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Aging, Discourse, and Ideology

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the language practices of members of the Andrus Center, a recreational senior center located in the southeastern United States. It specifically examines how "young-old" members, or those who had relatively recently made the transition to older identity, invoked and contested widely circulating ideologies of aging in the course of constructing their local age identities. Rather than treating age as an objective, individual characteristic, as commonly presumed in sociolinguistics, this study highlights the ways in which age identities were relationally and emergently co-constructed. Through analyses of interactional and ethnographic data collected over 18 months, I argue that mainstream ideologies of aging, particularly those that marginalized older people, were salient even within local communities like the Andrus Center, yet the specific cultural meanings and values of being "old" were locally negotiated and evaluated in ways that also countered these ideologies.

The analysis is divided into three parts. In the first, I show that while participants accepted a hegemonic ideology of aging as embodied decline, they resisted the typical assumption that this decline was always negative and that it was always their own responsibility to prevent it through "successful aging." Second, I address another ideology of aging, specifically one of epistemological progress, by turning to a specific case of an older African American woman who embodied recognizably older personas, the "sage" and the "nostalgic." Crucially, these older personas enabled this older person, when speaking with her black and white friends, to persuasively engage with

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contemporary discourses of race and racism. Finally, I identify three "aging genres" that young-old members regularly drew on to construct their identities: *aging up narratives*, *age co-construction*, and *stereotype disalignment and alignment*. As each of these genres involved the evaluative positioning of selves in relation to others, they offered participants the possibility of coming to positive understandings of becoming and being an older person. This study not only speaks to broader cultural trends in the United States, where older populations continue to grow, but it also illustrates how the linguistic choices of older speakers are culturally relevant, ideologically charged, and immensely complex and diverse in contemporary times.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Sociolinguists have long treated age as an objective characteristic of individuals. Yet age is anything but clear-cut or value-neutral, and it was rarely treated as such at the Andrus Center.[1] For members of this senior center, located in a mid-sized city in the southeastern United States, age was a social dimension that was both ideologically charged and complexly negotiated through everyday discourses. In this community, talk about aging[2] was pervasive, meaningful, and value-laden.

Despite how much old age in particular was talked about—or perhaps because of it—its meaning and value was far from agreed upon. Old age was described alternately as a time of physical and mental loss and as a liberating "second childhood." Older people were sometimes characterized as recluses who were ignorant of current societal issues and trends and, at other times, as elders whose experience and wisdom could contribute to society. In the course of such talk, community members located themselves in relation to these conflicting ideas about what it meant to be old. In this dissertation, I examine how older speakers engaged with ideologies of aging in the course of constructing their age identities. By analyzing a type of discourse that is often felt to be familiar to older, and even middle-aged, people in the United States, this dissertation explores the complex contours of how individuals negotiate, evaluate, and adopt age identities and makes explicit the ideologies and social types that these practices depend on.

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[1] I have chosen this pseudonym for the symbolism of Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, founder of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) in 1958, an organization for "older persons" that promoted Andrus' idea of "productive aging" and that generally aligned with the goals of this center.

[2] The morpheme "age" can be represented with or without the final "e" when suffixed with *–ing*, *–ism*, and *–ist*. In this dissertation, I have chosen to spell "aging" as I do because this spelling is a well-established convention of American English, while I have chosen to spell "ageism" and "ageist" as I do because these forms, coined by Butler (1969), are commonly used in scholarship on these topics. When I quote scholars or other writers who spell any of these terms differently (e.g., "ageing"), I have preserved their original spellings.

My approach to examining how language relates to age diverges to a significant extent from earlier sociolinguistic studies. First, it confronts studies that have dismissed older speakers, assuming that they have physical and mental deficiencies (e.g., Labov 1994:46) and attending to their speech only as relics of past ways of speaking (Chambers & Trudgill 1998). Rather, my work aligns more closely with studies that have recognized that even traditionally marginalized age groups deserve sociolinguistic attention. Studies of youth language in particular (e.g., Eckert 2000; Moore 2004; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Chun 2009; Bucholtz 2010; Snell 2010; Lide 2014) have been important in this sociolinguistic turn. At the same time, while youth speakers have become visible in current sociolinguistic research, as Coupland (2009) notes, aging is still the "unwritten chapter of sociolinguistics" (850).

Second, my approach examines the relationship between language and age not by attempting to identify the language "features" of older speakers but by examining participants' discursive actions as they collaboratively constructed age in interaction. Though recent scholarship focusing on older speakers (e.g., Rose 2006; Coupland 2009; Matsumoto 2009; Norrick 2009; Divita 2012) suggests that identity construction is a lifelong and active process, relatively little sociolinguistic research has been devoted to understanding age as a category that is to some extent discursively constructed and negotiated. As Nikander (2009) notes, studies of age identity have “failed to detail the interactional processes whereby positive and negative cultural meanings of age are mobilised in the multitude of immediate local contexts that make up the everyday” (865). Recognizing that interactions are key sites in which identities are relationally and emergently constructed, I analyze participants’ stances toward broader ideologies of age and how these are implicated in their discourses about age.

Third, I take an ethnographic approach to the social construction of age in contrast to approaches that assume pre-determined age categories. Over a period of 18 months of data collection (i.e., audio recording, observing, and writing field notes), I was a participant-observer at the Andrus Center. My ethnographic methods of data collection allowed me to prioritize participants’ local categories and discursive processes of meaning-making.

In addition to its contribution to sociolinguistics, my dissertation speaks to broader cultural trends in the United States. It is becoming increasingly important to examine how the linguistic choices of older speakers are relevant, socially meaningful, and diverse in contemporary times, as demographic shifts in the United States are resulting in an steadily larger older population. Adults over 65 represent the fastest growing demographic in the United States primarily because the numerous members of the Baby Boomer generation—those born between 1946 and 1964—are aging into this older category, and these increases are projected to continue for the next several decades. Moreover, in recent generations, a greater number of Americans are routinely living longer lives. These population trends have implications for the category of “older people” in America: this group is much larger and more diverse than in previous times. Consequently, these two changing age phenomena have become popular topics for discussion in media outlets, circulating various ideologies of aging. In popular U.S. discourses, for example, older people are typically represented as “rigid” or “inflexible,” “communicatively close-minded” and “senile” (McCann & Giles 2002; Whitbourne & Sneed 2002), “inarticulate” (Hummert et al. 1995), and “old-fashioned” (Divita 2012). Scholars have also shown that the negative depictions of older adults are far more common than those in which older adults are portrayed positively (Rozanova 2010:214).

The Andrus Center, a non-residential recreational center for people older than fifty, was located in Fairview,[3] a mid-sized city in the southeastern United States, and it was an ideal site for investigating the interactional construction of age identities at this particular cultural moment. The Andrus Center reflected the aforementioned current sociodemographic patterns, as it welcomed quinquagenarians, centenarians, and those in between. Potentially because members’ ages at the Andrus Center varied so widely, age became a salient means of social differentiation. In their everyday discussions at the center, members invoked ideologies of age and engaged in age-talk in order to make meaningful distinctions.

This dissertation is thus motivated by the following general question: How do older people use language to participate in or preclude the kind of marginalization presumed by dominant ideologies of aging? The specific questions I address are as follows: *(1)* How did widely circulating ideologies of embodied decline shape older people’s local discourses about their own bodies as well as the practices they engaged in?

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[3] Fairview is a pseudonym.

How did older people sometimes come to contest these ideologies and what implications did such resistance have for their own agency? *(2)* Can the embodiment of recognizably older personas play any positive, productive role in older speakers' interactions? *(3)* What kinds of "aging genres" did members, specifically those who identified as young-old, regularly draw on to construct their identities? What value did these genres allow speakers to assign to older identities?

In this dissertation, I argue that age identity is not an objective, stable characteristic of individuals but discursively produced both in the context of interactions as well as in relation to value-laden ideologies. I also argue that members of the Andrus Center engaged with widely circulating ideologies of aging, at times rejecting and complicating them while at other times reproducing and aligning with them, in the course of constructing their age identities. Specifically, given dominant ideologies that define aging bodies as being in decline, older people sometimes participated in hegemonic devaluations of their own aging bodies even if sometimes finding moments to showcase their acceptance and even celebration of the aging process. I show that the meaning of being "older" was valued to the extent that the persona of the older, experienced "sage" served as an interactional resource for making compelling arguments, in this case, about the contemporary issue of race. I also demonstrate that aging genres were an important resource for social differentiation among members of this community, particularly as they came to terms with their own aging processes, identifying negative qualities in their aged futures and finding positive exemplars of aging within the community.

In the following two chapters, I provide the theoretical and methodological background that informed my study. Specifically, Chapter 2 reviews relevant research on language and aging, aligning with social constructionist approaches and contrasting them with previous variationist and gerontological approaches to age. It then presents the conceptual assumptions that ground this dissertation—that language is a form of social action—and the theoretical background of the methods of data collection and analysis I used in this study. In Chapter 3, I describe my research site, the Andrus Center, and situate it within the local context of Fairview and the broader U.S. sociocultural and demographic context. I also explain my methods of ethnographic data collection and interactional analyses.

Chapters 4 through 6 present my analyses of practices in the community I studied. It is through interactions such as those presented in these three analysis chapters that people in this community remade what it means to be older. By looking at how members of this community used age in their everyday conversations, I show the process by which both positive and negative possibilities for aging were negotiated. The first two analysis chapters look at how speakers in this community engaged with (e.g., exemplified, defied, complicated) culturally circulating ideologies of aging—physiological decline and epistemological progress, respectively. Specifically, Chapter 4 argues that, while participants accepted the ideology of aging as embodied decline, they resisted the assumption of successful aging that this decline was always negative and that it was always their own responsibility to prevent it. They thus opposed culturally dominant discourses and reinterpreted embodied aging in a way that maintained their agency in the face of decline. Chapter 5 focuses on the intersection of aging and race by examining how personas associated with older age were used to accomplish race talk. As a case study, it centers on an African American individual and examines the ways in which she embodied the *sage* and *nostalgic* to both critique and adopt contemporary discourses about race. Finally, Chapter 6 examines three aging genres—aging up narratives, age co-construction, and stereotypes of alignment and disalignment—performed by "young-old" members of the center as they negotiated their shift into the category of older age. My analysis demonstrates that age was an important axis of social identification within this community and that these genres provided members with locally appreciated opportunities for constructing their age identities in ways that assigned positive values to the process of aging. The final chapter of this dissertation considers the contributions, implications, limitations, and future directions of my study.

CHAPTER 2

Approaches to the Study of Language and Age

This dissertation explores how language is used to construct older age and its value within a particular sociocultural context. In this chapter, I present the theoretical background that has guided my study. In the first half of this chapter, I provide several approaches that scholars have employed in the study of language and age—age as a sociolinguistic variable, aging as socially constructed, and aging as a process of linguistic and cognitive decline—focusing on the discursive construction of aging as the approach taken in this dissertation. In the second half of this chapter, I review a range of sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological research on the social meaning of language. I first discuss an approach, drawn primarily from linguistic anthropology, that treats language not as an abstract system already imbued with social meaning but as socially meaningful because of how it can be embedded in cultural practice and because it can produce particular social realities. Finally, I introduce my methodological framework, which takes an interactional approach to the analysis of identity.

2.1 LANGUAGE AND AGE

2.1.1 Age as a sociolinguistic variable

Within studies of language, age has long been acknowledged as a relevant dimension of social categorization. Early considerations of age can be found in traditional methods of dialectology that catalogued the language spoken in specific places and assumed older speakers to be the most “authentic” representatives of these places

(Bucholtz 2003). These methods were inherited from the European philology and folklore traditions, which privileged older texts (Bauman & Briggs 2003; Bucholtz 2003). Specifically, Herder, an 18th-century German intellectual, "created a conception of tradition as constitutive of vernacular literature and national identity" (Bauman & Briggs 2003:163); his notion of tradition was embodied in the poetry of the common people, which faced threats by modernity. As a result, Herder sought poetic texts from older, rural Germans, whom he viewed as "authentic speakers"; these priorities can also be seen in 20th-century dialectologists who sought to elicit speech tokens from non-mobile, older, rural males.

More recently, identifying the stratification of linguistic variables according to age has been central to the sociolinguistic study of language variation and change. For example, in apparent-time studies that examine the distribution of a linguistic variable across different age cohorts, sociolinguists have explored whether differences between younger and older speakers reflect historical change, i.e., a shift in language use across a speech community, or age grading, i.e., a shift in individuals use across individuals' lifespans. If younger age groups use a variant with greater frequency than older groups do, apparent-time studies would conclude that a historical change is in progress. The apparent-time method, therefore, relies on the assumption that "people do not significantly alter the way they speak over their adult lifetimes" (Boberg 2004:250) and thus treats older speakers as representing past ways of speaking. Lifespan studies (Sankoff 2004, 2005; Sankoff & Blondeau 2007; Sankoff & Wagner 2007; Sankoff et al. 2012) similarly use age as a social variable, although in contrast to apparent-times studies, they examine the ways in which individuals' use of linguistic variables change in relation to their communities. Lifespan change refers to cases where individuals “change over their lifespans in the direction of a change in progress in the rest of the community” (Sankoff 2005:1011).

While much attention has been paid to other aspects of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, class, and place identity, age as a variable in sociolinguistics has largely been underexplored. As Coupland (2009) points out, this is evident in two ways: first, when sociolinguists analyze class, ethnicity, or gender, for example, these questions do not usually incorporate age; second, when sociolinguistics does focus on age, it does so centering its research questions on youth (850).

As one of the few addressing this disciplinary gap, Rose (2006) has examined the language of members of a senior center in rural Wisconsin, focusing on “locally articulated communities of practice and ideological complexes as sources of meaning” (11). She argues that the older individuals in this community use the linguistic variables (dh) and (ow) to construct the social meaning of place, while also indexing social factors such as gender, age, and social status. Importantly, the social meanings of language are tied to locally meaningful, community practices such as “farming, playing cards, and attending the noontime meal at the Senior Center” (3). By attending to the socially meaningful nature of the language of older speakers, she thus challenges a central theoretical assumption within variation studies that older speakers “are merely living testaments to authentic speech from times past” (2); instead she frames these older speakers as “the people in a community with the greatest experience with language and meaning” (2). Significantly, she recognizes that although older speakers may use linguistic variables acquired early in their lives, these variables have accumulated meanings across their lifespans, rather than remaining stagnant.

2.1.2 Social constructionist approaches to aging

The discursive approach to aging that I take in this dissertation responds in part to a specific gap in sociolinguistics, as I have identified above, with respect to the study of age. Yet as I describe in this section, a discursive approach to language and identity also aligns with the growing attention to social constructionism in both sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology more generally. These scholars have advocated that aging, like other aspects of identity, such as gender, class, and ethnicity, is socially constructed, rather than a biological fact; moreover, they have identified qualitative methods of analysis as appropriate for examining this construction process. Coupland et al. (1991) call for a discourse analytic perspective to aging, which "invites an analysis of how social actors make sense of their social circumstances, and not least of themselves, through interaction" (24).

