

P R E F A C E

FIGHT AGEISM, NOT AGING: THE DISCOVERY OF TRAUMA

The history of liberation movements reserves a special place of honor for the documents that reveal inflicted suffering. Enlightenment struggles—for American independence from Great Britain, the abolition of slavery in Britain and the United States, women’s rights everywhere—needed such evidence to reframe public opinion. Reform depends on having the wrongs described, feelingly.¹ In the cultural study of ageism, credit for crucial concepts often goes back to Simone de Beauvoir’s exposé of bias, *Old Age (La Vieillesse)*, 1970). But the first important age critic, over a century before, may be Ralph Waldo Emerson, a radical nineteenth-century abolitionist and a vastly popular orator and essayist. In flashes of insight, the Sage of Concord revealed the hidden injuries of age.

Centuries, indeed millennia, of advice about aging had treated it as a primarily biological process closely linked to death. Biology, not culture or individual will, ruled. But by the age of fifty-nine, Emerson had become astutely conscious of the social impositions that impacted his age peers far short of death or illness. In his essay “Old Age” (1862), he explained.

That which does not decay is so central and controlling in us, that, as long as one is alone by himself he is not sensible of the inroads of time, which always begin at the surface edges. If, on a winter day, you should stand within a bell-glass, the face and color of the afternoon clouds would not indicate whether it were June or January; and if we did not find the reflection of ourselves in the eyes of the young people, we could not know that the century-clock had struck seventy instead of twenty.²

A power exercised by younger strangers, Emerson saw, unleashed destructive interior forces in those exposed to it. That power was epitomized for him by the *age gaze* of the young. Making a mountain of differentiation out of minute bodily differences, that judgmental gaze minimizes our durable qualities, imposing decrepitude by magnifying tiny defects and linking them to “the century-clock.”

Everything that “does not decay” in us *feels* “central and controlling,” Emerson’s sentence makes sense. It refers to a strong feeling of continuing selfhood. It explains (more appealingly than “denial” or ageist self-hatred) why many people say “I don’t feel old” or “Inside, I am only thirty.” Our inside affect can seem to override the weather outside. But Emerson responsibly added that enormous caveat, “as long as one is alone by himself.” Only the subjective life can be lived as if under a glass dome, a protective translucent bell jar. But no one lives for very long alone, or completely, in that solipsistic, potentially airless way. So, looking down from somewhere beyond weather, Emerson strikingly describes the effect of the withering January gaze.

And, as he rightly says, our vulnerable point is our “surface edges,” the place where our skin, that membrane that holds self together, offers our appearance to the watching world. (A writer who can get such metaphors right, compactly effusive, to express a big new idea, deserves our attention.) And then, in a tone that grows biting sardonic, Emerson expands on how dangerous that outside world can be for older adults.

Youth is everywhere in place. Age, like woman, requires fit surroundings. Age is comely in coaches, in churches, in chairs of state and ceremony, in council-chambers, in courts of justice, and historical societies. . . . Age is becoming in the country. But in the rush and uproar of Broadway, if you look into the faces of the passengers, there is dejection or indignation in the seniors, a certain concealed sense of injury, and the lip made up with a heroic determination not to mind it. Few envy the consideration enjoyed by the oldest inhabitant. We do not count a man’s years, until he has nothing else to count. . . . In short, the creed of the street is, *Old Age is not disgraceful, but immensely disadvantageous*. Life is well enough, but we shall all be glad to get out of it, and they will all be glad to have us [do so].

This is odious on the face of it.³

Where Emerson says “Old Age” (because his era lacked a term for the bias), many now know to call that “creed of the street” *ageism*. Ageism, the infliction

of suffering by mere fact of birthdate. Illustrating one situation, Emerson edges toward some fundamental principles of contemporary age theory. This preface lays them out for those people who are not familiar with them.

Chapter 1 then introduces the latest contemporary sources of sorrow. The set of prejudices we face has become a worse evil than in Emerson's time, when he considered it only "immensely disadvantageous." Pressures and interests he could not have imagined make of later life a great Demotion, not only in the USA but globally.

