontologist. In a centenarian's autobiography, on the other hand, the centenarian's story has to be turned into a written account. It is for this reason that a co-author is required. The account surrounding the inception of a centenarian's narrative, then, assures us that the co-author is capable of writing down the centenarian's story whereas the centenarian's friends or relatives possess no such capability. It is through this claim that the co-author legitimates his own presence and establishes himself as the *true* proxy.

In order to achieve this goal, however, the relatives have to be written out of the narrative. In *More than a Book: A Story of Friendship*, George Dawson's son, to whom the book is in fact dedicated, is written out of the narrative in a rather complex fashion. First, it may be important to recall that throughout the story, Glaubman positions himself as Dawson's adoptive son, and emphasizes that for him Dawson is his surrogate father. As Glaubman writes in the acknowledgement section of *Life Is So Good*,

> When I got to Texas, I met a man of integrity and dedication, Carl Henry, Mr. Dawson's teacher. He took the time to talk with me and welcomed me into his school community in such a way that I often felt more like a participant in his classroom than a visitor. Mr. Dawson, and particularly his son George Jr. and Junior's wife, Sallie, took me in as family – I felt that welcome. (viii)

In order for this kinship to become possible, however, the narrative has to get rid of Dawson's biological son, George Jr. It is symptomatic of the politics of co-written centenarians' autobiographies, I suggest, that the biological kin and the surrogate or adopted kin cannot coexist in the narratives. Even as Glaubman positions himself as Dawson's son, then, he bonds with the centenarian over raising children. In this scenario, he joins Dawson in smiling about the immaturity of his son, George Dawson Jr., who at this point is over sixty years old. As Glaubman notes, "Junior is sixty-five. My son is fifteen. Mr. Dawson is twice my age. But suddenly we are both fathers with sons who don't listen. 'Yeah, it drives me crazy,' I said. 'I just wish he would follow directions the first time I ask'" (*Life Is So Good* 19).

It is important to note in this context, however, that prior to writing the life of "their" centenarian, many of these co-authors were not authors in the first place. Before he set out to write George Dawson's life, for instance, Richard Glaubman taught elementary school. The co-author's claim to literary fame, then, may rest on shaky grounds; as a prospective co-author of the centenarian's autobiography and as his proxy, he may be no more legitimate than the centenarian's friends or relatives might have been. In order to dismiss such misgivings and establish himself as a genuine proxy and legitimate author, then, the co-author might do well to have alternative candidates for the proxy's position appear in, and then disappear from, the text. In *Life Is So Good*, George Dawson's relatives

appear towards the end of the narrative. It is by no means coincidental that these relatives, as potential proxies, should appear at this point in the narrative's chronology. As the centenarian's autobiography draws to a close, then, the moment of approval approaches; it is at this point, the co-author knows, that his bluff may be called. Significantly, then, the co-author and his rival proxies meet in the centenarian's kitchen. If the kitchen has been of central importance in establishing the centenarian's trust to the co-author, it is no wonder that the showdown between the potentially false proxy and the potentially genuine one should take place in the kitchen as well. In the encounter between the co-author and the centenarian's relatives, there is yet another danger through which the co-author's presence might be revealed as false. If because of his lack of education, George Dawson may not be able to read the finished autobiography and may hence proceed to waive his rights to disapprove, his relatives may be educated enough to both read the text and voice their lack of approval. If within the narrative, the initial moment where the co-author is about to recruit the centenarian was portrayed as a form of rising action beginning with the centenarian's initial discomfort and then cathartically ending with his consent, such rising action is also true of the moment in which the co-author finally presents the centenarian with the finished manuscript. The reader, along with the co-author, may hold her breath to see whether the approval will be given, or whether all the work – long hours of interviews over coffee at the centenarian's kitchen table – turn out to have been in vain. In the case of George Dawson, then, the fear of disapproval turns out to be doubly unfounded. Fortunately for the co-author, Dawson, even if by now, he would be able to read the manuscript, having learned his ABCs at the age of 98, chooses to waive his right of approval. Given the fact that *Life Is So Good* is a collaborative, co-written autobiography, it may be particularly important to explore the intricacy of the voices here. Describing the moment that he finished the book – which is also the last page of *Life Is So Good* –, Glaubman speaks about this moment in the centenarian's voice:

> But I thought you said that we should work together on a book. I assumed you would want to see it finished.
>
> That's right. I did say that it would be nice, you've been working so hard an all.
>
> Wait, it's not for me. I remember you saying that the world only changes with one person at a time. Your story might be of help to someone that reads it and that might make a difference.
>
> I could see his mind running in the way that it does sometimes. It can make him impatient, and then he don't listen so well. I put up my hand to stop that. He waited.
>
> I did say that before. Things is different now. I will be happy if the only man who changes is the man that wrote it. If you needed to write a whole book to do that, fine.

> I've never complained about it, but for once he turned his tape machine off. He gave me a hug and said, "The book is done then. I guess we're finished." (260)

What is so intriguing about this passage is that the voices of the centenarian and his co-author virtually blur into one single voice. Who is reassuring whom here? Who wants the tape recorder turned off? And most importantly, who stands to gain and to benefit from writing the book? In Glaubman's voice, then, we learn that it is the centenarian who wanted his story to be told. The centenarian himself, however, – as he is being quoted in this passage – implies that the book, the centenarian's autobiography, was written for the benefit of the co-author. It is he, the co-author, who has been "working so hard," and the finished book should be his reward. Or so the centenarian is said to have argued. This passage not only invokes the centenarian's altruism – he did not want the book to be written for his own sake –, but it also implies that writing the centenarian's story was a sort of introspection on the part of the co-author, Richard Glaubman. In a way, this may be the co-author reflecting about himself, precisely because we do not know who is speaking here. Writing a book about George Dawson, George Dawson is made to say here, changed the life of the co-author, Richard Glaubman. The questions of authorship, of legitimation, and of gain could not be more complex here. This intricacy notwithstanding, read with the grain, the end of the book assures us that the story we have just read was told for the benefit of the centenarian, not the co-author.

Moreover, Dawson's relatives appear in the centenarian's kitchen only to congratulate the author on the work he has done. It is this handshake between the centenarian's co-author and his relatives which finally legitimates the co-author as the centenarian's true and rightful proxy. In the act of this handshake, they waive their rights to having been the centenarian's proxy. And yet, in this as in myriads of other instances in centenarians' co-written narratives, we have to remind ourselves that we have to take the co-author's word that this handshake has really taken place.

It is characteristic of the politics surrounding centenarians' autobiographies that this ethical approval – the centenarian waiving his rights, the relatives shaking the co-author's hand – is claimed by the narrative and by the paratexts surrounding it to be much more important than legal or economic issues could ever be. For the politics of narrative altruism to succeed, the narrative has to dismiss the question of who will stand to gain, in sheer economic terms, from the publication of the centenarian's narrative. Where such economic aspects are mentioned at all, the narratives stress the fact that the proceedings are shared between co-author and centenarian. After the publication of "his" narrative, George Dawson happily announces, he is finally able to have his roof repaired. The centenarian's son tells him

about the potential benefits of having his autobiography co-authored by Richard Glaubman: "This is a good thing. You both are like partners, Daddy, and if it does get published, maybe there will be enough to fix your roof" (*Life Is So Good* 256). This passage serves as further legitimation of the co-author's work, this time not in ethical, but in economic terms. The question which is *not* asked in the narrative is the discrepancy between the centenarian's repairing his roof and the co-author's making a fortune – and a literary career – by becoming the centenarian's co-author. Moreover, even this moment in which the centenarian proclaims that he has stood to benefit from the publication of his autobiography in equal measure as his co-author is contained in a narrative in which the voice of this co-author cannot be differentiated from that of the centenarian. We have to take the co-author's word for the centenarian's happiness.

Who, then, holds the rights to the centenarian's narrative? This question, it could be argued, is central not only to understand the centenarian's autobiography, but also the economic politics surrounding it. At the core of centenarians' autobiographies, there is a simple question: Who, exactly, is the *author* of such narratives? As outlined above, it falls short of unraveling the complex politics underlying the publication of a centenarian's autobiography to refer merely to the fact that this autobiography has at least *two* authors. Centenarians' autobiographies, then, hinge on the play of power between these two "authors." The power dynamics between the co-author and "his" centenarian, however, are being represented only from the perspective of the co-author. If the centenarian approves of such co-authorship, as all of the published autobiographies insist, this approval is itself contained in a narrative which fuses the perspective of the centenarian and that of the co-author. In believing that the centenarian has consented to everything written about him, then, whose word do we take? Who, exactly, assures us that there is no misrepresentation to be feared because the centenarian has given his stamp of approval to the narrative *before* it was published? In the process surrounding the writing and publication of centenarians' autobiographies, two moments in particular are of crucial importance: the moment of recruitment when the centenarian still has the power to opt out of the study; and the time when the written narrative, "enabled" by the co-author, is finally finished. What happens, then, after the manuscript has been completed and before it is published? It is characteristic of the politics surrounding centenarians' autobiographies that this moment – in ethical, economic and legal terms – is left deliberately vague. In legal terms, who holds the rights to a centenarian's narrative? And who stands to gain, economically, from the revenue of its publication?

In the context of trying to unravel the complex politics of authorship surrounding a centenarian's autobiography, it may be important to consider the acknowledgments which accompany the written narrative. In the case of Richard Glaubman's

co-written autobiography of George Dawson, for instance, it is striking that the only acknowledgments to appear on the inside flip of *Life Is So Good* are Glaubman's own, as I will elaborate in Chapter 9. What does this mean for understanding the politics of writing a centenarian's autobiography, and for its potential readership? As a specific form of paratext, the acknowledgment zooms in on the person writing a text; in the acknowledgment, the author steps out of the fictional or semi-fictional universe of his narrative and leads us backstage to the individuals who have assisted him in this production. What does it imply, then, that George Dawson's voice and presence are entirely absent from the acknowledgment section? There are a number of implications here, all of them central to unpacking the power dynamics underlying the centenarian's autobiography. First, it could be argued that the centenarian's acknowledgments appear, not on the inside flip, but within the written narrative. Within the "autobiography," the centenarian may be shown thanking the co-author for writing his life; yet, here, too, this gratitude may be orchestrated by the co-author himself. Second, the blatant absence of the centenarian's voice from the acknowledgment section of "his" book seems to reveal that this is a book written about his life by the co-author, not the centenarian. Seen from this perspective, the acknowledgment section calls the bluff of the assumption that the book at hand is really a centenarian's *autobiography*. If it were an autobiography in the straightforward sense of the genre, the centenarian's acknowledgments would have to appear alongside those of his co-author. Third, it is important to think about potential audiences to the published book. Whom do the acknowledgments address? Arguably, there is a tension here between the actual narrative and the acknowledgments which accompany it. If, within the narrative, the co-author has to efface his presence, this presence is now made explicit through the acknowledgements. It is in the acknowledgments, in other words, that the co-author makes his appearance *as* an author. Through the acknowledgments, then, the co-author addresses his audience. To what extent, on the other hand, would the co-author's audience differ from the centenarian's? In this context, it seems interesting to imagine the centenarian's *relatives* as potential readers of his autobiography. As readers of their father's or grandfather's autobiography, these readers may have disapproved of the written text. Such readership, however, is dismissed from the acknowledgements which are only Glaubman's own.

This scenario is strikingly in keeping with the ethnographic paradigm. In nineteenth and early twentieth-century ethnographic texts, the "native" was never envisioned as a reader of the ethnographic narrative that had been written about him. Because the native was an informant whereas the ethnographer was a scientist, there was no need for the ethnographer to obtain the native's consent beyond agreeing to being interviewed. In fact, the ethnographer's claim to scientific practice, for long periods in the history of ethnography, rested on the claim that the

native's consent was entirely unimportant. If both the centenarian and his relatives are mere native informants, then, there is no need for their approval.

Yet, there is one more twist underlying the politics of legitimation which inform centenarians' autobiographies. In order for the centenarian's narrative to succeed as an autobiography, the centenarian has to live to see its publication. It is his physical presence, if not his voiced approval, which confirms the autobiography's truth claim. There can be no autobiography, then, without the centenarian's having been alive in the process of the publication. There is a certain cynicism here, which is born not only of the idea that the centenarian may not live to see his narrative go into print, but which is a direct consequence of the co-author's mission to turn the centenarian's narratives into a media industry of its own. In order for the centenarian's autobiography to be successful as an autobiography, then, the centenarian has to have been alive for the most part of its introduction. Like to gerontologist's conducting a longitudinal study about the secrets of extreme longevity, the co-writer's biggest fear has to be that the centenarian passes away before the manuscript is completed. In order for the publication of the centenarian's autobiography to be a true media event, moreover, the centenarian has to be alive for the book launch.

It is significant for the politics surrounding the centenarian's autobiography that as a miniscule media industry of its own, this autobiography is not a one-man-show revolving around the person of the centenarian storyteller, but it is in fact a two-men-show made up of the centenarian and his co-author cum manager. Yet, the concept of the centenarian's manager, in this case, may in fact be misleading: The most important constituent in this two-men-show so characteristic of centenarians' autobiographies happens to be the co-author. While the idea of the co-writer's being a manager suggests that he is a mere media aid to the centenarian, the reverse may be true in the case of centenarians' autobiographies. Rather, it could be argued that here, it is the co-writer who is the true media star. The centenarian has to be present at media events, on the other hand, merely to continue to legitimate the co-author. Even more significantly, TV appearances in which the centenarian and his co-writer appear side by side indicate that for the media industry to work, the centenarian has to be present, not conscious of what is happening around him. What is striking in this context is that TV events such as George Dawson's and Richard Glaubman's appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show may in fact reveal the original autobiography on which the appearance is based as false in its claim that it is the centenarian's voice we hear in its pages. On the Oprah Winfrey show, Richard Glaubman is the prompter of a centenarian who by now is hearing impaired. Yet, the question that is not asked in this context – neither by Oprah Winfrey, the talk show host, nor by the public avid for learning about the secrets of longevity – is whether this impairment dates back to

the writing of the manuscript. In this condition, how would the interview between co-author and centenarian have taken place? To what extent did the centenarian's monosyllabic answers merely serve to approve what may in fact have been the co-author's tale of extreme longevity?

8.4 Centenarians' Autobiographies as Living History Villages

One of the ideas which I would like to explore in this context is the relationship between ethnographic encounter and historical narrative. In narratives like *Having Our Say* and *Life Is So Good*, the co-authors can in fact be seen to go out of their way to justify their right to write the centenarians' narrative. This justification, I would suggest, is itself symptomatic: For it seems to confirm the suspicion that Thomas Couser has raised with regard to the ethics of life writing. Couser investigates constellations in which a privileged subject – privileged in terms of class, race, or ability – sets out to write the life of another person, a person much less privileged than the authors themselves. He argues that this setting gives rise to an ethical dilemma: Who *owns* the story of another person's life? In his study *Vulnerable Subjects*, Couser uses John Murdoch's writing the life narrative of his wife Iris Murdoch, who was living with dementia, as a case in point. He notes,

> Indeed, like most subjects I discuss in this book, [Iris Murdoch] is doubly vulnerable, or vulnerable in two dimensions. Her impairment makes her subject to harm (abuse and exploitation) in her life; and it also renders her vulnerable to misrepresentation in her husband's writing because it deprives her of the capacity to take part in, examine, respond to, or resist that representation. (x; my addition)

It is in this context that Couser speaks of "vulnerable subjects" (xii). These are subjects of narratives which for some reasons, these subjects have been unable to author themselves. What is interesting to note for my purposes here is that Couser observes that invariably, the co-authors justify the legitimacy of writing another person's narrative by referring to the common good, to the idea that these are stories that need to be told in order to de-stigmatize, for instance, conditions such as dementia. The same, I would argue, is true of centenarians' autobiographies. Invariably, the co-authors refer to the common good: The public, they write, deserves to read about these centenarians' lives. As Glaubman writes about the life story of George Dawson, "I heard a voice from a poor and isolated farm describe a life that was common one hundred years earlier, but would be lost to history unless I got the story down on paper" (*More Than a Book* 15). Yet, it may also be symptomatic here that these references and justifications often turn out to be contradictory. At the core of this contradiction, there is the gap between

altruism and self-interest. Glaubman's *More than a Book: A Story of Friendship*, for instance, starts out by saying that it was the centenarian who entreated his co-author to write down the story of his life. As Glaubman notes, "after living for one hundred years, [George Dawson] had a burning desire to share his story before he left this world" (3; my insertion). However, once we have moved from the preface to the actual text, this scenario has tacitly been reversed. It becomes clear that the co-author sought out the centenarian, not vice versa. Glaubman writes,

> On the anniversary of my father's death, wanting to hear his voice and hear his stories, I started to pick up the phone to call him. Of course, that wasn't possible. But then I saw a photograph in my morning newspaper that made something stir in me. And so on that day, I did pick up the phone. But I called George Dawson instead. (*More Than a Book* 3)

My point in this book, then, is that centenarians' autobiographies are as much about their readers as they are about their subjects, the centenarians themselves. Throughout theses chapters, my aim is to show that the co-authors may function as surrogates for their middle-aged readers. The desires we bring to centenarians' narratives, I suggest, are our own. What we may take to be ethnographies of a foreign country, the country of extreme old age, may in fact turn out to be only ethnographies of ourselves. At the same time, I argue that the truth claim of centenarian autobiographies is based on effacing this logic of self-interest: They deliberately blur the line between biography and autobiography. This is nowhere as pronounced as in the dedications. Richard Glaubman's book, *More than a Book: A Story of Friendship*, may serve as a case in point here: This is clearly a book about the making of another book, namely, *Life Is So Good*, the narrative Glaubman wrote about George Dawson's life. Yet, the dedication with which *More than a Book: A Story of Friendship* opens, is itself confusing or even misleading in this context. For why should Glaubman's book about his writer's journey be dedicated to the teacher and the son of George Dawson? The dedication reads, "*This book is dedicated to Carl Henry and George Dawson Junior*" (np; italics original). This dedication, I would argue, deliberately effaces the line between author and co-author: it could be the co-author's dedication as much as the centenarian's. The centenarian might obviously dedicated "his" book to Carl Henry, the elementary school teacher who taught him to read when Dawson was ninety-eight years old, and to his own son, George Dawson Junior. And yet, the co-author, Richard Glaubman, might also be assumed to thank Carl Henry for facilitating his encounter with George Dawson, and even Dawson's son for also taking part in this encounter. My claim in this book is that centenarians' autobiographies such as *Life Is So Good* and *Having Our Say* invite rather than solve this confusion between the author's and the co-author's lives, and between their respective subject positions.

One of the central claims to the co-author's alleged altruism, then, lies in the role of history for the writing of centenarians' narratives. At first glance, it could be argued that it is in his role as an eyewitness of the past, that the agency of the centenarian may be the most pronounced. It may be here, in other words, that he may move from being a mere puppet in the hands of his co-author to being a subject of his own, an agent telling his own story and the history with which it is interwoven. However, as I will show in this second section of this chapter, this agency may be more apparent than real. Rather, what may unfold in these centenarians' autobiographies may be a form of living history. I suggest that the very relationship between the co-authors and "their" centenarians turn the narratives into a form of "living history villages." As Brian Greenberg and Linda Watts observe,

> Living history museums typically consist of districts that combine historic buildings with restored or recreated landscapes to create for visitors the effect of walking into an historical setting. The attempt is to accomplish the sensation of immersion in another era and its way of life, as though a time machine had transported one back through time to another place and another society. (83)

The point I would like to make in this chapter, then, is that centenarians' autobiographies can be read precisely as such a time machine. I am concerned, moreover, with the relationship between the ethnographic paradigm which I have described in the first part of this chapter, and the role of history as it emerges from centenarians' narratives. In this context, centenarians' autobiographies seem to evoke not only the ethnographic paradigm, but the museumfication of history itself. Centenarians' autobiographies, I propose, can be seen as a theme park or living history village; as we move into the space of the centenarian, we have immersed ourselves into the past. Once again, there is a convergence here between ethnography and tourism. Tourism, too, has centrally been concerned with the reliving of history. In both contexts, the notion of experience – and of sensory experience and immersion – has loomed particularly large. As Khirfan observes, there is an "existential mode" of tourism which is at stake here: The tourist-ethnographer, as I have argued in the first part of this chapter, wants to "go native"; moreover, he is interested in the "spiritual experience" that this going native may yield. According to Khirfan, "the Existential mode encompasses tourists who seek a 'spiritual' experience through which they . . . desire to 'go native' not different from 'Hindu recluses, Israeli kibbuz members, Pacific Islanders'" (121). My contention, then, is that our immersion as readers into the life worlds of centenarians functions no different from the immersion of tourists into the lives of Hindu recluses. One point that the narratives make, as I will point out below, is that centenarians, too, lead a secluded life; it is for this reason, we may suggest, that going backstage is possible to

begin with. One idea may be particularly interesting in this context: So far, I have argued that the narratives follow a frontstage/backstage logic; that as readers, we move with the co-authors from the parlor into the kitchen. However, this changes if we conceive of the space of extreme old age as being itself "backstage": This space of the centenarian as Hindu recluse is itself described by the narratives as utterly foreign, as completely outlandish. Conceived in this way, the centenarian's home as a whole becomes a form of backstage, regardless of whether we find ourselves in the kitchen or in the parlor. As tourist-ethnographers in search of a spiritual transformation, we are on the lookout for the genuinely different. As Khirfan goes on to say, "tourists also originate from the West and endeavor for an authentic experience of the 'other' culture" (121). As I will try to show in the following paragraphs, then, the frameworks of ethnography and tourism cast a particular light on the centenarian's home. In the scenario painted by narratives such as *Life Is So Good* and *Having Our Say*, the centenarian's house may in fact appear to be part of an entire history village. As we immerse ourselves in this space where history is still alive, we experience the past, complete with sight, sound, and smell. As Joanne Connell, Stephen Page and Tim Bentley point out, "An attraction also needs to engage all of our senses (i.e. hearing, *sight*, touch, *smell* and taste) as companies stage an . . . and packaged for easy viewing or consumption and that will appeal to visitors, with a sense of surprise and *immersion*" (197; italics and ellipsis original). The point I am making here, is that centenarians' autobiographies are the product of a particular historical moment. As I suggest in this chapter, they are not distinct from but a part of the culture in which they emerge. I am reading centenarians' autobiographies, in other words, as symptomatic of a culture in which we define our identity through lifestyle; and where tourism makes up a key part of this lifestyle. As Michael Gross has argued,

> In a postmodern mode of consumer resistance, people pursue a noncommittal, fragmented lifestyle in which the production of self and culture through consumption is paramount. Consumers have begun to break down the marketers' dominance by seeking out social spaces in which they produce their own culture, apart from that which is fostered on them by the market. These spaces allow people to continually create their identities rather than let the market dictate identity for them. These nomadic lifestyles are most likely to flourish in social spaces removed from market influence. A postmodern countermovement of consumers against the McDonaldization of consumer products has also been manifested in the tourist industry. (763)

The point which I would like to make here is that our reading of centenarians' narratives can be understood as a form of readerly tourism into the country of extreme old age. In reading these narratives, we also refashion ourselves: To the extent that we distinguish ourselves from this country of old age in which we are mere tourists, we assure ourselves that we are still young, and not yet old. Even

as we may eventually come to inhabit this country, we are still at ease with experiencing its thrills, the thrills of the genuinely different. We may even go so far as comparing centenarians' autobiographies with a form of "disaster tourism": Precisely because we know that the centenarian whose life is being told may pass away at any moment, we may in fact hold our breath lest the centenarian vanish in the midst of his own narrative. The danger of the centenarian's impeding death is constantly evoked by the narratives only to be dispelled in the discourse of immortality, as I have pointed out in Chapter 6. What is interesting to note, moreover, is that if indeed centenarians' narratives evoke the contemporary mode of tourism, which Khirfan terms the "experiential mode" with reference to the work of Dean MacCannell, then it is by no means a coincidence that texts like *Having Our Say* should stress the experience of being in a centenarian's home.