In the discipline of anthropology, the absence of research on aging was recognized as problematic much earlier, as evidenced by the traditional "gerontological lament" that preceded many anthropological articles on aging, in which authors noted the sparseness of anthropological research on aging (Cohen 1994). Cohen critically argues that anthropology can provide a socially conscious alternative to gerontology's "biomedicalization of and control over older persons" (155). To this end, cultural anthropologists have contributed important ethnographic accounts of aging; among others,[4] I discuss three in particular that show how communities of older people manage the relationship between broader sociohistorical change and aging. Myerhoff's (1994[1979]) ethnography of a community center for Jewish seniors in Venice Beach, California, *Number Our Days*, was a seminal anthropological account of aging. As many of her Jewish participants were Eastern European immigrants who had rebuilt a large yet close-knit Yiddish community in Southern California only to see it destroyed by property development, her work centers on the themes of survival, continuity, and death. Vesperi's (1998[1985]) *City of Green Benches*, an ethnography of St. Petersburg, Florida, a city that was identifiable as a symbol of older age and retirement, tracks how the demographic changes in St. Petersburg affected the low-income older people who had retired there. Her study of this community focuses on the interaction between her participants, the increasingly urbanizing community in which they live, and the social programs aimed at helping them. Degnen's (2012) monograph of aging in the English coal town of Dodworth, *Years in the Making*, argues that the relationship between temporality, narrative, subjectivity, and social memory allows older people to both reproduce and resist the assumptions of older age. These cultural anthropological accounts of aging emphasize the ways in which aging is accomplished through everyday acts and practices.

Coupland et al. (1993) also emphasize the social construction of age through their proposal to refocus the study of age around a lifespan identity; in particular, they set out to critically examine "how we formulate the lifespan" (xii). They set this perspective in opposition to the notion that "age can appropriately be seen as a *determinant* of language competence and language behavior" (xi), instead investigating the ways in which people enact lifespan changes by "doing lifespan identity" (xiii). They note that when addressing language development, the focus has undoubtedly been on the other end of the spectrum, as studies have centered on child language acquisition. In addition, they point out that studies of language and aging had not yet explored the ways in which people at the latter stages of life are continuing to undergo language development. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, their edited volume includes chapters that show how categories of aging are identified in texts and conversation, age-appropriate behavior is prescribed in talk, references to time are linguistic resources for lifespan identity, and ageism is constructed in talk and text. Many of the earliest responses to this call focused on intergenerational conversations in which the speakers negotiate their relative social positions through interactional moments (e.g., Cicirelli 1993; McKay 1993; Hummert 1994; Ryan et al. 1994; Harwood et al. 1995; McKay & Caverly 1995; Okazaki 1999).

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[4] While there are some exceptions, as Degnen (2012) notes, "[r]ecent ethnographic monographs by anthropologists working on old age are few and far between" (24).

Similarly, Nussbaum et al. (2000) approach aging in terms of a lifespan identity, noting that this social process is inherently relational and that communication is "the vehicle through which aging as a social process occurs" (xvii). In particular, they take a developmental approach to communication through the lifespan, arguing that changes in communication among older speakers is a significant way they cope with the aging process (7), contrasting with others who have depicted these changes as inherent in the aging process. Nussbaum et al. (2000) review research on the ways in which changes in later life affect interpersonal relationships (e.g., with spouses, friends, caregivers, and family), attitudes toward aging (e.g., in the media and held by younger people), allocation of time (e.g., work and retirement), and embodied experiences (e.g., sensory loss, decline in health, and death). Although they discuss how older people experience decline in several aspects of life, they view the older individual not as a "personality inventory or an entity fulfilling a prescribed role, but as an *active participant in a system of relationships, who is constantly adapting and attempting to maintain relational equilibrium*" (Nussbaum et al. 2000:2). Despite the contributions of their approach, their approach arguably remains limited by assuming the goal of "successful aging,"[5] a paradigm that has since been critiqued for giving too much significance to the role of the individual responsibility in preventing age-related decline without adequate consideration of other social and economic factors.

The growing interest in aging as a cultural and communicative process is also evidenced by a special issue of *Ageing & Society* (2009), which devoted numerous articles espousing a move towards an understanding of how age is constructed through language. In her introduction to this issue, Coupland calls for a "social account of ageing" that views language and communication as "resources for making and reconfiguring what we take ageing to mean" (850). The articles in this issue use interdisciplinary perspectives to explore the "discursive construction of ageing," in which "researchers are interested *both* in the detail of local acts of meaning making *and* in how symbolic exchange through words and actions cumulatively contributes to social positions, norms and understandings about age – the micro-social connected through the macro-social" (Coupland 2009:850). That is, taking a discursive approach to aging allows us to examine how age is locally constructed through interactions and how these local constructions subvert or subscribe to popular ideologies of aging. These local meanings thus show how macro-discourses are instantiated in the embodied experience of being old.

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[5] I describe and present critiques of the successful aging model in Chapter 4.

The contributors to this issue use qualitative, interactional approaches to demonstrate how older people experience change that comes with aging and how this change is read and negotiated in discourse. Norrick (2009), for example, examines narratives by speakers older than 80 years and finds that within one story, older narrators often represent multiple past identities, as well as distance themselves from their current, weakened identity. Matsumoto (2009) examines the use of humor in “painful self-disclosure” (Coupland et al. 1991) by older Japanese women and demonstrates that older narrators may shift the framing of a difficult life event, such as the death of a spouse or personal illness, to “quotidian normality,” allowing them to reframe these events as normal everyday happenings, which allows the painful narratives to be viewed humorously. Significantly, she rejects the idea that painful self-disclosures, which had previously been studied in intergenerational conversations, are always unhappy interactions; rather, she notes that these painful self-disclosures may actually have other social functions in conversation, such as “a chance to relate a compelling story at a social occasion, and a vehicle by which to regain normal life” (Matsumoto 2009:948). In her analysis of the ways Finnish people nearing their fiftieth birthdays negotiated personal change and continuity, Nikander (2009) argues that they used language of “provisional continuity” (e.g., “still”), which allowed them to both acknowledge and contest the applicability of change in their lives, and shows that analyzing discourse can demonstrate the variability in the way people accomplish aging. Notably, she suggests that discourse analyses of age-talk that occurs in “everyday and institutional settings provide an analytical and theoretical middle-ground between the macro versus micro or ‘microfication’ debate in gerontology” (863). In a similar vein, the analysis in this dissertation addresses the ways in which circulating ideologies of aging are brought into both institutional discourses and everyday interactions.

Likewise, Divita (2012) addresses the complexities presented by age as a dimension of identity: he recognizes that it is simultaneously both a “chronological fact” as well as a “dynamic social category” (585). In his study of an Internet class for older people in a senior center in Spain, he attends to the ways in which participants engage in discursive practices that index age-related social categories and use these meanings to align or distance themselves from their chronological ages (609); he demonstrates that age is a category that can be played with to create social meaning.

An important resource for the discursive construction of age are moments in which age itself is explicitly talked about and named. Coupland et al. (1993), for example, propose a typology of age marking in discourse according to which older age identities are made relevant in interactions by two mechanisms: age-related categorization processes and temporal framing processes. Age-related categorization strategies draw attention to age as a category, such as “disclosure of chronological age,” “age-related category or role reference,” and “age-identity in relation to health, decrement, and death” (xxiii–xxiv). Temporal framing processes use mentions of time to index an older age identity, such as: “adding time-past perspective to current or recent-past states or topics,” “self-association with the past,” and “recognizing historical, cultural, or social change” (xxiv). Similarly, Harwood and Giles (1992) find that “age markers,” or forms of language that are related to age, are the most likely forms to make age salient through dialogue. Two of these age markers function primarily through discourse content: chronological markers, which explicitly refer to time or age, and problems-of-aging markers, which refer to states of being associated with aging. In contrast, with regard to a third age marker, or "manner markers," it is the act achieved by the utterance—rather than its propositional content—that connotes age (e.g., reminiscing) (Harwood & Giles 1992:416).

These discursive resources were often deployed in the community of older people that I studied. Among other forms of referential aging talk, "age-disclosure" (Coupland et al. 1991) and "age-category labeling" occurred frequently, were treated as a normal genre of discourse, and were often used to talk about practices and attitudes associated with aging (see Chapters 3 and 6 for a more in-depth discussion and analysis of this practice). These forms serve important functions in the discursive construction of aging because, as Mautner (2007) contends, "if we accept that labeling plays a crucial role in categorization, boundary drawing, and stereotyping, then the study of age labels emerges as a worthwhile contribution to aging research" (53). Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) likewise emphasize the importance of examining "terms of identity": "[s]uch terms function as symbols ready at hand for identities to hang on, providing the links between individuals and groups, the instruments therefore of identification" (208). Studying how speakers use, interpret, and contest the terms (e.g., "old," "young-old," "old-old") can show us more generally what stereotypes about old age represent to the people who are stereotyped by them.

As I discuss in this dissertation, one way that aging was discursively constructed at the Andrus Center was through the circulation, rejection, and acceptance of stereotypes of older age. Stereotypes of aging have been extensively researched, but most often in fields outside linguistics. These studies generally fall under one of two categories: first, examinations of the circulation of old age stereotypes in mass media texts (e.g., Nussbaum et al. 2000; Harwood 2007), such as television (e.g., Harwood & Giles 1992; Harwood 2000), magazines (Nussbaum et al. 2000), newspapers (e.g., Fealy et al. 2012), advertising (Lee et al. 2007; Williams et al. 2007; Ylänne et al. 2009); and second, perceptual studies of attitudes toward and stereotypes of aging held by members of different age groups as evaluated on surveys (Levy 1996; Hummert et al. 1994; Hummert et al. 1995). These studies have shown that people have complex, and often contradictory, views toward aging. For example, many people do not have only negative stereotypes of old people; rather, they may view some stereotypical aspects of elderly identities as negative, while seeing others as positive, which makes it difficult to eliminate ageist stereotypes overall.

This research has also led some to argue that Western societies are, for the most part, ageist: "age prejudice is one of the most socially condoned, institutionalized forms of prejudice in the world—especially in the United States—today" (Nelson 2002:ix). "Ageism," a term coined by Butler (1969), refers to the discrimination against and stereotyping of people who are old, based purely on their advanced age. Kite and Wagner (2002) elucidate that ageist attitudes are formed by the combination of three factors, which may be positive or negative: "feelings due to a person's age, stereotypes about what someone is like just because the person is 'of a certain age,' and differential treatment due to a person's advanced age" (131). Researchers who advocate activism against ageism take the perspective that "the facets of ageism that remain the greatest threat to the well-being of elderly people are those that are the hardest to deal with:

negative stereotyping, prejudice, stigmatizing behaviors, and our own fears about the aging process" (Braithwaite 2002:311).

It is not only older people who are subject to age-based discrimination. For example, Eckert (2004) argues that "[i]n many ways adolescents' position in society is similar to that of the aged" because both groups "are an institutionalized population, and much of their care is left to professionals who have come to constitute a major industry in our society" (362). However, I contend that older people face a qualitatively different form of age-based discrimination and stereotyping than adolescents do in at least two ways. First, adolescents necessarily age out of their stigmatized age group once they become adults, while adults who age into older age never escape marginalization. Second, adolescents primarily experience age-based marginalization only by adults—that is not by members of their own age group—while older people experience marginalization by younger as well as older people. In other words, older people often reproduce the very ageist ideologies that are used to discriminate against them.

Like scholars of other –isms (e.g., racism, sexism), researchers of ageism have often been concerned with how ageist stereotypes impact older people, or the targets of the stereotypes. Harwood (2007), for example, asks, "[W]hy do negative attitudes and stereotypes matter?" He argues that negative stereotypes of aging have a bearing on the lives of older people in four distinct ways: they affect older people's functioning, younger people's chances of getting old, and the quality of intergenerational communication, as well as lead to discrimination (70). Furthermore, as Levy (1996) demonstrates, priming older people for implicit negative self-stereotypes of aging leads older subjects to unconsciously perform worse on memory tests and have more negative attitudes toward aging. As she points out, the effect can apparently work in reverse as well; priming positive self-stereotypes can improve memory performance and increase positive attitudes toward aging. It has been concluded that beliefs and attitudes toward aging are therefore related to memory performance; this has implications for the relationship between the cognitive decline seen in older adults, the stereotypes of aging they are exposed to, and their attitudes toward aging (Harwood 2007:36).

While some stereotypes of older people are negative, adults of all ages maintain both negative and positive stereotypes of older people; additionally, there are several subclasses within each of these categories of stereotypes. The abundance of potential stereotypes for older people demonstrates that the personal qualities associated with aging are socially salient. Hummert (1994) and Hummert et al. (1995) have identified four main negative stereotypes (Despondent, Shrew/Curmudgeon, Recluse, Severely Impaired) and three primary positive stereotypes (Perfect Grandparent, Golden Ager, John Wayne Conservative) of old age. For each stereotype, Hummert (1994) lists the personality traits that are associated with it, as reported in Schmidt and Boland (1986) and Hummert (1990). For example, she summarizes that the Shrew/Curmudgeon, a negative stereotype of older age, consists of the following ten personality traits: complaining, ill-tempered, bitter, prejudiced, demanding, inflexible, selfish, jealous, stubborn, and nosy (Hummert 1994:166); in a similar list of qualities, Harwood and Giles (1992) also include rudeness, abrasiveness, and cantankerousness.

It has also been shown that stereotypes of older people in a variety of mass media venues have significant influence on the negative public perception of old age. For example, in their analysis of the television show, *The Golden Girls*, Harwood and Giles

(1992) argue that while the show was often lauded for presenting older people in a positive light that contradicted negative stereotypes of older speakers, it actually contributed to an ageist culture. Because the “counter-stereotypical portrayals” of old age, such as a hypersexual older woman (423), and rudeness attributed to malice (424–425), were the sources of the humor on the show. Therefore, they contend that these portrayals may actually perpetuate ageist stereotypes (Harwood & Giles 1992): “[i]f the alternative to a senile, lonely and boring elderly population is laughable, then we are left with our original conception as the only ‘serious’ option” (429). Moreover, others have argued that these media-circulated negative stereotypes of older people are more likely to be adopted by younger people without extended interpersonal contact with older people, because they have fewer counterexamples in their daily lives to these unidimensional, simplified, and often negative, portrayals of older adult life (Harwood & Giles 1992; Nussbaum et al. 2000; Harwood 2007).

The reproduction of ageist labels for old people is one vehicle for circulating stereotypes of older people in interactions; Nuessel (1982) defines ageist terms as “derogatory and demeaning because they depict the elderly as possessing largely undesirable traits and characteristics” (273). According to these criteria, the stereotype of personhood, “grouchy old woman” is an example of an ageist term: the label includes the lexical items, “old,” which denotes an older person, and “grouchy,” whose connotation is associated with older people (Nuessel 1982:273–274). In his discussion of ageist language, Nuessel specifically links the detrimental effects of ageist terminology to the way we treat older people. Following Butler (1975), he asserts that “ageist practices allow us to dehumanize the elderly, thereby making it easier for us to oppress this group.

This subjugation is achieved through the use of labels that devalue the elderly" (274). In addition, as Nussbaum et al. (2000) note, the general negative perceptions of a group can be, in part, evaluated by the quantity of pejorative terms available to label members of that group (27). Older people, as a socially identifiable group, are associated with an extensive number of negative terms: in his list of "selected ageist terms," Nuessel (1982) presents 75 examples of ageist language, for example, "little old lady," and "fuddy-duddy" (274).

It therefore becomes imperative that researchers who study older people also be conscious of these effects and use terms appropriate to the labeling of this group. For example, the label "(the) elderly" was often formerly used in academic literature about aging (e.g., Hummert et al. 1994). However, as Mautner (2007) found through her corpus study, the term "elderly" is overwhelmingly collocated with qualities of older people that are related to disability, illness, care, and vulnerability (63); correspondingly, most current literature on aging no longer uses "elderly" to refer to older people. Other scholars (Harwood 2007; Lee et al. 2007) use the phrase "older adults," which emphasizes that older people are on the same continuum of adulthood as other age groups, such as "young adults." Yet is important to note that "older adults" differs in a key way from phrases like "young adults": its comparative *–er* suffix seems to presuppose the negative connotation of "old" by serving a mitigating function. (One is merely "older" and not necessarily "old.") In addition, while "young adult" has come to be a normative category (e.g., "young adult fiction"), "old adult" remains marked. As I explain further in Chapter 3, I follow more recent conventions (e.g., Ylänne et al. 2009;

Fealy et al. 2012) and use the term, “older people,” which highlights the comparative age of its referents.