The rest of the book goes deep into some of these particular stories.

The first two principles of age theory are that people are aged by culture and that *decline* is the narrative about aging-past-youth systematically taught to us from on high. "Unremarkable actors in everyday interactions"—on the trolley, in the kitchen, at the office, in church, or in the rush and uproar of Broadway—are immediately responsible for decline's unyielding grip over so many hearts and minds.⁴ Looking at his dejected age peers, Emerson felt their depression, their "sense of injury," "the lip made up with a heroic determination not to mind it." "The emotions of those who are in a position of oppression should be accorded special privilege epistemologically," writes Alison Jaggar, a feminist ethicist.⁵ Through empathy or self-recognition, Emerson gave importance to the particular oppression and depression of ageism. Above all, social complicity and widespread suffering make ageism an ethical issue, not acceptable but "odious."

But, 150 years later, the struggle against ageism still has no manifesto like the Seneca Falls "Declaration of Sentiments," no stirring canonical speech like Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream." Many observers agree: compared to sexism, racism, or transphobia, ageism is the least censured, the most acceptable and unnoticed of the cruel prejudices. *Ending Ageism* collects materials for such a document of struggle.

No one who shies away from noticing the unnecessary griefs of ageism understands aging, however much they know about medicine or love their grandma. *Ending Ageism* says little about "geroscience": that needle-narrow focus on disease is an overwhelming reduction of the meaning of "aging," as if there could be human events without sentient subjects. Instead, in this book I stress the malign discharges of social systems and their sobering subjective impacts.

Aging, ageism—the two slippery concepts are often confused. The difference between them needs to become rudimentary. Let us devise a new consensual

definition of “aging” that fixes it more squarely in culture. Whatever else it may be, *aging is the process that serves as the trigger for ageism.*⁶

Can we sharpen the distinction between a trigger and the pain caused by discharging the gun? To make that meaningful, we need a fleshier concept of age-related trauma.

A GREATER WE

In each era, many people wake up to immoral suffering inflicted by a system. For Emerson, that awakening was slavery. For me, it was Vietnam. Your awakening may have been McCarthyism, *Brown v. Board of Education*, Stonewall, sexism, the Contra War, Abu Ghraib, global warming, Occupy’s revelations about the 1 percent, NSA spying, threats to deport Mexicans and Muslims. . . .

Many say the timing of that “first” divides us by generation. Untrue. The generations of those who dare to confront history often march together.

In this book, another “we” embraces those who identify deeply as members of a family. Mine is multigenerational (the oldest is ninety-five; the youngest, four months). For us, history is intimate, anecdotal, fabulous. It’s in our genealogy, more powerful than genes. We don’t care to be addressed as if each age cohort shared values primarily with those who chance to be the same age. Like the man in a Harry Bliss cartoon, people in families like ours look up from their human-centered life to ask, “Honey, I forget—are we Millennials, Gen-Xers, or Baby Boomers?”⁷

Family history is precious: stuff of memory, source of endless gossip, pride, amazement, jokes, conjecture—stories polished and handed down like silver. As kids, we cousins listened rapt. We learned the tales by heart. Grandpa Herman arrived on Ellis Island in the nineteenth century! The year McKinley was assassinated! He married four times, the last at eighty-six! Eww, did the other Grandma really cut her daughter-in-law’s eyes out of the photos in her album?! My parents returned to Brooklyn after the Florida nursery business failed; I was seven. My father taught my brother and me to walk on stilts, choke up on a hammer, and weed crabgrass. Family legend-building went on and on. Our parents marched against the Vietnam War. My father contracted ALS and my mother cared for him at home until he died. She married his oldest brother. Years later, divorced, she had a love affair in her late seventies. At the D.C. March for Women’s Lives in 1992, twenty-one members of the family turned up together.