Not only are centenarians truly "different," then, but they are authentic in their difference. Many of the narratives emphasize the fact that centenarians have remained "untouched" by the civilization around them; having no telephone and wary of other media, they have preserved a way of life which is of another time, far removed from the present. By the same token, centenarians' autobiographies seek to capture this sense of authenticity; they enable the reader, who is implied to inhabit a different temporality, to immerse herself, for the duration of reading a centenarians' life account, into a truly different, authentic environment. Having supplied his credentials and having stressed the legitimacy of his request, the co-author is finally allowed to enter the centenarian's home. Seen from an ethnographic perspective, this moment is crucial: He is now able to observe the centenarian as native in his own habitat. It is crucial for the dramaturgy of the centenarian's autobiography that the centenarian's home is as bizarre as possible. The strangeness of his home environment, especially the outdatedness of the décor, is proof of the authenticity of the centenarian's narrative. The centenarian is only a true centenarian if he lives as such. Obviously enough, the tourist, in visiting a foreign country, is not interested in sameness; he wants difference. According to MacCannell, "Tourists enter tourist areas precisely because their experiences there will not, for them, be routine" (597). The role of the reader of centenarians' autobiographies, I suggest, is no different from the tourist described by MacCannell. If indeed the centenarian's home were familiar to the reader, the experience would be rather anti-climactic. The experience of entering the centenarian's home is authentic only if this home is bizarre. In *Having Our Say*, this desire for the truly different is clearly confirmed. As the Delany sisters observe,

> Everybody is always after us to get a phone. We hate phones! Of course, we had a phone years ago when Bessie was a practicing dentist. We had to and that was OK. But ever since

> we moved to this house, in 1957, we have not had a phone. If we have an emergency, we have a light that we put on in the house that we never use otherwise, and somebody always comes running over here right away . . . .
>
> The phone company came by and pestered us. Finally we told the man, "Mister, if the phone company installed a phone for free and paid for a man to stand there and answer it for us, seven days a week, we still wouldn't want a phone!" He got the message. (20)

One of the questions which presents itself, then, is whether there is a sort of age primitivism at the core of centenarians' narratives. In this context, narratives such as *Having Our Say* may be part of two specific genealogies. First, as I have argued above, they are in line with a particular form of tourism, a search for the genuinely and authentically foreign. Second, however, it may by no means be a coincidence that many of these co-written autobiographies center on African American centenarians. What would happen, I would like to ask, if we read *Having Our Say* in the genealogy of the primitivism of early historical periods, such as the Harlem Renaissance? What if what emerges here is also a primitivism of extreme old age? (McCabe 1997). In the Harlem Renaissance, the lives of black subjects were being written and recorded not only by themselves, but also by their white patrons (Kellner 53). The Harlem Renaissance can be read not only as a major unfolding of African American music, art and hence self-expression, but also as a deep-seated desire and fascination by white Americans, for all things black. Thus, Carl Van Vechten photographs Billie Holiday holding an African mask: both images – the black singer's face and the African mask – are turned into projections of a white gaze. One of the questions which I am trying to explore in this book is hence the question of projection on two levels. In *Having Our Say*, a white, middle-aged gaze may project its own fantasies onto the lives and faces of the Delany sisters. In *Life Is So Good*, moreover, this projection may work not only in age and in race terms, but also in terms of class difference. What is even more disturbing to note in this context is that in the narrative perspective of *Having Our Say*, the narrative primitivism creates a distance between the co-author and by implication the reader, and the African American centenarian sisters. For precisely because they are middle-class professionals, the life of the Delany sisters, even as they are extremely old, may not be that different from that of their middle-class readers. The primitivism of old age, I would suggest, thus serves as a distancing device: it may create difference – the genuine difference sought by the tourist-ethnographer – where in fact there is none.

The centenarian sisters' primitivism, then, is further reinforced by their distrust of technology. The Delany sisters are mentally fit enough to do their own banking, the text assures us, but they nonetheless distrust credit cards. As Sadie Delany goes on to say, "The world is a puzzling place today. All these banks sending us credit cards, with our names on them. Well, we didn't order any credit

cards! We don't spend what we do not have. So we just cut them in half and threw them out . . ." (*Having Our Say* 202). It is in contexts such as this one that centenarians are not only reminders of a bygone era, enabling the reader to embark on a time travel of her own, but they also serve as a form of moral guidance, making the reader wonder whether the problems of the presence have not been caused by technology and the complexities of an advance banking system. If middle class readers are besieged by debt, *Having Our Say* implies, they may do well to heed the advice of the centenarian sisters who have never possessed a credit card in their life. Primitivism, in these narratives is at once a form of quaintness, reinforcing the ethnographic potential of these autobiographies, and a form of moral exhortation. Even at the end of the twentieth century, the Delany sisters insist on boiling their tap water. Old habits never die. Sadie notes, "As soon as we moved to our house in 1957, we began boiling the tap water we use for our drinking water. Folks keep telling us that it's not necessary, that the City of Mount Vernon purifies the water. But it's a habit and at our age, child, we're not about to change our routine" (*Having Our Say* 289).

The quaintness of not having a telephone, in *Having Our Say*, is further enhanced by the sisters' own irony. Because they have no telephone, the sisters observe, it is only useful that one of them should be psychic. Sadie writes about her sister, "But over the years, I've come to think that Bessie really does have some special talents [such as her intuition]. And I admit that it often comes in handy. You see, we don't have a telephone. We have to rely on the U.S. mail and on Bessie's intuition" (20).

The narrative primitivism here, it may well be observed, is a form of age Orientalism. At the core of the Orientalist paradigm, as Edward Said has described it in his groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, there is the element of "bizarre jouissance" (103). Each and every detail in the Oriental's life is unfamiliar; or even if it is familiar, it occurs in a context that renders it strange. It is in this context, moreover, that the line between genres is deliberately blurred: *Having Our Say* is both an ethnographic text and a form of advice literature. The life of the Delany sisters, in the living history village that is their home, is strange not only because they have no telephone, but also because they make their own soap. They distrust not only tap water, but also ready-made toiletries. As Sadie Delany declares, "Even my neighbors swear by my soap. There was a little girl with sensitive skin, and her mother said my soap was the only kind that made her feel better" (64). In this context, we may once again evoke the idea of centenarian industries, which I have already discussed in Chapter 5: *Having Our Say* is part of a network of texts, which ranges from the co-written autobiography, *Having Our Say*, to the eponymous movie to *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*. Not incidentally, all of these narratives were co-written and masterminded by Amy Hill Hearth, the

white co-author. As a promotional video on "Good Morning America" puts it, "After more than a century on this earth, Bessie and Sadie are enjoying a bit of celebrity. Reporter Amy Hill Hearth interviewed them for the New York Times, out of that came a book and out of that, TV appearances, perhaps even a movie deal" ("Amy Hill Hearth on 'Good Morning America' with the Delany Sisters").

This centenarian industry may once again evoke the scenario of a theme part of extreme old age: We may well imagine how many different products we may buy in the museum store as we exit the part, from home-made soap to a yoga guide. Moreover, precisely because books such as *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* is a form of advice literature complete with recipes for making your own soap and your own wine, they provide not only a readerly, but also a culinary experience. As the Delany sisters note, "We've always had friends and family coming by, more than we could handle. That's a compliment! Why, there was a time when we made four cakes every week to serve company. Two we varied, but one was always chocolate and the other was always a pound cake" (86).

8.5 Bizarre Temporality and the "Enshrinement" of Centenarians During Their Lifetime

In keeping with the idea of the theme park of extreme old age and the idea of the living history village, there is the portrait of the centenarian herself. There is at the core of centenarians' autobiographies, as well as of the marketing strategies by which accompany them, a peculiar politics of enshrinement. If, as I argue throughout this book, centenarians' narratives provide an aging society with a new kind of civil religion, the civil religion of age, then centenarians are held up to be "paragon[s] of positive aging" not just in terms of lifestyle but also and especially with regard to religion and spirituality. As I have argued above, the search for spirituality, too, is in keeping with the tourist paradigm described by MacCannell.

There is, however, a particular kind of temporality which accompanies the idea of the centenarian as a spiritual role model. Ultimately, the narratives themselves function as a form of enshrinement. As monuments of successful aging, centenarians come to be enshrined even during their lifetime. In keeping with this logic, there is a split temporality to these narratives: The cover images of the published autobiographies are reminiscent of tomb stones; they memorialize the life of the centenarian even before it has actually ended. This bizarre temporality – the narrative and visual enshrinement of a living centenarian – is reinforced by the assumption that the publication of each centenarian's autobiography is a race against time: The "deadline" which the narrative strives to make is the publi-

cation of the autobiography while the centenarian subject is still alive. There is hence a cynical logic at work in the marketing of centenarian narratives.

The dual temporality which characterizes centenarians' autobiographies, once again, is tied to the politics of ethnography. As a form of framing ethnography's object in a specific temporal manner, this politics is by no means restricted to an ethnography of old age. Rather, it is also emblematic of, for instance, ethnographies of Native American communities. In this context, Native American theorist Gerald Vizenor has spoken of the myth of the "vanishing Indian." This myth, as Vizenor notes, was at its height in the nineteenth century but persists until today. In the logic of "Manifest Destiny," it was argued that Western civilization was bound to eradicate Native civilizations; each Native American whom the ethnographer encountered in the present was hence seen to be the "last of his tribe." As Fabrice Le Corguillé observes,

> Native Americans have not vanished and are not vanishing: this assertion is nowadays ceaselessly, and rightfully, put forward by Native American Indians in North America. It is iterated as a counter-*topos* against the widely admitted idea in white Anglo-American society that indigenous peoples were and are still bound to disappear completely and definitively, if not already extinct, due to an intrinsic racial, cultural and demographic inferiority. As Brian Dippie explains, the tendency to depict Native Americans as the "Vanishing American" is "a constant in American thinking," "a habit of thought" that has "achieved the status of a cultural myth." (1).

This highly problematic logic of the "vanishing" native entailed a temporal split: While the ethnographer was clearly an inhabitant of the present, the native was seen to be a remnant from the past, the last witness of a civilization which, in the logic of Manifest Destiny, had already become obsolete. From this perspective, the native had temporarily escaped his own doom; he might still be alive, but since his civilization was bound to extinction, he was as good as dead. In this sense, three time zones were juxtaposed in one and the same moment: Each native encountered by the ethnographer was a witness to a bygone era, and hence a remnant from the past; in this sense, the native might be alive, but he was by no means *of* the present. Secondly, the ethnographer could fast forward the moment in which a live Native American could still be encountered and, *from the vantage point of the future,* mourn a civilization which would soon be extinct. I need to add a caveat here, however. To argue that the logic of the vanishing Native American is similar to that of the "vanishing centenarian" is not meant to conflate the differences between the two. Crucially, the myth of Native Americans as a "vanishing race" was historically used as a justification for Native American genocide. This is a historical specificity of the trope of the "vanishing" native, which cannot and must not be collapsed into other cultural, social and historical contexts.

What I am interested in here, however, is the idea that certain forms of temporality are themselves associated with mastery. In cases of cultural, economic and political dominance, there is a sense in which the dominant culture sets out to "preserve" the Other for future generations. Part of this preservation, moreover, is the idea that this Other is also being remade in the image of the dominant culture.

Centenarians' autobiographies, then, seem to evince a specific kind of temporality that is also closely related to the trope of vanishing. As remnants from a premodern past, centenarians embody a lifestyle which has long become obsolete. This is a lifestyle, however, which present-day middle-aged communities now seek to emanate; it must hence be recorded before the centenarian passes. Yet, precisely because the subject of the autobiography is a hundred years old already, the narrative is framed – and marketed – in such a way that we look back at the centenarian's life in the not-to-far future in which this life will be remembered, and no longer lived. Centenarians are thus not only paragons of old age, but also *living monuments* of longevity. As living monuments, they may share the peculiar temporality which Vizenor has described for Native Americans as the "vanishing race" (133): Through a narrative ethnography of old age, every centenarian is implied to be a vanishing centenarian. What is common to representations of Native Americans in nineteenth-century ethnography and present-day "ethnographic" narratives of centenarians' lives, moreover, is that these ethnographies may have little in common with the self-representations of their objects themselves. The "native" may thus be in the eye of the ethnographic observer.

This ethnographic framework of the salvage ethnography of extreme old age, in turn, may be closely connected to the idea of the centenarian's legacy. Uneventful as they are, how do these narratives end? They may end with finally addressing a question which the narrative has avoided throughout its pages: The possibility, even probability, of the centenarian's impending death. In keeping with Carlo Leget's idea that contemporary Western societies, giving the waning of religion, may be in need of new rituals not only of living, but also and especially of dying, it is at this point that the co-author may be more than ever reminiscent of a child needing the "adult" centenarian's advice. This is an idea that I have already discussed in Chapter 6.

At the end of *Life Is So Good*, Richard Glaubman's persona in the narrative finally admits to George Dawson that one of the reasons fueling his desire to write a centenarian's story was his inability to cope with his own father's passing (251). There is hence a signature discrepancy between the co-author's and the centenarian's perspective on dying. Virtually all these narratives feature one and the same moment: the scene in which a fearful co-author – or rather, her persona in the text – asks the centenarian whether or not she is afraid to die (251). As a rule,

then, the centenarian does not share his white, middle-aged co-author's fear. Here, too, the black centenarian functions as "griot" and spiritual advisor to the white co-author huddling in his kitchen. It would hence be reductionist to argue that in their adulation of extreme longevity, these accounts are in fact narratives of immortality. Even as the rhetoric of the life sciences celebrates the achievements of biomedicine and its ability to prolong life to points hitherto deemed impossible, centenarians' autobiographies seem to function as advice literature not only of the "art of living" into longevity, to take up Claudio Leget's formulation, but also of the art of dying, and of living into extreme old age without being afraid of either sickness or death. Moreover, there is a sense in which these accounts capitalize on and evoke the age-old model of the immortality of a published narrative. His autobiography, of course, is what makes the centenarian immortal. Yet, the fact that these narratives function as a form of advice literature also pertains to the idea of dying and to the centenarian's genealogy. Within the narrative, the centenarian imparts his advice for successful aging to the avid co-author who is listening to him in his kitchen; there is a sense in which the co-author is present, even after the book has been completed, in the moment of the centenarian's passing. This presence is evoked through one narrative moment in particular: the moment in which the co-author asks the centenarian to imagine his own death. In this sense, too, centenarians' narratives are advice literature not only on how to live, but also on how to die. Moreover, precisely because the narrative establishes the co-author as the centenarian's kin, the co-author himself is part of the centenarian's genealogy. From the psychology of the narrative, the co-author is the centenarian's legitimate heir, more even than the centenarian's biological children. The co-author, after all, is the person who keeps the centenarian's memory, and who makes it immortal through publication. In an uncanny sense, this is a context in which the publication of a centenarian's narrative is once again reminiscent of ethnography. Historically, in many different frameworks, written ethnographies and the knowledge they imparted were said to be superior to the knowledge contained in the oral narratives circulated in native communities (Rosaldo 30). This difference in knowledge production seems to recur in the case of centenarians' autobiography.

The centenarian, of course, will also and chiefly be remembered by his children and grandchildren, by the stories they tell. Yet, the politics surrounding centenarians' autobiographies are such that these memories rarely have a place in the written version of the centenarian's life; in this version, it is the co-author, as the centenarian's surrogate son, who keeps his memory. This idea of the nexus between kinship and memory is nowhere as pronounced as in the case of the Delany sisters: When Elizabeth Delany passes away, it is Amy Hill Hearth, the co-author, who is there to comfort the centenarian. In this case, however, there

seems to be no "legitimate" heir since neither of the Delany sisters ever married, and neither had children of their own; the narrative does feature, however, reference to their nieces and grandnieces. Yet, as in the case of George Dawson, these oral memories and the people who keep them are marginalized in the written politics of memorialization.

8.6 The Centenarian as an Eyewitness of the Past: Canned Voices

How, then, does this idea of age primitivism relate to the telling of the past, the past of the American nation? I would argue that here, too, the agency of the centenarian is compromised by the narrative mode in which his or her story is being told. In the sense that the centenarian is an eyewitness, his expertise and his agency may in fact exceed that of the co-author: he is the expert where the co-author is only the novice, or so we might assume. After all, the centenarian possesses first-hand experience of the past, where the co-author only has second-hand knowledge. What is remarkable about this potential inequality, however, is that the narratives proceed to reverse this hierarchy between the eyewitness and the co-author. What is so disturbing in this context is that this distinction is once again at the core of the ethnographic paradigm: it is the distinction between knowledge and experience. Narratives such as *Having Our Say* and *Life Is So Good* reverse the power hierarchy between the eyewitness and the writer/ethnographer by locating experience as knowledge of a different, a lesser order. Experience is sensory, where knowledge is intellectual. Here, too, the narratives may in fact aim to keep the centenarian in his place. This dismissal of native knowledge, too, was at the heart of ethnography for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Rosaldo 30).

This book inquires into the peculiar, and peculiarly symbiotic, relationship between the centenarian and his co-author. As Glaubman puts it, "It was my writing, but it was his life" (*More Than a Book* 16). The distinction which emerges here is that between raw material – the experience of the past that the native provides – and the knowledge which frames this experience. While the former is provided by the native, the centenarian himself, the latter can be provided only by the ethnographer and co-author, or so the narrative wants to make up believe. What emerges here is less a dialogue between two equal partners – the perfect interface between knowledge and experience – than the hierarchy between them. My claim here is that the relationship between the co-author and the centenarian is strikingly similar to the ethnographic paradigm described by Michèle Grossmann in reference to the work of Renato Rosaldo. Rosaldo describes the dis-

crepancy, and power imbalance between a person he terms the "lone ethnographer," on the one hand, and the "native" who seems to be "owned" by this ethnographer. According to Rosaldo,

> By definition, the Lone Ethnographer was literate, and 'his native' was not. In accordance with fieldwork norms, 'his native' spoke and the Lone Ethnographer recorded 'utterances' in his 'fieldnotes'. In accordance with imperialist norms, 'his native' provided the raw material ('the data') for processing in the metropolis. After returning to the metropolitan center where he was schooled, the Lone Ethnographer wrote his definitive work. (Rosaldo 30)

The point which I am trying to make throughout these chapters is that there is a similarly proprietary relationship between the co-author and "his centenarian." What is even more striking is that just as in the case of the Lone Ethnographer described by Rosaldo, there is a Lone Co-Author at the core of these centenarian narratives. The co-author's stay with the centenarian – particularly in his kitchen – can be seen as a form of fieldwork. It is only when he has gone back home that the co-author will write the "definitive work" about extreme old age. It is in fact fitting to speak of a Lone Co-Author because the idea of a "rugged individualism" when it comes to writing about extreme old age is particularly apt: In fact, the entire choreography of the narrative sets up the co-author as the pioneer, the adventure tourist who moves into the country of extreme old age where no-one has ventured before. It may also be interesting to consider the spatiality of the field and the metropolis here. In centenarians' narratives, this spatiality works both in terms of age and class: The co-author/ethnographer's "home" is both white America, and it is the America of the middle-aged. It is also important to note, moreover, that the audience shares the background of the co-author, not the native. As Grossman goes on to note, still in reference to Rosaldo,

> To employ a variant of this spatial metaphor, at the apex of the triangle lies the 'us' of Western civilization, against which the 'timeless traditional culture' of the Native Informant is measured, and into which the Lone Ethnographer inserts himself for a period of time in order to authenticate, from the 'inside', the observations, descriptions, analyses and interpretations that will form his fieldwork when he returns to the 'outside' world of civilization and the academy. (148)

Who, then, is part of the 'outside world of civilization' when it comes to centenarians' autobiographies? My claim here is that to the extent that the living history village of the African American centenarian's home is bizarre and outlandish, "civilization" is coterminous with white, middle-aged, middle-class America here.

What emerges from this distinction between "raw material" and "data," moreover (Grossmann 148) is that the native's voice is devoid of agency. Even where the native is allowed to speak, in other words, the words coming out of his

mouth are seen as "data" rather than knowledge. In the land of the past, the centenarian is the native where the co-author is the historian. What these narratives cannot imagine, in other words, is the idea of the centenarian as an expert on history. Raw material and raw sensation, these texts imply, are never the same as genuine knowledge. What is even more noteworthy here is that Grossman's description of traditional ethnographic fieldwork speaks to the difference between an allegedly disinterested writing and a critique aimed at genuine change. The Lone Ethnographer records the dismal circumstances in which the native has to live; he does not strive to alter them. This difference between record and critique speaks quite clearly to Richard Glaubman's description of the squalid circumstances in which George Dawson, "his" centenarian, has to live. For the field to be the field, and for the native to be genuinely native, his circumstances must remain unaltered. As Grossman points out, the Lone Ethnographer's "work services the interests and desires of the imperial underpinnings of ethnography in its efforts to systematize and hierarchize (*rather than politicize and challenge*) cultural and social difference" (149; italics mine). This may in fact be one of the biggest problems of centenarians' autobiographies written by white co-authors: These narratives never set out to "politicize and challenge" the circumstances they encounter. In fact, the more dire these circumstances are, the more sensationalist these narratives about extreme old age can become.

There is a difference, at the core of these co-written narratives, between the oral and the written: This is a dichotomy which once again parallels an ethnographic framework underwritten by colonialism. One of the questions which I would like to raise in this chapter, then, is whether there is in fact an imperialism of age at the core of these narratives. To what extent are these narratives, I would like to ask, less a form of giving voice and agency to centenarians than a projection conceived by a middle-aged co-author? At the core of the ethnographic project – in the ethnography of the "East" as much as in the ethnography of the land of extreme old age – there is the distinction between the oral and the sophisticated, between data and knowledge, between experience and expertise. As Grossman suggests, referring to the work of George Marcus, there is in traditional ethnography the "division" between "native talk" and "ethnographic text" (149). Like Marcus, Grossman refers to "oral history" as a framework in which natives would be allowed a form of expertise on par with the Western historian (149). The point which I would like to make, then, is that centenarians' autobiography are *not* oral histories. If they had been, they would have had to acknowledge that the centenarian's words are knowledge, not data. It is the hierarchy between voices – that of the ethnographer-field worker and that of the native centenarian – which distinguishes these narratives from oral history projects. Where oral histo-

ries would have granted the centenarian his or her own form of expertise, these co-written narratives deprive "their" centenarians of precisely such agency.

What emerges here is not the role of the centenarian as an expert on the history which he himself has lived, but, rather, the idea of a theme park in which the tourist-visitor pushes a button to hear a canned voice speak. My contention here is that the voices that we hear in centenarians' narratives with regard to the historical past are in fact not dissimilar to these canned voices contained in living museums. Moreover, it is the co-author who pushes the button, prompting the centenarian to speak. This idea of the "canned voice" is also in keeping with the enshrinement of the centenarian during his lifetime: There is a sense in which these autobiographies are life narratives and eulogies at once. They are narratives of a centenarian who is about to vanish. It is this idea of the vanishing centenarian, then, which prompts the ethnographic paradigm. Historically, ethnographers justified the act of putting "live natives" into a museum such as the Museum of Natural History by referring to the benefit that this would have for the history of science: It was in the interest of science, not their own gain, that ethnographers studied indigenous people while they were still alive. This, in gist, is the idea of the so-called "salvage ethnography" paradigm. As Susan Wood observes,

> American anthropology, from its earliest practice, focused on what was termed "salvage ethnography," the documentation of Native American cultures considered to be dying or extinct. At the turn of the 20th century, the newly emerging academic discipline of anthropology competed with the established museum-centered profession for control of the ongoing salvage ethnography project. (1)

Here as elsewhere in this book, my aim is by no means to conflate different histories and communities. In the US historically, the "salvage ethnography" paradigm as it pertained to Native Americans was clearly part of a strategy of domination and discursive control. My interest in bringing the notion of "salvage ethnography" to a reading of centenarians' autobiographies is to inquire at what moments – historical, social, and cultural – the ethnographic paradigm may emerge as a tool of both sense-making and discursive mastery. *To what extent, I would like to ask, can centenarians' autobiographies also be seen as a form of the salvage ethnography of extreme old age?*

It is hence the co-author who pushes the centenarian's button, and who turns off his narrative at will. It is in this sense that the chapter structure in centenarians' autobiographies is by no means only superficial, nor is it coincidental: Rather, each insertion by the co-author into the narrative can be said to cut off the centenarian's voice; the visitor-tourist-ethnographer leisurely strolls around the theme park or living history village, and he may not listen to the canned voice of the native to the end of the recording. The idea of "pressing the button" may be

particularly pronounced in *Life Is So Good*. On each of his visits, Richard Glaubman gives "his" centenarian, George Dawson, a reading assignment: "The picture and the article that Richard showed me were from that book that covers the whole twentieth century. I guess he likes to check that book out with me because I been alive for every year of this century, and even a few years from the century before that" (168).

How, then, do these narratives establish the ethnographer's mastery over the native? How do they manage to reduce knowledge to mere experience? Time and again, the co-authors stress the fact that the centenarian's narrative, as it was told to them by the centenarian, was completely disorderly; it was they who imposed order on what might otherwise have been an incomprehensible narrative. This, too, evokes an ethnographic scenario: The native has experience, but he does not know what to make of this experience. It is only the ethnographer who is able to construct meaning. In other words, the centenarian does not really know what he is experiencing; he is steeped in a perpetual presence. The distinction between knowledge and experience is quite pernicious here, because it serves to reintroduce a power hierarchy between the co-author and the centenarian: What happens here is that second-hand knowledge is transformed into expertise, while first-hand knowledge is no longer seen as expertise, but only as a series of sensations. Moreover, the centenarian herself is implied to be unable to make sense of these sensations.

At this point, it may once again be important to note the class distinction between co-author and centenarian. As may be expected, in this battle between knowledge and experience, the co-author Richard Glaubman wins hands down over George Dawson, who has been uneducated most of his life. Yet, the case seems to be more difficult in *Having Our Say*: The Delany sisters are African American professionals, and their education may in fact be superior to that of their co-author, Amy Hill Hearth. These are two women who became pioneers in their respective line of work.

How, then, does the narrative manage to regain its balance in favor of the co-author? It is at this point that narrative perspective may once again reign supreme: Precisely because it is the co-author who masterminds the narrative, and the structure of the narrative, she is able to "can" even the voices of two African American intellectuals.

It is significant for the practice of enlisting the centenarian in the project of writing his own life – or rather, of having his life written, – that his extreme old age is only the initial impulse, not the ultimate goal of the centenarian's autobiographies. Rather, the co-author assures the centenarian that he needs to tell his life to the public because he is an eyewitness to the historical events of an entire century. It is here that the co-author assumes yet another role: Not only is he a gerontologist and a proxy to the centenarian's account, but he is also a *historian*.