The research discussed in this section thus address how language both reflects and constructs the social realities of aging; this perspective is significant because it recognizes that age, like other more-frequently investigated dimensions of identity, such as gender and ethnicity, is something that is “done” through language, rather than being presupposed. Like others who examine the discursive construction of aging (e.g., Coupland et al. 1991; Hamilton 1999; Coupland 2009; Divita 2012), throughout this dissertation I use discourse analysis to examine how speakers use interaction to make sense of their changing lives through the aging process. An advantage of this approach is that it does not assume that identity categories, such as age, are predetermined in interactions; instead, as Coupland (2009) notes, it “assumes that identities are complexes of meaning potential, waiting to be triggered or activated or made salient under particular circumstances and in the flow of social life and social interaction” (855). I view this as a particularly productive approach to understanding how social actors make sense of aging, as it is often construed as a unidimensional and unidirectional process of decline. In the analyses that follow, I examine how participants discursively negotiate the multiple meanings of aging, including those that represent circulating stereotypes, and through this discursive process construct their own identities. These discursive approaches respond to the shortcomings posed by the study of language and age from other perspectives that treat aging as a purely physiological event rather than acknowledging the ways in which it is socially constructed, in addition to being physiologically experienced (see, for example, Chapter 4).

2.1.3 Limitations of other approaches to language and age

2.1.3.1 Sociolinguistics

While studies of language variation and change have used age productively as a macrosocial variable to investigate language change, previous sociolinguistic studies of older speakers have been characterized by three key limitations. First, most have problematically assumed that a speaker's chronological age (age according to one's birthdate and year) is representative of her or his "true" age rather than recognizing how age can be sociolinguistically constructed. Eckert (1997) acknowledges that studies of adults use "etic" age categories rather than examining age categories from an "emic" (i.e., insider's) perspective, for example, examining how life stage transitions (e.g., retirement) affect language use. Moreover, as Llamas (2007) critiques, "age (in sociolinguistics) is often approached uncritically and treated as a biological fact with which to categorize speakers, and against which other aspects of…identity are played out" (69). Likewise, Divita (2012) aptly notes that while sociolinguistics has paid a great deal of attention to the ways in which certain dimensions of identity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race) are socially constructed, age has been understood "as a fixed chronological fact rather than a socially meaningful resource" (585).

A second shortcoming is the tendency to focus on the language of older speakers primarily as evidence of language change, a perspective that necessarily treats speech in older age in relation to the speech of younger people. While this certainly is a valuable point of linguistic inquiry, I suggest that it is also important to examine the linguistic practices of older speakers on their own, rather than comparative, terms. Eckert (1997) recognizes the paucity of research that examines the nuances of life-stages for older speakers: in contrast to the study of children and adolescents, which has been nuanced, adults have been treated as one large, relatively undifferentiated age group: “adulthood has emerged as a vast wasteland in the study of variation” (165). In particular, those individuals who are in later adulthood and are retired have been studied the least of all age groups.

Yet a third shortcoming that remains in previous sociolinguistic considerations of age is their particular focus on linguistic features that are presumably distinctive to—or at least more frequently used by—particular age groups than by others. While language certainly exhibits patterns of difference across age groups, treating difference as the central object of study, rather than linguistic practices of differentiation, or distinction (Bucholtz & Hall 2004), presents only a particular portrait of how age is linked to identity. As I discuss later, what remains underexplored is the discursive process by which language is used to draw boundaries between and create alignments of age identity—to engage in practices of distinction and adequation (Bucholtz & Hall 2004)—not only by drawing on forms that are particular to age groups but also semantic content that allows speakers to talk about age and age distinctions.

2.1.3.2 Gerontology

Similarly to its treatment in sociolinguistics, other fields have been slow to recognize the socially constructed aspects of age. As noted by Nussbaum and Coupland (1995), much of the research on language and aging has traditionally followed a gerontological model, investigating the aging process from a cognitive perspective, studying the ways in which language use in older age declines in comparison to earlier stages of life. Gerontology, the scientific study of old age, has typically approached aging in general from a biomedical and psychosocial standpoint, focusing on topics such as demography, social services, health care, and intergenerational attitudes. In other words, aging was conventionally studied as a physiological and psychological process, and not until recent decades has it been also understood as a social process (Nussbaum et al. 2000).

Those who study aging from these physiological perspectives have typically framed the process of aging in terms of physical and social decline, which reflects stereotypical views in society on aging. Much of language and aging research continues in this psycholinguistic or neurolinguistic vein, for example, investigating how age-related hearing loss, "presbycusis," leads to a restricted conversational style (Villaume et al. 1994); how cognitive impairment from decreased mental faculties (e.g., dementia) causes semantic memory impairment and pragmatic disruptions, leading to discourse incoherence (Kemper & Lyons 1994); and how declining frontal lobe performance is associated with off-topic verbosity (Gold et al. 1994). In other words, each of these studies investigates how psychological or physical changes associated with aging negatively affect language production and perception in older age.

These studies are undoubtedly important, as they explain the biological basis for language impairment that is often observed in old age, yet their focus has led to a myopic view of communication and aging as an inherently negative process and resulted in a paucity of socially based research on the aging process. The early 1990s were marked by scholars recognizing this need for increased attention on aging and communication from a lifespan perspective that does not approach aging from a fundamentally negative perspective (e.g., Coupland et al. 1991; Coupland & Nussbaum 1993; Coupland et al.

1993). These early critiques of the cognitive-based investigation of language and aging were led by Coupland et al. (1991), who warned that social scientists following traditional gerontological paradigms resulted in a limited view of language and communication by older people: “Linguists, sociologists and psychologists are in danger of asking excessively narrow questions about elderly language and communication: questions about declining competence” (4). While scholars following a social constructionist view do not deny that there is some decline in the language of older people, they insist that it is equally as important to critically examine how discourses of decline and decrement are used in constructing the meaning of aging.

Trying to remedy this cognitive and biological bias in previous works, Coupland et al. (1991) critique earlier work on aging as following a deficit paradigm, which adopts “a stereotypically based set of assumptions about how diachrony and decrement ‘naturally’ relate to ageing as a process” (3). They present findings of earlier studies to demonstrate that researchers had assumed that aging leads to decline. In turn, they argue, by taking a deficit approach to language and aging, researchers had analyzed only the aspects of older people’s language that seem to be deficient and problematic for interactions. They point out that by focusing on diachrony, or change over time, researchers assume that old age is constantly in flux. In addition, focusing on how language has changed over an individual’s lifespan, coupled with the assumption that these changes are fundamentally negative, leads researchers to maintain that aging leads to a decrement of language. In other words, the problem with this type of research (while potentially valuable to understanding the relation between aging and health) was that it uncritically accepted aging as a process of decline; “normal” aging is thus characterized as inherently involving deterioration (Coupland et al. 1991:4). Taking this critique to heart, social scientists have subsequently moved toward incorporating new understandings of aging within language and age research in their analyses.

2.2 LANGUAGE AS PRACTICE

2.2.1 Agency

In this dissertation, I adopt the theoretical assumption that language is a form of social action (Ahearn 2001:110). While this assumption can be traced to J.L. Austin's (1975) early insight that speakers necessarily "do things with words," this theoretical perspective may find its more recent lineage in practice theory in anthropology, which developed in response to the strengths and shortcomings of two prevalent models in the 1980s. The first was Geertzian symbolic anthropology, which maintained that the anthropologist should study culture from the point of view of the actor, although it minimized the role of institutional structures on culture. The second was political economy, which focused on the effect of systems of economic and political power on local cultures, but did not investigate the ways in which social actors may also be agents in the formation of culture (Ortner 1984). These theoretical approaches on their own were unable to simultaneously account for what social actors actually do on a day-to-day basis while also acknowledging how they are limited by the structure of the society in which they live.

Practice theory thus provided an alternative theoretical perspective that focuses on the interactions between social structure, ordinary living ("practice"), and the agent's role in reproducing social relations. In other words, practice approaches to culture were attempts to answer the tension between interactionist and constraint-based theories of anthropology, which either paid too little and too much attention to the effects of institutional structure on human behavior. In contrast, a theoretical approach of a practice standpoint "restored the actor to the social process without losing sight of the larger structures that constrain (but also enable) social action" (Ortner 2006:3). Foundational practice theorists, such as Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1979), "set out to conceptualize the articulations between the practices of social actors 'on the ground' and the big 'structures' and 'systems' that both constrain those practices and yet are ultimately susceptible to being transformed by them" (Ortner 2006:2). Rather than looking only at human action or the influence of the system on culture, this theoretical approach seeks to elucidate the relationship between these two levels by assuming that culture and social actors are co-constructed through practices, which potentially acknowledges agency in practitioners' actions (Ortner 2006:129); in the context of this theory, "practice" refers to "anything people do" (Ortner 1984:149).

The view of language as a form of social action presupposes that "any act of speaking involves some kind of agency" (Duranti 2004:451). Though agency, especially in relation to identity, has been a problematic concept for social theorists because it has been interpreted to mean that individuals are free to construct their identities without limitations from institutional structures or that acts of agency are inherently acts of resistance (see Ahearn 2001; Bucholtz & Hall 2005:606 for further discussion), it also has proven to be a productive theoretical concept in linguistic anthropology. Within current linguistic anthropological theory, agency has been defined as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001:112). Moreover, this conception of agency allows linguistic anthropologists to "show how culture in all its forms emerges from everyday linguistic agency that is itself shaped by sociocultural formations" (Ahearn 2001:125).

2.2.2 Language as constitutive

Linguistic anthropologists have, as have anthropologists in other subfields, applied the tenets of practice theory to its own subject of study: language. As philosophers of language (e.g., Austin 1975; Searle 1976) have argued, words do not merely convey information (i.e., propositional content) but are necessarily used to perform actions, such as describing, promising, and pronouncing, thus having some force in the world. In other words, language has performative, or perlocutionary, effects rather than merely locutionary or illocutionary ones. An action-based approach to language thus has implications for how form is understood to relate to context. In contrast to some formal linguists, linguistic anthropologists (e.g., Duranti 1997; Hymes 1997; Du Bois 2000; Agha 2007a) argue against the divorcing of language from context. Thus, while the linguistic form of utterances remains important, linguistic anthropologists believe it is crucial to examine how linguistic form interacts with social relations to achieve social actions, not merely reflecting about also producing social contexts and realities (Ahearn 2001:111).

2.2.3 Indexicality

The specific process by which linguistic forms are linked to social contexts and realities—to their social meanings—is what linguistic anthropologists refer to as "indexicality." Indexicality, as Mertz (2007) explains, is a concept that semiotic and subsequently, linguistic, anthropologists have drawn from Peircean semiotics: an index is understood to be a sign (e.g., linguistic form) that points to a particular social meaning and is dependent on interactional context for meaning (see Mertz 2007 for a discussion on the evolution of this concept). Indexicality is the semiotic mechanism that mediates between linguistic forms and identities or personas being constructed. For example, Agha (2007b) defines social indexicality as a situation "when the contextual features indexed by speech and accompanying signs are understood as attributes of, or relationships between, social persons" (14). In his theoretical framework relating language and social relations, spoken utterances are seen as social objects because they function as a form of mediation between the people who use them, as well as describe the contexts in which they are used (15).

Moreover, the relationship between linguistic forms and the identities they index are not always transparently linked—linguistic anthropologists have long recognized that the indexical value of signs can be flexible and multiple (e.g., Ochs 1992; Irvine & Gal 2000; Agha 2003, 2005, 2007a; Silverstein 2003). That is, a linguistic sign may index multiple social meanings or "indexical fields" (Eckert 2008), of which some may be more recognizable than others to social actors, leading people to naturalize certain social meanings while ignoring others indexed by the same sign. As Silverstein (2003) shows, ideology is the mechanism that mediates between the linguistic sign and the social meanings speakers recognize that are indexed by the linguistic sign. He argues that language forms are always both "pragmatic," or indexical, and "metapragmatic," or dependent on ideology (227). Once a linguistic feature is linked to a particular category, it can be used to make ideologically loaded moves in interactions and exploit these associations, creating new indexical meanings and producing tensions between different "orders of indexicality" (Johnstone et al. 2006; Johnstone & Kiesling 2008; Johnstone 2010).

2.2.4 Stereotype and ideology

It is through habitual practice that indexicality produces ideologies of socially salient identities (Bucholtz & Hall 2004:380); in turn, "ideology organizes and enables all cultural beliefs and practices as well as the power relations that result from these" (379). While ideologies are characterized by broad cultural assumptions, stereotypes are attempts to typify and represent groups of people according to our ideologies. Stereotypes, or "societally shared beliefs about the characteristics (such as personality traits, expected behaviors, or personal values) that are perceived to be true of social groups and their members" (Stangor 1995:628), allow us to identify individuals as typical members of a group and therefore are convenient in navigating the terrain of our social worlds. Although stereotypes in practice may be either positive or negative, they are most commonly understood to be negative and essentializing heuristics that can be exploited to the advantage of one group of individuals at the expense of another. Taking this view, some sociolinguists have focused on how stereotypes circulate within groups by examining mass media texts and interactions. For example, Santa Ana's (2009) analysis of late-night comedian Jay Leno's use of stereotypes of Latinos demonstrates that negative cultural stereotypes are often circulated and made excusable in mass media under the guise of humor.

Sociolinguists in recent years have explored how linguistic stereotypes of social types may be reused in new contexts for accomplishing social action. Such a perspective echoes Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1985) early illustrations of how community-specific stereotypes of ethnicity are resources for individuals' linguistic and code choices, or "acts of identity." Sociolinguists who examine stylization practices, for example (Johnstone 1999; Coupland 2001b, 2007; Chun 2007), mock language forms (e.g., Hill 1999, 2008; Meek 2006; Bucholtz & Lopez 2011), and mocking practices, (e.g., Chun 2004, 2009), address how speakers can employ language forms that are indexical of certain stereotyped groups, thus reproducing certain language ideologies in the process while potentially subverting others. For example, Johnstone's (1995, 1999) research on Texas women's linguistic choices and metalinguistic commentary shows that they creatively use ideologies about regional and gendered identities to sound Southern for strategic purposes in interactions. Likewise, work by Chun (2004) and Reyes (2004, 2007) has argued that stereotypes may be reappropriated and recontextualized within a locally-relevant context to become interactional resources a particular community uses to achieve social action. In particular, by focusing on how Asian American teenagers in a community use stereotypes of Asian Americans as interactional resources, Reyes demonstrates that "metapragmatic stereotypes" are not static features of groups, but rather shift meanings and relevancies across social interactions and scales (e.g., locally v. widespread).