“Love is loyalty,” Marilynne Robinson, the author of *Gilead*, writes, in a semi-hopeful essay on family. “The real issue is, will [family members] shelter and nourish and humanize one another? This is creative work, requiring discipline and imagination.” “The antidote to fear, distrust, self-interest is always loyalty,” Robinson says of this microcosm.⁸ Because this creative kinship matters so much, in my family we worry about whether all of us, from the youngest to the oldest, are going to be able to move successfully through our entire life courses. Our younger relatives, brought up with our traditions, tragedies, and peculiarities, are able to live inside our skins, even now when some of these show wrinkles. People operating as members of families—like Jessie, the student we will meet in chapter 3 who describes her unemployed uncle—are the likeliest to be aghast at discovering contemporary forms of ageism, and to reject them indignantly.

I use a third “we,” which includes myself, to express the potential utopian solidarity of those who are here and now aging-beyond-youth. Some of my peers sagely observe the inflictions of ageism. Others start out not noticing, or even denying, our risks. Slowly it dawns on them, the protagonists of their own lives, that they are becoming minor defective characters in someone else’s story.

The collective “we” I often use here joins these vast overlapping groups in a natural union of those willing to face the inconvenient truths of their era responsibly, and ready to treat the politics of age with defiance. But what is our inconvenient truth, exactly?

THE GRAYING-NATION “PROBLEM”

The template of writing about old age was set in 44 B.C. by Cicero, Emerson’s model, in *De Senectute* (*On Old Age*). That tradition is based on a false premise: that there is an essential truth about being old, independent of history and cultures.

Demanding deep obeisance to the woes of physical decay, this “truth” is leavened by a dollop of maturational accumulations. Like Cicero, Emerson plumped up the list of the “capital advantages” of growing older. “The Indian Red Jacket, when the young braves were boasting their deeds, said, ‘But the sixties have all the twenties and forties in them,’”⁹ Emerson wrote, somehow imagining that “the young braves” believed this wisdom, although he saw clearly that younger white men did not. His own list of aging’s advantages, balm to successful men as they age, has enrolled the American Montaigne among the

legions of positive-aging gurus. His more profoundly original and disturbing discoveries about ageism have been overlooked.

The paradigm of harping on physical decline or compensations rather than on imposed social losses has been fortified in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Writers persist in the age-old old-age tradition, still trying to close in on that will-o'-the-wisp, the Truth of Aging. The tradition sheers off in two directions. A large faction of "Happy Gerontologists" explains *Why Almost Everything Gets Better after Fifty*. If your expectations are bad, as researchers say they typically are, you may indeed eventually agree that *Life Gets Better*.¹⁰ An opposing faction insists that it only gets worse: "extreme old age can be nasty, brutish, and long."¹¹ Scientific humbuggery about "agelessness" also swirls through the public air, displacing ways to keep dignified and comfortable the longevity that many enjoy.

Age theorists say, "Enough!" *How does this dichotomy map onto people who Skype versus "Pluggers" with no computers and poor life chances? The "ill-derly" versus the "well-derly"?*¹² *What about the other intersections?* Even the most thoughtful book cannot predict my own old age. I am my own specific time capsule, and am still pretty busy filling it up. It can be opened only in retrospect. The meta-argument against the Ciceronian convention is this: neither empirically nor philosophically can there be a universal truth of elderhood, any more than a single truth about "adolescents" or "women." Getting "inside" aging is thus an idle boast. In the era of the new longevity, anyone interested in true weights and measures must, like a barometrist, know this: nothing is unaffected by society's weather.