Not incidentally, before he set out to write George Dawson's life, Richard Glaubman taught elementary school. It is important to note here, however, that the historical paradigm – the centenarian's life as a first-hand account of an entire century – and the ethnographic gaze invited by the centenarian's autobiography are by no means mutually exclusive. Rather, these two paradigms can be seen to converge. Many of the centenarians' autobiographies stress the fact that the centenarian is a "remnant" from the past. Not only has he lived in a bygone era, but given his outdated lifestyle, he still inhabits it. It is this asynchronicity between the centenarian on the one hand and the co-author and his readers on the other that are at the core of the representational politics of a centenarian's narrative. Despite the apparent triviality of centenarians' narratives, they are intriguing especially in their layering of different temporalities. There is an element almost of science fiction in the encounter of the co-author and the centenarian. If the centenarian is portrayed in these narratives as a remnant from the past, his account enables the reader both to travel back in time and to anticipate, through the centenarian's presence, the possibility of becoming one hundred himself. The aim of this book is thus also to inquire into the temporality of centenarian autobiographies: they are poised, I argue, between the past, the present and the future.

In coaxing the centenarian into telling his life's narrative, the co-author assumes a curious didacticism. Once again, the ethnographic and the historical framework converge. The co-author, not only if he happens to be a teacher of history, knows about the events of the last century from history books and newspaper accounts. His, however, is second-hand knowledge, whereas the centenarian has seen history unfold. The co-author's task, then, is to coax the centenarian into revealing history first-hand; he becomes, if not his subject's tutor, then at least his prompter. In the case of George Dawson, this prompting is even more complex. Dawson learned to read only at 98, a fact that is highlighted in the marketing of his narrative. Yet, for this very reason, he was illiterate most of his life; he may have witnessed historical events, then, but he was never able to read about them in the paper. There is a curious scenario at the heart of Richard Glaubman and George Dawson's "co-written" autobiography *Life Is So Good*: The co-author supplies his centenarian with newspaper articles about the events of the twentieth century, which Dawson is now finally able to read. These newspaper articles, in turn, serve as prompts to invite the centenarian to tell a wider public about these events from his own experience. There is an implicit hierarchy of knowledge here: The historian cum ethnographer has book learning, while the centenarian as a "native" from another era can provide the "flesh," the lived experience and haptic quality of the past. Similarly, Patricia Mulcahy writes in her foreword to Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's autobiography *It Is Well with My Soul*,

> Thus this woman, who was orphaned at age four and survived the Great Depression; lived under Jim Crow laws in the South; lost her beloved husband and raised two young boys on her own while being employed full-time as a social worker . . . has a few things to tell us all about all-American grit, self-reliance, and independent thinking (xiii).

A number of aspects are remarkable in this passage. First, the centenarian figures in this passage as a native of a bygone era, literally embodying "history in the flesh." Second, it is once again significant that this passage serves to "whitewash" an African American centenarian's experience. This is seen not as a narrative of resilience, but of *American* resilience. Mulcahy's foreword celebrates Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's achievements not as the achievements by an African American woman against all odds, even in the face of the Jim Crow laws. Rather, the racism inherent in Johnson's history, and the profound social inequality against which she had to fight, are said to be mere adversities. The fascination that the centenarian holds, then, is that she is a role model for individual resilience. It is no wonder, then, that the foreword should refer to "self-reliance" as a true motto of Americanness, harking all the way back to Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is this foreword, I would like to argue here, that subverts the idea that this is genuinely Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's narrative. Rather, the framing of this narrative is the co-author's. And, as this passage implies, the black centenarian's autobiography is being framed as a story about resilience, not a story of race. It can thus be argued that despite the fact that she will go on to efface her presence in the actual narrative, which hence fully unfolds as an "autobiography," Mulcahy is actually the mastermind of this narrative. Or rather, it is impossible to determine, from the written product of the co-written autobiography, who the author of this narrative is. What is key in this instance, moreover, is that the co-author's preface serves as a form of guidance for the reader: It is the preface which frames the way in which the autobiography might or should be read. It is through this framing, also, that the authority of the co-author as the ethnographer in the country of extreme old age is being maintained.

This is a hierarchy that the centenarian's autobiography never quite abandons: The co-author is the expert, the centenarian is only the native. It is here that the ethnographic paradigm which informs centenarians' autobiographies recurs. Before going into the field, the ethnographer or cultural anthropologist has read about native cultures; the native, on the other hand, has experienced this culture first-hand. Even as he has first-hand experience of the lived reality of his culture, however, the native lacks the ability to make sense of and theorize this culture. This is knowledge only the ethnographer possesses, or so the ethnographic paradigm wants to make us believe. The same is true of the encounter or collaboration between the co-author and his centenarian: While the centenarian possesses the experience of the past, the co-author, whether or not he happens to

be a professional historian, is able to theorize this experience. There is hence a hierarchy between the co-author's voice and the genre he uses to make this voice heard, and the centenarian's narrative.

In both *Life Is So Good* and in *Having Our Say*, co-written by Amy Hill Hearth and the Delany sisters, the co-authors provide the historical framework, and the centenarians fill in the blanks. In the case of *Having Our Say*, Amy Hill Hearth explicitly frames herself as a historian. The entire narrative, marketed as the autobiography of two centenarian sisters, is structured by historical periods or historical events. The descriptions of these periods are provided, in italics, by Amy Hill Hearth who appears in this framing less as a co-author than a historian. As she herself puts it in an interview on "Good Morning America": "They [the Delany sisters] have to offer us a slice of American history which is pretty much missing from most of our basic textbooks. It made me more aware of how difficult black Americans have had to so much in this country" ("Amy Hill Hearth on 'Good Morning America' with the Delany Sisters"). Not only does Hearth portray herself as a historian here, but she represents herself as the author of an alternative history book.

These italicized passages, didactically addressed to both the readers *and* the centenarians, are strikingly similar to the newspaper clips provided by Richard Glaubman in *Life Is So Good*. In this context, moreover, it is especially noteworthy that *Having Our Say* has become standard reading in history classes, especially classes on black history, in high schools. Not incidentally, there are Spark Notes about *Having Our Say*, "Here's where you'll find analysis of the literary devices in *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*, from the major themes to motifs, symbols, and more" ("Spark Notes: Having Our Say"). As a website for teachers (NYSUT, "Check It Out: Having Our Say") announces, *Having Our Say* has also been used by teachers for a number of school types and grades:

> **Recommended by**: Kim Donius, Pre-K-6 and 7–12 school librarian, Alfred-Almond Teachers Association
>
> **Suitable for**: grades 9–12
>
> **Why I chose this book**: This is a story about the extraordinary lives of two sisters, daughters of a former slave, who unveil their against-all-odds lives. Both women, civil rights pioneers who lived past the age of 100, didn't observe history, they made it. Overcoming racism and sexism, A. Elizabeth "Bessie" Delany became the second African-American woman to practice dentistry in New York state, while Sarah "Sadie" Delany became the first African-American to teach Domestic Science in a New York City public high school.
>
> **How teachers can use this book**: This inspiring oral history can generate interest and reflection about the roles of women in society, African-American history, careers, slavery, prejudice and education.

> The book begs students to offer their opinions and thoughts about the Delany sisters' lives and accomplishments amid white-dominated America. Their story is a natural for American history classes, and will provide an incredibly interesting resource for lessons grounded in Common Core.
>
> **What I like best**: The writing in this work is honest, based on the sisters' recollections. I like the way they speak their minds. ("Check It Out: Having Our Say")

If there is a power hierarchy between the co-author as ethnographer and historian and the centenarian as eyewitness and native, this hierarchy is even more pronounced in *Life Is So Good*. In fact, the narrative makes much of the fact that George Dawson has lived his life in the humblest of circumstances; he has been poor and uneducated for most of his life. As the reader learns in the authors' biography section of the book, "George Dawson worked for more than seven decades. Some of these jobs have included breaking horses, driving spikes for the railroads, building levees on the Mississippi, and laboring on farms and in a sawmill" (np). Despite the fact that at age 101, Dawson is "a full-time student" (np), the centenarian is portrayed as a man who has been uneducated and illiterate for most of his life. Arguably, this reinforces the power relationship between the centenarian and the co-author, who is described as being "an elementary school teacher" (np). This hierarchy is also reflected in the narrative structure of the book: Dawson provides the raw material, which is then being interpreted by Glaubman. Dawson may be able to narrate history, but Glaubman goes on to teach it.

How, then, does the centenarian's autobiography differ from other eyewitness accounts? What is specific to centenarians' autobiographies, as outlined above, is that the historical and the ethnographic paradigm are present in these narratives at one and the same time. Yet, age adds another twist to this convergence between the ethnographic and the historical. Centenarians' autobiographies, even in setting up the centenarian as an eyewitness and hence in some sense an expert on the past, never let the reader forget that this is a centenarian witness. It is here that a central aspect recurs which centenarians' autobiographies share with gerontological studies such as the Heidelberg Centenarian Study: As the centenarian talks, we are never quite sure whether he will be able to finish their sentence. In the framework created by centenarians' autobiographies, then, we are amazed not so much about the fact that the centenarian has witnessed the First World War, but that first, he lives to tell this story, and second, he is mentally capable of both remembering the past and of putting this memory into words. As an eyewitness, the centenarian might come across as an expert on the past; yet, as a centenarian expert, he is also somewhat bizarre. He is witness and specimen at one and the same time. It could hence be argued that the centenarian's age – which, after all, is the co-author's reason for writing the centenarian's life in the first place –, compromises his role as an expert on history.

8.7 Towards an Ethics of Readership: Do Centenarians Read Their Own Autobiographies?

In the intersection between centenarians' autobiographies and the ethnographic frameworks they seem to conjure up, however, one aspect seems crucial. In the history of ethnography, frameworks which establish a clear-cut hierarchy between the ethnographer and his native subject have long been abandoned. Why, we may ask, have these frameworks regained their currency in the case of centenarians' narratives co-authored by white, middle-aged co-writers? Ethnography and cultural anthropology, to be sure, have long redefined themselves in terms of a more dialogic relationship between researcher and ethnographic subject (Clifford/Marcus 2010). Crucially, centenarians' autobiographies, read on the surface level, pay tribute to a similar dialogue by stressing the form of co-authored biography. Yet, as I attempt to show throughout these pages, this dialogue may be more apparent than real; instead, the narratives of extreme longevity may be more monologue than dialogue. Yet, this monologic quality of centenarians' autobiography is veiled by the form of collaborative autobiography itself. This framing in terms of genre, in fact, may serve as the perfect solution: Applied to the concept of ethnography, such an insistence on a collaboration between the ethnographer and his subject would mean that the ethnographer's account of "native" culture is no longer visible as such, but is skillfully woven into the informant's own narration. The framework of collaborative autobiography may thus account for the fact that centenarians' narratives may still be able to retain outdated ethnographic models: These models, given the assumption of the co-authorship of these texts, may not be that visible in the first place. Secondly, in order to determine why the problematic ethnographic assumptions woven into centenarians' narrative have not drawn large scale criticism from the audience of such narratives, it may be important to return to the concept of readership. If indeed centenarians' narratives are read mostly by middle-aged readers, there is simply no lobby to rally against the misrepresentation of the oldest old. Historically, misrepresentations of women in the media were countered by feminist criticism and political activism. The same is true for political action in many other instances, such as queer activists' protest against what was perceived, by these communities themselves, as a misrepresentation of their identities in mainstream media. Who, however, would rally against misrepresentations of the oldest old, especially if such misrepresentations cater to the desires of middle-aged readers for a particular form of imagining extreme aging? There is a sense here in which, unlike contemporary representations of minority groups in terms of race, gender, or sexuality, the authors of centenarians' narratives may be confident of the fact that even if their description of extreme old age could be seen as a distortion or misrepresentation, they will get away scot free. *Centenarians, in other*

words, may not take to the streets to protest the misrepresentation of their own group in autobiographies written by middle-aged co-authors for a mainstream market. This is an assumption which the autobiographies themselves reinforce: If the centenarian does not even have a telephone, why would she post comments on facebook disagreeing with the representational politics of a centenarians' narrative? Yet, this very assumption is fraught in a number of ways. First and foremost, other activist movements of the past have shown that rallies, for instance, against the misrepresentation of homosexuality are by no means organized only by queer communities themselves. In other words, the politics of protest must not be reduced to identity politics. Why, then, should there be no protest by the middle-aged about the representation of centenarians as freaks in the pages of centenarians' autobiographies?

It is in this context that the ending of *Life Is So Good* is particularly significant here. The book, it can be argued, goes out of its way to address the questions of authenticity, of trust, and of legitimacy. As the narrative closes, it asks a question that is in fact a meta-question when it comes to the legitimacy of centenarians' autobiographies in representing the country of extreme old age. Now that the narrative is finished, the centenarian may in fact be able to read what the co-author has written about him. He may be able to judge the veracity of the co-author's claim about his life. It is hence deeply significant that Dawson, the centenarian, should waive this right:

> Don't you want to see it finished?
>
> That be fine if it is, and just as fine if it's not.
>
> But I thought you said that we should work together on a book. I assumed you would want to see it completed. (Glaubman and Dawson 260)

Life Is So Good ends with the centenarian's saying that he has no need to inspect the finished product of this process of co-writing, his own autobiography. Instead, the centenarian refers – *or is said to refer by the narrative* – only to his friendship with Dawson, his co-author: "No, son, we're not finished. We just don't need us a book anymore. You can just come and visit anyway" (260). In the end, the centenarian authenticates the co-author's claim that this is indeed "more than a book: the story of friendship," as the title of Glaubman's *next* book has it. The centenarian's words, at the close of the co-written narrative, substantiates and confirms all the book's previous claims, especially the idea that the co-author's motives were indeed altruistic. Applied to the paradigm of ethnography, this also implies that the native has waived all his rights to the narrative: There is no need for him to approve what the ethnographer has written about him. In this context, one

more item found on the dust jacket may be significant: The holder of the copy-right to *Life Is So Good* is Richard Glaubman, and only Richard Glaubman: "Copy-right © 2000 by Richard Glaubman" (np). This may imply that Dawson's waiving his right to read the narrative also resulted in more substantial benefits for Glaubman, the co-author. This has profound implications for the agency of the centenarian within his own narrative, and with regard to the marketing that surrounds this narrative. In this context, it is the ethnographer who reaps the benefit. The native, by contrast, happily lives on in the foreign country of extreme old age. Or so the published narrative of *Life Is So Good* would have us believe.

9 “The Elephant in the Room”: The (In)visibility of the Co-Author in Centenarians’ Autobiographies

9.1 Writing Old Age through Middle Age: The Enigmatic Figure of the Co-Author

In the dialogic space between life sciences and life writing, what functions does the centenarian’s autobiography serve? How does it help us come to terms with the future of a society in which many will live to be extremely old? And to what extent are our fears and desires of such extreme old age culturally specific? Through whose bodies and lives do we imagine our own futures? Seen from the perspective of life writing research (Couser 2003; Eakin 2008), then, it may be important to inquire not only into the historical and cultural context from which centenarians’ autobiographies emerge, but also into their aesthetic specificity. Who, precisely, is the *author* of centenarians’ autobiographies? On the level of aging narratives, then, it may be crucial to consider the relationship between the centenarian on the one hand and the person of the co-author on the other. What does it mean that inevitably, the co-author happens to be middle-aged? And to what extent can this co-author be seen as a stand-in for an equally middle-aged public? Moreover, if indeed the co-author, in the pages of the centenarian’s co-written autobiography, can be seen to mirror the subjectivity of the middle-aged reader, to what extent does he also figure as a *translator* of extreme old age?

Centenarians’ accounts, whether in oral form or in the published version of autobiographies, may thus be interesting on two levels. They are intriguing for their politics of writing as much as for the politics of reading. Who provides the impetus of these accounts being told, let alone published? And what fears and desires do we bring to these tales of extreme longevity?

One aspect in particular seems to inform both the politics of writing and of reading centenarians’ autobiographies. If there is indeed a “key” to extreme longevity, the centenarian himself does not know it. She may thus be coaxed by the interviewer (or co-author) into dwelling even on the minutiae of her everyday life, even on the most trivial aspects of her daily routine. To the extent that the key to longevity is yet unknown, any detail, however inconspicuous at first, may turn out to be the open sesame of longevity. In the Delany sisters’ eyes, the key to healthy aging is “discipline” (*Everyday Wisdom* 37). Sadie muses,

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> People ask us how we've lived so long, how we got where we did. Well, the key is leading a disciplined life . . . . When you're our age, it means exercising every day whether you feel like it or not. A lot of people cringe when they hear the word "discipline." They think it means having no fun. Well, that ain't true, and we're living proof. We have a good time. (*Everyday Wisdom* 37)

It is from this context, then, that the enigmatic nature of centenarians' narratives emerges. If anything could be a reason for extreme longevity – from a healthy diet to regular exercise and genetic make-up to sheer good fortune – no detail contained in a centenarian's life narrative will seem too trivial for publication. Quite on the contrary: These narratives themselves can be informed by a veritable hunt for details. Surrounded by an ever-increasing number of centenarians' autobiographies, the reader may begin to compare and compile her own statistics about which piece of advice seems most valid for achieving extreme longevity. Centenarians' accounts, with autobiographies being chief among them, may stock each reader's own storehouse of clues to longevity. The Delany sisters, among many other centenarians, also turn to genetics to account for the miracle of their own longevity. Sadie Delany muses, "Longevity runs in the family. I am sure that's part of why we're still here. As a matter of fact, until recently there were still five of us, of the original ten children" (*Having Our Say* 208).

In this context, centenarians both figure as experts on extreme longevity and, perhaps paradoxically, as readers of their own story. They, too, are at a loss to explain why they have become so old. Like the gerontologists who interview them, centenarians themselves set out to account for the riddle of their own longevity in retrospect. There is a curious paradox here. The centenarian has become a "natural gerontologist" by virtue of having lived to 100. At a point in the history of the life sciences where extreme longevity continues to be enigmatic, the very notion of "expertise" is suddenly up for grabs: To the extent that it is as yet unclear in which domain the clue to longevity may lie (diet, genetics, habits), anyone can become an expert. Among such potential candidates for "scientific" expertise, the centenarian himself reigns supreme. As a potential oracle for longevity, he himself may have become a gerontologist of sorts.

This constellation, in turn, leads to a change in the centenarian's life. Virtually overnight, she has become a celebrity. The centenarian herself may in fact be puzzled by this sudden fame. As Ann Nixon Cooper puts it in *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name*, "Little did I know what the president-elect had started for me [when he called my name in his acceptance speech]! My phone began to ring off the hook . . . . Don't get me wrong now. That was *plenty* exciting. But I'd had a life before CNN and the rest 'discovered' me" (5–6; italics original, my insertion).

Many centenarians’ autobiographies begin with the exact same scene. In this scene, the centenarian is “recruited” by a person who wants to become their co-author, as I have elaborated in Chapter 4. Time and again, the centenarian is asked by an avid prospective co-author to tell his life story to the public. The writing and publication of this particular centenarian’s story, each co-author patiently informs his “object,” is deeply necessary at a historical moment where both the life sciences and the general public are keen on finally solving the riddle of longevity, as I have suggested in Chapter 2. Yet, all of these considerations seem to take for granted the fact that these life writing narratives are in fact autobiographies. They are marketed as such, and once we open the books, we encounter first-person narratives. The aim of this chapter, however, is to interrogate precisely this concept of authorship with regard to centenarians’ life writing narratives. Can we really dismiss the fact that these are co-authored narratives? Would it be beneficial, or even possible, to zoom in on the person of the co-author? And what would such co-authorship imply about the way in which we write – and read – narratives about extreme longevity?

In the pages that follow, I will revisit many of the aspects that I have already touched upon in previous chapters: the recruiting of the centenarian, the question of the mental fitness of the oldest-old, and the issue of race. While I have discussed many of these characteristics of life writing narratives above, the point I would like to make in this chapter is that the role of the co-author may actually be central to these considerations. I claim throughout this book that centenarians’ narratives may tell us more about us than about the centenarians themselves, about the desires and fears we bring to the enigma of extreme longevity. In all these desires, it seems to be existential that the co-author remains hidden from view. The fascination these life writing narratives exude, I propose, lies in the *presence* of the centenarian. This presence is evoked, first and foremost, through the first-person perspective that is essential to autobiographies. The illusion or reality of the centenarian’s presence, then, can be maintained only as long as the co-author remains invisible. Amy Hill Hearth’s account of her own role as co-author in the preface of the Delany sisters’ *Having Our Say* is emblematic of this concern. As Heart assures us, “This book is woven from thousands of anecdotes that I coaxed from the Delany sisters during an eighteen-month period . . . . The sequence of stories is mine but the words are all theirs” (xiii). The only function of the co-author, this would imply, is to “coax” the centenarian into telling their story; the co-author simply “records” this story, and, at most, they may rearrange the order of storytelling vignettes. It is this assurance by the co-author that we, as readers of centenarians’ autobiographies, may or may not take at face value. But what if the co-author simply effaced their presence? And if this were the case, what would be the (narrative) mechanisms through which such a co-authorly

presence might be concealed? As Richard Glaubman states in a conversation between himself and George Dawson that is quoted in *Life Is So Good*, "You lived the life, I just helped write about it" (253). The point to be made here is that the co-writer's authorship is being downplayed in a highly intricate way: Living the life, this sentence implies, can itself be seen as a form of authorship. The co-author's role, on the other hand, disappears from view. And yet, given the politics of collaborative autobiography, this perspective may in fact be misleading: The centenarian's life as we read about it may actually be the co-author's *construction*.

9.2 Mental Fitness and the Autobiographical Pact

One aspect that seems to loom large with regard to the question of the co-author's absence or presence in the centenarian's narrative is the idea of mental fitness. As I have suggested above, the centenarian is often described as a griot, a wise woman or storyteller. Not only is she expert on her own aging and the achieving of extreme old age, but she also figures as a comforter of the middle-aged co-author who has come to tell her story. As a rule, the centenarians' co-author is middle-aged. He thus represents a larger audience, which is also for the most part middle-aged, and which may be afraid of aging, and of aging *un*successfully. The comfort the centenarian imparts to this larger audience is manifold. It contains, above all, the assurance that old age, even extreme old age, is nothing to be feared. Not only has the centenarian lived to one hundred, but she is still able to tell her life's story. The very fact that this story is being told by the centenarian herself is thus proof that old age is not inevitably accompanied by dementia. It is this idea that centenarians' narratives share with the New England Centenarians Study (NECS) sponsored by the Alzheimer Foundation. The conclusions of both the New England Centenarian Study and the centenarians' autobiographies assure us that extreme longevity and dementia are by no means mutually constitutive.

It is for this reason – the idea that the centenarian is mentally fit enough to tell her story – that it is by no means irrelevant that these centenarians' narrative are framed as *autobiographies*. The genre of autobiography assures its audience that a centenarians' narrative is indeed told by the centenarian herself. The autobiographical pact described by Philippe Lejeune is hence doubly important for centenarians' autobiographies. According to Lejeune, the key to autobiography and to its truth claim is the identity between the author of the autobiography and the person whose life is told within this narrative. According to Lejeune, an autobiography can be defined as a "[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). As Lejeune goes on to say, the "author (whose

name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical” (4), and “the narrator and the principal character are identical” (4). In the context of centenarians’ autobiographies, I would argue, this autobiographical pact acquires additional meaning. The identity between author and subject is singularly important for assuring the reader that to achieve extreme longevity is not automatically to live with dementia. In reading centenarians’ autobiographies, the autobiographical pact is hence simultaneously proof of the author-narrator’s mental fitness. Yet, it is crucial to note that the notion of co-authorship significantly complicates this scenario: If there is a co-author and potential “ghostwriter” of centenarians’ autobiographies, how can we take the claim to the centenarian’s mental fitness, their presence within their own text and the autobiographical fact at face value?

It is here that the current cultural climate may come into play. For what happens if our desire for reading centenarians’ autobiographies overrides our skepticism about their truth value and the applicability of the autobiographical pact? It is in this cultural climate that I examine centenarians’ autobiographies which were co-authored by white middle-aged writers or perhaps, ghostwriters. As noted above, I am concerned with the politics of reading such autobiographies as much as with the politics of writing. Ultimately, then, the term “autobiography” may be misleading when it comes to centenarians’ autobiographies: They may in fact tell us more about our own fears or hopes of aging than they may reveal about the centenarians’ lives. In reading these autobiographies, we may thus in fact be reading ourselves.