Crucially, linguistic stereotypes are not merely about how certain kinds of people speak but the kinds of actions they are imagined as enacting. This concept of "metapragmatic stereotypes" relies on an understanding of stereotyping as a function of language, as well as an understanding of language as practice or social action (Ahearn 2001). Agha (1998) defines metapragmatic stereotypes as generalizations about others' behaviors: "Since our ideas about the identities of others are ideas ABOUT pragmatic

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phenomena, they are in principle metapragmatic constructs" (151). When these linguistic stereotypes come to be recognizable over time and across a community, they have undergone the process of "enregisterment," (e.g., Agha 2003, 2007b; Johnstone et al. 2006; Johnstone & Kiesling 2008; Johnstone 2011)—that is, they are stereotypical linguistic representations linked to models of personhood (Agha 1998, 2007b). While some of these stereotypes may become subject to overt typification and comment (Labov 1972a), at other times, they circulate in more covert ways (Hill 1999).[6]

2.3 IDENTITY AND INTERACTION

Sociolinguists have usefully turned to the study of interactions as essential sites in which language is used to accomplish social action, such as the construction of social identities. Interactional approaches to identity, rather than presuming identity to be fixed and quantifiable by the researcher, emphasize the moment-by-moment emergence of identity through interactions and interactionally complex units of meaning other than identity categories (e.g., stances and acts), as well as allow for the intersectional nature of identity. Additionally, as Bucholtz and Hall (2005) note, these approaches treat identity as positioned in the relationship between macro-level categories, local positions, and moment-to-moment stance-taking acts, thus allowing for analysis on multiple levels of identification processes. In this section, I present each of these theoretical assumptions as well as discuss specific scholars who have engaged with them.

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[6] It should be noted here that I am using "stereotype" in a conventional sense to refer to the ideologically-loaded qualities ascribed to a particular group of people, rather than in the Labovian sense, which Johnstone and Kiesling (2008), for example, define as "[a] variable feature which is the overt topic of social comment; may become increasingly divorced from forms that are actually used; the form may eventually disappear from vernacular speech" (9). Eckert (2008) also draws on Silverstein's (2003) interpretation of Labov's (1972a) use of the term "stereotypes" to refer to variables that are used in stylistic variation and "are subject to metapragmatic discussion" (463). While different in nature, my use of the term "stereotype" here also refers to entities and qualities of groups that are available for metapragmatic commentary.

Such an approach is distinct from variationist methods of analysis that investigate primarily how language features correlate with identity variables such as class (e.g., Labov 1966, 1972a), race (e.g., Wolfram 1969), and sex (e.g., Trudgill 1972), often in ways that have been critiqued as “static” rather than “dynamic.” Such quantitative methods, prominent in sociolinguistics since the 1960s, clearly offer a powerful tool for identifying patterns of variation across communities or situations. Variationism has different goals from approaches that view identity as socially constructed (e.g., stylistic variation, interactional identity): it has “set itself other primary objectives, linked to understanding language systems and how they change, rather than understanding social action and interaction through language” (Coupland 2007:7).

An interactional approach can fruitfully address how identity is socially constructed.[7] One of the earliest studies in this vein, Le Page and Tabouret-Keller’s (1985) “acts of identity” framework emphasizes that individuals have active roles in using language to identify with or distance themselves from others (181). This approach foregrounds the dynamic qualities of identity and views identity as a process, rather than depending on externally defined categories. This theoretical perspective has been a promising one for bridging the disciplinary gap between linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics. In particular, linguistic anthropologists have taken a critical stance toward the use of “identity” as a theoretical construct in sociolinguistics because this concept has been used to essentialize characteristics of groups of people and depict qualities of individuals as inherent and generalized (see Bucholtz & Hall 2004 for a summary of this critique). However, an interactional approach to identity attempts to correct for this essentialization by acknowledging an individual's agency in his or her identity construction, rather than imposing identity categories determined by external forces on the individual. It is worth noting, however, that a focus on individuals' constructions of identity risks ignoring the significance of how identity ascriptions, or assignments of identity by others, can be highly relevant in the daily lives of individuals. In addition, the influence exercised when social institutions assign identity categories to individuals is not always acknowledged when analyzing from a speaker-centric analytical perspective (cf. "structuration theory" [Giddens 1984]). It is therefore important for the analyst to consider the ways in which broad social categories may also be made relevant in interactions.

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[7] It should be noted that some sociolinguists also treat identity as socially constructed though they do not do so from an interactional approach, for example those who investigate stylistic variation (e.g., Moore 2004; Eckert 2005, 2012; Coupland 2007).

2.3.1 Stance

Importantly, the process of indexically linking forms and social meanings must be understood along temporal trajectories. The fact that these indexical links may shift, or at least oscillate, between different units of social meaning, such as categories of stance and identity—was articulated by Ochs (1992) and has more recently been highlighted in numerous analyses of interaction and linguistic styles (e.g., Johnstone 2007; Bucholtz & Hall 2008; Bucholtz 2009; Johnstone 2009; Kiesling 2009; Snell 2010). In her work on gendered language, Ochs (1992) differentiates between direct and indirect indexicalities: a "direct index" links a linguistic form (e.g., 'baby talk') with an interactional act (e.g., accommodation), while an "indirect index" links that interactional act (e.g., accommodation) to a social identity (e.g., “caregiver”). Significantly, she draws attention to the relationship between linguistic forms and social identity or group as mediated by interactional acts, such as stances and other acts of social positioning, given that particular stances and acts become conventionally associated with social categories of people over time.

Interactional approaches thus attend to how language is related to nuanced units of social meaning, such as stances, acts, and activities (Ochs 1992) and how these nuances of meaning may eventually become associated with broadly defined social groups. An interactional approach provides a framework for analyzing the moment-by-moment emergence of identity and production of meaning (Bucholtz & Hall 2005), primarily through the positioning moves achieved, or stances taken, by speakers. Jaffe (2009:13) defines stance as an analytical framework that examines “the subject positions and relationships that can be enacted through forms of talk,” which in turn are “statistically and/or stereotypically mapped on to named linguistic systems (“accent”, “dialect,” “language,” “mixed codes”) or less explicitly named discourse categories (register, genre, discourse” (13). When speakers engage in stance-taking, or take up “a position with respect to the form or the content of one’s utterance” (Jaffe 2009:3).

Stance-taking is essentially a dialogic process of evaluation by which speakers position themselves in relation to a stance object and assign it value (Du Bois 2007:143). Within a sociolinguistic framework of stance, two particular types of stance-taking moves have been foregrounded—epistemic and affective stance. Through epistemic stances speakers make claims of knowledge and authority about a stance object relative to their interlocutors. Affective stances represent the speaker’s feelings toward the stance object as the speaker's evaluation positions her on an affective scale. As Du Bois' stance triangle (2007) shows, through both epistemic and affective stance-taking moves, in addition, speakers position themselves relative to their interlocutors by aligning or disaligning with their interlocutors' positionings toward the stance object.

Attention on the interactional level thus privileges the ways in which identity is constructed through the positions taken up by participants in moments of discourse. By examining stances, or "footings" (Goffman 1981[1979]), which allow the speaker to construct relational identities with other social actors, analysts are able to connect moment-by-moment interactions to other levels of identity construction, such as personas and styles (e.g., Johnstone 2007; Bucholtz 2009; Kiesling 2009) that may take place along various timescales (e.g., Wortham 2003), whether those that are sociohistorically emergent in a community, ontogenetically emergent for an individual, or micro-interactionally emergent within a particular moment of talk. In other words, using stance as a framework for interpreting identity construction in interaction allows the analyst to look across interactions to see how speakers employ stances that become "habitually and conventionally associated with particular subject positions…and interpersonal and social relationships" (Jaffe 2009:4). That is, through repetition over time, "stance accretion" (Du Bois 2002, cited in Bucholtz & Hall 2005) enables fleeting stances to build into persisting and recognizable personas and styles. Finally, taking an interactional approach to identity encourages the analyst to investigate the indexical relationships that result from stances mediating the association between linguistic forms and dimensions of social identification (Ochs 1992; Jaffe 2009).

2.3.2 Relational and collaborative construction

According to this "sociocultural linguistic" approach (see Bucholtz & Hall 2005, 2008, 2010), identity is understood as the "social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:586), a definition that allows for identity to be approached as a "relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than as a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories" (585–586). Because identities are relational, they obtain their meanings relative to other identity positions, individuals, and social groups.

Crucially, under this approach, identity is not merely constructed but it is necessarily co-constructed by participants in an interaction, as disregarding the ways in which identity is collaboratively constructed risks attributing too much agency to the individual speaker. Not only does an individual construct his or her identity, but others with whom they interact also participate in this process of construction and negotiation. The importance of these "local discourse contexts" in the process of identity construction highlight the importance of situating interactional approaches to identity within communities, and interactional analysis is one means to develop a close understanding of how relevant categories are produced through discourse practices within a community.

2.3.3 Intersectionality

Moreover, because it conceives of identity as simultaneously constructed along various social dimensions at once (e.g., race, class, gender, age), an interactional theory of identity reflects a productive way that sociolinguists have addressed the intersectional nature of identity: that social dimensions intersect, rather than operate independently of each other. The goal of intersectionality theory is to analyze "how social and cultural categories intertwine" and to examine "[t]he relationships between gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class and nationality" (Knudsen 2006:61). In the 1990s, multicultural and black feminists (e.g., Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991) formulated intersectionality theory as a response to the version of feminist studies that privileged the experiences of white women and excluded the experiences of women of color. Thus, intersectionality theory provides a framework for understanding "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (McCall 2005) and how multiple dimensions of identity interact to produce a mixed identity (Anzaldúa 1987). In particular, intersectionality theory has most often been deployed to analyze how interlocking systems of race, class, and gender intersect to produce situations of oppression and marginalization. As Collins (2000) explains, intersectional theorists "view race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, among others, as mutually constructing systems of power. [And] . . . these systems permeate all social relations" (11). Crucially, analysis through an intersectional lens rejects the notion of identity as additive and instead argues that "effects of identity categories are multiplicative, producing contextualized experiences of oppression and privilege for all individuals and groups, not just women of color" (Mallinson 2006:39–40). And, intersectionality tries to unite the influences of structure with the everyday practices (Brah & Phoenix 2004) as well as capture "the ways in which subjects experience subjectivity or strategically deploy identity" (Nash 2008:11).

Intersectionality theory has only recently been applied explicitly to sociolinguistics (e.g., Mallinson 2006; Lanehart 2009; Levon 2011). Although intersectionality began as a theory to discuss the multiply oppressed positions of women of color, it has been increasingly applied to understanding how other dimensions of identity intersect. As Mallinson (2006) notes, since intersectionality privileges "questions that center on context and variation rather than separable and discrete membership categories," it "allows for a broader examination of not only majority group members but also those of previously understudied groups" (41). Regarding the analysis of social meaning in language variation, Levon (2011:81) argues that sociolinguists should privilege an intersectional understanding of identity:

> we cannot know a priori how individuals will experience the intersection of two social categories in their lives or how that experience will inform their social practice. Rather, it is only in the context of empirical investigation that intersectionality gains its explanatory potential—a potential that is itself necessarily grounded in the facts of observed social practice.

While intersectionality was founded primarily to focus on race, class, and gender as categories of identity, some scholars (e.g., Collins 2000; Lanehart 2009) have acknowledged the dimension of age as part of the interlocking system of identities. Because it does not presume that any particular category of identity is necessarily relevant to an interaction prior to its analysis, an interactional approach to identity allows the analyst to be attentive to the multiple intersecting social dimensions that may emerge as simultaneously relevant and connected through the interaction.

CHAPTER 3

Ethnographic Field Site and Methods

3.1 THE FIELD SITE: THE ANDRUS CENTER

3.1.1 Introduction to the site

My first official visit to the Andrus Center in Fairview was on a temperate morning early in October of 2012. I had previously been to the center two years prior for a small jazz concert open to the public but attended mostly by older people. As I approached the center for the second time, I observed that it was thoroughly kempt and tidy, with fresh paint and shiny floors. Its grounds provided a pleasant place for its members to walk laps around; a sign posted outside informed me that one lap around the center was the equivalent of walking one quarter of a mile.

I had arranged by email to meet the director of the center, to investigate the possibility of conducting my dissertation research at the center and serving as a volunteer while doing so. In our meeting, Patricia, a quick-talking professional woman in her sixties, dressed in a suit and low heels, initially seemed hesitant.[8] Her first hesitation was on behalf of the center and its staff. She explained that the volunteers at the center—usually undergraduates from a nearby university—often needed supervision and ended up creating more work for the center staff. Her second consideration concerned my research goals; she was unsure that the center could provide the right environment for the topic I had initially envisioned for my project, specifically stylistic variation in the everyday language of seniors. As Patricia explained, the Andrus Center was not as socially oriented as other senior centers (e.g., Myerhoff 1994[1979]; Rose 2006), many of which provide daily lunch and serve as a gathering place for seniors to linger for hours. Instead, she told me, many members came for specific activities or social events, particularly exercise classes and dances, a few times a week for a few hours at a time.

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[8] Despite her initial concerns, Patricia became an enthusiastic supporter of my research project, and I owe her greatly for sponsoring my access at the center, including helping me find ways to collect data and to contribute to the center's projects.

Patricia's warning was my first clue that the Andrus Center's mission and purpose was different from the senior center that lived in my (and the public's) imagination. Rather than emphasizing fellowship and camaraderie as the primary benefits from membership in the center,[9] its mission and structure prioritized active bodily and intellectual maintenance through exercise and education. My conversation with Patricia illustrated the ways in which the Andrus Center's institutional discourses represented it as a place for older adults to improve and maintain their health.

Patricia's representation of the center as a place for health and wellness was reinforced a few weeks later during my first volunteer experience at the center's annual fall event, the Autumn Fair, which was attended by several hundred members of the center. The fair provided a fun atmosphere for members to meet representatives of associations and businesses that provided services for aging well. The organizations represented were varied: nearby subsidized senior apartment buildings, home healthcare agencies, financial planners, and city hospitals, for example. Representatives set up tables stocked with giveaways such as tote bags, hand sanitizer, cardboard fans, pens, and candies throughout the center's large ballroom and spoke to members about the resources and programs they offered to assist older people with successful and independent aging. Members were encouraged to walk around and meet all the vendors in a scavenger hunt; those who completed the scavenger hunt were entered into a drawing for small door prizes provided by the vendors. Free flu shots were offered by the local franchise of a large pharmacy chain. After a few hours for milling around and the scavenger hunt, a chili-and-cornbread lunch was served by volunteers from the local university. And the highlight of the event was an Elvis impersonator. Some members danced along to his songs, and many wanted their pictures taken with him.

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[9] This is not to say that camaraderie, friendship, and community did not emerge among members at the center. However, unlike other centers, the primary institutional goal of the Andrus Center was not to foster the social lives of its members.

3.1.2 The Andrus Center in Fairview

The Andrus Center was the main recreational facility in Fairview dedicated to the aging population, serving approximately 1,000 paying members over the age of 50. Given the minimum age requirement for basic membership, those who joined in their fifties were often looked at and talked about with suspicion—as if they were too young to belong to the center (e.g., see opening anecdote in Chapter 6). For example, this gatekeeping language was used when the director of the center recounted to me an incident in which one member challenged the validity of another's membership after seeing her run on a treadmill in the center's cardio room, noting that she looked younger and ran faster than a typical 50-year-old. While there was a lower limit on age qualifications for membership, there was no upper limit; in fact, once members reached 90 years, they were offered free lifetime membership at the center.

As a result of its membership requirements and the contemporary demographic trends in America (see Section 3.2), the Andrus Center served a population of older people that was rather diverse in terms of age. The oldest member at the center during my time there was 106 years old, creating more than a 50-year gap with the youngest members of the center. As a group, members therefore represented two or three different generations. In some cases, the younger relatives of older members also aged into eligibility for membership and joined the center to accompany their older relatives (e.g., parents, aunts, uncles) to classes, events, and dances. And, because most of the classes and activities were not graded or divided by age, it increased the likelihood that people with large age gaps between them did interact. The center attracted members of widely different ages who were all considered eligible to belong to a “senior” center yet who identified as “old” to varying degrees, making the center an interesting site for examining the ways that speakers engage with the multiple meanings and categorizations of older age.