Study ageism. At this historical conjuncture, that's the detour around the impasse. Truths about the *harms* to old(er) people don't line up neatly with either positive aging or biodecline—although the assaults certainly do make life nastier and, sometimes, shorter. Some of the worst downgradings are ignored or misrepresented to the public, and invisible even to the very people most affected. Whenever these can be identified, it makes sense to subsume them together under the umbrella term *ageism*.¹³

OBNOXIOUS UNTRUTHS AND DISREGARDED FACTS

Emerson also sussed out the geography of ageism (it was worse in cities than villages), located one of its sources (young men), and, like Plato's Cephalus in *The Republic*, noticed an attribute afflicting many targets: they occupied a

lower social class. If you travel by trolley, you don't get the respect attached to those who wear gowns and sashes and roll along in private carriages; you are more blighted by the creed of the street. Emerson thus edged toward a basic truth of all cultural studies: that, in given historical circumstances, superior powers create systems of inequality and inferiority that bleed into individual lives. The "woman problem" turned out to be sexism, not the supposed nature of women. The "Jewish problem" was and is anti-Semitism, not Jews. The "Negro problem" is still squarely racism. Now the whole world is said to be facing the "Graying Nations problem": too many old people, sickly, unproductive, costly, selfish. . . .

The system behind the ugly "Graying Nations" charges is *decline* ideology, stating pointblank that people normally aging are ruining nations. Age critics finger the underanalyzed truth: ageism. This should be obvious, not a revelation. If it is still shocking, it's partly because so many trust the powers that malign the minority group of older people. They don't hear the thousand journalists on the age beat who supplement the scholars,¹⁴ all trying to broadcast counter-information into the air like a sheaf of arrows: "The old are *so* productive." "Healthier longer, *less expensive* than you think." "They *do* like sex." "They are not only white-and-rich; they are increasingly ethnic/racial." "They *don't* vote as a bloc against the young." "They earned their Social Security." Do social science data and humanistic interpretations pierce through the fog and filthy air? No doubt they solace some good hearts. As we'll see, facts seem to have little effect on the armored decline machines, using the media (slothful or complicit) to shoot glossy, loud propaganda into the minds of the majority. Absent a political force, what can truths matter when power rules?

Although there is no single truth about aging-past-youth, there are many despicable falsehoods. Consider physiological weaknesses, supposedly "naturally" accumulating or the fault of ill-chosen lifestyles. In fact, power foists biological declines on many. From the prenatal period on, the body's fate is grounded on what money buys: access to nourishing food, healthy surroundings, higher education, medical attention, avoidance of dangerous work. Being married correlates with later, and less, disability. If these are lacking, a life accrues disadvantages that may lead to premature illness and death. In life expectancy, the United States actually ranks only fiftieth in the world. Dying at fifty rather than eighty is a sign of grim inequalities in wealth. This disparity ought to be "the next frontier of the inequality discussion."¹⁵ It is a feat to reach the ages at which disparagement begins.

Even more cleverly obscured are decline's other impositions, this book's focus: bias in all its forms, whirling middle and later life askew from normal human development. Visual, discursive, medical, economic, political, bureaucratic, legal. . . . In fact, we should learn to speak of *ageisms*, in the plural.

Do older people enjoy equitable conditions and social inclusion? A question to be asked. The insidious demotions that many experience are produced by the inveterate, well-funded activity of elites, often transnational in their power, who decide for us "what is allowed or expected in every specific domain," as political scientist Victor Wallis notes.¹⁶ Neoliberal capitalists control discourse and much of the global economy either directly, through supranational agencies, or through the votes they influence and the mass media they literally own. In their panic for reliable profit they are racing to the bottom in earthly and human resources. They cut wages and the option of work, even for prime-age workers. Good midlife jobs are outsourced to low-wage nations. Small-government, low-tax conservatives are indefatigable in trying to slit the safety nets of the welfare states.