9.3 Celebrating Co-Authorship in Ella Mae Cheeks’ Johnson’s *It Is Well with My Soul*

Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson’s *It Is Well with My Soul* may serve as a case in point to illustrate the politics of co-authorship. In order to examine the politics of authorship, or rather, of co-authorship of centenarians’ autobiographies, it is important to look at the paratexts surrounding these narratives. How, for instance, are the authors’ names provided on the book’s cover? Is there only one author, the centenarian themselves, or is the co-author listed as an author in their own right? One of the claims that this book seeks to make is that despite the individual differences between centenarians’ autobiographies, the politics of co-authorship is actually central to all these narratives. For instance, while *Life Is So Good* lists both George Dawson and Richard Glaubman as authors, *It Is Well with My Soul* is said to be authored by “Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson with Patricia Mulcahy” (np). Once we open the book, however, this clear-cut distinction seems to blur. First, there are biographies of both Johnson and Mulcahy:

> Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson was born in 1904 in Dallas, Texas. In 1924, she saw W.E.B. Du Bois speak at Fisk University, and in 2009, she attended Barack Obama's presidential election in Washington, D.C. She is a great-grandmother and lives in Cleveland, Ohio. (np)
>
> Patricia Mulcahy is a freelance editor and writer who has worked on books including *Q: The Autobiography of Quincy Jones*, *Ten Minutes from Normal*, and *A Free-wheelin' Time*. She lives in New York City. (np)

The fact that both biographies are being provided seems to indicate that there are in fact two authors of *It Is Well with My Soul*. The dedication, on the other hand, seems to be Johnson's alone:

> In memory of Tenny and Moody Davis, who raised me; for they began the story of my life and through their kindness taught me compassion.
>
> In memory of my first husband, Elmer Cheeks, the love of my life and father of our adored sons, Jim and Paul.
>
> To my two sons, for inspiring me and giving me strength as a young mother to carry on, and for continuing to love and encourage me; for my beloved grandchildren, Audrey, George, and Jimmy, who bring me great joy; and for my cherished great-grandchildren, Nika, Andrew, Alex, and Nico, who light up my life. (np)

What may be curious to note at this point is that this dedication is not signed; we simply assume that these are the centenarian's words. This unsigned dedication seems to imply that the authorship of the centenarian's autobiography that we are about to read is Johnson's alone. Patricia Mulcahy as the co-author of this same narrative disappears from view, a fact that further reinforces the idea that this narrative was simply written by Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson *with* Patricia Mulcahy, relegating Mulcahy to a form of secondary or supplementary authorship. This serves to strengthen, we may want to argue, the "autobiographical pact" (Lejeune 1989); the paratext argues that the presence of a second author, Patricia Mulcahy, does not violate the pact: The autobiography, in other words, is not the biography written by Mulcahy about the centenarian, Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson, but rather a narrative written by the centenarian herself.

This authentication of the centenarian's autobiography as an autobiography is further enhanced by the first chapter, a chapter written by Mulcahy about what it was like to work with the centenarian. This chapter is titled "'A Cheerful Giver Be': Working with Ella Mae" (Mulcahy xi). As in George Dawson's and Richard Glaubman's co-written *Life Is So Good*, the fact that there are specific chapters supposedly written by the co-author reinforces the idea that the other chapters are in fact solely written by the centenarian herself. Mulcahy's account of how her collaboration with Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson started begins with the following sentence:

> Frequently, I get lost, in more ways than one. Driving to see Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson for the first time at Judson Park in Cleveland, I twisted and turned along the leafy road of the Ambler Heights Historic District near Case Western Reserve University, but kept missing the entrance to the retirement facility. (xi)

This passage is significant for a number of reasons. Unlike the other centenarians whose life narratives I analyze in this study, Johnson lives not at home but in a “retirement facility” (xi). Moreover, whereas George Dawson reiterates time and again that he does not need a cane and the Delany sisters are also portrayed as highly agile, Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson uses a wheelchair. However, the narrative emphasizes that in telling the story of her life, Johnson is keen to de-medicalize old age. As Mulcahy puts it in her description of one of her first encounters with the centenarian, “Ella Mae wheeled up to the table and ordered lobster, followed by a large piece of cheesecake smothered with fruit for dessert. At age 106, she doesn’t do things halfheartedly. Her flair for living comes through loud and clear, no matter what her age of immediate circumstances” (xiv).

There is another narrative device in *It Is Well with My Soul* that serves to authenticate the centenarian’s narrative and strengthens the autobiographical pact. In the chapter written by herself, Mulcahy stresses the centenarian’s role in approving and assessing the narrative that has been written about her. The authentication, I would argue, lies in the fact that Mulcahy stresses that Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson has both the mental ability and the intellectual capacity to judge what is being written about her. Even if, like the other autobiographies by centenarians discussed in this book, there is no passage in *It Is Well with My Soul* that explicitly mentions the centenarian approving the final narrative before its publication, passages such as this one nevertheless serve to establish the centenarian as a judge of the finished product, her own life narrative. As Mulcahy observes in “her” chapter, “Though warm and welcoming, these ladies [Ella Mae and her friend Betty] were not fooling around: even a quick introduction told me that. They are can-do-people” (Mulcahy xi–xii).

There is in fact an implicit dialogue, I would argue, between Mulcahy’s description of her work with Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the centenarian’s acknowledgments. In the acknowledgement section of the book, Johnson thanks “the writer Patricia Mulcahy, who helped me translate 106 years of life into a succinct storyline” (xxi). The concept of translation, I would claim, is at the heart of centenarians’ autobiographies as a specific genre within both aging narratives and autobiographies. For where does translation end and where does authorship begin? While both Mulcahy and Johnson reiterate that Mulcahy’s function was only that of an editor of Johnson’s life narrative, or that of a secondary author who simply organized the events told by the centenar-

ian into a more coherent "storyline," there is no way in which we can disentangle Mulcahy's from Johnson's voice.

Throughout these chapters, I am trying to make the point that centenarians' autobiographies are being overdetermined by the paratexts and the discourse of centenarianness that surround them. Ultimately, this discourse may also serve to shed light on the notion of co-authorship. If the present moment is characterized by a veritably hunt for centenarians, a deep fascination with extreme longevity, then the study of these discourses embedded not only in the literary realm but also society at large, may also serve to illuminate the evasive figure of the co-author of a centenarian's autobiography. The desires that the co-author brings to the centenarian's narrative, in other words, may be representative of the dreams and desires that the larger public brings to the life narratives of centenarians.

Moreover, the politics of co-authorship, on closer inspection, may turn out to be a veritable matryoshka, a Russian doll, in which each co-author or manager of longevity is connected to another. As Mulcahy writes at the outset of *It Is Well with My Soul*, her setting out to co-author Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson's narrative was itself prompted by an editor who brought this particular centenarian to her attention:

> I knew Ella Mae was a reflective person even from our ten-minute conversation, which was how we met after and editor from Penguin called and asked if I'd be interested in working with a 105-year-old African American woman who'd come to his attention from interviews on National Public Radio and PBS at President Obama's inauguration. On the phone, Ella Mae was thoughtful and full of insight, utterly lacking in sentimental attitudes. (Mulcahy xii)

What is remarkable about this passage is that it is remains unclear from Mulcahy's account whether it was Johnson who had told the editor that she might be interested in having her autobiography co-written or having her life narrative published. The role of the centenarian herself remains rather opaque in the recruitment process, as I have elaborated in Chapter 4. Yet, what also becomes clear from this passage is that there is a centenarian industry that is constantly on the look-out for centenarians willing to have their life story published. Like Ann Nixon Cooper whose life narrative was published under the title *A Century and Some Change: The Day the President Called My Name*, President Obama's inauguration, in which Cooper's narrative featured prominently, sparked off a hunt particularly for black centenarians willing to tell their own story. As I argue throughout this book, the politics of race are as significant as those of age.

9.4 The Co-Author as "the Elephant in the Living Room": Strategies of Legitimation and (In)visibility

This book explores the question to which extent centenarians – the presumed authors *and* subjects of centenarians' autobiographies – are "vulnerable subjects" in Thomas Couser's sense. Couser writes,

> My primary concern is with the ethics of representing vulnerable subjects – persons who are liable to exposure by someone with whom they are involved in an intimate or trust-based relationship, unable to represent themselves in writing, or unable to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else . . . . Of primary importance is intimate life writing – that done within families or couples, close relationships, or quasi-professional relationships that involve trust – rather than conventional biography, which can be written by a stranger. The closer the relationship between writer and subject, the greater the vulnerability or dependency of the subject, the higher the ethical stakes, and the more urgent the need for ethical scrutiny. (xii)

I would like to argue that the question of vulnerability is a highly complex one when it comes to the co-authoring of centenarians' autobiographies. The point that I am trying to make throughout these chapters is that there is in fact an "intimate or trust-based relationship" (Couser xii) between the centenarian and their co-author, or so the co-authors claim. The crux of this argument, then, is that as readers, we have to take the co-author's work for this trust relationship, since we have access to the centenarian's voice only in the book written or co-written by the co-author. There is thus a vicious cycle here with regard to the politics of trust and the "ethics of representation" that Couser has highlighted in his exploration of vulnerable subjects. It can thus be argued that centenarians' autobiographies are located on the verge between the "intimate" biographies that Couser mentions and the "conventional biographies . . . written by a stranger" (Couser xii) to which he contrasts these biographical narratives.

In order to assess, or try to assess, the extent of centenarians' vulnerability, it is indispensable to look at the "person" of the co-author. The act of co-authorship, in turn, may constitute a problem for life writing research. Arguably, the power of "life writing" as a concept may lie precisely in effacing the boundaries between biography and autobiography. As Marlene Kadar notes about the "original" definition of life writing (1), originally, life writing "was equivalent to 'biography,' and biography used to be considered more generally to *include* autobiography, and perhaps other kinds of autobiographical writing" (1; italics original).

Moreover, the "writing" of some lives may be possible only through the help of the co-author; such support, indeed, may be both fruitful and necessary, for a narrative to emerge. Schaffer and Smith have investigated the role of co-authorship, for instance, with regard to human rights narratives (Schaffer and Smith 2004). At

the same time, the role and the presence of the co-author has tended to be elusive; there is no way of disentangling, then, the co-author's voice from that of the centenarian. It is this impossibility, in turn, which may contribute to the centenarian's vulnerability in Couser's terms.

This chapter zooms in on the role of the co-author, then, by means other than reading the written autobiography. Rather, it investigates the self-representation of the co-author on websites, in interviews, and in the paratexts accompanying the autobiography itself. I am particularly interested in the ways in which these forms of self-representation outside the autobiography may contradict the self-representation – or self-effacement – of the co-author within the autobiographical narrative. To what extent, then, are these co-authors visible in the autobiographies themselves? Where do they surface and where is their presence elided? By what forms or stylistic devices do they seek to erase their presence? To zoom in on the "person" or function of the co-author, in turn, is to reveal centenarians' autobiographies as fabricated, as being mass-produced for a specific market. In order to understand or elucidate the role of the co-author, then, we need to zoom in not only on the co-author's self-representation outside the autobiography itself, but also on the processes of recruitment which are depicted both outside and inside the centenarians' autobiographies.

In fact, in order for the centenarian's autobiography to be credible as an autobiography, the co-author needs to be invisible. How, then, does this form of co-written autobiography affect the "autobiographical pact" described by Lejeune (4)? At the core of the pact, in the context of co-written autobiographies, may be the *unobtrusiveness* of the co-author, I would argue. The description of *Life Is So Good* on the Random House homepage, for instance, advertises the book as follows: "Richard Dawson captures Dawson's irresistible voice and view of the world, offering insights into humanity, history, hardships and happiness" ("Life Is So Good" np). The representational politics of a centenarian's autobiography, I would suggest, hinges on its "authenticity": on the claim that it is indeed the centenarian's own voice which we hear in the pages of "his" narrative. The stability of this claim, in turn, often hinges on the use of pronoun: Time and again, Richard Glaubman has stressed the fact that this is Dawson's book, not his own. Why, however, should the *acknowledgements* which preface the book be those of the co-author, then? In trying to trace the presence of the centenarian in his own text, then, we may in fact encounter a tension between the book's dedication and the acknowledgments. The dedication, to which I will return below, seems to confirm the idea of co-authorship. If *Life Is So Good* is the centenarians' life writing narrative, it is both Dawson's autobiography and Glaubman's biography of Dawson, or, alternatively, it is a co-written autobiography. One of the central characteristics of the marketing of *Life Is So Good* is that it leaves this question open: On

the dust jacket, the term “autobiography” is never explicitly mentioned. Yet, there is George Dawson on the cover, and his is one of the names mentioned as the author of the book. The autobiographical pact, then, seems potentially intact.

Why has the centenarian himself disappeared from these acknowledgements, and what does this mean for the politics of autobiography here? The sole presence of the co-author in the acknowledgments upsets and contradicts the claim, within the autobiography, that this book is not his own; that his own account and presence does not intrude, let alone impose itself on the centenarian’s narrative. This is one instance then, where the paratext contradicts the text itself. This is what Glaubman writes in his acknowledgments:

> As with any good story, this one could never have come about without the help of many people. From the beginning, I had the support of family, friends, and colleagues. As the story progressed, I had the good fortune of meeting some wonderful people who were there at each critical phase of *my* work and helped *me* move on to the next level. (*Life Is So Good* vi; italics mine)

There are a number of aspects here which could not be more striking for understanding the politics of co-written autobiography. First, why do Glaubman’s acknowledgments not even attempt to address their contradiction to the autobiography that follows them? Why is such a blatant contradiction of representational logic possible, and what does this imply about the logic of co-written autobiographies, or the relationship and possible hierarchy between the co-author and “his” centenarian? Secondly, it is significant that Glaubman should refer to the book as “my work” even as this centenarian’s narrative is framed as an autobiography within the text. Within the text, this is how the narrative starts: “Wanting to enjoy every moment, I stared at the hard candies in the different wooden barrels. The man behind the counter was white. I could tell he didn’t like me, so I let him see the penny in my hand” (*Life Is So Good* 3). Who precisely, is speaking here given the bizarre incongruence between the text itself and the acknowledgments which precede it? And what does it mean for Glaubman that good friends “helped *him* to move to the next level”? This passage, I would argue, points to the constructedness of the autobiography. It has become a tenet of autobiography research, of course, that every autobiography is also auto-fiction (Hornung 2010); yet, I would claim that the politics of autobiographical fictionality work differently and in quite specific ways in co-written autobiographies. The person *writing*, and not just editing, George Dawson’s life story is Richard Glaubman; it is he who takes the account of this life “to the next level.” It is significant in this context that there is not one, but there are two dedications in *Life Is So Good*:

From George Dawson:
this book is dedicated to
my teacher, Carl Henry, and to my son, George Jr.

From Richard Glaubman
this book is dedicated to
my wife, Jody, and to my children, Jessie and Casey
(np; italics original)

The fact that there should be two dedications further substantiates the idea that there are two authors of this co-written autobiography. It also serves to capture the presence of the centenarian in his own narrative; George Dawson’s, after all, is the first dedication. Yet, as I suggest throughout this chapter, this may be an illusion of presence. There may in fact be a tension between the dedication and the narrative itself: Even if the text opens with the centenarian’s dedication of “his” autobiography to his teacher and his son, the actual narrative may still be the product of the authorship of the co-author, Richard Glaubman. Throughout this book, I propose that this tension between the absence and the presence of the centenarian is at the heart of centenarians’ autobiographies. The dedication, then, may serve to heighten the presence of the centenarian, George Dawson, and to erase the hand, literally, of Richard Glaubman.

By contrast, Patricia Mulcahy’s and Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson’s co-written autobiography features only one form of acknowledgment, the one written by the centenarian herself. Crucially, this difference between Johnson’s and Dawson’s autobiographies may also be reflected in the title: On the title page of *Life Is So Good*, there are two authors, George Dawson and Richard Glaubman. By contrast, as I have outlined above, the title page of *It Is Well with My Soul: The Extraordinary Life of a 106-Year-Old Woman* refers to the authorship of “Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson *with* Patricia Mulcahy” (np; emphasis added). Yet, I argue throughout this book that this differentiation may be misleading; both Mulcahy and Glaubman may in fact be more central to these “autobiographies” than the marketing and narrative structure would suggest. In order for these narratives to succeed as centenarians’ autobiographies, the figure of the co-author has to disappear from view. One of the aims of this chapter is to investigate the mechanisms through which this disappearing act becomes possible.

This may be particularly true of *Life Is So Good*. In order to efface his presence, and to uphold the illusion of the centenarian’s presence in what is after all, claimed to be the centenarian’s own narrative, Glaubman has to “capture” Dawson’s voice by having him speak in African American vernacular. After opening with a gerund (“Wanting to enjoy every moment”) (3), the text changes its register; yet, both these registers are said to be George Dawson’s actual voice: “I had been thinking of those hard candies since my father woke me before daybreak

and said, ‘Hitch the wagon. We gonna take some ribbon syrup into town and you comin’” (3). It is due to the implicit contradiction between the presence and absence of the centenarian that a reader’s blog refers to this co-written autobiography as “ghostwriting”:

> I’ve just read the ghostwritten *Life Is So Good*, the reminiscences of George Dawson, the Texas centenarian . . . . Let’s look at the elephant in the living room first. Dawson’s ghostwriter, Richard Glaubman, is annoying. Far from being a ghost, Glaubman is overwhelming from the very first sentence in Chapter One. “Wanting to enjoy every moment, I stared at the hard candies . . . .” As I said in my blogcritics review, if George Dawson began his sentences with gerunds, I’ll eat my hat.” (“George Dawson Update: ‘Life is So Good.’”)

In order for the centenarian’s autobiography to be credible as an autobiography, then, the co-author has to efface his own presence in the text. In fact, the more visible he is in the media industry surrounding the centenarian, the more invisible he has to be in the narrative itself. This can be achieved by a number of means. The co-author can, for instance, insert chapters in which he comments, in his own voice, on the events subsequently narrated by the centenarian. In Amy Hill Hearth’s co-written autobiography *Having Our Say*, the co-author intrudes into the centenarian sister’s narrative by inserting didactic chapters of her own. These chapters serve a number of purposes at once. First, they indicate that in the chapters not headed by Amy Hill Hearth’s name, it is truly the centenarians’ own voices that we hear. The differentiation, in the written autobiography, between the co-author’s and the centenarian’s voices serves to reinforce the claim that in the chapters “authored” by Bessie and Sarah Delany, there is no intrusion from the co-author; these chapters, as it were, are “unfiltered.” The claim that the narrative at hand is truly an autobiography is thus enabled by the differentiation between the co-author’s voice and the centenarians’. Yet, this claim, too, is constructed; from the published version of the centenarian’s autobiography, it is in fact impossible to tell the voices apart. The formal differentiation between the co-author’s and the centenarian sisters’ voices is thus a construct.

Yet, the establishing of the “authenticity” of the centenarian’s narrative can also be achieved by the insertion of specific dialogues into the text. In these dialogues, the centenarian is shown to disagree with the co-author’s version of her narrative. This interchange proves a number of points at once. First, it testifies to the fact that the centenarian is mentally capable of understanding the account that the co-author sets out to give about her life. This reference to the centenarian’s mental “fitness,” in turn, legitimates the co-author’s narrative: This narrative, it is claimed, is by no means a tale based only on the co-author’s projection of the centenarian’s life, but it is instead a narrative which is corroborated and corrected by the centenarian at every turn. One of the pivots of the centenarian’s

autobiography, then, is its dialogic quality. For the autobiography to be successful as an autobiography, the narrative can be the centenarian's monologue about her own life, occasionally interrupted by the co-author's prompts; or it can be a dialogue between the co-author and the centenarian. What it cannot be, on the other hand, is the co-author's monologue about the centenarian's life, a monologue which is witnessed but not understood by the centenarian who happens to sit at his kitchen table. It is in the latter instance that the centenarian is truly a vulnerable subject in Thomas Couser's terms. As outlined above, Couser argues that for the co-written narrative to be ethically legitimate, the vulnerable subject has to give his consent. Yet, it is significant of the politics of centenarians' autobiographies that this notion of consent takes a curious turn. Precisely because we have to take the co-author's word for having obtained the centenarian's consent, this consent rests on unstable ground. Moreover, it may be read by the co-author as a form of consent if the centenarian keeps letting him into his kitchen, or does not hesitate to invite him in. Glaubman's reference, both within *Life Is So Good* and the sequel *More Than a Book: A Story of Friendship*, to the fact that his relationship to Dawson is a friendship rather than a work relationship itself functions as a form of legitimation and implies that Dawson consents to what is written about him by the white man who keeps sitting in his kitchen. Crucially, as the narrative draws to a close, it stresses the co-author's dependency on "his" centenarian; yet, it is equally significant that this dependency is not described in economic, but in personal terms. In this scene, the black centenarian has truly become the white co-author's surrogate father; the co-writer truly has been adopted into the centenarian's family. In an interview, Richard Glaubman describes this process in the following words:

> The first time I stayed in a hotel on my first visit, and then he invited me to live with him, and that's really what changed everything, 'cause I started going to school and just living his life. And I started meeting the people at school, and just relatives and friends that came by to visit, and it was an interesting thing, instead of becoming a dialogue, I was just there. ("Books at Berkshire")

It is at this point that the overlaps between life sciences and life writing that I have discussed in Chapter 2 may seem particularly significant. In studies such as the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie, a proxy (usually a relative or close friend) was being interviewed to determine the centenarian's quality of life (Poon et al. 2007). One of the central arguments that I am making in this book, then, is that in co-written centenarians' autobiographies, the co-author assumes the role of such a proxy. In order for the adoption of this role to be ethically justifiable, then, there needs to be a passage in the narrative where the friend or relative acknowledges the co-author as a legitimate proxy. In discussing the relationship between the centenarian and their co-author, virtually all the autobiographies I look at in this book

mention the issue of trust. As host Marilyn Smith Layton says in an interview with Richard Glaubman, this question may become even more complicated in the case of a white man co-authoring writing a black centenarian’s autobiography. Layton asks, “I was very interested in issues of trust that run through this book, especially between blacks and whites . . . . What do you think allowed him to trust you? . . . What did you do to make it right for him?” (“Books at Berkshire”). This trust, it can be argued, is established through the mediation of the centenarian’s proxy: a relative, a close friend. In the case of George Dawson, it is Dawson’s son, George Jr., who serves as a mediator. As Glaubman recalls, “I wrote a short book, a picture book, about a man who learned to read [a photo is shown of Dawson holding the book in his hand], and I went back for a visit to run it by him and his son, George Jr., who was in his late sixties at the time” (“Books at the Berkshire”). As his father’s “proxy,” then, George Dawson Jr. is implied to have approved of Glaubman as the future co-author of his father’s autobiography.

In quite similar terms, Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson’s *It Is Well with My Soul* begins with co-author Patricia Mulcahy being inspected by both the centenarian and her close friend, Betty. Mulcahy recalls,

> After a quick cell phone conference with Ella Mae’s dear friend Betty Miller, I finally arrived to find the lady herself waiting to greet me in the lobby, wearing a pink dress and large dark glasses. Betty, an attractive, jovial woman dressed in resort wear and dangly earrings, was also sporting big shades as she pushed Ella Mae’s wheelchair through the halls. (xi)

It is also significant that Mulcahy, in ways quite similar to the other centenarians’ narratives discussed in this study, emphasizes that the project of co-authoring the centenarian’s autobiography is being approved from all sides from the very beginning:

> Being with her [the centenarian Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson] is fun too. The first night of my initial visit, Rob Lucarelli, Judson’s personable and efficient director of public relations, arranged for all of us to go to a local restaurant for a dinner celebrating the commencement of the book project. (xiv)

In the context of examining the politics surrounding the publication of centenarians’ autobiographies, this passage might be read with and against the grain. Read with the grain, it is indicative of how the centenarian is constantly being celebrated by those who surround her: by her family, her friends, but also society at large. Read against the grain, however, this same passage may also imply the workings of a centenarian industry in which others may benefit quite substantially from the publication of the centenarian’s life narrative. How often, we might want to inquire, does a public relations manager join a family dinner? The point that I would like to make here, then, is that in the politics of co-authorship,

there is a deliberate blurring of the line between manager and proxy, between friend and co-author. This blurring of lines, moreover, can be seen as a veiling of economic interest on the part of the co-author, the publisher, the agent, and the public relations manager. What seems equally bizarre, then, is that this passage starts with a reference to “fun”: The co-author, this passage implies, is at the dinner simply for enjoyment, not for economic gain or for furthering her own career as a professional writer. Telling the story of the centenarian is thus an altruistic endeavor: The public, the co-author implies, needs to know the story of the centenarian’s life. Money, in other words, has nothing to do with the publication of this life story.

It could be argued, then, that centenarians’ autobiographies are fully aware of the “ethics of representation” (Couser xii) that underlies their publication. Time and again, these texts seem to go out of their way to stress that the centenarian is both able to consent and has in fact given their consent. Yet, arguably, it is not the text that goes out of its way to stress this ethical legitimacy, but the co-author who frames the centenarian’s life narrative. This, too, may in fact point to the elephant in the room: The more emphatic the text is about the centenarian’s consent, the more problematic or fraught the politics of co-authorship may actually be. In George Dawson’s *Life Is So Good*, the centenarian’s signing the book contract is portrayed both as a formal ceremony and a reason for celebration. At first, the centenarian is said to think carefully about whether or not he should sign the contract. This consent, for George Dawson, is even more difficult because the co-author is white:

> When the house got quiet again, I actually stayed up thinking a bit . . . When I was a boy, my father had told me, “Whites and colored ain’t meant to mix . . . You go against that, you be asking for trouble. Somebody will get hurt.” . . . Being able to sign my name is a new thing for me and brings choices I never had to make before. Richard be an honest man. It’s not about him though, it’s just about a way of living that I’ve gotten used to, that’s worked for me. He would understand if I keep my ways and don’t put my name on nothing . . . [The next morning] Junior had come by . . . Junior said, “This is a good thing. You both are like partners, Daddy, and if it does get published maybe there will be enough to fix your roof.” Carl Henry said, “I checked: it’s a good agreement.” “I know,” I said. “But what if I don’t sign it?” Richard shrugged. “That’s okay, Mr. Dawson. I’ll still finish the book. Nothing will change.” “Daddy, he can write, but then no one can print it.” I had to think on it some more. Nobody said nothing. I knew I was with friends and whatever I chose would be okay . . . I put on my glasses and signed my name in cursive . . . It felt so good that besides Richard we told Junior and Carl they could be witnesses and sign it too. It was like a ceremony, something special for us (255–256).