3.1.3 Center mission and branding

Founded in the mid-1990s by residents of Fairview, the center was intended to provide the city’s increasing ranks of seniors with a central gathering place. As a not-for-profit recreation center, its mission, stated on its website and in pamphlets distributed to members, is similar to that of other senior centers across the United States, specifically in its focus on prolonged independence, education, and activity for those over the age of fifty. While I am not citing directly from the center’s actual statement, in an effort to maintain its confidentiality, I draw below from statements of other centers in the United States, similar in size and in goals. The language used in the Andrus Center’s mission statement resembled, for example, the following:

> “[The] Senior Center welcomes adults age 50 and older to come for exercise, socializing and to broaden their horizons through a wide array of classes. We

> emphasize lifelong wellness with a focus on fun and learning, and offer a multitude of opportunities for seniors to try new things and meet new people" (Lowcountry Senior Center).

Yet the Andrus Center differed from many other centers in that its name no longer included explicit reference to the seniors it served, a result of the modernizing and rebranding campaign it underwent between 2010 and 2014. For example, when I visited the center two years after I had first been there, I noticed that the interior of the center had been remodeled since my prior visit—the old linoleum floors were now wood laminate, the previously low ceilings were now vaulted, and its walls and ceiling beams were newly painted. Originally named the Fairview Senior Center, it was given its new name, The Andrus Center, in 2013, which, significantly, no longer referred to age.

This change to rename senior centers without using age-referring terms is part of a larger trend nationwide. In one publicized case, the Rochester Senior Center in Rochester, Minnesota, in addition to undergoing numerous modernizing changes, was renamed 125 LIVE. According to a local news organization that covered the groundbreaking and rebranding ceremony, 125 LIVE was chosen "with the number referencing the address of the Rec Center, while LIVE was chosen as part of an effort by the organization to be more inclusive and avoid any stigma associated with the word senior" (Brownell 2015). Consequently, the mission statement for this center excludes any reference to older age, citing instead that the center's aims are to "promote independence" and provide "opportunities to stay active and engaged." As Jennifer Levitz (2015) observes in her *Wall Street Journal* article about the Rochester Senior Center's name change, "in rebranding to attract zippy boomers, old monikers are out." Levitz (2015) quotes Sally Gallagher, the executive director of the former Rochester

Senior Center, as directly attributing this change in order to make senior centers and their services more attractive to aging baby boomers: "It's very clear when you talk to people in the baby boomer group that they don't like [the label 'senior'] and they don't want anything to do with it." The Andrus Center's own onomastic change was motivated by a concern over the center's perception by younger old people. During one conversation I had with Patricia, the center director, she invoked similar reasons for the name change from the Fairview Senior Center to the Andrus Center.

3.1.4 Andrus Center members

For many of the community members I spoke to, making the decision to join the Andrus Center was more than simply a matter of turning 50; it was also imbued with conflicting emotions (see Examples 6.3 and 6.4 in Chapter 6). In both interviews and sessions of the Story Collective workshop, members recounted their decision to join a senior center as a process through which they began to come to terms with their own aging. For example, in our interview, Marie, 65, told me that she had joined the center five years before she retired just to go to an aerobics class. While she thoroughly enjoyed the class, when her friend said, "Just think if we were retired, we could go to the senior center and spend all day there," Marie's reaction was dismissive: "and I'd say that 'Gah I don't want to do that.' You know be with all those old people there. I don't want to do that. Too frickin old those people." At the time of our interview, five years after she had retired, though she still resisted identifying herself as old, Marie's attitude toward the center had changed: "But here I am now. I go all the time. I love it." Joining the Andrus Center became one symbolic step toward accepting aging, though as I discuss further in

Chapter 6, in these narratives about the decision to become members, some members also resisted identifying with the older people with whom they interacted at the center.

Though membership at the Andrus Center was first and foremost determined by age—members had to be over 50 years old to join—it was also contingent on socioeconomic status. To join, members had to pay an annual participation fee, which was stratified in three levels. The lowest level payment ($25) enabled participation in social events and educational opportunities (e.g., art and Spanish classes, computer tutoring, lectures on aging topics, arthritis-related exercise classes). The middle financial level ($85) additionally allowed members access to the center's gym, including cardio and circuit rooms. The most expensive membership ($25 monthly or $225 annually) allowed access to all services at the center, including additional exercise classes (e.g., tai chi, Pilates, aerobics, and yoga). Varying levels of participation at the center were thus linked to fee payment; members who did not want or were unable to pay a full membership price were excluded from accessing some services at the center. The fees and cost stratification had the potential to alienate some members who, for financial reasons, may have had access to fewer classes than others. These monetary considerations had implications for interactions of members at the center; educational classes and social events were spaces in which members of multiple socioeconomic backgrounds were likely to meet, while most exercise classes were populated by those members who could and felt it worthwhile to pay the full membership fee. Ultimately, then, socioeconomic stratification of the wider society may have been replicated within the local context of the center.

Despite its fee structure, the center appeared relatively diverse in terms of commonly used measures of socioeconomic status, such as education, occupation and housing. For example, many members had college educations, although some did not, while others had graduate degrees.[10] Members were also diverse in terms of present and former occupations; among the members I met, the following occupations were represented: social worker, nurse technician, primary and secondary schoolteacher, artist, law enforcement, and nurse. The center's socioeconomic diversity may also have been at least partially a result of its location. Within walking distance in one direction from the center were two subsidized senior apartment buildings; within walking distance in another direction were houses that were in the upper strata of Fairview's housing options. Members of the center came from both of these neighborhoods as well as numerous other Fairview neighborhoods at varying socioeconomic strata. As discussed previously, the socioeconomic status of the members became relevant because membership at the center required the payment of fees.

In comparison with Fairview as a city, which was about 50 percent European American, the center had a larger proportion of European Americans; based on my observations, it appeared that European Americans comprised approximately about two-thirds of the community, while the remaining third of the center's population were African American. Active members who identified as neither black nor white were so small in number that many participants identified the three Asian American and two Latino members by ethnic terms such as "Korean," "Chinese," and "Mexican." While race more generally was a common subject of the conversation among subgroups of the members, among other groups it was actively silenced; these patterns and their implications are addressed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

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[10] While this variety of educational experiences was often not explicitly addressed at the center, it was raised during a Story Collective session I recorded when one member, with some self-deprecation, noted her lack of education relative to other members.

Of the Andrus Center's most active members, at least two-thirds were women, while about one-third were men (cf. Rose 2006). This numerical dominance of women surpasses a gender pattern among older populations in the United States more generally, in which women (25.1 million, or 56.1 percent) outnumber men (19.6 million, or 43.8 percent) (U.S. Administration on Aging 2014).[11] Women were even more strongly represented in my data, given that they tended to more actively participate in center activities. For example, of the approximately 25 total participants in Story Collective, only two were male, one of whom only attended twice and the other participated regularly for just a two-month period; in contrast, half of the six most regular participants of Thursday Afternoon Coffee were male. As I discuss further in Section 3.3.4, this uneven gender representation is replicated in the data I present in this dissertation.

While the makeup of the Andrus Center community certainly was not homogeneous, many of the participants had similarities across their personal histories. Though some members had moved to Fairview and the region in recent years, the majority of those with whom I became acquainted had lived in the American South for a substantial number of years, either growing up in the region or moving there between 30 and 50 years prior. They noted that during their lifetimes Fairview had undergone significant changes. As several participants mentioned, between the 1980s and my period of data collection in 2013 and 2014, it had changed from a "sleepy Southern city" to "a city about to be on the move," "on the edge of being very livable," and "very attractive to someone who wanted to move here and have…a good shot," as one member, Henry, told me in an interview. In interviews and sessions of Story Collective, many acknowledged that not only had Fairview changed in this time but that the culture in the South had also changed significantly over their lifetimes, particularly with regard to race. Having lived through the Civil Rights Movement, they were witnesses to the end of legislated public segregation through the repeal of Jim Crow laws and government-mandated integration. These commonalities in terms of local and regional culture served as points of connections for participants to bridge their differences across other identity categories.

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[11] While older women are still predicted to outnumber older men in the future, the 2010 Census projected growth report estimates that the number of older men are catching up to older women; in 2050, of those 65 and older, the percentage of women is predicted to decrease from 57 to 55 percent, and of those 85 and older the percentage of women is expected to decrease from 67 to 61 percent (Vincent & Velkoff 2010:8).

3.1.5 Center activities

Members of the Andrus Center met one another primarily in the context of various organized activities such as fitness classes, educational and cultural opportunities, and social events. The week's schedule of activities and flyers advertising the center's new offerings were posted on bulletin boards at the head of the center's main hallway. As the Spanish instructor and Story Collective workshop facilitator, I created content for the flyers publicizing these classes. All of the center's programs were listed in the center's quarterly newspaper, on its website, and at the center's reception area, where approximately 10 clipboards with sign-up sheets regularly lined the counter of the front desk. While some activities required advanced sign-up, most did not, and frequently many more members would sign up than would attend the program.

The center, as an institution, was comprised of several different kinds of roles, in addition to that occupied by members. The day-to-day operations of the Andrus Center were run by a permanent staff of four whose demographic characteristics roughly resembled those of the center's members in terms of ethnicity (two African American, two European American) and gender (three women, one man); although the staff was slightly younger than most members, their ages ranged from the forties to the sixties. A 12-member board of directors, consisting primarily of members from the center as well as several individuals from the community, also weighed in on major changes and decisions at the center. The front desk was staffed with volunteer receptionists who were often members themselves. Finally, the center's classes, the focal point of participation at the center, were taught by paid and volunteer instructors hired by the programming director; the majority of these instructors were also of membership age (i.e., over 50 years old) and were a mixed group in terms of racial and gender identification. Though center members sometimes interacted with the permanent staff for complaints, requests, and praises about classes and center policies, they most often interacted with the instructors and other members.

The fitness program at the Andrus Center consisted of exercise classes and two fitness rooms (one for lifting weights and the other for exercising on machines); for the majority of members, this was their predominant form of engagement at the center. Offering over 300 hours of exercise each month—many more hours than other types of activities—the center thus prioritized encouraging physical activity. These classes were at varying levels of difficulty to accommodate the many different physical ability groups represented by members of widely disparate ages. For example, those who were less physically well could participate in an arthritis-specific exercise class, balance classes with local university volunteers as “spotters,” or gentle yoga. For those more active members it offered cardio aerobics, Pilates, and strength and conditioning classes. Other classes such as tai chi, chi kung, and meditation appealed to a wide variety of members because they incorporated strategies for nurturing the mind-body connection.

The center’s educational and cultural programming was also a significant form of engagement for its members, though to a lesser degree than its fitness program. With about 50 hours of educational and cultural programming each month, the Center sought to encourage its members to maintain mental acuity, have continued personal growth, and learn about the process of aging from the perspectives of medical, legal, financial, and social professionals and institutions. For example, educational opportunities (e.g., Spanish language classes, computer tutorials, Story Collective) endeavored to help members prevent cognitive decline. By offering culturally oriented programs (e.g., ethnic dance classes, painting and drawing, quilting, and jewelry-making), the center encouraged members to continue to expand their horizons and learn new artistic skills. To educate its members on issues they might encounter as they aged, it provided Lectures at Lunch, a series of seminars by professionals and experts that addressed physical problems that are connected to aging (e.g., stroke prevention, hearing devices), health issues that may affect older adults differently than younger ones (e.g., dentistry, medication safety, nutrition, depression), or legal and financial affairs that they might come up against (e.g., identity theft, Social Security, Medicare, advanced directives).

In addition to the socializing they did during fitness and educational classes, members were encouraged to join the numerous social events and groups offered by the center. For example, members could seek out social activities weekly in Thursday Afternoon Coffee and Thursday Bingo, biweekly in Singles on the Town and Fellowship and Food, or monthly in Lifelong Scholarship and a local branch of the Red Hat Society, a national social organization for women over 50. The center held quarterly social dances that featured dance music by Fairview's big bands, were open to the public, were attended by 200–300 people, and cost members 15 dollars per ticket. In addition, until May 2015, the center sponsored the AC Social Dance, a smaller event that featured a musical trio or quartet and was held every other week on Friday nights.

In its heyday until about two years ago, the AC Social Dance had over 150 attendees, but by the time I served as its coordinator, turnout at the dance had decreased significantly to between 11 and 36 attendees, though most often the attendance was around 24. Throughout the time I attended these dances, much of the conversation at the start of each dance was about how low the attendance had fallen. This dramatic change was explained to me as deriving from several factors: increased ticket cost, inclement weather, decreased frequency of the dances, and, most often, changing center demographics. As Patricia, the center's director, told me, social dancing (e.g., swing, foxtrot, waltz) was seen by young-old people (i.e., Baby Boomers) as a pastime for old-old people (i.e., people who had grown up during World War II). Patricia and others in the community attributed the decrease in participation to the aging of this latter group; many of the old-old people in the community had already reached ages at which they were less mobile and could no longer dance, moved into residential facilities, or passed away. Indeed, the majority of the participants who continued to dance every other week were in their eighties; a younger couple in their mid-sixties stood out to me as the anomaly in the crowd. Moreover, as a member of the AC Social Dance email list, I continued to receive emails notifying us of “another dancer’s last waltz” when former dancers and center members passed away. These electronic missives apprising us of the passing away of the community’s dancers drove home Patricia’s point that the changing demographics of the center—like those in the United States overall—favored new or different types of activities for a new generation aging up into the category of senior.

3.2 SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

3.2.1 Aging in America

The Andrus Center’s rebranding campaign is reflective of changing national demographics. The population of older people in the United States—like those of other nations globally (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2013)—has been increasing and is expected to continue rising significantly in the future. For example, a brief issued by the United States Census Bureau, “The Older Population: 2010,” noted that the number of people who were 65 years and over in 2010 was greater in that census than in any of the previous censuses (Werner 2011). In addition, it reported that between the 2000 and 2010 censuses, this population had increased at a faster rate than the United States population as a whole (15.1 percent and 9.7 percent, respectively) (Werner 2011). Similarly, the Administration on Aging division of the Administration on Community Living, a department of United States Department of Health and Human Services, reports that between 2003 and 2013, the number of Americans 65 and older had increased by 24.7 percent, whereas the population under 65 years had increased by only 6.8 percent in the same time period (U.S. Administration on Aging 2014).

As has often been reported in the media, this increase in the older population is expected to continue, particularly as members of the Baby Boomer generation[12] have begun (as of 2011) to age into the over-65 category. By 2030, the population over 65 is expected to represent one in five Americans, in contrast to 2011, when this proportion was reported to be one in seven (Vincent & Velkoff 2010:1). While the population of Americans aged 65 and older was estimated at 40.3 million in the 2010 Census, it is projected to reach 88.5 million in 2050, thus more than doubling in the ensuing 40 years. The United States Administration on Aging's (2014) "Profile of Older Americans" reports different numbers than these in their 2013 estimate: the number of Americans 65 and over increased between 2003 and 2013 from 35.9 to 44.7 million and is forecast to total 98 million in 2060. Though these timescale and statistics differ slightly, they point to the same conclusion: the over-65 group in the United States is a significant and growing portion of the population.