In the United States, the middle years (not long ago, a peak age) are riven by inequality, wage stagnation, and poverty. Adverse Supreme Court decisions—*Murgia*, *Gregory*, *Kimel*—weakened Congress's intent in the Age Discrimination in Employment Act to protect people over forty against unfair job loss.¹⁷ When anyone older is unemployed long-term, especially when unemployment benefits end, we can be treated as unemployable. *Middle-ageism* (a term I invented so such failures cannot be ignored)¹⁸ now strips, in every generation as it ages, many people's prized accumulations of respect, salary, family well-being, health, and equal protection of the laws. By shredding wages and benefits that rose with age and thus supported seniority in the broad sense, the "prime drivers of exclusion" render the midlife increasingly precarious and stressful, even for the middle class.¹⁹

In the slacker fable of neoliberal rhetoric, Social Security recipients are "idle, they are well off, and they live off the hard work of others."²⁰ The poorest of those alleged to be undermining national well-being—many of them single women, lesbians, and women of color—survive on their hard-earned monthly benefit alone. In 2014 the average benefit for all retired American workers amounted to \$1,294 a month.²¹ Can people with no other income eat? Although the most successful antipoverty program in US history, Social Security, is intended to maintain seniors in personhood and dignity, Republican legislators chisel away our "parasitical" benefits.²² President Barack Obama briefly agreed. The Cost

of Living Adjustment (COLA) was cut to zero in the very same year, 2015, that the economy had allegedly improved enough for the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates.

Ageism is built into the commerce of aging as well. Pharmaceutical companies benefit from promoting how bad aging-past-youth must be. All the dysfunction and uglification industries champion remedies against getting sexually, esthetically, physically, and cognitively “old,” having already taught the coming inferiority to the not-yet-old. The pseudoscience of rejuvenation exacerbates the modern fixation on the “body” (ideally youthful, fit, tall, male, white, and topped by an educated brain). The numbers of those in the United States alone who sell unapproved “anti-aging medicine” indicate almost three times more snake-oil salespersons than specialized trained doctors. The cash motive drives the medical researchers who assert, “Old age is a collection of diseases.”²³

We know that the “ideal citizen is one who remains youthful as long as possible.”²⁴ That judgment—“*Is she youthful enough?*”—is, however, out of our control. Outside of Emerson’s protective glass dome as well as within, the no-longer-so-young typically fall toward a sense that our status is declining after having been maturing and valued for so very long. I become suspect to myself, asking, in a kind of limbo: do I have the wrong body, the wrong mind? In this way, by being sprung on us late, ageism differs from racism and sexism, the born-into-them biases.

We cannot choose not to be old. And once we are considered “old” in important settings, no amount of theoretical deconstruction or individual behavior or good attitude makes it reversible for any of us. The continuing subtractions from selfhood hurt even when the body carries on just fine. If the body is suffering organically, the attacks on selfhood worsen all ills. In her novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson’s narrator, John Ames, a well-liked preacher in his early seventies who deals well with his angina, discovers there are other injuries that hurt his heart.

I really feel as though I’m failing, and not primarily in the medical sense. And I feel as if I am being left out, as though I’m some straggler and people can’t quite remember to stay back for me. . . . It could be true that my interest in abstractions, which would have been forgiven first on the grounds of youth and then on grounds of eccentricity, is now being forgiven on grounds of senility, which would mean people have stopped trying to see

the sense in the things I say the way they once did. That would be by far the worst form of forgiveness.²⁵

It's worth lingering over the complaints Ames is supplied with, noticing social misery. Novelists rarely convey that it's how we are treated rather than our physiology that hurts. Gerontologists studying "successful" aging rarely ask how we are treated. And the resultant leathern silences of those who might listen muzzle those who suffer from racism and sexism, often worsened by age.

As birthdays arrive, we get only *more* oldness, not wisdom, attributed to us. I contend that, in our historical conjuncture, age (which theorists usually consider a moving target) becomes, in legal language, "an immutable trait." Nina A. Kohn writes, "The characteristic of immutability—the inability to control an immutable trait . . . is generally used [by the Supreme Court] to justify greater scrutiny."²⁶ The Court treats sex and race, but not age, so protectively. That needs to change. Decline need not be a social fate.