This passage is significant for a number of reasons. First, the situation described here in George Dawson’s *Life Is So Good* is in fact highly similar to Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson’s *It Is Well with My Soul*: In both cases, the centenarian is accompanied by friends or relatives, who act as a safeguard against their being taken

advantage of by a commercial co-author avid for a new book contract. In the case of Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson, it is her friend Betty who accompanies the centenarian to her first encounter with Patricia Mulcahy, her future co-author. Quite similarly, George Dawson signs the contract in the presence of his son, Junior, and his elementary school teacher, Carl Henry, who taught Dawson his ABCs when the latter was 98 years old. What is so curious about the above-cited passage, however, is that read against the grain, the co-author, Richard Glaubman, may say in the "black" voice of the centenarian that he, the co-author, is ethically beyond reproach: "Richard be an honest man." Here, the use of Black English may further serve to reinforce the authenticity of the quote, and the fact that these are really Dawson's words and not Glaubman's. Moreover, this passage takes pains to reassure the reader that Dawson was in no way pressured into having his autobiography published. If he had not signed the contract, Glaubman reassures him in a text co-authored by himself, nothing would have happened; the book would simply not have been published. What these celebrations of consensuality dismiss, however, is the politics of power that may actually undergird the writing of these narratives. What implicit hierarchy would be at work between an African American centenarian who learned to read and write only at 98, and a white co-author, an elementary school teacher turned professional writer? At the same time, it could be argued that such a power relation would be more relevant for Dawson's relationship to his co-author, not for middle-class, highly educated centenarians such as Ann Nixon Cooper, Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson, or the Delany sisters. Class may hence play a key role in the context of co-authorship. At the same time, the centenarians' age may also be of significance here: As in Dawson's case, they may rely on their children's advice with regard to the trustworthiness of the potential co-author.

The legitimation of co-authored centenarians' autobiographies, I would argue, hinges on the notion of "need." Who precisely needs whom? As Glaubman notes about his relationship to George Dawson, as cited above,

> Although there was a huge gulf between us consisting of age, race, religion and geography, our need to share a story was great enough to overcome the challenges. While he had been illiterate for almost a century, I had the good fortune of growing up in a family that valued the printed word. And as I listened to him, I could begin to see his story in print. (*Life Is So Good* 4)

This passage significantly downplays the element of economic gain and career development on the part of Glaubman, the co-author. By focusing on the "need to share a story" that connects him to George Dawson, Glaubman dispels any notion of hierarchy between himself and the centenarian. He thus acknowledges the "gulf" that separates them, only to dismiss this lopsidedness in the next moment.

This is an idea which I have already discussed in Chapter 4: Invariably, co-written centenarians' narratives stress that it is the centenarian who urgently wants their story published, not the co-author who is hunting for a subject.

9.5 Kinship as a Legitimation Strategy of Co-Authored Life Writing

With regard to the politics of representation, it could be argued that the constant allusion to the friendship, even kinship, between the co-author and his subject paradoxically serves to heighten the invisibility of the co-author in the text. The more visible the co-author is as an interlocutor, the less visible he will be in the centenarian's narrative. To the extent that the co-author clearly delineates and emphasizes the moments in which he does surface in the text, the more absent he seems to be from the rest of the centenarian's narrative. Moreover, the reference to his "kinship" with the centenarian serves to dispel any suspicion that he would intrude into or falsify the centenarian's narrative. The "ethics" of friendship or kinship, as Thomas Couser has suggested, may in fact clash with the ethics of producing a co-authored autobiography (xiii). It is hence significant for the textual politics of centenarians' autobiographies that these narratives deliberately blur the line between economic exchange and friendship. Crucially, this is a difference between gerontological studies such as the Heidelberger Hundertjährigenstudie and co-authored centenarians' autobiography. In the case of gerontological research, the proxy does not stand to gain anything from corroborating the centenarian's story. The obverse is true, however, for centenarians' autobiographies. It is characteristic of the representational politics of these narratives, on the other hand, that the co-author assumes the position of the proxy in gerontological research by claiming that he, too, has no reasons other than altruistic ones for being co-interviewed along with the proxy. This scenario, in centenarians' autobiographies, is all the more bizarre because in this case, the co-author is both interviewer and proxy at the same time. As literary narratives, centenarians' autobiographies are thus characterized by a complex cast not so much of characters than of narrative *roles*. What would happen, however, if all of these roles were not only orchestrated, but *played* by the co-author? Precisely because there is no way of disentangling the centenarian's narrative from that of his co-author, centenarians' autobiographies may in fact be a monologue which the co-author holds with himself. The point of this argument is not to discredit or dismiss centenarians' autobiographies as such; it is, rather, to draw attention to their complex politics of representation and the ambivalent form of agency which they grant to, or withhold from, the centenarian herself.

9.6 The Portrayal of Racism in Co-Authored Narratives

In the context of literary role play and the idea of the co-writers assuming many different roles at once, it may be especially instructive to discuss the depiction of white racism in stories purportedly “written” or told by black centenarians. *Life Is So Good* starts with a graphic description of lynching, whose indictment of white society at the beginning of the twentieth century could not be more blatant. In this passage, many of the characteristics common to centenarians’ autobiographies, especially autobiographies of black centenarians, converge. First, as outlined above, the centenarian is an eyewitness of the past and can hence “illustrate” historical events or circumstances through first-hand accounts. George Dawson, the text implies, has not only read about lynching in the deep South – this would have been impossible as he learned to read only at 98 –, but he has seen a close friend lynched before his own eyes. In the first chapter of his life narrative, Dawson recalls the lynching of his friend Pete when Dawson was just a boy:

> As he swayed from the tree, the crowd hushed and tried to look away from his accusing eyes. Not till Pete’s body stopped swinging did anyone move. The crowd broke up in silence and went their separate ways. I didn’t want to, but as we left Marshall I turned ‘round in my seat and looked. Pete was still looking at me and I knew that he always would be. Pete would stay till morning. When they did a lynching, they made us leave the body hanging, to put a terror in the colored folk. (*Life Is So Good* 11)

What does it mean, however, that this black centenarian’s account of the atrocity of lynching in the American South should be told in a white co-author’s voice? There is a sense in which the indictment of racism, in the narratives of black centenarians co-written by white co-authors, can be seen as a form of white self-flagellation. This self-flagellation is invisible, however, because these passages in the narrative are framed as being the black centenarian’s own voice. As outlined above, the narrative itself carefully distinguishes between parts where the co-author is present – as when he gives a history lesson to both the reader and the centenarian at the beginning of most chapters –, and passages from which the co-author is implied to be absent. In order for the “authenticity” of the centenarian’s autobiography to be established, then, the narrative has to stress the fact that it is George Dawson who castigates Southern whites for their racism in his personal recollection of the past. The narrative describes the murder of Pete by a white lynch mob in all graphic detail:

> As they caught up alongside Pete, the mob seemed to get inspired. Pete had been twisting and screaming all get-out, but those men seemed to double their strength when they seen the lynching rope coming. Up by the post office, the old oak tree, the Confederate Tree, they called it, was going to be a gallows. (*Life Is So Good* 9)

With regard to a black centenarian's autobiography co-written by a white co-author, a number of aspects seems to be significant here. First, the "authenticity" of the narrative seems to be confirmed by the idea that there are elements from black English used in the text. This, the text seems to imply, is indeed Dawson's "black" voice. Second, not only is the lynching itself described in minute detail, but the inhumanity of the white mob is highlighted in similarly elaborate terms: "People talk about white trash around here. My mama and papa wouldn't let us call anyone white trash, but it seemed that's wat the sheriff was saying to Norris [the leader of the lynch mob]" (*Life Is So Good* 11).

Yet, there are a number of aspects which would compromise this assumption of authenticity. First, even though he may have learned to read and write at age 98, George Dawson has never had the benefit of formal education. This is not to say, of course, that the ability to describe and theorize the atrocities of racism requires book leaning; it is to say, however, that a fully-fledged account of the structural and social underpinnings of racism may not have been provided by George Dawson, the working-class centenarian, in quite these terms. What if, then, black centenarians' narratives were in fact stories a white audience tells to itself through the person of the white co-author who may not only edit or inflect, but mastermind the narrative? Seen from this angle, black centenarians' autobiographies written by white co-authors emerge as narratives of white self-introspection. In these narratives, the black centenarian, in a complete reversal of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, may in fact be a mere spectator or listener to a white co-author's tale about the past as this co-author imagines it. There is yet another twist to this idea of white self-flagellation through a black voice. In a practice which elsewhere I have called "ethnic ventriloquism" (Banerjee 2008), the white author divests himself of his whiteness not only by speaking, or pretending to speak, in a black voice, but by distancing himself from a white racist past. The more the co-author, in his "black" voice, castigates whites for being or having been racist, the less white he himself becomes. This act of ethnic ventriloquism, then, helps the co-writer turn the centenarian's autobiography into a truly color-blind narrative. In this text, both parties purport to transcend race: The centenarian, inside the text, is made to emphasize the fact that he has no misgivings about the co-author's racial difference because this co-writer has long become "family." The co-author, on the other hand, proves his color-blindness by letting the centenarian "speak his mind" about white racism in a manner which is completely unfiltered by the white co-author's intrusion. In this context as in many others, of course, it is impossible to distinguish the "real" absence of the co-author's intrusion from the act of the co-author's making himself invisible in the pages of what is framed as the centenarian's narrative. Centenarians' autobiographies thus become the disappearing act of a (white) co-author,

a site in which this co-author can move in and out of his own racial make-up. In the preceding chapter, I have read centenarian autobiographies as minstrel shows of aging; I have argued that in these narratives, black subjects may be made by white co-authors cum puppet masters to enact white fantasies about aging successfully. Yet, the instance described above may be seen as a white co-author donning blackface: By pretending to assume a black voice in order to depict the atrocities of lynching in the South in the era of Reconstruction, the co-author sheds his own ethnic and racial identity to speak in a black man's voice. In both cases, however, white imagination needs blackness for self-introspection to become possible. This self-introspection is doubly present in the context of black centenarians' autobiographies written by white co-authors: On the stage of the literary narrative, black subjects are made to enact and dispel white fears of aging by assuring white audiences and their white co-author that there is nothing to fear. In this literary theater of successful aging, however, there are black characters played by black men, but there is also one white man in the cast: Virtually undetected, the white co-author has gone native and now lives the reality of black aging. As Richard Glaubman puts it the interview I have already discussed above, "I was living [George Dawson's] life" ("Books at the Berkshire"). The bearer of white imagination is both on the stage and in the audience.

This going native, this moving into "black life" by a white co-author is apparent at yet another moment in narratives such as *Life Is So Good*. At moments in the text where the narrative goes out of its way to establish its own authenticity, the black centenarian is made to speak in use African American English. This manner of speech, in the narrative of a black centenarian written by a white co-author, serves a number of purposes at once. First, it serves to stress the centenarian's *blackness*. The use of the vernacular reinforces the autobiography's claim to authenticity: The vernacular is meant to indicate that in the pages of this narrative, it is really a black man's voice that we hear. The vernacular is thus intended to signal to the reader that the co-writer is entirely absent from the text, and that he has not even edited the centenarian's own narrative. To the extent that vernacular usage has not been "edited out" by the white co-author, the autobiography is "real." Secondly, the use of the vernacular may indicate not only that the centenarian is of a different ethnic background, but also from another class. In *Life Is So Good*, George Dawson is marked as "different" both in racial and in class terms.

What effect, then, does the element of didacticism have on the relationship between a co-author and "his" centenarian? Once again, there is a parallel to the parameters of ethnography here. In the history of ethnography, in a framework which is now outdated, there was often a hierarchy embedded into the interaction between the ethnographer and the native informant. In this framework, the

native provided "data," descriptions of lived experience which the ethnographer would eagerly record. Yet, it was assumed in this framework that the native himself lacked the ability or knowledge to make sense of these data. His was an ant's perspective of his own culture, so to speak, while the ethnographer had the bird's eye view. As the ethnographic thesaurus describes this form of "armchair ethnography," "Fieldwork done through reading and speculation, rather than through any interaction with the culture under study" ("Armchair Ethnography"). In a sense, the ethnographer approached the native to explain to him his own culture, a culture of which, given his much too detailed, close-up view of the environment in which he lived, the native alone allegedly could not make sense. As Ola Abdalkafor observes, "the label 'native informant' is conventionally used in ethnography to describe indigenous people who provide information about non-western societies to western ethnographers" (9). What would it imply, then, if we applied this ethnographic paradigm to the life writing of the oldest-old? To what extent, in other words, is the middle-aged co-author the "armchair ethnographer" or participant observer in the country of extreme longevity?

The logics of ethnographic observation, it could be argued, may be present in centenarians' autobiographies in two interrelated ways. First, centenarians like George Dawson may have experienced the past, but they may not have the education necessary to make sense of these events, even in historical retrospect. This assumption, at least, is implied in the didactic insertions, by the co-author, into the centenarian's eye-witness narrative of the past. The centenarian can thus supply the co-author/historian/ethnographer with data – the lived experience of the past –, which the former then uses to flesh out his own theory of historical events and circumstances. This relationship between data and theory, moreover, is inflected in yet another sense in the case of black centenarians' autobiographies written by white co-authors. Not only does the co-author as historian have the theory but lacks the experience, but the centenarian as historical native provides his learned interlocutor with an inside view of black history. Not only has the centenarian lived history rather than read about it, but he provides his white co-author with a glimpse of *black history from below*. As an ethnographer looking for the truly different, the co-author can immerse himself in two worlds at one and the same time. First, he follows the centenarian into the past, which is all the more alien to him because as black history, it is a past not his own.

9.7 Centenarian Puppets and Their Puppet Master? The Politics of Co-Authorship

This book is interested, then, in the curious relationship between the centenarian puppet and its puppet master: Who, in other words, gets the credit of the centenarians’ autobiographies? My contention here is that the centenarian’s credit, seen through the logic of centenarians’ autobiographies, is his longevity; the puppet master cum co-author, however, gets the credit for the centenarian’s *autobiography*. One of the ideas which I explore in this book, then, is the curious assemblage of paratexts and promotional narratives which surround the centenarians’ autobiographies, and, more often than not, which can be said to contradict it. What is the tension, in other words, between the centenarian’s autobiography – and the assertion of the non-hierarchical collaboration between the co-author and “his” centenarian – and the co-author’s self-promotion on his website? Richard Glaubman’s self-narration on his website may hence reveal the extent of his puppet mastery. Before he “found” George Dawson, the centenarian, this narrative holds, Glaubman was an “author” waiting to be discovered (“Richard Glaubman”). There is a curious Sleeping Beauty metaphoricity at work here: Who precisely is awakened from slumber by whom? Who precisely discovers whom, for what reasons, and for whose benefit? As Glaubman’s website advertises, he made his living as an elementary school teacher before he discovered George Dawson, the centenarian whom he would turn into a celebrity by writing down his story. But what, I would like to ask here, are the politics of stardom here? There is a twofold sense of stardom, of celebrity status at work here. First, in the cultural climate saturated by life sciences discourse on longevity, the centenarian becomes both a curiosity and a celebrity by virtue of her sheer longevity and, even more importantly, her healthy longevity. As Sarah Delany points out,

> Folks ask me why I’ve lived such a long and happy life . . . . Another reason is the way we live – exercise, eating lots of fruits and vegetables, no smoking, things like that. Plenty of folks want to know what makes us tick, don’t they, Bessie? I remember how doctors suggested that we leave our bodies to science so they could try to figure us out . . . . The doctor got right to the point. She said she was in charge of some kind of “brain project” and wanted our brains after we died! (*Everyday Wisom* 52)

Second, however, what this logic of reading the centenarian’s autobiography with the grain – and the logic of its marketing – implies is that in tandem with the centenarian becoming a celebrity, the stardom of the co-author is born. There is a sense, then, in which the centenarian’s autobiography is almost parasitical: the co-author needs the centenarian in order to be “reborn” as an author. Prior to the “arrival” of the centenarian, he is an author without a topic; indeed, he is an au-

thor without a book and can hence be said to be a sleeping author, a sleeping beauty author, at best.

The photograph used on Glaubman's website may be a case in point here: In the photograph, Glaubman is standing behind "his" centenarian, hands on George Dawson's shoulder. Yet, given the complex politics of writing and of co-authoring longevity, how are we to interpret this gesture? I believe that the complexity of the gesture cannot easily be resolved; it is a gesture of support – the co-author "helps" the centenarian's narrative to take shape; it may also be the gesture, however, of a puppet master propping up his puppet for the next performance; a puppet without which the puppet master cum director simply has no career, and does not have a narrative. In co-authoring the centenarian's autobiography, then, the co-author literally authors himself; it is through the puppet that the puppet master comes into being, and not vice versa. This paradox I believe, is at the heart of centenarians' autobiographies. As Richard Glaubman recalls in an interview, he was at first conflicted about writing a black centenarian's story from a first-person perspective:

> Richard Glaubman: Those were the hard parts for me, and one of the reasons I didn't get started for the longest time was that I couldn't get a handle on how to do this book, I certainly wasn't going to write it in the first person, being that he's a black man aged one hundred, growing up in the South, in a heavily Christian area, and I'm Jewish, I was born in the North East, lived a middle-class life. We had nothing in common, to say the least, and it would be presumptuous to write in the first person.
>
> Marilyn Smith Layton: First person Richard Glaubman?
>
> Richard Glaubman: No, first person George Dawson. It just didn't seem right.
>
> Marilyn Smith Layton: But that's how you finally did it.
>
> Richard Glaubman: That's how I finally did it . . . . Another author told me, it's not about the writing, it's about the story, just do it. And I thought, that's pretty simple . . . I started writing, and I didn't really have a plan, and it sort of came out as first person as if George Dawson was speaking. ("Books at the Berkshire")

This passage, it could be argued, turns the concept of autobiography on its head. Seen from this perspective, *Life Is So Good* is Richard Glaubman's biography of George Dawson, not the black centenarian's *auto*biography. Throughout these chapters, I have argued that centenarians' autobiographies may tell us more about us than about the centenarians themselves. Our desire, as it informs the literary marketplace, may thus make us yearn for the centenarian's self-authored narrative; in this desire, we may want to overlook the actual process of writing. The passage quoted above clearly seems to indicate that *Life Is So Good* is not in

fact an autobiography, based as it is on conversations between Glaubman and George Dawson:

> Marilyn Smith Layton: Did you have a lot of material from him on tape at this point?
>
> Richard Glaubman: Well, I didn't envision the story being like this, I thought I had enough, I just started . . . [After about six weeks], I had a manuscript, maybe 70 or 80 pages. And I thought, I'll go back, I have some questions . . . . ("Books at the Berkshire")

Life Is So Good may thus be a biography of the centenarian's life, based on the material that Glaubman had collected when interviewing the centenarian. It is here, too, that the concept of the as-told-to-autobiography recurs, which so commonly informed white-native relations in the early twentieth century. According to Arnold Krupat,

> these texts are the end-products of a rather complex process involving a . . . collaboration between a white editor-amanuensis who edits, polishes, revises and otherwise fixes the "form" of the text in writing, a Native "subject" whose orally presented life story serves as the "content" of the autobiographical narrative . . . . (3)

What underlies these "autobiographies" is the desire for the native to speak on his own terms; yet, it is the mediation which can in fact be said to dictate and transform (if not distort) these terms. By the same token, what we have in *Life Is So Good* may be a white, middle-aged version of a black centenarian's life: a biography rather than an autobiography.

I am interested in the multiple ways in which we can read *Life Is So Good* as a co-authored autobiography, and in the ways in which each of these readings may in some way be misleading. To approach the text as an autobiography, thus downplaying the role of the co-author, I would submit, may itself be to fall into a trap set up for us by the complex ways in which – both culturally and economically – this narrative has been framed. I believe that autobiography or life writing research may so far have been reluctant to address both co-authorship and the economic politics of the production of life writing narratives. What, for instance, is the role of the publisher in this economy? I believe that in the case of *Life Is So Good*, the general public may actually be one step ahead of the literary critic. While the logic of autobiography research, I would argue, may read into the text the presence – indeed, the authenticity – of the centenarian in this co-authored narrative, average readers have refused not to focus on the person – and not just the presence – of the co-author and his role in what they see as "manipulating the text." As one reader puts it, then, Richard Glaubman as the co-author (or even, at worst, the sole author) of *Life Is So Good* is actually the "elephant in the living room" – he is the presence which, for all its obviousness, and obvious intrusion

into the text, we refuse to see. The elephant in the room as a metaphor is curiously akin to the idea of the puppet master; his strings too, may be obvious, yet we may refuse to see them. One of the questions which I am interested in in this book, then, is what the mechanisms are behind this practice or habit of unseeing the strings of the puppet master, or of acknowledging the elephant in the living room.

What is at stake, then, in a white man doing black age in the act of writing a black man's autobiography, or at least, in co-authoring it? The problem of co-authorship thus hinges on the idea of presence. Just how 'present' is the centenarian in his autobiography? My point in this book is that this question is by no means an absurd one; rather, it may point to the core of what might be called the literary economics of aging and longevity. Who stands to gain, then, from marketing this narrative?

And to what extent does the actual presence – narrative rather than physical – of the centenarian have to be erased in order to assure his marketability? The curious point to be made here, I believe, is the necessity of disentangling the centenarian's physical presence from his narrative presence within his text, or the narrative which purports to be about his life: In order for the minstrel show of old age, the industry revolving around the centenarian to continue, the centenarian has to be bodily present, and as cynical as this may sound, he has to be alive. Publishing the centenarian's autobiography, in turn, has been described as a race against time. It is the physical presence of the centenarian, then, which serves to legitimate both within the text and in marketing appearances, the voice of the co-author and the "authenticity" of his text.

As the case of Richard Glaubman indicates, the co-author can appear alone on talk shows, but he nonetheless has to gesture towards the centenarian's presence off-screen. As Glaubman has it,

> Richard Glaubman has appeared on CBS Sunday Morning, Good Morning America, The Discovery Health Channel, and numerous regional television and radion stations. His book has been reviewed by the New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, USA Today, The Washington Post, The LA Times, The Seattle Post Intelligencer and The Dallas Morning News, as well as many other publications. It has been a selection of both the Book of the Month Club and the Literary Guild.
>
> By the Charter of the University of the State of New York, the New School University awarded him a doctorate of Human Letters "for outstanding achievement in the service of humankind." And, *Life Is So Good* won the Christopher Award for writers whose work "affirms the highest values of the human spirit." ("Richard Glaubman")

This industry revolving around the centenarian's life, then, will be cut short only by his death – or so it would seem. As the case of Richard Glaubman indicates, however, this is only partly true, as paradoxical as this may sound: After the cen-

tenarian has passed on, there needs to be a shift in medium as autobiographical production has of necessity come to a hold: the "George Dawson industry" can continue after the centenarian's passing, then, by turning the autobiography into a play: Crucially, in a drama about anyone's life, this role of the protagonist is rarely played by the "object" of the drama itself. There is bound to be an actor playing the part. For once, the strings of the puppet master can thus be made visible; there is no longer a need to conceal his hand. What interests me here is a continuing decrease of the presence of the centenarian: he may still linger in the pages of his autobiography, but he is completely absent from the play which the co-author proceeds to put on about his life. As Glaubman's website informs us,

> Agreement has been reached for EBZT productions to produce a theatrical production of LISG [Life Is So Good]. Starting in October, 2008, the play is scheduled for some fixed venues, but also will be on tour at selected high schools. If you are interested in information for the location of the play or to have it produced at your school, check with EBZB Productions. ("Projects")

Yet, it could be argued that there is a limit to how long the longevity industry can continue after the centenarian's death. Just how many sequels can his autobiography have, on stage or off? Given the marked age difference between the co-author and "his" centenarian, moreover, this form of cultural and economic production is bound to be parasitical: the co-author will thrive long after the object of his work has passed on; and he may thrive precisely because of this "object" in the first place. As in any symbiotic process, moreover, the co-author may move on to look for a different "host": Many co-authors of centenarians' autobiographies have made their career writing multiple centenarians' autobiographies: After one centenarian's passing, the co-author will look for another centenarian whose autobiography has not yet been written; there is thus literally a hunt for centenarians. As demographically the number of centenarians has been increasing in Western industrialized countries, moreover, there will be no shortage of work for prospective co-authors.