The aging up of the Baby Boomer generation is not the only factor in the increasing number of older people in the population and the percentage they represent; rather, longer life expectancies overall are also contributing to this rise. The older population in the United States has been steadily increasing over the past century; this comprehensive increase is due to rising life expectancies during this time period. In its report, "The Profile of Older Americans: 2014," the United States Administration on Aging summarized this trend, stating, "the older population itself is increasingly older." In this report, it was also found that in 2013, people who reached the age of 65, on average, have a life expectancy of an additional 19.3 years, though this projection is slightly different between women (20.5 years) and men (7.9 years). The number of the oldest members of this population—those older than 85—is expected to increase between 2010 and 2030 from 5.8 to 8.7 million (2.3 percent of total population) and then again, reaching 19 million (4.3 percent of total population) in 2050 (Vincent & Velkoff 2010:3). Whereas in 2010, only 14 percent of the older population will be 85 and older, by 2050, it is projected that 21 percent of the older population will fall into this oldest-old category. These projections from the U.S. Census Bureau (Vincent & Velkoff 2010:10) are shown below in Table 3.1. This particular change has significant implications for social and government support because those over 85 generally need more caretaking services (Vincent & Velkoff 2010).

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[12] The Baby Boomer generation, one of the largest in U.S. history, refers to those adults born between 1946 and 1964 (Vincent & Velkoff 2010), reflecting the large increase in birthrates in the two decades after World War II.

Table 3.1 Older population in the U.S. in millions (with percentages of total)

	2000	2010	2030	2050
65 and over	35.0 (12.4%)	40.3 (13.0%)	72.1 (19%)	88.5 (20.2%)
85 and over	3.9 (1.5%)	5.1 (1.7%)	8.7 (2.3%)	19 (4.3%)

These widespread demographic changes have occasioned both academic and public discourse about the appropriate names and labels for both this trend and the people who inhabit these expanding categories. For example, a May 19, 2014 National Public Radio (NPR) story, "'Silver Tsunami' And Other Terms That Can Irk The Over-65 Set" (Montagne 2014), focused on exploring this dilemma. For example, phrases like "the silver tsunami" frame this pattern of demographic growth problematically and hyperbolically as a sudden and destructive crisis, as Ashton Applewhite, an anti-ageism blogger and book author, critiqued: "A tsunami is something that strikes without warning and that sucks everything out to sea — as [if] we're supposed to believe old people are going to suck all our resources out with them" (Montagne 2014). Similarly, labeling this population change based on hair color, as found in phrases such as the "greying of America," has been critiqued by scholars and activists as problematic for two reasons: first, it also objectifies older people by identifying them merely on the basis of their physical characteristics; and, second, it inaccurately implies that an overwhelming proportion of America has become old, despite constituting around 20 percent of the population, and problematically invites public panic about this segment's growth.

The growing attention to aging trends have also given rise to academic and popular discussions of the terms used to refer to people older than 65. The use of the term "elderly," for example, potentially conveys negative connotations, as suggested by Mautner's (2007) corpus linguistics study that found the term frequently collocated with terms with negative semantic meanings such as dependence and disability. Thus, while "elderly" was once appropriate for referring to people of older ages, it has now been shown to convey ageist connotations of "discourses of care, disability, and vulnerability, emerging less as a marker of chronological age than of perceived social consequences" (Mautner 2007:51). As such, uses of this now pejorative term have sometimes encountered public objection. For example, when the term was used in a National Public Radio story headline on March 6, 2013 to refer to a 71-year-old ("For Elderly Midwife, Delivering Babies Never Gets Old "), critiques by NPR's audience prompted a response from the NPR ombudsman Edward Schumacher-Matos. He highlighted the lexical dilemma posed by aging: "Who, when they get past the age of 60, wants to be called 'elderly'?...What *do* you call people today past 60 or 70, or even 80 or 90?" (Schumacher-Matos 2013).

Academics and journalists have suggested numerous replacements for “elderly,” each of which is burdened with ideological implications. However, the most common practice among them, following the lead of scholars of geriatrics and gerontology, is the use of the adjective “older” to modify the nouns “adult,” “person/people,” or “American.” The rationalization for, as well as cultural legitimacy of, this usage is provided by Schumacher-Matos, who quotes Paula Span, a professor at Columbia Journalism School and author of “The New Old Age” blog at *The New York Times*: it is “inelegant and non-specific but also unobjectionable” (Schumacher-Matos 2013). Similarly, in “Elderly No More,” a post on *The New York Times’* “The New Old Age” blog, the director of academic affairs for AARP, Harry Moody, was quoted as suggesting the use of “older people” “because it’s the least problematic” since “everyone is older than someone else” (Graham 2012).

Like others who address issues of social gerontology, I too have had to find appropriate ways to refer to these culturally and locally recognized categories, basing my labeling decisions on metalinguistic commentary from community members, academics, and circulating media. Following the current consensus of labeling practices among those who write about and study older age, throughout this dissertation, I refer to members of the Andrus Center as “older people” or “older adults.” As others have suggested, these terms are less problematic than other options because they emphasize that that age is relative. Though I have made this lexical choice to use the comparative adjective “older,” I also recognize its limitations. First, local members generally use the adjective “old,” rather than “older” to modify the noun “people.” While they use the term “older” when referring to the aging process (e.g., “I notice as I’m getting older”), they less often use this term to refer to individuals or groups of people. Second, while it does emphasize the relativity of age, this term also privileges youth as the comparative norm; that is, it does not acknowledge that a 75-year-old, for example, though she may be "older" (than a 25-year-old) is also younger (than a 95-year-old). Though I have chosen to use this term, it should be noted that it does problematize old(er) adults, in contrast to the label "young adult," which is not framed in a similarly comparative way but rather is normalized (see discussion in Section 2.1.2).

In addition, following practices in this community (see Section 6.3) and academia, when appropriate, I distinguish between members who are between 50 and 85 years old from those who are older than 85 by referring to them as "young-old" and "old-old," respectively. Occasionally, I also refer to those who are between 50 and 65 as the "youngest old" and those who are over 95 as the "oldest old" to highlight the diversity within this group.

3.2.2 Aging in Fairview

The Andrus Center (AC) is located centrally in Fairview, a mid-sized city of approximately 100,000 to 200,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010) in the southeastern United States. Throughout this section, I use demographic figures from the 2010 United States Census and have rounded to the nearest whole number all numerical values representing statistics about Fairview and the state in which it is located. Approximately 18 percent of Fairview's population is estimated to be over the age of 55, a percentage that is about 10 percent less than the over-55 population of the state and 8 percent lower than the estimates for the national percentage of the same age group. About 9 percent of Fairviewans were 65 years and older; this percentage is about 5 percent less than that represented by the over-65 populations of the state in which Fairview is located and the United States as a whole. The 2010 Census also showed that approximately 2 percent of Fairviewans were over 85 years old, a number that is similar for both the state and the South, though 0.5 percent less than the percentage across the United States. These numbers are represented in Table 3.2, below.

Table 3.2 Percentage of older population in the U.S., by region, state, and city

	Over 55	Over 65	Over 85
Fairview	18	9	2
State	28	15	2
The South	(unavailable)	13	1.6
United States	26.1	13.8	1.9

Distribution of age in the United States differs regionally. Fairview's regional designation, the South,[13] had the highest number of people in the following two age groups: over 65 (14.9 million people; 13.0 percent) and over 85 (1.8 million people; 1.6 percent). The state in which Fairview is located has roughly the same proportion of the population in each of these age categories as the South as a whole does.

Fairview's ethnic makeup and median income were similar to those of the state as a whole, though somewhat different from the United States at large. In general terms, Fairview had a larger relative population of African Americans and smaller relative population of European Americans than the state as well as the nation, though whites still constituted the largest racial group in the city. While Fairview was approximately 50 percent European American, 40 percent African American, and 5 percent Hispanic or

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[13] As categorized by the U.S. Census Bureau, the South includes the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Latino, the state as a whole had a higher percentage of European Americans (65 percent), a lower percentage of African Americans (25 percent), and approximately the same percentage of Hispanics or Latinos (5 percent). The United States overall stood in greater contrast with 63.7 percent European American, 12.6 percent African American, and 16.3 percent Hispanic or Latino. Fairview's female population was slightly under 50 percent in contrast to the state's, which was slightly over 50 percent. The city's median income was just over $40,000, about $4,000 lower than the median household income of the state and $13,000 lower than that of the United States.

3.3 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

As I entered my field site in October 2012 and began the process of data collection a few months later, I prioritized developing an insider's understanding of local linguistic and cultural practices. To achieve this "emic" perspective, it was essential for me, as an ethnographer, to approach the community "not in terms of preconceived categories and processes, but with the openness to discovery of the way native speakers perceive and structure their communicative experiences" (Saville-Troike 1997:126). Noticing what social distinctions are meaningful to members of the community allows us to understand the social meanings that "link individual linguistic forms to interactional moves and then to broader identities, social structures, cultural processes, and ideologies" (Bucholtz & Hall 2008:158). It is through ethnographic methods that we can make such connections across multiple scales of linguistic practices and begin to understand how they function within a particular community. These methods enabled me to document communicative practice in its myriad forms as well as develop a deep understanding of the relevant contexts in which language is used to create social meaning. My ethnographic understanding of the community developed gradually over three total years: 18 months of intensive data collection, dispersed between January 2013 and November 2014, supplemented by numerous follow-up visits that continued through the weeks in which I completed this dissertation.

In this section, I detail my methods of data collection and analysis as follows. I first describe my assumptions inherent in my taking an ethnographic approach to linguistic research, and then describe the gradual development of the multiple roles I played at the center that allowed me to become a participant observer. While I was unable to become a full participant-observer due to the visibly obvious age difference between my participants and me, these age-suitable roles allowed me access to groups and conversations that might otherwise have been closed to me. Second, I reflect on my positioning as an ethnographer at the Andrus Center. I consider the ways in which my own identity characteristics and roles within this community shaped the kind of data that emerged through my encounters with participants as well as my interpretation of the local activities I observed. Third, I introduce the specific contexts in which I audio-recorded the participants whose voices will be represented in the upcoming chapters. Finally, I discuss my methods of analyzing the interactions I recorded and observed at the center; I include my methods of transcription and an overview of the categories, roles, and stances my analyses include.

3.3.1 Ethnography

Ethnography, as a method of empirical description, provides a way to observe language forms produced in everyday communicative practices as well as the broader social contexts that ground their use. Ethnography is thus “the written description of the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretive practices characteristic of a particular group of people" (Duranti 1997:85). In addition, ideally, an ethnography is a multiperspectival document "in which the researcher establishes a dialogue between different viewpoints and voices, including those of the people studied, of the ethnographer, and of his disciplinary and theoretical preferences" (87). Duranti's definitions highlight the fact that ethnography should be viewed at least partially as a product of the ethnographer; in Geertz's terms (1973), ethnography is constituted by "data," which "are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they said and their compatriots are up to" (322). Analysis of this "data," then, is a process of sorting and organizing these complex meanings into patterns and understanding their significance.

Throughout this process, I was regularly reminded of the benefits of letting my participants act as my guides to the "acts of identity" (LePage & Tabouret-Keller 1985) that were meaningful in their community. Entering my fieldwork, I became aware that members of the center privileged age as a dimension of social identification, and, accordingly, my analytical focus shifted. I had started this project planning to analyze how older speakers use linguistic styles to create meaning, but I soon noticed that the local identity category they privileged most often was age and that on the rare occasion when members did use linguistic styles, it was often in service of marking or talking about age. I became attentive to the ways in which age was an axis along which identities were constructed and negotiated and community was generated.

Though my younger age was often the most salient difference among features of social identification between my participants and me, it did not seem that their focus on age was an artifact of my presence in the center. These discourses about age persisted when I exited the room but left my recorder running (see Example 6.5) as well as when I was an overhearer rather than a participant in the conversation. For example, long after my fieldwork ended, I overheard a conversation between two women who, though they were acquainted, were not close friends. After the younger of the two said that she did not mind getting older but did not like its effect on her body, the other woman relayed her own experience with aging: no birthday phased her until 60. She poignantly said that the milestone birthdays of 30, 40, and 50 did not phase her, but that turning 60 was very difficult for her. In her seventies, she used her experiences to bond with and encourage her younger interlocutor; these are just two functions of the frequent age-talk in this community. Because I was not a ratified participant in this conversation, this interaction, like others I had overhead, demonstrated to me that age was a category that *they* found important in *their* communicative practices. I would contend that members of the center often talked about age and aging because older age was what members purportedly shared at this senior center. As such, they treated this institution as a space where they could safely and freely talk about aging and its attendant effects. One might even argue that members spoke freely about age in front of me not because of my presence but in spite of it.

This ethnographic project might also be viewed as conferring additional benefits on my fieldwork (e.g., Feagin 2002), such as allowing me to overcome the "observer's paradox," the "problem" identified by Labov (1972b) as the difficulty for linguists to collect "authentic" data from speakers when they know they are being observed and recorded (113). However, as Bucholtz (2003) discusses, the ideal of collecting "real language," or "language produced in authentic contexts by authentic speakers" (398), is inherently problematic, as it presumes the existence of language that is authentic, necessarily marginalizing some speakers and settings defined as inauthentic, and ignoring the discursive practices though which language becomes authenticated. Aligning with Bucholtz's critique, I did not embark on a search for language that was "untouched" when choosing ethnographic methods. Instead, I recognize that the language I heard and recorded may have been shaped by a range of factors, including my own presence, and my goal in drawing on ethnographic methods has been to understand how language practices and their social meanings emerged in complex cultural contexts of interactions, activities, and ideologies.

3.3.2 Participant-observation

A key component of my ethnographic approach included my long-term role as a participant-observer. After I helped with the fall event, the director of the center, Patricia, invited me to return to the center in January 2013 as a volunteer at the front desk for three hours on Tuesday afternoons, allowing me to visit the center regularly and to get to know the members and staff. On my first day, I greeted members when they walked in and several of them commented on the fact that I was new there. By the end of my fieldwork, I had become a familiar face to long-time members and continued to meet new members as they joined the center.

Working at the front desk allowed me to observe how the center was run, who it served, and what types of interactions and activities occurred there. It also led to other opportunities to become involved in several official capacities at the center, such that my contact with members increased and my presence, originally noteworthy, became less remarkable. First, on the third Tuesday that I worked at the front desk, I learned that the center's Spanish teacher was unable to teach her introductory language class. While I initially volunteered as a substitute, by the next week, at the request of students, I was asked to teach Spanish for one hour every Tuesday, and in September 2013 I was asked to teach a second Spanish class. After each 10-week class, the students and I would go out to lunch at a local Mexican restaurant to celebrate the end of the term. Second, between May 2013 and November 2014, I facilitated Story Collective, a weekly personal storytelling workshop that I designed with the center's programming coordinator and director as a way for me to contribute to the community in a meaningful and appropriate way. Third, throughout my period of fieldwork at the center, I met a variety of members by volunteering at quarterly themed dances, at which I sold soft drinks and made popcorn. Fourth, from January 2014 through April 2015, I also served as the coordinator for AC Social Dance events held every other Friday, setting up refreshments, taking money and attendance at the door, and sometimes dancing with members. Finally, I volunteered when needed at other special events such as the Autumn Fair and the center's renaming ceremony. During my fieldwork, I interacted with members of the center between two and 10 hours a week.

From these official roles at the Andrus Center, I made additional acquaintances with other members in unofficial capacities. For example, members that I knew through Story Collective, Annie and Joyce, invited me to play and call bingo and to attend the center's Thursday Afternoon Coffee. Several dancers I met through the AC Social Dance welcomed me to Fellowship and Food, a biweekly potluck supper club that concluded the evening with dancing. Invited by Jane, a student in the Spanish class, I played tennis with a group of members who had originally learned and played tennis as part of the center's exercise program. Birdie, a Story Collective participant, welcomed me to join her at the center's Lifelong Scholarship, a group primarily made up of former educators that invited guest lecturers from nearby universities. And at the request of Gloria, a frequent participant in Story Collective, I gave a guest lecture on linguistics to the center's local branch of the Red Hat Society. While I did not collect recorded data at all of these opportunities, my observations and exposure to many different groups of members inform my interpretations of the discourse I analyze in this dissertation, enabling me to gain an in-depth understanding of the types of interactions and practices that were common at the Andrus Center.