As the wars against the midlife and age escalate, they are noxious to younger people too. Praise of their beautysexandbrains provides them no certainty of higher education, jobs, or decent wages. Treat people poorly at lower ages—pay them less, treat them rudely, minimize their attributes—and no matter how young they are, they will look inferior to others, and worth less. How, then, can growing-past-youth look good to the young, when they see so many ahead of them becoming second-class citizens? Fearful of that fall, some Silicon Valley employees are getting cosmetic face-work when barely over thirty.²⁷ (Indeed, Silicon Valley may be the most ageist place on earth.) Why don't the young fight ageism instead of "aging"?

In a slack labor market, with more people looking for jobs than there are jobs created, age-linked competitiveness adds to the well-known rivalries created by sexism, racism, and ableism. About the economy, younger people are intentionally misled, told that people called "the Boomers" are "deadwood." But also that older adults are super powerful and wealthy, and represent giddy marketing opportunities. Intergenerational rivalry, a factor in ageism in many countries, encourages the young to blame midlife workers for greedily holding onto their jobs. Blame is a cudgel that employers use to shame midlife workers out of claiming higher wages and seniority benefits. The cult of youth is one reason incomes have been stagnating without more protest. Those who harp on the nation's dangerous demographics, older workers' deficiencies, a misleading dependency ratio, supposedly scarce public resources, and high youth

unemployment interpose intergenerational warfare where there should be solidarity and common sense. Cultural snipers forget that the 1 percent includes thirty-year-olds. Instead, they teach that *age* is what divides a society.

The older age classes will always remain a minority. In 2060 in the United States, people over sixty-five will be only 22 percent of the population.²⁸ And, despite alarming statistics about the “graying globe,” this minority status is true internationally. The fact, as I see it, is that heterogeneous as old people are, privileged as some may be, we endure many attributes of other numerical minorities: invisibility and hypervisibility, intolerance of our appearance, lack of audiences for our subjectivities and our grievances, underestimation of our trials, dislike of our alleged characteristics or disgust at our apparent weaknesses, and unwillingness to look us in the eye or spend time in our company. Sometimes these are mixed with the chilling sentimental look that Jean-Paul Sartre, referring to anti-Semites, termed “brotherly love.”²⁹ (“How cute she is,” “How sweet they are.”) Anyone may be capable of doing harm through a freezing age gaze, verbal condescension (*elderspeak* is only one form), dismissive personnel decisions, careless voting. “Minority” is used by other cultural critics to refer to ethnic/racial people over sixty-five, not to all of us in later life. However, the generic term is applicable to all and illuminating in many contexts.

Innumerable motives explain the reluctance to hear the hard news about ageism, including, of course, ageism itself. If some people think only the most marginalized are liable to suffer from avoidance, disdain, and other risks of being old, they are wrong. Do those who follow the commercial rules for delaying “aging” actually trust that they will find themselves exempt? Do those who enjoy healthy later life and leisure feel serene? Many people are eager to see agency, or potential agency, in themselves or in the age class—feminists, gerontologists, me. But it doesn’t help to ignore the elements of our minority powerlessness.

Even those who swear they are neither socially afflicted nor internally infected may see there are evil consequences that it behooves us to mind. A shift in thinking might rescue people from internalizing ageism to their sorrow. At some level, we do all intuit that the imposed demotions—not old people in themselves—are what, for everyone, make the life course ahead fearful. People tend to distance themselves from individuals or groups that frighten them. Fear can be taught, heightened, or redirected: after World War II, against communists; after 9/11, Muslims; today, immigrants. Social-identity and terror-management theories, informed by age theory, explain how fear can be manipulated against old people. A handy new group to target.

Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People, is arranged to present increasingly grave instances from the array of ageisms. In each chapter, something fails the test of fairness, equality, or basic humane dealing.³⁰ It might be a glaring neglect in private or public life, grossly hostile speech, abusive images, cruel practices, threats, incitements to self-harm, or violence. In each chapter, suffering is allowed to speak. The question is often not what, but whether, remedies are possible. Justice may be as simple as distinguishing the targets, listening to the survivors, and naming the malefactors; or as fundamental as asserting our right to live as long as each of us can and wants to.