What is at stake in this context, then, is the relationship between the "original" centenarian's narrative and the "sequels" that follow it. Thus, following the success of the co-written autobiography of the Delany sisters, *Having Our Say*, the life writing narrative was turned into a movie, whose script was similarly co-authored by Amy Hill Hearth. Moreover, Hearth also co-wrote *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*. As I have argued in Chapter 5, centenarians' autobiographies, even as they constitute forms of life writing, may also verge on other genres, especially the genre of advice literature. It may be for this reason, among others, that they may lend themselves particularly well as the basis for spin-offs: Thus, *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* may only render explicit a facet of centenarians' narratives that may also be present in the "original" autobiography,

Having Our Say. In a veritable confusion of genres, the autobiography may thus function as a poetry album or book of everyday wisdom, and the advice manual may also serve as a form of autobiography. Given this translation of a single life narrative (here, the joint life narrative of the Delany sisters), it seems hard not to conceive of the centenarian as the basis for an aging industry of sorts. It is here that the "serial" quality of the narratives, as well as their "fissuring out" into other genres, may also play a significant role. Following the publication of both autobiography and book of wisdom, Hearth went on to co-author another autobiography, this time of Sarah Delany after her sister Elizabeth had passed away, *On My Own at 107: My Life Without Bessie*.

From the co-author's perspective as it emerges in their narrative, this seriality of co-written autobiography would seem purely altruistic. It is the co-author, Amy Hill Hearth emphasizes time and again, it is her penmanship that enables the Delany sisters to "have their say." This co-authorship, however, leads to an output of narratives that, Hearth's claim to altruism notwithstanding, may also prove lucrative for the co-author's own career. As Hearth recollects in the preface to one of her subsequent books,

> *Having Our Say* turned out to be all-consuming in an unexpected but thoroughly delightful way . . . . To my surprise (and to the amazement of the publishing industry, which had rather low expectations for it) *Having Our Say* was on the New York Times bestseller list for a total of two years. I went on to write two more oral histories of the Delany sisters, in 1994 and 1997, and a children's book on them in 2003. In 1994–95, I worked on Broadway as an adviser on the theatrical adaptation of *Having Our Say*; in 1999, I was a consultant for the award-winning film adaptation. (*Strong Medicine* x)

It is significant here that Hearth should frame *Having Our Say* as an oral history rather than an autobiography; this is a blurring of lines to which I will return below. What emerges from this passage, however, is an idea that I have already traced in the preceding chapters: the idea that for the co-author, the recruiting of a centenarian – or, in Hearth's case, of centenarian sisters – may turn out to the pivot of the co-author's career. Yet, there is a sense in which a certain hierarchy of power may also be at play here: Is there a sense in which white co-authors "mine" the stories of ethnic centenarians for their own financial and career benefit? It is this idea of self-interest on the part of the co-author that is immediately dispelled, in all the autobiographies discussed in this study, by the notion of kinship. The co-author, after all, has come to be the centenarian's kin.

One idea that it may be interesting to consider in this context is the role of the reader. To what extent does the reader, too, become part of the centenarians' extended family? Precisely if, as I have argued in the introduction, the reader looks upon the centenarian as a role model or mirror of her future self, the "kinship"

which the co-author has developed with her centenarian subject may also be extended to the role of the reader. She, too, is drawn deeply into the centenarian's life.

Yet, my use of the image of the symbiosis may appear problematic, even cynical here. Yet, my aim is by no means to cast blame on a particular co-author; it is rather, to inquire into a particular politics of production and a deep-seated interest, at a particular point in time, in the enigma of longevity. The narratives and expectations we bring to the phenomenon of old age may thus be both "universal" (as human beings, we may be scared of becoming old and frail) and culturally specific. What is at stake in centenarians' autobiographies considered in this book may hence be both doing age and doing American age.

9.8 Black Griots and the Surrogacy of Aging

Thus, the relevance of race and ethnicity seem to be at the core of these aging narratives. Throughout this book, I am trying to argue that if age is the new frontier, then it is African Americans who function as what Toni Morrison has called a "serviceable figure": In how far, then, are African Americans surrogates who help a white public allay fears of extreme old age? Thus, this book also sets out to argue that "doing age" is culturally specific at a given moment in time; in this sense, what matters is not just that these are centenarians' autobiographies, but that they are *American* centenarians' autobiographies. What, then, are the politics of race as they intersect with the politics of age in centenarians' autobiographies? As Toni Morrison has argued, "white" Americans' cultural identity has been shaped by what she calls an "Africanist" presence (5). White lives, or white American lives, have hence defined themselves *against* black presences, onto whose bodies the white imagination has mapped cultural fears. There is at stake here a certain "outsourcing" of fear: Whatever the white imagination is grappling with at a certain moment in historical time, is mapped onto the body of a black presence. Seen from this perspective, the problem is not so much that these centenarians' autobiographies are doing age as much as they are doing race. The point is that they are doing age through doing race, or even more precise, that they are doing white age through black bodies. Black centenarians assure a white audience that there is nothing to fear; that there is nothing horrendous or frightening about getting old. It may hence at first be surprising to read in the blurb of the Delany sisters' autobiography that these two black women centenarians are "griots." As the blurb has it, this centenarians' autobiography is "an oral tale in the tradition of African 'griots.' The sisters are lively storytellers capable of taking you on a journey through American history without lulling you to sleep" (*Having Our Say* np). This passage evokes the genealogy of an *African* folk tradition, that

of oral storytelling and women griots. Yet, there may be a certain primitivism here as “Africa” is nowhere to be found in the Delany sisters’ *Having Our Say*; what may be at stake, rather, is that in the reviewer’s eye, there is a certain primitivism, what Morrison terms an Africanist presence, which informs the politics of *reading*. It is these politics of reading, in turn, which may be interwoven into politics of writing a centenarian’s autobiography, precisely because these oral narratives are co-written by (white) co-authors. It is not so much or not only that, as Patricia Macauley has suggested, that the editing and revising by these co-authors makes the narrative more palatable to a wider audience, but that they may introduce into these narratives the specter of white imagination. The review quoted above is a telling one in this context. What may be at stake here is not so much a griot in the African folk tradition, but a nurturing presence telling a bewildered white audience that there is nothing to fear. In what sense are these black women centenarians mammy figures lulling a white audience to sleep? Pace the review, the point is not that these centenarians’ autobiographies are not entertaining, being so eventless as to lull their audience to sleep, but that they reassure a white, middle-aged readership that aging need not be feared as a nightmare. It is here that the cultural politics of aging may be different from mere demographic shift: Even if statistically, the number of unmarried women among centenarians is relatively high, the point here may be that for a white American readership, there may be something deeply reassuring about a black centenarian storyteller paving the way into (benign) old age. The point, then, is not so much that autobiographies such as the Delany sisters’ *Having Our Say* portray the African American experience, but that they portray the African American experience as a *stand-in* for white aging. As another review reprinted on the book’s blurb has it, “The Delany sisters recall their remarkable lives, spanning more than a century of the African American experience” (np). The point, then, is not only that there can never be such a monolithic concept as “the” African American experience, but that there is a complete absence, in this reviewer’s praise, of white imagination as it learns from the black experience of aging. What is more, it is at this juncture that biomedicine may be back in the picture, after all. Cynically speaking, if these black centenarians managed to live to 100 without health care, how much older might a white middle class reader expect to get?

What emerges in this context, then, is that the fears which may underlie the publication of these books may be *white* fears in particular. If indeed the co-authors can be read as surrogates or stand-ins of a larger reading public, then it is no coincidence that as I will elaborate below, these white co-authors turn to ethnic others – the African American centenarian, the Native elder – to help them allay their fears. It is significant, I would like to argue here, that the notion of adoption becomes an underlying theme in both Richard Glaubman’s and Amy

Hill Hearth's co-authoring not only the autobiographies of African American centenarians but also of Native Americans that are framed as "elders."

What may seem significant, then, is that both co-written centenarians' narratives and the life narratives of Native Americans that were subsequently co-authored by Glaubman and Hill Hearth feature passages that can be read as adoption narratives. Not only does Dawson refer to Glaubman as "son," in a vernacular way of speaking that, in the context which I am trying to explore here, may take on a deeper meaning, but Hearth, too, portrays her relationship to Strong Medicine, a Native American elder, as a form of kinship. In both cases, I would suggest, these references to kinship also serve as a legitimation of co-authorship. This legitimation, in turn, serves to blur the line between autobiography and biography.

9.9 Stories about Ethnic Aging for White Eyes

What does this mean, moreover, for the politics of white desire as they emerge from the pages of centenarians' autobiographies? If at the turn of the twentieth century, there is a widespread desire for roots, as Americans of all heritages embark on what Matthew Frye Jacobson has called a "roots trip," then some Americans, it could be suggested, are left without any story to tell.

As Ian Haney López writes in his book *White by Law*, "Whiteness describes, from Little Big Horn to Simi Valley, not a culture, but the absence of culture. It is an empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't" (168). In a climate where the US is suddenly defined by a resurgence of ethnic histories, white Americans suddenly seem to have no story to tell. Even more dramatically, the only story which they may have to tell is one of guilt and shame (Jacobson 2006). As Matthew Frye Jacobson observes,

> The leader of an antiracism workshop in the 1990s once noted a disquieting inclination on the part of the group's white participants to dissociate themselves from the history and persistent reality of white privilege by emphasizing some purportedly not-quite-white ethnic background. "I'm not white; I'm Italian," one would say. Another, "I'm Jewish." After this ripple had made its way across the group, the seminar leader was left wondering, "What happened to all the white people who were here just a minute ago?" (1–2)

In the post-Civil Rights era, as Jacobson notes, whiteness may thus have no story to tell because the only story it might tell would be that of historical guilt. Moreover, in the age of multiculturalism, ethnicity may just be so much more interesting than plain whiteness. As Ruth Frankenberg has observed, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, white middle-class women experienced their own identity as a void (Frankenberg 1993): As Donna Haraway writes in her discussion of the

late Ruth Frankenberg's groundbreaking inquiry into the nature of whiteness, the thirty white, middle-class women interviewed by Frankenberg found themselves at a loss to describe their own identity:

> whiteness seemed empty to them, the realm of Wonder Bread, Heinz salad cream or Kleenex, and racial others seemed full of culture, good food, lots of history, and, of course, racial problems.
>
> Whiteness was a self-invisible norm that many of the women could not identify with; to identify as white in any concrete way seemed racist to most of them. (np)

What would it mean, then, to map this moment of white anxiety onto the politics of centenarians' autobiographies? It could be argued that in these autobiographies in which white co-authors discover their centenarian subjects' black past, both these moments converge: First, if indeed white subjects, after the Civil Rights Movement, find themselves without a story to tell, they may turn to *black* narratives for solace. Second, if the only stories they may have to tell about their own past are shameful ones given the history of white racism, they may choose to distance themselves from their own ethnic identity and join their black interlocutors in castigating whiteness. The process which Jacobson has described as "white ethnic revival" (Jacobson 2006) may thus also inform centenarians' autobiographies. Jacobson notes that at the moment when "white" stories could no longer be told, whiteness itself came to be differentiated into myriads of shades. In a political and social climate where no one wanted to continue to be white, whiteness was re-differentiated into Italian American, Greek Americanness, Irish Americanness and so on. If historically, the twentieth century had been characterized by a desire, on the part of these ethnic groups, to "become white," this process was now reversed. What, however, of those Americans whose roots simply seemed beyond recovery? Centenarians' autobiographies suggest that there may yet be another option: the solution of simply becoming black. As with other forms of "going native," the white subject simply immerses himself into an ethnic world altogether different from his own.

Moreover, the co-author's potential "racechange," to use Susan Gubar's term (Gubar 1997), becomes all the more credible because with her, the centenarian can truly "speak her mind." It is in this sense that it is particularly apt that the Delany sisters' autobiography, co-written with Amy Hill Hearth, should be entitled *Having Our Say*. The point implicit in this title is not only that the centenarian finally gets to speak, but that a black centenarian is finally enabled to speak up about white racism. The credibility of the white co-author, and her invisibility, is enhanced by the idea that in speaking about the white racism they have experienced in the past, the black centenarian sisters speak to their co-author *as if she were one of their own*. Centenarians' autobiographies, in instances in which they

involve white co-authorship of “black” narratives, are thus characterized by a deliberate effacing of the co-author’s racial make-up: In the exchange with her centenarian subjects, the co-author alternately becomes colorless, changing her own ethnicity in the process of being adopted into the centenarians’ family, or assumes a black voice. What is missing from these co-written accounts of a history of white racism as it emerges from black centenarians’ accounts of their own past, then, is any element of accusation. This shameful history of whiteness, the centenarians’ narratives seem to imply, is by no means the co-author’s own. In this sense, cross-racial centenarians’ autobiographies may be born of a white desire for black stories.

In the case of centenarians’ autobiographies, the politics of race are mapped onto those of age. In the pages of these narratives, co-authors distance themselves from their own identities in two interrelated ways: First, they assume a black voice, and are indignant about white racism in unison with their black subjects. Second, they read and write the story of extreme longevity by imaginatively putting themselves in their black centenarian subject’s shoes. In these narratives, the centenarian informants act out what it means to be black, and what it means to be extremely old. This acting out, however, it itself masterminded, edited or even devised, by the white co-author herself. As in the case of the as-told-to-autobiographies which centenarians’ autobiographies so resemble, then, it is a middle-aged person’s idea of old age that we may get, and a white woman’s image of a black woman’s life.

In order to unpack the politics of racial desire, then, it may be instructive to inquire into the co-author’s subsequent work following her writing of black centenarians’ narratives. In the case of Amy Hill Hearth, it is interesting to note that after finishing the Delany sisters’ autobiography as well as some of its sequels, Hearth turned to Native American culture, similarly in search of ethnic role models as inspirations for her own future. This time, her native interlocutor may not quite have been a centenarian, but at 86, she was an elder in her Native American community. What impressed Hearth about this Native American woman elder, by her own account, was the strength of this woman’s voice. As Hearth writes in the preface, “This book is a rare look, from the inside, at contemporary Native American life as experienced by one tribe and, in particular, one particular member of that tribe, a woman Elder named Strong Medicine” (*Strong Medicine* ix).

It could be argued that Hearth’s prior co-written autobiography *Having Our Say* may be read through the prism of her subsequent account *Strong Medicine Speaks*. In both instances, the role of ethnography looms large: these are journeys both into the country of extreme old age and into ethnic territory. If, as I am arguing throughout this book, the function of these autobiographies is to help us cope with aging societies, with what it may mean to live into old age, then this country of the oldest-old is at once fascinating and frightening. Even more importantly,

however, it is ethnic voices that are used as surrogates through which white co-authors (and, by implication, white readers) may make sense of the challenge of growing old.

It is in the light of these observations that we may view the parallels between *Having Our Say* and *Strong Medicine Speaks*. In each case, the white co-author explicitly admires the "ethnic" woman's ability to speak her mind. If in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, white subjects have been deprived of a story to tell, they may be all the more enamored of "ethnic" stories. In this framework, once again in keeping with the politics of the minstrel show, the ethnic subject becomes both a surrogate and a role model. Moreover, the loss of "white" stories may acquire yet another twist in the context of aging. In the field of history, whiteness may no longer have a legitimate story to tell. Instead of traditions to be proud of, it is left only with a void. In the arena of aging, however, this void may be even more pronounced. To the extent that white subjects find themselves without traditions or role models of their own, with the loss of extended family or regional roots, they may be in dire need of alternative stories about aging. It is these stories which the ethnic women whose narratives they set out to co-author, if not to write, seem to provide. In their desire to age successfully, and to live to one hundred, white co-authors never seem to refer to their own families. In the case of Richard Glaubman, these family relations seem to be characterized by a certain lack of intimacy. This is a void which the adoptive kinship to the black centenarian may serve to fill.

In exploring centenarians' autobiographies, we may hence do well to read these narratives against the grain by restoring the links which the narratives themselves go out of their way to obfuscate. Virtually all centenarians' autobiographies insist that the relationship between the co-author and his centenarian is not only a consensual one, but a relationship marked by friendship and even kinship.

Yet, in the preface of *Strong Medicine Speaks*, the reader is surprised by an astonishing revelation. In *Having Our Say*, arguably, Amy Hill Hearth, the white co-author of the Delany sisters' autobiography, can be said to "go native" as she moved into the black space of the centenarian sisters' life. This "going native," it could be suggested, is at the same time curiously at odds with the reiteration, made time and again in the narrative, that "color" or racial difference played no role at all in co-authoring this narrative (Delany and Delany 1994). In the era of aging societies, then, white publics may need black or ethnic centenarians to act as surrogates for imagining what old age, and especially extreme old age, may be like. After moving into the life of two centenarian sisters in *Having Our Say*, then, Amy Hill Hearth proceeded to move into the life of a Native elder, Strong Medi-

cine. In this journey into the territory of Native aging, however, the white co-author makes a surprising discovery. As Hearth writes in the preface,

> Until a few years ago, when my father came across information about Mary [a Native American woman living in the 17th century], I had assumed I was 100 percent white. My ancestors on my father's side came from England twelve generations ago, arriving in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1635 and possibly earlier. Another branch of the family tree includes a rather famous tale of a Dutch woman who arrived in America at Sandy Hook, New Jersey, around 1640. (She arrived via shipwreck). They sound like bluebloods, but in actuality, they were a scrappy bunch – judging from early Colonial court records that detail their various transgressions, which include insulting Governor Peter Stuyvesant by claiming that he took bribes. You couldn't ask for a more intriguing set of ancestors. Finding out about Mary, however, was especially tantalizing. As a journalist by training, my first instinct was to research the Leni-Lenape Indians. Who were they? Where have they gone? Why do we not hear more about them? (*Strong Medicine* x)

Here, we could argue that whiteness can have its cake and eat it, too: Amy Hill Hearth traces her own ancestry back to the Founding Fathers, and hence cements her claim to whiteness. At the same time, however, she does not need to fear the guilt that may accompany this history of whiteness. Owing to her father's discovery, Hearth can now also lay claim to her Native roots. In keeping with Jacobson's description of white ethnic revival, Heath is thus no longer white: She can trace her genealogy back to a 17^{th-}century ancestor, and is now safely Native American. This may also lead us to re-read *Having Our Say* in a different light: the narrative would now seem to be a black-native co-production. Yet, what this stance would seem to efface is precisely the privilege of whiteness: Despite her 17^{th-}century ancestor, Hearth can in fact still said to be white, with all the privilege that this would entail. Moreover, even the white "bluebloods" in Hearth's ancestry, she emphasizes, were not really privileged, since through insulting Peter Stuyvesant, they were almost outlaws.

This search for one's own genealogy, moreover, may also cast a different light on co-written autobiographies: In how far, we may ask, is this moving into black centenarians' or native elders' lives an ancestor search by white, middle-aged co-authors? What desires, not only about age but also about race, are met by these narratives? The idea of whiteness having its cake and eating it, too, could not be more pronounced than in the paragraph cited above. In her account, Hearth lays out her white privilege in minute detail, from the Founding Fathers to her Dutch ancestry. Yet, in keeping with Jacobson's observation about the practice of white ethnic revival, Hearth does not need to fear the guilt that may come with such settler colonial genealogies. She is, after all, part native.

What may be even more surprising, if not disquieting with regard to the politics of race that underly co-written autobiographies, Hearth implies in the preface

that she may have known about her "native" ancestry even at the time of writing *Having Our Say*. This seems all the more surprising – and significant – because *Having Our Say* pivots on the idea of a white woman writing black women's lives. In the marketing, the writing and the framing of centenarians' autobiographies, then, racial difference seems key. As a white woman, Hearth could translate black centenarian sisters' lives for a wider public. How would this account have been different had Hearth already "come out" as part native even when *Having Our Say* was first published? As she writes in the preface to *Strong Medicine Speaks*,

> Alas, my investigation [of my native ancestry] would have to wait. At the time of my father's discovery, I was fully preoccupied with my first book, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First Hundred Years* (1993). An oral history of two sisters, the daughters of a man born into slavery, *Having Our Say* grew from a feature article for the *New York Times* in 1991. (x)

I have argued throughout these chapters that as demographics change and societies have increasingly become "aging societies," there may be a need for ethnic surrogates, through whom we may come to imagine what it feels like to grow into old age, even extreme old age. In the work of co-author Amy Hill Hearth, then, these ethnic surrogates, it could be argued, are both African American and Native American. In 1993, as I have outlined above, Amy Hill Hearth "discovers" that in the 17th century, she had a Native American ancestor; in 2008, she proceeds to write the biography of a native elder, *Strong Medicine Speaks.* In her career as the co-author of the (auto)biographies of the oldest old, Hearth has thus gone from "black" to "native," involving both black centenarians and native elders as role models for "aging well." Even more intriguingly, there is a direct link or intertextual connection between these two (auto)biographies about ethnic aging. The subtitle of *Strong Medicine Speaks*, incidentally, is *A Native American Elder Has Her Say*. In both cases, then, it is the white co-author who enables the ethnic "elder" to speak her mind or have her say. Or rather, if we follow Hearth's own train of thought and her own self-positioning, a woman who defines herself as part native comes to co-author first, the autobiography of two African American centenarian sisters and then the life narrative of a Native American elder. What all this implies, I would posit, is that in the contemporary US American cultural imagination, race and age are strongly intertwined.

At the same time, it may also be interesting to note that while *Having Our Say* is framed as an autobiography, for all the reasons I have outlined in the preceding chapters, *Strong Medicine Speaks* is defined on the book's cover as an "oral history." This genre reference is significant for a number of ways. First, it could be argued that this difference in genre – the difference between *Having Our Say* and *Strong Medicine Speaks* – is more apparent than real: In *Having Our Say*, the

line between autobiography and biography was already blurred, because Hearth wrote down the actual text from the notes she had made during the conversations with the Delany sisters. Moreover, *Having Our Say*, too, contains traces of oral history, since many of the chapters are prefaced with references to the historical contexts to which the chapters refer. In this sense, we may well come to re-read *Having Our Say* in light of the subsequent *Strong Medicine Speaks*: the latter text may alert us to features that the prior autobiography has had all along, but which we may have failed to notice. In any case, however, regardless of the difference between biography and autobiography, it is through ethnic surrogates that we are invited to imagine what it may mean to grow old, and to grow successfully old. In the development from *Having Our Say* to *Strong Medicine Speaks*, then, co-author Amy Hill Hearth has moved from positioning herself as a white woman (in co-writing the Delany sisters’ autobiography *Having Our Say*) to “outing” herself as part Native American. It must be noted, however, that this quest for a native ancestor is quite common in contemporary US American culture. Hearth’s redefining herself as part native, moreover, is clearly in line with what Matthew Frye Jacobson has termed “white ethnic revival”: In contemporary US culture, no-one wants to be “just” white. It is in the light of Hearth’s own “race-change” (Gubar 1997), then, that we may also want to reconsider the notion of colorblindness which permeates *Having Our Say* to such a great extent. In this autobiography, Hearth asserted, time and again, that color did not play any role whatsoever; she became the Delany sisters’ confidante, regardless of the difference in race. Reading Hearth’s subsequent biography *Strong Medicine Speaks*, however, we find that there may actually not have been a need for colorblindness because Hearth was secretly native all along. By the time she wrote *Having Our Say*, she had already discovered her native ancestry through her father’s notes from the attic.

What is so surprising, almost uncanny, then, is that after writing the autobiography of George Dawson, the black Texan centenarian, Richard Glaubman, too, proceeded to write a Native American man’s biography. In 2018, Glaubman proceeded to co-write *Everything Is a Gift*, co-authored with John Joseph. This book is described on the blurb as follows:

> John Joseph’s life is explained by biographer Richard Glaubman in vibrant, simplistic and very touching ways by a man who has devoted himself to helping others. This is an outstanding memoir, somewhat in the style of *The Education of Little Tree*. We not only learn about the ancient trade language of the Mohawk people but also how certain Plains Indian medicine ways were adopted by John later in life. We learn about the Sun Ceremony and burial rites where the spirits of ancestors return to bless and propitiate the grave site. (np)

What is also fascinating to note in this dust jacket description is that biography and autobiography blur into each other, a factor that, as I argue throughout this study, can also be observed with regard to centenarians' autobiographies. The cover description refers to *Everything Is a Gift* as a memoir, an idea that is confirmed by John Joseph being listed as an author on the book's front page and cover. At the same time, however, Glaubman is mentioned as both co-author and biographer:

> A fascinating memoir of Mohawk native, John Joseph, who tells how he grew up speaking the ancient "trade language" of his people and living in the wilderness. His story of family, animals, and grandparents is deeply affecting, as is his time in Vietnam as a family nurse practitioner who saved many lives. Co-authored by biographer, Richard Glaubman. (np)

One of the questions that emerges in this context and that may also be relevant for the study of centenarians' autobiographies is the question of readership. Just for whom are these autobiographies written? It is significant here that *Everything Is a Gift* should be advertised through reference to *Life Is So Good*, thus linking not only two books written by Richard Glaubman, but also a black centenarians' life narrative to the (auto)biography of a man who is implicitly framed as a Native American elder: " 'A remarkable autobiography . . . the feel good story of the year.' The Christian Science Monitor on *Life is So Good*" (cover np). This, I argue throughout this study, is a key question when it comes to the reading and circulation of centenarians' autobiographies: Who precisely "feels good" when reading these life narratives? If we return to Jonas Jonasson's *The 100-Year-Old-Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared*, which I have discussed in Chapter 3, celebrating the centenarians' life may be a practice that benefits the guests more than the centenarian himself.