3.3.3 Ethnographer positioning

As I have described, I eventually became a familiar face at the Andrus Center, but this entry was gradual and, at first, slightly challenging. Because the center was a private institution with paying members, the staff, who served as gatekeepers, needed to ensure that I was trustworthy and that I would not negatively affect daily activities at the center. In addition, some center members viewed my presence at the center as an oddity. In my late twenties at the time, I was more than twenty years younger than even the youngest members. While I took on an institutionally recognizable role in the community as an instructor, and while I was permitted to partake in classes and activities at the center free of charge, my membership at the center remained relatively peripheral because of my perceived biological age. As was made clear to me by discourses at the center, an individual's looks were the first signs read by members to determine whether he or she belonged (see, for example, Chapters 4 and 6).

In fact, my age sometimes became the subject of conversation when I was seen as either transgressing or exemplifying age expectations. For example, when I could not remember a word or phrase while teaching Spanish, I was gleefully teased by my students that I was having a "senior moment," a condition of momentary forgetfulness that they playfully framed as contagious. "You must have caught it from us," they told me. At other times I betrayed my youth, as when members could tell by my puzzled visage that I did not catch onto jokes relevant to the experiences of older people, for example, when the phrase "having personal summers" was used as a reference to menopause. They also commented on my apparent physical agility, both marveling at it and forecasting ominously that it would diminish when I was their age. As I analyze further in Chapter 6, these types of comments were not exclusive to conversations about me, but they mirrored discourses that took place more generally between the older and younger members of the center. In fact, the members in the community much more frequently focused on the ages of other members at the center (see Example 5 in Chapter 6) than they did on mine.

While I never tried to adopt practices in order to appear older than how I usually acted, I did take care to minimize acting or dressing in ways that saliently diverged from the center's norms. For example, while at the center I avoided using my smartphone, as that was comportment associated with younger people, a fact that became particularly salient when members criticized young people's technology-related practices. While at the center, I also dressed in a way that was suitable to my positioning at the center between staff members, who wore professional attire, and center members, who wore exercise or other casual clothes appropriate to their activities at the center. I made conservative makeup and clothing choices, most often wearing jeans with a modest shirt and sweater. I found that even my gait needed monitoring (cf. Myerhoff 1994[1979]); I learned that it was better to join members in conversation as they ambled down the center's long central hallway rather than striding purposefully down it, as I normally would have done, even if walking slower meant I was late to an activity. Finally, I accommodated to local practices of calling members by their first names, rather than using formal titles and last names, even if doing so required diverging from Southern practices of address that were common in Fairview.

I was markedly different from center members in other relevant ways that positioned me as a cultural novice that both limited and afforded opportunities to participate in particular kinds of conversations. Since my political and religious beliefs, shaped by my upbringing and education in a left-leaning region of California, differed from the conservative politics and religious practices common in Fairview, when my participants discussed these often-contentious topics, I participated only minimally so not to create any obvious ideological rifts. This was also a strategy that some of my participants reported using. For example, Marie, a resident of Fairview for over 30 years, recognized that the Andrus Center was a community with some "people who are real real different from me, people who are different politically," who would "be appalled if they knew" her personal belief. She constructed her choices of interactions at the center as minimizing this conflict: "so I don't say everything about myself [but] I have a great time. And we talk and we laugh." My non-Southern phonology also marked me as not a native Southerner. As several of my participants had also been raised in other parts of the United States, I was able to ask them about their experience moving to Fairview from the perspective of a fellow transplant; with native Fairviewans, I was able to ask how the city as I knew it had changed over their lifetimes from the perspective of someone who was newer to the region. My particular positioning as an outsider gave rise to interactions that I might not otherwise had if I had been a native Southerner and Fairviewan; these conversations positioned them as cultural experts and allowed me to ask questions from the position of apprentice and eager student.

My identity as an educated European American woman, potentially viewed as embodying a form of race and class privilege, also likely affected my positioning at the Andrus Center. For example, for some members, my white middle-class identity may have been a point of similarity, though for others, it may have been a point of difference. I nonetheless felt I developed amicable relationships with people of various ethnic and racial as well as socioeconomic, gender, and educational backgrounds, and I was not aware of being excluded from interactions, specifically on the basis of my race, class, or gender identity. It might be noted that there were many more women than men represented in my data, though I did not sense that this gender skewing was a product of my gender. Rather, as I discuss elsewhere, this seemed to be largely a consequence of the demographic and cultural fact that women tended to be more involved in center activities than men. Importantly, I built relationships with male members, even if it is possible that my gender enabled me to develop greater rapport with female members of the center.

In addition, my presence necessarily transformed any interaction at the center into an intergenerational one. This might seem to pose a problem to my focus on intragenerational discourse (conversations among those of the same generation), in contrast to intergenerational ones (e.g., interviews with a younger researcher) that had been the focus of earlier age-related research (e.g., Coupland et al. 1991; Giles et al. 1994). However, it was clear in many of the contexts I recorded and observed that I was only one of numerous participants, both speakers and audiences, who co-constructed the trajectory of conversations. Thus, while I recognize that these conversations were always to some degree a product of my participation in them, my understanding of cultural norms, expectations, and practices at the center demonstrated to me that the exchanges that occurred in my presence were similar to those that took place when I was not recording, when I was an overhearer rather than a ratified participant in the interaction, or after my fieldwork officially ended.

Though my presence at the center was initially viewed as exceptional, members became accustomed to me being there, and some invited me to join them for activities or suggested other people to whom I should talk. By the end of my fieldwork, members jokingly chastised me for my absence from activities I could not attend. The change in my status at the center over my period of fieldwork was most apparent to me at the 2015 Autumn Fair (a year after my fieldwork ended), when many of the people I had met at the center greeted me by name, hugged me, engaged me in conversation, and asked why I had not been at the center recently; this was a marked difference from my first time volunteering at the Autumn Fair.

3.3.4 Study participants

The nature and structure of the center both enabled and constrained my abilities to recruit participants. It was difficult to maintain consistent contact with some participants because attendance at the center was voluntary, and for some members, sporadic. Attendance patterns were predictably unpredictable; members would consistently take part in a group for a period of time, disappear for several weeks or months, and then (sometimes) return. For example, each Spanish class consisted of a ten-week term, which I started with ambitious class rolls of twenty or more students, but by the halfway point of the term, it was not unusual to have only eight students who would continue with the undertaking. At the start of the next term, some of those who had stopped coming would return, explaining their absences and pledging to stick with it this time, but many would again have interruptions in the term. Over time, I began to understand that participants' inconsistent attendance could be attributed to a wide variety of reasons: personal illnesses, family responsibilities, extended vacations, and other community commitments. For example, during my period of data collection, participants suffered strokes and falls, moved their parents into nursing homes or provided after-school care for their grandchildren, moved to the beach for the summer or spent the winter in Arizona, and became involved in political advocacy groups, as well as experiencing other major life events. As multiple members explained to me, after retirement, they had adapted to a more free-flowing lifestyle. While they acknowledged that their freer schedules in retirement could conceivably make them more committed to their chosen activities, they observed that older people were particularly susceptible to lapses in attendance. As Birdie astutely noted during a session of Story Collective, I found this pattern unexpected: "You expect older people to be reliable, but we're not always."

During the time I spent at the center, I came into contact with over 150 community members, though these connections varied widely in terms of their depth. I obtained signed consent forms from and recorded interactions with approximately 50 members, about 20 of whose voices I present in this dissertation and are detailed below in

Table 3.3. Most of the individuals I chose to interview were those who had participated in other activities and were familiar with me, though I did interview one individual, Marie, who had been recommended to me by other participants.

Table 3.3 Participants[14] quoted in analyses

Pseudonym	*Race*	*Age*[15]	*Group(s)*
Jane	European American	65	Spanish, Interview
Rosalie	European American	79	Spanish, Interview
Marie	European American	65	Interview
Katie	European American	63	Spanish, Interview
Meryl	European American	72	Spanish, Interview
Gloria	African American	76	Story Collective
Dana	African American	60	Story Collective
Barbara	European American	60	Story Collective
Leah	European American	63	Story Collective, Spanish, Interview
Lib	European American	73	Spanish, Interview
Birdie	European American	73	Story Collective, Interview
Joyce	African American	73	Story Collective
Tom	European American	68	Story Collective, Spanish
Pearl	African American	86	Story Collective
Kay	European American	83	Story Collective
Sandra	European American	52	Story Collective
Henry	European American	69	Spanish, Interview
Susan	European American	68	Spanish, Interview
Ella	European American	65	Story Collective
Annie	Asian American	86	Story Collective

The gender, racial, and age identification of the participants who appear in this dissertation (shown above in Table 3) do not quite reflect the population at large. First, as is clear in the table, the majority of my participants were women. This was due partially to the gender disparities at the Andrus Center. As mentioned previously, older populations tend to have more females than males and in this community those differences were even greater. However, the disproportionate number of women in my sample cannot be explained purely by gender distribution in the population; I would also contend that these activities were somewhat biased toward those who were most active at the center. Though the population at the center was roughly 40 percent male, the female members appeared to be more active on the whole, participating in a greater number of activities. For example, when I taught the beginning Spanish class, a roll of 15 students would include a maximum of three male students—at 20 percent, this proportion was less than the ratio of men at the center. In addition, my participants were disproportionately European American. However, the African American participants who are included—Dana, Pearl, Gloria, and Joyce—were among the most consistent and long-term attendees of Story Collective. Finally, the age distribution among my participants was uneven in representation between old-old and young-old members. As a result of this final disparity, the analyses that follow focus on the shift between age categories.

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[14] Participants are listed in the order in which they are presented in this dissertation.

[15] Participants' ages refer to the chronological ages they had reached by the end of 2014, when I concluded my data collection period. I have selected an arbitrary date for the purposes of presenting these participants as a group. However, throughout my data analyses, I introduce participants with their ages at the time the audio recording was made.

3.3.5 Speech events

I developed the interpretive lens that informed my analysis of the data over the more than three years I spent visiting the center, 18 months of which comprised my official data collection period. My analyses certainly were also influenced by the practices I observed, if informally, for the first four and last 14 months of my time at the center, though I was not audio-recording during that time. In addition to group and individual interactions with members, my role as a participant-observer also enabled me to take into consideration institutional discourses and materials, such as flyers advertising activities and events, pamphlets about issues of concern to the members, and quarterly newsletters. Though I did not record them, I had numerous lengthy conversations with center staff members.

In total, I audio-recorded approximately 85 hours of data, 65 of which were recorded during center activities and 20 of which were recorded during interviews with participants. The center activities I recorded were in both educational and social settings. My data includes four audio-recordings of the Thursday Afternoon Coffee group among the 20 I had attended; while I had originally hoped for regular recordings of this group, one of its members chose to not be recorded. In addition to these two social settings, I regularly audio-recorded the two Spanish classes I taught. Noting the surprising variety of conversations that occurred in both the beginning and intermediate levels, I asked for permission and recorded five sessions of each. I also recorded five meetings of an informal Spanish conversation group.

The majority of my recordings (n=47) were from Story Collective, the weekly storytelling workshop I facilitated between May 2013 and November 2014, which was modeled after StoryCorps, an independent nonprofit organization that records, archives, and publically circulates oral histories.[16] There were between two and eight participants at each session, though at most sessions there were at least four. Some participants only came to the group once while others attended each Thursday for long stretches of time, and still others attended sporadically over the span of several months. The format of this group evolved as time went on; originally, the workshop was designed as an opportunity for participants to share, record, and receive copies of the stories they told centered around a particular topic.[17]

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[16] According to StoryCorps, oral histories are important to "remind one another of our shared humanity, strengthen and build the connections between people, teach the value of listening, and weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that everyone's story matters" (StoryCorps n.d.).

The discourse that emerged in this activity was certainly shaped to some extent by my facilitating role. When these sessions first began, I was frequently positioned by members as a "teacher." However, over the months, I increasingly referred to myself as a "workshop facilitator" to minimize my directive role in the group and emphasized that conversations generally (not just stories) were important to me. Additionally, though I often came prepared with my topic suggestions, not all topics were accepted, and the particular topic for the session (e.g., Halloween, food, state fairs, most interesting visitor, school, medicine) was decided upon by the group. I also maintained a relatively minimal structuring role, and it was always members themselves who made suggestions to the general structure of how they took turns. For example, in response to members perceived as "rambling," the members of some sessions asked that I serve as an official timer, enforcing a time limit for stories, both to give everyone their turn as well as to encourage everyone to be conscious of their time. Some constellations of participants enjoyed the timer while others preferred more spontaneity.

In addition to audio-recording in these contexts, I conducted 20 hours of interviews that allowed me to ask more focused questions about my participants' demographic information and personal histories. Between June and October 2014, I conducted 10 interviews with a total of 13 participants. Of these, three interviews were with two participants, five were with one individual, and I interviewed one participant twice at her request. I conducted these interviews either at my apartment, their homes, or the Andrus Center, depending on which location was most convenient and comfortable for them; as a researcher I took care not to inconvenience a participant who might have had physical difficulties or lacked convenient transportation. The interviews each lasted between one and three hours, and I provided baked goods and coffee or tea for my participants. These interviews supplemented my other forms of data collection, particularly to elicit metapragmatic commentary and ideologies of aging, in addition to being informed by my observations during my participant-observation.

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[17] This type of workshop is not uncommon at other senior centers (see, for example, the oral history group described in Meyerhoff 1994[1979]), many of which provide forums for seniors to tell or write down their stories; for example, a participant in Story Collective shared stories that she had previously written in another storytelling group at the center.

Across these interactional contexts, the kinds of conversations that emerged shared certain qualities that were particular to this kind of space: they allowed age to be highlighted and conflict to be mitigated. First, as an institution that brought together a disparate group of people whose primary shared characteristic was age, the Andrus Center seemed to encourage stranger sociality. In their interactions, members seemed to emphasize the commonality of age, thus constructing the center as a space in which it was acceptable to talk about old(er) age, a practice that is often discouraged and marginalized by ageist practices in mainstream (i.e., youth-centric) society.

Second, members generally oriented toward collaborative interactions. Unlike other types of age-based institutions (e.g., schools, nursing homes), member attendance at and participation in the Andrus Center was voluntary; members were at the center because they wanted to be there and were therefore likely to be motivated to limit conflict. When I did observe conflict between members, it was almost exclusively managed indirectly. For example, a woman who came to one session of Story Collective telephoned me to say that she was not going to be returning to the group because she felt that another member had monopolized the conversation; in the session itself, though, she did not attempt to change the subject or reclaim the floor. Another member seeking to prevent the same problem requested that I set a timer during Story Collective, again making me the arbiter of conflict without directly addressing the person whom she perceived as talking too much. And when one 95-year-old European American member of Story Collective made comments about “zoot-suiters,” and I missed the potentially racist connotation of his remarks, his 76-year-old African American interlocutor quietly explained it to me in the hallway later, excusing his racism due to his advanced age, rather than directly address his transgression during the actual interaction. The frequency with which direct conflict was mitigated and the lengths to which members went to avoid it stood out as a feature of this institution and its particular social structure and purpose.