At the same time, self-celebration and whiteness may intersect in centenarians' autobiographies. The ethnic centenarian serves as a surrogate who dispels white fears of aging; and in co-telling stories of racism and poverty, white co-authors testify to the fact that they are in no ways complicit with structures of social inequality. Yet, there is a sense in which it is they who may hold the strings in telling the centenarian's story. To the extent that these narratives are biographies rather than autobiographies, what we may be reading, in fact, may be white stories about ethnic aging. In a ventriloquism of longevity, white authors assure us that old age is nothing to fear, that indeed, life can be good. What is so remarkable is that it would seem that on the US American book market, such reassurance must inevitably be made in an ethnic voice. "The subject of the dream," Morrison reminds us, "is the dreamer" (9). If centenarians' autobiographies are literally dreams, forms of wishful thinking of what it may mean to live to 100 and beyond, white co-authors may actually be talking to themselves about what it means to age well. As Morrison

notes, throughout US history, black bodies have served as a foil onto which both fears and desires were being projected. It is this projection, then, that may account for the fact that on the American book market, age is being imagined through black bodies, and – in the case of the narratives that both Amy Hill Hearth and Richard Glaubman published after finishing their centenarians’ autobiographies -, through Native American lives. Race and ethnicity, then, serve as prisms through which whiteness may reimagine itself. This may be as true for imagining age as it is for other spheres of life.

9.10 “Sign Up Your Favorite Centenarian”: Digital Recognition of Extreme Longevity

In order for the autobiographical pact of successful aging to be upheld, the centenarian’s autobiography must be distinct from the illness narrative. It may in fact constitute an anti-illness narrative; this antithetical quality may actually be one of its genre characteristics. What, however, of the hand of the co-author figuratively “propping up” the centenarian in order to invoke the illusion of both his presence and his agency? At their most problematic, centenarians’ autobiographies may contribute to an industry, even freak show of extreme old age, which is being maintained by middle-aged entrepreneurs, who turn aging narratives (which they co-produce) into both economic and cultural capital. What, then, is the connection between centenarians’ autobiographies, on the one hand, and the growing “aging industry,” on the other? When, moreover, does a mere celebration of the centenarian turn into an aging industry? There is a website run by Lynn Peters Adler, on which individuals can “sign up” their “favorite centenarian.” This, too, is a format in which centenarians can be celebrated, both by their loved ones and by society at large. The project is part of the “National Centenarian Awareness Project” (NCAP):

> Our Centenarian Network is a national registry database of 99 year olds and older. National Centenarian Awareness Project (NCAP), a nonprofit organization for which Lynn Peters Adler is the director, believes it is a great distinction to live to 100 years or more and honors all centenarians for this achievement and their contributions to our past. Additionally, NCAP celebrates these active centenarians as role models for the future of aging. NCAP also works with community entities to promote recognition of our eldest citizens. NCAP recognizes centenarians with a personalized certificate. (“Centenarian Registry”)

The claim I would like to make here is that there may in fact be a connection between this centenarian awareness website and the centenarians’ autobiographies discussed in this book. At the core of both formats there is the idea that

extreme longevity is itself an achievement, and an achievement that needs to be recognized. As a form of recognition, the published autobiography may in fact be highly similar to the certificate that is being awarded by the NCAP.

Both the certificate and the autobiography, moreover, are ultimately “promotional” texts: both “promote recognition of our eldest citizens,” as the website has it. Furthermore, at the center of both formats, there is the idea of recruitment. On the website run by Lynn Peters Adler, individuals can “sign up” “their” centenarian. Similarly, it is newspaper journalists or relatives who “advertise” their centenarian, who may eventually come to the attention of co-authors wanting to co-write an autobiography of the oldest-old. What is more, the terminology of recognition and achievement that the website evokes is entirely in line with the description of centenarians as “paragon[s] of positive aging” (Robine and Vaupel v). As the website puts it, centenarians are “the future of aging.” Finally and perhaps most importantly, the centenarians that can be signed up on the website need to be “active centenarians”; only then, the website implies, can they serve as “role models” to society at large. Even if the title of “successful aging” is not mentioned explicitly here, its characteristics can nonetheless be said to be present in every line of the website description.

It is also important to note that in this process of recognition, the centenarian themselves remain passive: It is not, in other words, the centenarian who signs up on the website in order to be widely recognized, but it is their relatives who sign them up. Moreover, the idea of “signing up” one’s “favorite” centenarian can be said to be a form of infantilizing the oldest-old, who have become almost a mascot of extreme longevity. As a number of critics have argued, this form of “infantilizing” older people is itself a form of ageism (King 2018). The politics underlying the website are thus quite similar to the practice of recruiting the centenarian, which I have discussed in Chapter 4. The website itself can be a form of recruiting – through “signing up” the centenarian. The point to be made here is that it is by no means the centenarian himself who covets this recognition. To evoke Jonas Jonasson’s fictional description of Allan, it is others who want to celebrate the centenarian’s one hundredth birthday, not the centenarian himself. The website’s call for centenarians runs as follows: “Has your favorite centenarian achieved 100 years of life? If so, request a Centenarian Certificate from National Centenarian Awareness Project. Click here to learn how to request a certificate” (“Centenarian Registry”). This call for recruitment, moreover, seems to entirely disregard the idea of consent. Does one have to ask one’s “favorite” centenarian whether they want to be “signed up”? Moreover, to once again return to *Der Hundertjährige, der aus dem Fenster stieg und verschwand,* this raises the question of who is being celebrated. The point may be, both in Jonasson’s novel and the website, that the guests are celebrating themselves, using the centenarian as a pretext, as I have suggested in Chapter 3. Just as the centenarian may not read or approve of the finished autobiography, is

there a sense here in which centenarians can retract their story once they have been signed up by their relatives? Do centenarians access Adler’s website?

It is also important to note here that just like the autobiographies, the website is well aware that the centenarian’s presence needs to be evoked. Just as the co-author cannot “celebrate” the centenarian fully in the absence of the story’s subject, the process of “signing up” the centenarian is complete only when centenarians’ voices are also included on the website. There is, after all, one rubric called “Centenarians Tell It Like It Is.” Moreover, just as Amy Hill Hearth and Richard Glaubman seem to be at the core of an entire “franchise” revolving around “their” centenarians – from Broadway plays to sequels to the original autobiographies –, the NCAP website, too, advertises Lynn Peters Adler’s own book about centenarians: “Excerpts from Lynn’s Book, Centenarians: The Bonus Years.” Finally, just like many of the titles of centenarians’ autobiographies, the website gestures to the idea of immortality. R. Waldo McBurney’s life narrative, after all, is called *My First Hundred Years*, implying – with a sense of self-irony – that one may well live to two hundred. In much the same vein, there is one rubric on the NCAP website that refers to the ABC feature “Live to be 150.” The website thus gestures to the idea that the human life span may be increased well beyond one hundred.

One aspect to be discussed in this context, moreover, is the identity of the one who masterminds this circulation of centenarians’ narratives. What credentials, for instance, does one need in order to co-author a centenarian’s narrative? Interestingly, both Amy Hill Hearth and Patricia Mulcahy are journalists, while Richard Glaubman is an elementary school teacher. These differences in qualification notwithstanding, however, the “credentials” these co-authors invoke in wanting to write or co-write a centenarian’s life narrative is their admiration for longevity. In other words, the “writing up” of the centenarian’s life account is not seen as related to one’s profession, but it is, rather, an altruistic mission that has nothing to do with fame or economic gain. This concept is also evoked in an interview with Richard Glaubman:

> Marilyn Smith Layton: You’ve been honored for the work that you’ve done on this book. Tell us about the wonderful awards that you’ve received.
>
> Richard Glaubman: Well, I’ve just really been fortunate, really blessed with this . . . And when the book came out, it was well received, and I didn’t just mean that in a commercial sense, in terms of sales, but the ideas and the thoughts in there seem to resonate with a lot of people. And there was a college in New York, the New School, gave both of us an honorary degree . . . We got the Christopher Award, . . . it’s awarded for literature and films that do something to improve the human spirit. (“Books at Berkshire”)

Where Layton evokes the idea of the co-author's getting recognition for the centenarian's narrative, Glaubman downplays the idea of economic gain as well as the career achievements constituted by multiple rewards. In lieu of such economic or professional recognition, Glaubman evokes his being "blessed" and having been recognized as someone who wants to "improve the human spirit." It is the co-author, then, who "improves the human spirit" with their narratives, not the centenarian themselves.

In quite a similar vein, the "credentials" that Lynn Peters Adler evokes as an explanation for curating the NCAP website is her love for her grandmother:

> When Lynn Peters Adler was 15 years old, she went shopping with her grandmother for her Christmas gift, a new winter coat. As Lynn's grandmother was completing the purchase, the saleswoman asked Lynn, "How does she want to pay for this?" Realizing that the saleswoman was ignoring her grandmother, Lynn replied, "Why don't you ask her?"
>
> On the bus ride home, Lynn's grandmother, who was in her 60s, remarked sadly, "No one wants to talk to you when you're old."
>
> Lynn began to pay attention after that and noticed that her grandmother was right; people did treat her differently, often indifferently, and sometimes even within the family. This struck Lynn as both wrong and unnecessary, and ever since that experience, she has made it her life's work to prevent the diminution of a person's stature in society due to advancing age, and to improve the quality of the daily lives of elders. The level of her activities evolved and matured as she has, and for the past 23 years, she has been involved full-time in this cause. ("About Lynn Peters Adler, J.D.")

The website's implicit agenda, then, is the fight against agism. And yet, it is important to note that celebrating the centenarian is never framed as a systemic critique. The aspect of systemic inequality or of agism being built into the social fabric is never explicitly mentioned, neither on the website nor in centenarians' autobiographies. Rather, it is the middle-aged who are celebrating their own vision of the oldest-old; yet, in celebrating "their" centenarians, they may ultimately be celebrating themselves. By signing up one's "favorite" centenarian, then, one can also public demonstrate one's love for older people; the act of signing up one's relative or neighbor may thus serve to celebrate one's own liberalism. The point to be made here, then, is that this act of recognition is not in and of itself automatically an altruistic one.

One of the arguments that could be proposed here is that there may in fact be a continuity between the website on the one hand, and centenarian autobiographies on the other: In both instances, the "credentials" of those who "sign up" the centenarian consist less in their expert knowledge about longevity, than in their relationship to the centenarian whose life they want to celebrate. Even as in the case of the website, this relationship is mostly one of kinship – the centenarian is registered by her children or grandchildren –, this difference to the co-

authors of centenarians' autobiography may be one in degree rather than in kind. As I have tried to show in this chapter, the co-authors, too, position themselves as close friend or even "found" relative of "their" centenarian. By linking centenarians' life narratives to websites such as Lynn Peters Adler's, this book investigates the continuity between different genres at a given moment in time; here too, the website illustrates that in reading centenarians' autobiographies (or looking at websites) we may learn more about the reader than the centenarian. If indeed we can speak of a hierarchy of stages of life, then the middle-aged may clearly be in control of the narratives they obtain from the centenarians.

10 Conclusion: Centenarians' Autobiographies as Master Narratives of Aging?

In this book, I have tried to read the contemporary discourse on aging and on extreme longevity in particular through the prism of centenarians' autobiographies. Such life writing narratives, I have suggested, may seem paradoxical. In a cultural climate where there has been a stress on perpetual youthfulness, no-one wants to age; yet everyone wants to become a centenarian. To return to the aging mirror described by Margaret Morganroth Gullette, which I have discussed in the introductory chapter, centenarians are the mirror images we would like to have once we grow old. The centenarians who are described in the narratives that I have analyzed here are emblematic of "successful aging" in a number of ways: they seem healthy, happy, resilient, unafraid of death, and completely at ease with themselves and the world. For them, as the title of George Dawson's co-authored autobiography has it, "life is so good." It is for this reason, then, that centenarians' autobiographies can also be linked to the riddle posed by the Wizard of Oz, which Christine Overall mentions in her study on longevity (*Aging, Death, and Human Longevity* 13): If indeed we were to live to 100, would this be the good or the bad news? Centenarians' autobiographies, I have suggested in this book, would assure us that this is indeed good news, and that old age is nothing to fear.

10.1 Successful Aging and the "New Jim Crow"

As this book has argued, there is a certain claim to universality of centenarians' autobiographies in their depiction of successful aging. As I have suggested throughout these chapters, these autobiographies can be seen in striking continuity with the medical model of "successful aging" proposed by Rowe and Kahn in 1997. Moreover, I have claimed that even though these narratives by centenarians fall into the field of life writing – straddling the boundary between autobiography and biography –, they strongly converge with other accounts about extreme longevity, from advice literature to cookbooks. All these considerations seem to imply that "successful aging," as Holstein and Minkler have cautioned, may indeed have become a "master narrative" of aging (787). Any other form of aging, by implication, seems to be a less successful one.

For this reason, it hence seems essential to read these centenarians' narrative not only with, but also against the grain. For an understanding of notions of aging as they circulate in American culture today, it is important not only to read the

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stories that centenarians' autobiographies tell, but also to wonder what stories are *not* told in this context. Precisely because centenarians' narratives are portrayed, both within the texts themselves and in the paratexts surrounding their publication, as "universal," they dismiss contexts of social inequality. What is even more disturbing, as I have argued in many of the preceding chapters, centenarians' autobiographies by black centenarians go out of their way to emphasize that race does not matter, that one can live to one hundred even under the most adverse of social and economic circumstances. What would it mean, then, to relate the autobiography of, for instance, George Dawson, to Michelle Alexander's idea of a new segregation at work in the US today? Alexander argues that given the fact that the majority of those incarcerated in the US are black men, the US may have evolved into a system of de-facto segregation, a "new Jim Crow." She goes on to say that what matters in the upholding of this segregation is not only the fact that those incarcerated are predominantly black, but also that even once they have been released from prison, they will not regain many of their civil rights. Alexander notes,

> Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination – employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits . . . – are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it. (2)

What, we might argue, would the "new Jim Crow" have to do with narratives about successful aging? I would like to claim at the close of this book that the two discourses may have more in common with each other than one might first think. Alexander's concept of the new segregation at work in the US today implies, even if this is not explicitly addressed, that there will be an infinitely greater amount of stress, of social anxiety, and of housing restrictions, and an infinitely lesser amount of employment opportunities and of social embeddedness available to large parts of the black population. All these factors, in turn, have been known to be averse to individual health and well-being. Not incidentally, the current Covid-19 pandemic has drawn attention to what has been termed the "twin pandemics" of racism and Covid-19. I would like to argue, then, that it is under such circumstances where the social fabric of the US, along with its legal and economic system, continues to be direly unequal, that the celebration of successful aging in black centenarian's narratives may in fact seem cynical. To the extent that these narratives reiterate, in an echo of Rowe and Kahn's notion of successful aging, that *anyone* can take control of their own aging process, they significantly downplay the systemic requirements of aging well. In the era of mass incarceration, of

police brutality and racial profiling, what would it mean or imply to speak of the universal availability of positive aging? As jarring as it might at first seem, what would it mean to juxtapose the killing of Trayvon Martin with the autobiography of George Dawson or the Delany sisters? Trayvon Martin was killed, at age 17, after walking home from the place of his father's fiancée; in his pocket, there was a packet of Skittles that he had just bought at a local store. When George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watchman, encountered him on the street, he thought that Martin looked "suspicious." In a time when a black youth is innocently killed due to a climate of racial paranoia fueled by the media (Alexander 2012), what would it mean to say that ours is a time when anyone can age successfully and live to 100, regardless of the color of their skin?

One of the points that I would like to make in closing, then, is that in reading centenarians' autobiographies, we have to be as conscious of what they say as of what they do not say. As the example of juxtaposing the discourse of successful aging and the Black Lives Matter movement illustrates, it may be important to recontextualize, for instance, narratives by black centenarians. At the core of these accounts, I have suggested in this book, there is the discourse of color-blindness. Both the co-authors and the centenarians quoted within these life narratives reiterate that "color" has nothing at all to do with aging, and with aging successfully. The Black Lives Matter movement, on the other hand, has highlighted the fact that we live in an era where black lives have not seemed to matter, where black youth could be killed through police violence and, until very recently, their killers could be acquitted. The point to be made here, then, is that we may need to "race" or "re-race" these narratives by black centenarians, and we need to resist the idea of successful aging as a master narrative. At a time when black youth are killed through police violence or neighborhood watchmen, and when a large part of the black male population is in prison, what would it mean to speak of the universal availability of successful aging? As Alexander notes, one in three black men will be imprisoned at least once in their lifetime (182). Seen from this perspective, George Dawson's life narrative, as admirable as it may be, would seem to be the exception rather than the rule. A report from the CDC from August 30, 2022, features the following statistics in the breakdown of life expectancy by ethnic groups:

> The data are featured in a new report, "Provisional Life Expectancy Estimates for 2021." The report shows non-Hispanic American Indian-Alaskan Native people (AIAN) had the biggest drop in life expectancy in 2021 – 1.9 years. AIAN people had a life expectancy at birth of 65.2 years in 2021 – equal to the life expectancy of the total U.S. population in 1944. AIAN life expectancy has declined 6.6 years from 2019 to 2021.
>
> Non-Hispanic white people in the United States had the second biggest decline in life expectancy in 2021 – one full year from 77.4 in 2020 to 76.4 in 2021. Non-Hispanic Black people

> had the third biggest decline, a 0.7 year drop from 71.5 years in 2020 to 70.8 in 2021. Life expectancy at birth in 2021 was the lowest for both groups since 1995. After a large (4.0 year) drop in life expectancy from 2019 to 2020, Hispanic people in the U.S. had a slight decline in 2021 of 0.2 years to 77.6 years. Life expectancy for non-Hispanic Asian people also dropped slightly in 2021 – 0.1 years – to 83.5 years, the highest life expectancy of any race/ethnic group included in this analysis. ("Life Expectancy")

Again, we might argue that at first sight, life expectancy data have nothing at all to do with the way in which we read centenarians' narratives. Yet, to insist on the separateness of these two entities – life writing narratives by centenarians, and the CDC report – would be to concur with the idea that centenarians' autobiographies can indeed be read independently from their cultural, social and economic context. However, in order to resist the main implications of these narratives – the idea that anyone can age successfully and live to 100 –, I would argue, it is paramount to contextualize centenarians' autobiographies. At a time when centenarians' narratives celebrate the fact that the model of successful aging is universal, that anyone can take their aging process into their own hands, life expectancy for American Indian-Alaskan Native people has dropped to where it was in 1944; and a white person in the U.S. will live significantly longer than a black person.

What may be needed in this context, moreover, may also be an intersectional reading: For a person to live in poverty, regardless of their ethnicity, will have significant consequences for both their life expectancy and their quality of life. In this context, it must be noted that except for George Dawson, who, according to his co-author Richard Glaubman, lived in a "shack," all of the centenarians whose autobiographies have been discussed in this book would seem to be middle-class. The Delany sisters were both professionals, having worked as a dentist and an educator, respectively; they were part of the African American elite. Similarly, Ann Nixon Cooper and Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson both were highly educated. This social status, if we read the life writing narratives against the grain, would seem to imply that successful aging needs to be socially contextualized and may not be available to all Americans on equal terms. As a recent study by the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR) notes, "There can be little doubt that it is the poor, the school dropouts, the victims of discrimination and unlucky genetic endowment who disproportionately die young. An increase in life expectancy and a decrease in inequality in life expectancy are important goals of health policy" ("Life Expectancy"). Even as genetic variance always has to be taken account, this study implies that social and economic factors will significantly influence age expectancy.

What would it mean, moreover, to read the successful aging narratives of George Dawson, the Delany sisters, Ann Nixon Cooper and Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson through the current black maternal mortality crisis? As of 2018, the likelihood

of a black woman to die from pregnancy-related causes was three to four times higher than for a white woman (Villarosa 2018). All these considerations suggest that the successful aging propagated and celebrated by these black centenarians' narratives is far from universal and is far from being universally available. Rather, these narratives would need to be carefully contextualized in order not to obfuscate the reality of social inequality in the US today.

10.2 The Promise of Immortality and the Reality of Social Inequality

At the same time, one of the dimensions that may make centenarians' autobiographies so fascinating is the implicit promise of immortality that they contain. After all, why should a number of these autobiographies, in their titles, refer to the idea that living to 100 may only be the beginning of what could be an even longer life? What would it mean, in other words, for R. Waldo McBurney to speak of "My First Hundred Years" and to argue that the Delany sisters have had their say during their "First Hundred Years," implying that another century may well be to follow? In this context, too, centenarians' autobiographies are closely aligned with similar discourses in the life sciences. The twenty-first century is a time when new developments in biomedicine have made it possible to extend human life further than it has ever been imaginable. In a 2017 article in the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, philosopher Wilhelm Schmid muses about a jellyfish that is in fact immortal:

> The jellyfish Turritopsis dohrnii is immortal. Soon humans could do the same . . . Developments on the market for eternities give us reason to suspect that things are getting serious. The most painful wound in the self-understanding of man ever since he attained consciousness is about to be closed, but this time, it is for real, not through the consolation in the afterlife, but through interventions in the this-worldly nature of man. For some time now, hopes have been directed at the telomeres, the ends of chromosomes that regulate cell renewal but are cut off with advancing age. Might they be reattached? Their discoverers were awarded the Nobel Prize in 2009, but the correlation between the length of the ends and the aging process has now been called into question. Never mind, a stem cell cure then! Pluripotent stem cells are believed to repair age-related damage, and they are abundantly present in young blood. In animal experiments, this biological refreshment, which can prolong life, has already been successful. Will this also be possible in humans, perhaps any time soon? (np; my translation)

If age is envisioned, in longitudinal studies in the life sciences and beyond, as the "last frontier," it may no longer seem impossible to link human life to the life of the one living organism that lives forever: the jellyfish Turritopsis dohrnii. What the celebratory tone accompanying accounts of new possibilities in biomedicine

may make us forget, however, is that these new biomedical developments may in fact serve to reinforce existing social inequalities. If indeed it will eventually become possible for human beings to extend their life span to, say, 120, such biomedical measures may be accessible to some and beyond the question for others. As Schmid goes on to observe, "And what about the universal justice that people of old saw in the fact that everyone must die in a foreseeable time? Gone! If for millennia, death sooner or later took the poor and the rich, the overcoming of death will only deepen the social divide" (np). Centenarians' autobiographies, on the other hand, are characterized by separating the biographical from the social. Precisely because the centenarians portrayed in the texts have "aged naturally" and have achieved the biblical age of 100 without the help of modern biomedicine, they completely dismiss the considerations outlined above.

To the extent that biomedical interventions into human longevity may eventually enable us to extend the human life span beyond what has hitherto seemed possible, however, such prolongation, given the exacerbation of social inequality, may be a possibility for some and a luxury for others. Not only does the majority of African Americans, the communities from which many of the centenarians come, not have access to state of the art medical care, but other factors may influence their life span as well. The stories told about black centenarians in the pages of *Life Is So Good* or *Having Our Say* are narratives about centenarians who happen to be black; they do not take into account, in other words, the notion of "black aging" (Schäfer 2021). As a biological process, then, aging is never "neutral" or unfolds outside the domain of culture and society but is instead informed by cultural ascriptions. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette has famously argued, then, we are "aged by culture": that is, biological age does not mean anything by itself; its meaning is inscribed by the cultures we live in (5). In the context of aging processes in minority communities or ethnic cultures, then, aging is inflected through the cultural meanings already ascribed to, for instance, "blackness" in American culture. By insisting on the "color-blindness" of aging and arguing that these centenarians' ethnicity is irrelevant for their stories about aging, on the other hand, these narratives fail or refuse to take into account the social context which both inflects and informs these centenarians' lives.

What does it mean, then, to publish black centenarians' autobiographies and to frame them in universalist, rather than culturally specific, terms? And to insist that these individuals turned a hundred without the benefit of medical aid? There is a form of cynicism here which emerges, however, only if we take into account not only what is said and emphasized in these black centenarian's autobiographies, but also what is left unsaid. What would happen, as I have asked above, if we were to read black centenarians' autobiographies alongside the life writing of young black men in prison? This question could not be more important for an under-

standing of the narratives of black centenarians such as George Dawson, Ann Nixon Cooper, or the Delany sisters. How do we contextualize these narratives? With what other narratives can they be compared? One of the central considerations to be taken into account here may be that of genre. In this book, I have read these narratives in comparison to one another precisely as centenarians' life writing accounts. What would it entail, on the other hand, if they were to be recontextualized as forms of black life writing? This very context, it could be argued, would fundamentally change the way in which we read these narratives. How, then, would we read George Dawson's *Life Is So Good* differently when considered alongside black men's prison writing (Greenberg and Watts 2009)? In this context, I would claim, George Dawson would seem the exception rather than the rule; and it would become visible that Dawson's narrative may have significantly downplayed factors of economic, racial and social disparities, all of which are highlighted in prison writing. For instance, Nina Heydt is currently investigating the genre of prison survival guides (Pisano 2016) predominantly written by black men. In *Life Is So Good*, George Dawson celebrates the fact that one may live to 100 even when one is poor, illiterate and disenfranchised; prison survival guides, on the other hand, tell their readership how to survive another year in prison (Heydt 2023). As I have elaborated throughout these chapters, black centenarians' life writing narratives reiterate that blackness is of no consequence for understanding these autobiographies. This emphasis on colorblindness, on the other hand, would clash significantly with Michelle Alexander's definition of what it may mean to be black in the US today. She notes,

> Arguably the most important parallel between mass incarceration and Jim Crow is that both have served to define the meaning and significance of race in America. Indeed, a primary function of any racial caste system is to define the meaning of race in its time. Slavery defined what it meant to be black (a slave), and Jim Crow defined what it meant to be black (a second-class citizen). Today mass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America: black people, especially black men, are criminals. That is what it means to be black. (197)

The insistence both inside the narratives and by comments of the centenarians' white co-authors that these narratives of longevity are truly color-blind, transcend as they do the boundaries of race by having a white co-author write the life of a black centenarian, thus obfuscate the idea that for many young black men today, it would be utopian to imagine that they will live to one hundred. Given the aversity of social conditions, however, such a premature death may be due not to genetics, but to social and economic circumstances. The insistence in these centenarians' narratives on racial transcendence, on the other hand, would make it impossible to establish a link between, say, a black centenarian's autobiography

and the life narratives of black men in prison today. As a rule, centenarians' autobiographies, by insisting that as in the case of George Dawson, even a black man born into slavery, illiterate for most of his life, can live to a hundred, dismiss social inequality as irrelevant.

My concern in this book, then, has been as much with what these centenarians' autobiographies say as what they do not say, the stories they do not tell. If indeed centenarians' autobiographies constitute a new genre in and of itself, then the question arises to what degree the emergence of this new genre can be correlated with a certain master narrative of aging. What, then, would be the characteristics of such a master narrative? First, I would argue that this master narrative views aging as universalist, as a universal process of human life. What matters, in other words, is less the circumstances under which the centenarian became a centenarian than the fact that that he reached his 100th birthday in the first place. This universalism, I would argue here, is fundamentally flawed, since a variety of studies from the fields of neurobiology as well as epidemiology have shown that social discrimination can substantially reduce one's life expectancy. According to Andreas Meyer-Lindenberg,

> The importance of social factors for physical and mental health has been empirically well documented and often shows remarkable dimensions. The effects of social factors such as poverty, unemployment or minority status are particularly evident in the greatly increased prevalence rates of coronary heart disease, affective, anxiety and dependency disorders, as well as significantly reduced life expectancy in the affected populations. (49; italics mine; my translation)

What this implies could not be more crucial for a critical reading of centenarians' autobiographies as catering to a certain master narrative of aging: Under the circumstances of social discrimination described by Meyer-Lindenberg, it could be argued, to reach the age of eighty-five for a person living under conditions of social inequality would be as much of an accomplishment as for someone of higher social status and wealth to live to the age of 100. As Meyer-Lindenberg goes on to say, "What is remarkable here is that a person's social status has a high predictive value for their psychological well-being and even their survival" (54–55; my translation).

One of the central questions with which this book has been concerned, then, is not only what master narratives of aging are inscribed through centenarians' autobiographies, but also what other narratives of aging they can be said to *write out*. It is in this sense that in reading centenarians' autobiographies, I have tried to take my cue from critical gerontology. As Holstein and Minkler observe, "critical gerontology asks questions such as these: Who benefits and who is harmed by culturally prevailing normative standards?" (789). This practice of writing in a given (and newly emerging) genre such as centenarians' autobiographies may be

especially crucial for our understanding of the autobiographies of African American centenarians. To what extent, I have asked with regard to the autobiography of George Dawson, is the assertion that anyone can live to 100, even under the most averse of circumstances, tied to a universalism of both age and longevity?

One aspect which the present study can be faulted for is that it surrounds centenarians' narratives with too much paratext to the extent that at times, the close reading of centenarians' autobiographies themselves seems to recede into the background. This is a tension which I struggled with throughout writing this book. One and the same passage in a centenarian's narrative, I felt, could be read from a number of different angles, and seemed to require various different and often mutually exclusive contexts. Yet, the explanation that I would like to provide for what may sometimes be a lopsided relationship between centenarians' narratives and the contexts in which they are being read in is precisely the fact that I view these autobiographies as part of a larger societal concern with aging and with aging well at the turn of the twenty-first century. Even as these centenarian's autobiographies are thus remarkable narratives in their own right, they are also *symptomatic* of a cultural shift which accompanies the realities of aging societies. It is in order to emphasize this cultural turn that I have wanted to stress the intersection between centenarians' autobiographies, on the one hand, and the paratexts, often invisible, which surround them. The full meaning and the full potential which these narratives may unfold, I have tried to argue in this book, becomes visible only if we explore the contexts of which the paratexts are indicative to the fullest extent.

This book has been as much about what I am reading as the emergence of a new genre – centenarians' autobiographies – as it is about the genres which do *not* exist. What had to happen, what developments had to take place, to make the genre of centenarians' autobiographies possible? At a different point in historical time, would the equation of age with achievement have been so important to our notions of age, and of successful aging?

The other side of centenarians' autobiographies, then, would be to read lives, and ages, differently. It would figure in social inequality and inequality in the health care system. In a poor neighborhood, especially given the dumping of hazardous waste, to reach the age of 75, then, would be equivalent to being a centenarian in another social and economic context. As Adamson et al. have noted, "60 percent of African American and Latino communities and over 50 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans live in areas with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites" (Adamson et al. 4). What happens, then, if we were to change the parameters? If we change the questions that are being asked about aging and about aging well? How would questions of environmental justice, for instance, change how we conceive of longevity? The problem with centenarians' autobiographies, then, is that they see aging and longevity as curiously indepen-

dent of context: Context, if at all, is evoked to show that extreme aging is possible even under the direst of circumstances; and yet, this off-hand reference to (social and economic) context does not lead to the raising of entirely different questions. Under circumstances which are averse to health and well-being, a centenarian may well be the millennial in a community of centenarians. If under these circumstances, to reach the age of 75 is an achievement, how much more of an achievement would it be to live to one hundred? My point is that this is where the *politics of surrogacy* come in: If the ultimate goal of a (say, black) centenarian is to show a white reader how to age well, how to achieve longevity, then the economic and social adversities do not have to be taken into account. There is no need, in this minstrel show of longevity, to dwell on either context or environmental justice. What, moreover, about forms of trauma? In economically disenfranchised environments, there is a higher rate of substance abuse and dysfunctional family structures; there is also a higher probability of trauma. How does trauma affect life expectancy? (Storrs 2009). I am arguing, then, that these considerations are not the flip side of centenarians' autobiographies, but they may indeed be their conditions of formation.

What this is saying, also, is to ask what the role of studies of social inequality has been in aging studies. In mainstream media and popular culture, the question of how we all age *differently* is often relegated to the margins. I would like to argue, however, that these questions of differential aging may be at the core of understanding aging as such. *My aim is hence to describe the genre of centenarians' autobiographies as much as to dismantle it from within.* I am calling, thus, for a genre which does not exist; and which, given our expectations towards aging narratives, may well never come into existence. Should there be entire genres of Black aging or Native American aging? This is not, I would argue, a falling apart of science into ever-smaller fields and subfields; it is the attempt to link longevity to the context in which it takes place. The implications of such an inversion of the sorts of questions we have been used to asking, moreover, could not be more profound: centenarians' autobiographies, it could be argued, fuel longevity research or at least justify the allocation of funds; what if an equal amount of funding were allotted not to research to stem off mortality but to an effort to increase life expectancy in poor neighborhoods throughout the country? Who, we might also ask, stands to benefit from longevity research? If the funds are finite, moreover, then who stands to lose in this context of a specific allocation of funding to specific lines of inquiry?

The necessary shift, here, is from "individual" rights or considerations to considerations of social inequality. My point is, then, that once we take the social determinants of health into account, discussions of longevity and reproductive health may actually not be as distinct or separate from each other as it may at

first seem. Rather what may matter are *the parameters of human life in the era of biomedicine*. The parameters underlying reproduction in, for instance, African American communities may thus not be dissimilar from concepts and possibilities of aging in the same community. The trap in writing a book about centenarians' autobiographies, then, may lie precisely in dissociating some discourses from others: to separate examples of successful aging from "unsuccessful aging," a practice or liability which is always implied but never made explicit; to separate discussions of extreme old age, from the circumstances (economic, social, cultural, political) of reproduction. Such a correlation between reproductive health and longevity may be far from accidental; is it a coincidence, for instance, that Christine Overall, after her award-winning book on longevity, should have written another book on reproduction? (Overall 2012). It has been argued, then, that debates on the beginning and the end of life possess a certain kinship; both may shed light on the limits of "changing" (of creating or extending) human life in the era of biomedicine. My point here is to inquire into the larger context into which centenarians' autobiographies may be inserted, and to ask why this has often not been the case. What do centenarians' autobiographies "do," for instance, to the field of age studies, medical humanities, or debates on social inequality? My aim in this book has been to engage all these multiple frameworks for mobilizing particular aspects present or at least implicit in centenarians' autobiographies. Centenarians' autobiographies, then, are not at all susceptible to being associated with medical humanities precisely because there is nothing "medical" about these narratives. "Medical issues," in other words, are seen as being diametrically opposed to the successful aging which these centenarians' autobiographies set out to illustrate.

The aim of this book has been to read the discourse of successful aging as it emerges from and undergirds centenarians' autobiographies against the grain through both disability studies and, perhaps more counterintuitively at first, through prison studies. What does it mean to read these success stories of black aging through the prism provided by prison studies, as I have suggested above with regard to Michelle Alexander's notion of "the new Jim Crow"? (Alexander 2012). Under these circumstances where a vicious cycle of violence and the prison-industrial complex serves to dramatically shorten the life expectancy especially of black men, what does it mean to speak of "black aging"? Moreover, to speak, in the language of life sciences studies of extreme old age, of "escapers" here would seem more than cynical. As Hill et al. note,

> At birth, Black people have a shorter life expectancy compared to White people. Life expectancy at birth represents the average number of years a group of infants would live if they were to experience throughout life the age-specific death rates prevailing during a specified

> period. Provisional data from 2020 show that overall life expectancy across all racial/ethnic groups was 77.3 years (Figure 13). Life expectancy for Black people was only 71.8 years compared to 77.6 years for White people and 78.8 years for Hispanic people. Life expectancy was even lower for Black males at only 68 years. (np)

If I argue throughout this book that centenarians' autobiographies, by proclaiming a colorblind notion of aging, tend to "whitewash" black centenarians' narratives, my aim in this study is *to read color back in*: What would it mean, in other words, to color a narrative which, while telling the life story of a black centenarian, pretends not to be about blackness at all? What would it mean to insist, in other words, that these are in fact black narratives of aging, or narratives of black aging, even as the narratives pretend to be colorblind? This argument, in turn, is closely connected to the politics of minstrelsy as they emerge in these narratives: For it could be argued that the politics of surrogacy – the idea that white fears of aging are played out on and enacted by black centenarian bodies – works only if the narrative is colorblind: the mechanisms of projection work, in other words, only if these are narratives that could well have been written about white bodies. White readers (as spectators of a literary minstrel show) can hence project their own fears about aging onto surrogate black bodies on the literary stage only if these bodies are themselves curiously colorless. To resist the logic of this literary politics of extreme old age, then, is to resist their colorblindness (Williams 1997). For every line quoted in this book from colorblind narratives of successful aging, then, there needs to be another quotation from black studies and prison studies. Michelle Wallace's groundbreaking study *The New Jim Crow* as well as Patricia Williams' *Seeing a Color-Blind Future* are thus central to reading the autobiographies by black centenarians against the grain. The politics of whitewashing, in turn, may be centrally aided by the fact that there is a white co-author to these "black" narratives.

This study has hence located black centenarians' narratives first, at a historical point in time – a time when demographically, the numbers of centenarians have been growing throughout the industrialized world, from North America to Europe and Asia (especially Japan). Second, however, it asks how this demographic increase in longevity is made sense of in the cultural arena, and hence also in specifically national contexts. Using the US as a case in point, I suggest that successful aging is not only, as Sarah Lamb has argued, a "global obsession" (Lamb 2017), but that it also has to be read through specifically national imaginaries. The politics of minstrelsy, and the minstrelsy of longevity, then, is highly specific to the US American cultural context.

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As I have argued in Chapter 9, the co-author establishes his authority in the writing of the centenarian's narrative by establishing himself as his kin; at the end of

the centenarian's life, it is hence the co-author who is framed as his legitimate heir and kin. We have come full circle with regard to the politics of memory. If I began this book by saying that in the absence of family histories of their own, white people may turn to black memories instead, this may be true not only for stories of living, but also for accounts of dying, and – paradoxically as it may sound – of dying successfully. These accounts may be undergirded by white co-authors' uncertainties about how to live, and their fear of dying; they are written in a way in which, for all his intrusion into the text, the co-author's own family is never featured, but in which he instead becomes a member of the centenarian's own family. The post-Civil Rights memory politics, as Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued, may privilege those who have a story to tell. At a moment in American history where it was no longer shameful, but desirable to have an ethnic past, anyone's ability to locate the memories of an "ethnic" ancestor among the papers and documents hidden away in the attic was seen as a happy occasion. What, however, of those who could dig up no such happy memories? It is in the climate of such a hunger for ethnicity (Jacobson 2006), and a need for histories other than one's own, that white middle-aged co-authors make themselves at home in black centenarians' kitchens. In the warmth of these black kitchens, white co-authors become centenarians' surrogate sons and daughters; they are embraced in an alternative family which they never knew. Once the centenarian passes away, it is they who live to tell and even more importantly, to write down their stories. It is the co-authors who become the centenarian's true kin.

Yet, this entire idyll of kinship and of surrogate parenthood is imagined in what may in fact be a white co-author's narrative, not the centenarian's own account. The voices that are marginalized in this narrative or are evoked only to be superseded by the co-author as the legitimate proxy and heir, are those of the centenarian's own children and grandchildren. There is a sense, then, in which the co-author occupies a very central place in the centenarian's life, and where he is especially demanding of the centenarian's attention. If we imagine for a moment a similar, but different scenario in a nineteenth-century kitchen, this would be a moment where the black cook – ridiculed as "mammy figure" in white accounts of black lives – longs to leave her white charges behind to take care of and spend time with her own children. As Tonia Leigh Wind notes, "By caring for the master's children and fulfilling their needs, the 'Mammy' figure was forced to neglect her own children and the needs of her own family" (175).

It is one of the dismal chapters in history, then, that we rarely have access to these children's accounts, or to the descriptions of the time spent by the black cook outside the white kitchen. To be sure, there is some potential in the idea that white children were raised listening not only to white, but also to black stories; and these stories need to be acknowledged as forms of signification in their own

right. Yet, what remains disturbing is the focus on white kinship, and the marginalization of the black family of which the black cook was a part, and from which her work in the white kitchen kept her. In centenarian's autobiographies, the black kitchen once more becomes a site of cross-racial encounter; once again, the black woman or man is pestered by their white surrogate children for advice on how to live: this time, what is sought is advice on how to live into extreme old age, and to pass away peacefully and without fear. Once again, white anxieties are made sense of through surrogate black lives, and through lives *staged* by white imaginations.

In the co-written autobiographies discussed in this book, the co-authors seem to have assumed the place of the proxy. If, as I have argued in Chapter 2, life sciences researchers of extreme longevity interview both the centenarians themselves and their children, other relatives, and close friends, it is the co-author who can be said to assume all these different roles in the life writing accounts discussed here. The challenge for future research, then, may lie in striving to unearth the accounts, oral or written, of the centenarian's *genuine* proxies, and her own children. Yet, these accounts may never even see the light of publication, marginalize as they might the co-author's voice in the production of the life story of "his" centenarian.

What remains, however, is the idea of a moment in American history which is riddled by anxieties, and a widespread fear of the future. In the nineteenth-century, urbanization and industrialization changed people's lives to an extent hitherto unimaginable, and hence called for role models and cultural and psychological frameworks through which to make sense of this change. This, as Eric Lott has argued, gave rise to the minstrel show, in which white audiences imagined what it might mean to live in the city (Lott 1993). It was through the antics of black bodies on stage, then, that white audiences explored what actions might be appropriate and inappropriate for city dwellers. If urbanization is a key frontier of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century social life, it was black bodies who were being used to explore such uncertainty as surrogates for white imagination (Lott 1993). As Andrew Womack notes,

> The minstrel show began in an environment that was struggling to find identity. The antebellum North was deeply engaged in urbanization, industrialization, minstrel show. The wars abroad were over, but the wars at home were only about to begin, on and off the battlefields of Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Antietam. At a time in which the United States was arguably at its weakest, masses of working-class, white Americans of diverse descent flocked to the minstrel stage and helped popularize a new cultural identity. The minstrel depiction of blacks created a perception of black identity based on how the white actors presented it, and the white audience embraced the production with cheers and applause. (np)

The point which I would like to make here is by no means to simply equate black centenarians' autobiographies with the minstrel show; these centenarians, of course, cannot simply be seen as ridiculing black life – or the lives of African American oldest-old. However, what is central to note about the minstrel show here is that the fear of urbanization came to be projected onto black bodies on stage. Fear and anxiety, in other words, were coped with and processed through the surrogates that black bodies constituted. In what way, I would like to ask here, do black bodies serve a similar purpose for imagining age at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

At the beginning of a new millennium, two centuries later, demographic changes seem to present us with another kind of challenge: the challenge of imagining, and of coping with, extreme old age. Moreover, as demographers inform us, this change, too, may come to be the rule rather than the exception. Today, centenarians may still seem fascinating and unusual, since it is as yet rare to attain such extreme longevity. Yet, the statistics of an aging society, and the fear that old age will be accompanied by frailty and dementia, may make a necessity of imagining extreme old age. Once again in this moment in American history, then, white anxieties may be imagined through the bodies of black men and women. It may hence be much more than a coincidence that black centenarians' autobiographies written by white co-authors make the *New York Times*' list of bestsellers, like *Having Our Say*. In this context, however, it may be useful to turn to older, historical models where black bodies were also used to make sense of changes in white society's life: In this sense, this book has tried to argue that it is by no means coincidental that black centenarian's autobiographies should often be written by white co-authors. Then as now, an "Africanist" presence (Morrison 1992) may help us imagine what it may be like to be "white." Then as now, an imaginary blackness may become a foil onto which we may map our deepest fears and anxieties. In this sense, then, it may also be no coincidence that the genre in which this projection takes place is one of *ambiguous authorship*. As I have argued throughout these pages, the genre of co-written autobiography is highly ambiguous especially since it leaves the concept of authorship unresolved. There is no way of unraveling, in other words, the co-author's voice from that of the centenarian. This, in turn, may be the ideal playground for white imaginations of black lives, or rather, for imagining white futures through black bodies. These accounts, then, are by no means stories of "black aging." Quite on the contrary, they may in fact serve to marginalize black accounts of aging, and what it may feel life to grow old as a black person. Instead, these narratives mask and are marketing as "colorblind" narratives of aging, sold to a mass mainstream. It is this reference to and insistence on the narratives' colorblindness which may make it possible for white imagination to "toy with" black lives in the first place. Moreover, by holding up black centenarians as role models not only for

white readers, but also for black communities, these narratives cynically dismiss the social, economic and material realities of black lives today. Evoking the rhetoric of centenarians as "escapers" of sickness and ultimately, of mortality, a rhetoric borrowed from the life sciences, these narratives have a black centenarian advise a black community on healthy living. This advice, however, may seem cynical given the health statistics of black lives in the US today: What possibilities of escape are there, we may ask, in the absence of access to health care and in the face of toxic waste being dumped in black neighborhoods? (Adamson et al. 2002). The rhetoric of self-help literature so ubiquitous in centenarians' autobiographies could not be more out of place in this context. Evoking a "human" universalism, these accounts may in fact help to mask existing social inequalities. Invoking a rhetoric of frugality and moral rectitude, these narratives divorce the experience of aging from the social environment in which it takes place. They take up the logic of neoliberalism by admonishing each individual to take her health into her own hands, and to blame anyone for not living to one hundred for squandering their most valuable capital. For many black youths living in disenfranchised neighborhoods today, however, it will be an achievement to live to the age of seventy. In this sense, centenarians' autobiographies can be located at a particular point of convergence: They participate in and help fuel the memoir boom and the increasing dialogue between the life sciences and life writing, but they may also be a handmaiden of a discourse which dismisses the impact of social and economic inequality on human health. This is an aspect which could not be more disturbing: By holding up as paragons of successful aging black centenarians who emphasize that they have never needed a doctor in their entire life, these narratives confirm political ideas that the "Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act" or "Obamacare" can safely be dismantled; by ventriloquizing an up-by-the-bootstraps logic they reiterate that any failure to maintain one's health is only the individual's own fault.

To once more evoke the politics of minstrelsy here, however, what does this mean for a genre in which white readers imagine extreme old age through black bodies and minds? It would mean that if black people can live to one hundred without access to health care and clean living environments, white readers with all such benefits can well expect to live up to a hundred and twenty. Currently, new research in the life sciences assures us that biologically speaking, the physical limit to a "normal" human life span can be set at a hundred and twenty-two. As Mikhail Blagosklonny suggests,

> Although average human life expectancy is rising, the maximum lifespan is not increasing. Leading demographers claim that human lifespan is fixed at a natural limit around 122 years. However, there is no fixed limit in animals. In animals, anti-aging interventions (dietary restrictions, rapamycin, genetic manipulations) postpone age-related diseases and thus automatically extend maximum lifespan . . . . The life expectancy [in humans] is constantly

> rising and median lifespan is increasing but maximum lifespan is not. Although the number of centenarians (100 years old or older) is doubling every ten years, maximum longevity remains the same. The longest living person died in 1997 at the age of 122 and this record has not been beaten. (110)

Such implicit promises of immortality, however, imply that attaining the age of, say, 122 is an achievement that may be available to anyone, regardless of their social, racial or economic background.

In this sense, whiteness can have its cake and eat it, too: White readers can safely entertain their deepest fears about aging by voyeuristically looking at black bodies going through the direst of circumstances and still aging successfully; and they can then return to their own privileged lives and hope to live to one hundred under much more convenient circumstances. Moreover, they can borrow black people's memories as their own surrogate family histories, without having to go through the pain of living through these experiences in the first place. Blackness, in the imagination of extreme old age, becomes lifestyle rather than lived experience. Moreover, black memories about living and black stories about dying may become white readers' civil religion; they may adopt this religion without ever going to church themselves. Black lives become substitutes and surrogates for white imagination. For the duration a centenarian's autobiographies, white middle-class readers can imagine, through black bodies, what it may be like to live into extreme old age. Yet, this too may be a form of make believe: There is no way of gleaning *black* stories from these black centenarians' accounts. Given the politics of ambiguous authorship, we have to take the white co-author's word that these were really the black centenarian's words which the co-author then simply wrote down, with minor editing on his own part. The mastermind, in this contemporary form of the minstrelsy of old age, may continue to be the white co-author or playwright. The memory he writes may in fact be his own, or his own dream of a memory he wished he had. At the core of this study is hence Toni Morrison's idea of "whiteness and the literary imagination." Yet, this study, taking into account Eric Lott's memorable study of the psychological politics of the minstrel show, wonders what this literary politics of imagining an Africanist presence has to do with social and demographic changes. Literature can thus be understood as a form of coping mechanism. As such, it may help us make sense not only of social changes, but also of psychological challenges in our own lives. Centenarians' autobiographies may thus help us make sense of one of the most widespread fears in our aging societies, the fear of growing old and of living with human frailty. That they imagine this change through black bodies, however, is a form of imagination deeply embedded in American cultural and social history. Once again, black lives are used as surrogates of white imagination. What remains for us to do, then, is to try to

unravel these politics of imagination, and to expose their one-sidedness; to highlight the ways in which they marginalize other stories of aging. Most importantly, by unraveling and exposing their logic, we must guard against the very distinction between aging successfully and unsuccessfully. What would it mean, then, not to be an "escaper"? And is it really a failure to be chalked down to the individual if he or she succumbs to the dangers inherent to living in unclean and unsafe environments? And who, precisely, is the judge who awards the prize for aging successfully? Reading centenarians' autobiographies, in other words, we must strive to make visible all the other, alternative stories which they do not tell, and whose very existence they try to deny. What happens, Rachel Adams has asked, when the freak leaves the freak show and simply goes home? (R. Adams 2001). Similarly, I have tried to ask in this book what happens when the memoir has been completed and the black man sits in the kitchen with his family relieved that the white co-author who has posed as his surrogate son has finally gone back home to his own life. We must strive to find, and to tell other stories about aging, where aging "unsuccessfully" may in fact serve to expose factors of social inequality which are obstacles to the idea that there is a human right to healthy living. Centenarians' autobiographies may help us to make sense of what it means to live to one hundred, but they may do so in a highly biased manner. Seen from this perspective, we may want to resist the logic at the core of these narratives, a logic which they have borrowed from the life sciences, that only a life lived to one hundred is a life worth living. We must strive to resist the idea that only a life lived without dementia and disability is a successful life, and we must expose the cynicism inherent in this distinction between successful and unsuccessful aging. Instead, we must read narratives about lives lived with dementia and disability as narratives in their own right, and as driving home the fact that human life will always be fraught with contingency, and that illness and disability can by no means be blamed on individuals themselves. What makes a life successful, then, can never be defined in economic terms, and is far from the dictates of neoliberalism. To read centenarians' autobiographies, then, is to think about the stories these accounts tell us *not* to read, and whose presence on the book market they may try to marginalize by hopping on the memoir trail. Paradoxically, centenarians' autobiographies may provide us with an alternative reading list: The very books they tell us *not* to read should in fact be the first ones on our reading list.

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