3.3.6 Analysis of interaction

As scholars have noted, the process of transcription is the first step toward the analysis of discourse. It is inherently subjective and selective, as there is a nearly infinite number of details from spoken discourse that can be transformed into written symbols in a transcription (e.g., Ochs 1979; Bucholtz 2000; Edwards 2001; Johnstone 2008). Because transcripts that contain too much information become unwieldy and are difficult to analyze (Ochs 1979:2), I have had to be selective in my transcription practices. In deciding what goes into a transcript, the researcher directs the audience’s, as well as her own, attention to particular dimensions of language; these decisions have both scientific and political implications. As a result, my transcriptions themselves are products of my analysis, and I reflectively attended to this fact throughout my analytical process. With the understanding that my role in transcribing transforms private texts into circulatable ones, I recognize that my choices have implications for how my participants will be portrayed (Bucholtz 2000:1440). For these transcriptions, I use standard orthography so as not to unnecessarily highlight nonstandard speech (i.e., transcribe "wuz" for the word "was") that may not be relevant to the analysis and may represent my participants in a way that has unintended social consequences (e.g., Jaffe & Walton 2000).

The list below provides a key to the transcription conventions I use throughout this dissertation. Following common sociolinguistic practice, each line in a transcription represents an intonation unit. I use these transcription conventions judiciously in an effort not to make the transcripts too cumbersome to interpret while still attending to the pauses, turn taking, prosody, emphasis, laughter, and quoted speech through which speakers use language forms as a resource for social action.

Transcription Conventions

1. *Pause intervals*

(.)	brief pause (less than 0.5 seconds)
(n.n)	length of pause (in tenths of seconds)
-	interruption, cutoff of speech
~	connected speech

2. *Turn taking*

=	latching speech
[word]	overlapping speech
[$_1$word$_1$] [$_1$word$_1$]	overlapping speech in proximity to other overlap

3. *Intonation*

?	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
↑	raised pitch
↓	lowered pitch

4. Emphasis

word	slight emphasis on utterance
word	strong emphasis on utterance
wo:rd	lengthened sound or syllable (indicated after the lengthened sound)
WORD	increased volume
°	decreased volume

5. Laughter

<@word@>	laughter throughout an utterance
<@ (n.n) @>	laughter for an extended amount of time (in tenths of seconds)
@ @	short bursts of laughter

6. Quoted Speech

“word”	quoted speech is contained within quotation marks

7. Transcriber Notes

((details))	relevant transcription details
(word)	uncertain transcription
(xxx)	wholly unintelligible utterances are replaced by a series of three xs
[[omitted]]	lines of speech have been omitted for brevity and relevance

My process of analysis began with the transcription of full-length recordings made in a variety of social contexts within this community. As I continued my participant-observation, I began to narrow my analytical focus to ideologies and discourses of aging, and I started more selectively transcribing recordings. I continued to transcribe moments in which participants referred to and made relevant locally salient social types, categories, distinctions, or meanings; elsewhere I noted the other themes and topics they discussed but did not transcribe these in full. I made note of the themes that I noticed across interactions and returned to these later to transcribe in greater detail. I collated and organized my data according to these themes and qualitatively coded them to investigate for patterns of interactions and categories. These methods allowed me to attend primarily to the participants’ categories of identification (e.g., Schegloff 1997), while simultaneously relying on my ethnographic knowledge to explore implicit ways that participants might make other contextual facts relevant (Duranti 1997). These more detailed transcriptions allowed me to attend to the ways in which turn-taking (Sacks et al. 1974) plays a role in the emergence of identities through interaction.

Throughout my process of discourse analysis, in addition to analyzing how members oriented to broad demographic categories, such as age and race, I also paid attention to the use of locally relevant social types in constructing identities in interaction. As community members, our social competence is in part our ability to interpret how linguistic or material (e.g., sartorial) forms point to, or index, social distinctions (Coupland 2007:1); we then use these social distinctions to continually make meaning as we reuse these linguistic resources for our own interactional purposes. Like macro-social categories, community salient figures of personhood can be explicitly referenced (e.g., "young-old"), or distinguished through presuppositions that make certain identities relevant in discourse (e.g., "have you heard of the X?," where X refers to a particular group of people), allowing speakers to construct both their own and others' identities in interactions.

In my analysis I also attend to interactional stances and acts of positioning that allow speakers to display their relation to objects of evaluation (stance objects) and the recipients of these stance-taking acts. The epistemic and affective stances taken by social actors mediate the relationship between linguistic forms and the social group indexed by those linguistic forms (Kiesling 2009:177). By repeatedly taking certain social positions and stances, speakers become associated with these particular stances (e.g., "stance accretion"), which become part of one's persona. In addition, stances themselves become "habitually and conventionally associated with particular subject positions (social roles and identities; notions of personhood), and interpersonal and social relationships (including relations of power)" (Jaffe 2009:4). In my analysis I use these understandings of stance-taking and its relationship to the employment of styles and personas to examine how a speaker's interactional stance-taking moves accumulate within and across interactions (e.g., Johnstone 2007). Epistemic stance, or the way speakers position themselves as knowledgeable towards a stance object (Du Bois 2007) can construct an experienced identity or a sense of belonging. Affective stance, or the attitude a speaker takes toward a stance object, can index the acts of aligning with and distancing from the stance object.

CHAPTER 4

Countering the Ideology of Aging as Embodied Decline

“What about a stereotypical older person?” I asked Jane, 65, and Rosalie, 79, during our interview. My question followed up on our discussion of the typical behaviors of young people. Jane immediately answered with a disparaging nasal tone, “Wearing polyester, grey hair, clunky shoes.” Her pat answer prompted Rosalie to self-consciously inspect her own attire. Jane assuaged her, “You don’t have clunky shoes on, you’re not wearing polyester, you’re in good shape…I mean we can’t help getting older, but we don’t have to look old.”

Jane’s response to my question reflected a commonly heard ideology of aging in the Andrus Center community. According to this ideology of embodied decline, bodies, including the clothing that enveloped them, submitted to the inevitable consequences of time’s passage. More generally, this ideology aligned with widely circulating representations in U.S. popular media, according to which bodies feel aches and pains, bellies no longer are flat, feet start shuffling, and skin begins to loosen. While few would deny that older people have health complications that arise from aging, these problems are regularly magnified and problematized by discourses that negatively value the aging body. Crucially, as reflected at the end of Jane’s response, these circulating discourses of successful aging place the onus of bodily maintenance on the individual; exhibiting signs of decline is accordingly framed as morally objectionable.

In this chapter, I examine how bodies, such as Jane's and Rosalie's, came to be managed, policed, and produced through discourse (Bucholtz & Hall forthcoming). By examining moments in which speakers discussed the ways in which they experienced physical and mental decline, I show how their discourses often paralleled culturally circulating discourses that police and manage the aging body. Yet I argue that they also diverged from them in important ways. Specifically, I argue that while many members of this community accepted the ideology of age as decline, they resisted it at moments when their agency in choosing how to age was threatened. Such discursive transformations allowed them to actively resist hegemonic discourses of successful aging and construct other possibilities for the meaning of embodied aging.

In this chapter, I first summarize recent literature on discourses of successful aging and embodied aging and sociolinguistics. Second, I identify and describe three key components that form an ideology of aging as decline: aging as leading to embodied decline or negative state; decline as something that needs to be prevented; and the individual as responsible for preventing this decline. I demonstrate the ways in which speakers aligned with these aspects of the ideology of aging as decline in four realms of their lives: physical health, appearance, cognition, and independence. Finally, I present analyses of moments in which speakers contested these three components of the ideology of age as decline. To resist this set of dominant ideologies, they highlighted the benefits of decline, rejected the assumption that aging (and its associated decline) should uniformly be prevented, and countered the expectation that the individual is responsible for coping with decline. I thus argue that, through these counterdiscourses, these speakers used these specific strategies to reassert their own agency in the aging process.

4.1 DISCOURSES OF SUCCESSFUL AGING

North American discourses about aging very often promote "successful aging,"[18] a prescriptive model for aging well that is linked to "specific notions of individualist personhood especially valued in North America emphasizing independence, productivity, self-maintenance, and the individual self as project" (Lamb 2014:41). Originally derived from a biomedical model for aging, the successful aging paradigm is widely credited to Rowe and Kahn (a physician and psychologist, respectively), who defined successful aging as having tripartite goals: "low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life" (1997:433). At its inception, this paradigm was important in leading gerontology away from differentiating between only two classes of older people—those individuals with disease and disability and those without—to also distinguishing between two groups of older people without disease or disability: those who aged successfully (high functioning, low risk) and those who aged normally (low functioning, high risk) (Rowe & Kahn 1997:433). Over the last two decades, the concept of successful aging, which emphasizes personal responsibility in aging well, has spread from medical contexts to becoming a popular North American cultural narrative (e.g., Rozanova 2010; Lamb 2014). It remains the prevailing model for the process of embodied aging accessible to older Americans.

While widely adopted in medical and mainstream discourses, critical gerontologists have pointed out the problems with this model of aging, particularly its preoccupation with individual actions and motivations. First, because this model emphasizes the importance of the individual in preventing or reversing forms of loss and decline associated with old age (Rozanova 2010; Rubenstein & de Medeiros 2014), in recent years it has come under critique for reflecting, or at least supporting, a broader ideology of neoliberalism. Rubenstein and de Medeiros (2014) argue that successful aging, as popularized by Rowe and Kahn’s (1998) book *Successful Aging*, shares characteristics with a wider neoliberal philosophy. In their critique, Rubenstein and de Medeiros (2014) argue that the standard of successful aging, first, overemphasizes the agency of the individual in aging “successfully” without regard for how an individual’s life circumstances may affect his or her aging process and, second, does not provide alternative aging options for those older adults who do not age successfully, thus establishing a two-tiered hierarchy of older adults: those who age well and those who do not (1). This critique of the successful aging model highlights the ways in which this paradigm easily aligns with neoliberal principles of mainstream discourses in the United States.

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[18] The phenomenon described by the term "successful aging" has also been called "active aging," "healthy aging," "productive aging," "vital aging," and "aging well," though there are some nuances between these terms.

Second, in her study of discourses of successful aging in the media, Rozanova (2010) highlights the role of older people as consumer targets of marketing strategies and describes the picture of older age painted by the media as a “glorious retirement during which people can stay ageless, vital, and happy virtually indefinitely” (214). Images such as these illustrate the problems identified with successful aging: as critical gerontologists (e.g., Katz & Marshall 2003; Liang & Luo 2012; Lamb 2014; Rubinstein & de Medeiros 2014; van Dyk 2014; Laliberte Rudman 2015) have argued, this model implies that staying actively engaged in life is sufficient for any individual to maintain the norms and abilities of middle age. Yet as these scholars point out, agelessness is not a realistic aim for most older people, this paradigm promotes the values of busyness and activity that are associated with mid-life rather than recognizing older age as a different life stage, disregards other cultural standards for aging (see Lamb 2014), and contributes to the biomedicalization of aging.

4.2 EMBODIED AGING AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS

As the above discussion of the successful aging paradigm shows, the experience of aging in Western cultures is fundamentally an embodied one that relies on an ideology of aging as decline. Mainstream U.S. cultural attitudes have been recognized as ageist (e.g., Featherstone 1991; Featherstone & Hepworth 1991; Gullette 1997; Hepworth 2004) because they privilege the health, ability, and appearance of youth (Hurd 1999; Coupland 2013) and assume that older bodies undergo embodied decline. Because of Western cultural preferences for youth, old age and its attendant physical changes are viewed as negative, and older bodies are judged in comparison to younger ones (Woodward 1991). Our daily lives are suffused with messages about beauty norms that emphasize "youthfulness and disparaged wrinkles, sagging skin, gray hair, and other physical indicators of advanced age" (Hurd Clarke & Griffin 2007:198). As people age, they are lured by the "seductiveness of agelessness," a goal that Andrews (1999) argues is ageist itself because it continues to promote a youth-centric view of aging rather than acknowledging the value in old age (315); meeting these demands of youthfulness is seen as laudable[19] while not living up to these standards is seen as failure (e.g., Furman 1997).

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[19] Indeed, as I was preparing to write this chapter, a banner advertisement appeared on my Internet browser with a picture of the American model Christie Brinkley. The banner contained the ageist statement "At 61, Christie Brinkley is looking better than ever. How can Christie look so youthful and beautiful even after 40 years of modeling and acting?," and a hyperlink imploring me to "Find out Christie's secret."

One theme that captures the tension between the natural process of aging and the cultural unacceptability of aged bodies is “the mask of aging” (Featherstone & Hepworth 1991), which conceptualizes aging as a process that bifurcates the body and the self into an external older body that contrasts the internal younger self that contrasts (e.g., Featherstone & Hepworth 1991; Woodward 1991). Much of the literature on embodied aging has been from a gendered perspective (e.g., Furman 1997; Hurd 1999; Hurd Clarke & Griffin 2007), given that women’s bodies are more stringently examined than those of men in general, women are socially expected to maintain youthful standards longer than men, and women tend to spend more time in old age, though more recently some attention has turned toward older male bodies (Twigg 2004).

This focus on the body within social gerontology marks a change of course away from a purely physiological view of the aging body (Twigg 2004) as scholars have recognized that “we are aged by culture” (Gullette 1997, 2004). Twigg (2004) elaborates insightfully on the interplay between society and the body, emphasizing that the aging body is not “prediscursive”: “Dominant culture teaches us to feel bad about aging and to start this early, reading our bodies anxiously for signs of decay and decline” (61). While people’s perceptions of older bodies certainly are influenced by mainstream cultural messages and images, it is also important to recognize that cultural discourses do not exist absent embodied experiences. Additionally, language is the medium by which we make sense of the body. The framework of “embodied sociolinguistics” (Bucholtz & Hall forthcoming) is a valuable one for analyzing how language is implicated in the social construction of the aging body. As characterized by Bucholtz and Hall (forthcoming), embodied sociolinguistics views the body as a dialogic product (15):

> And just as bodies produce language, so the converse also holds: Language produces bodies. That is, language is a primary means by which the body enters the sociocultural realm as a site of semiosis, through cultural discourses about bodies as well as linguistic practices of bodily regulation and management. (1)

As a theoretical perspective, embodied sociolinguistics highlights the interplay between hegemonic discourses (e.g., discourses of successful aging) and embodied experiences (e.g., aging); the concept of the body as a dialogic product allows us to see the complex ways in which speakers engage with dominant discourses that seek to discipline the body (Bucholtz & Hall forthcoming:14).

4.3 REPRODUCING THE IDEOLOGY OF AGING AS DECLINE

As a community, the Andrus Center was not impermeable to the ideology of aging as embodied decline that circulate in mainstream U.S. culture and the discourses of successful aging that constructed this decline as a change that individuals should prevent. Rather, in everyday conversations at the Andrus Center, community members frequently invoked the ideology, reproducing cultural discourses of aging as a form of loss. Moreover, they often talked about age-induced decline as a development to be prevented, and, aligning with discourses of successful aging, implied that it was the individual's responsibility to prevent or forestall this decline. At times the Andrus Center itself produced similar discourses, as official publications (e.g., its mission statement) and programming at the center positioned the center as an instrument for allowing individual members the opportunity to take personal responsibility for maintaining their mental and physical health. In this section, I analyze these three assumptions maintained by the ideology of aging as decline in the following three embodied contexts: health, appearance, cognition, and independence. By taking preventive healthcare measures, concerning themselves with their physical appearances, maintaining their cognitive abilities, and planning ahead for cognitive decline, participants discursively established the “right” ways—those that align with ideals of successful aging—to manage and police the aging body.

4.3.1 Health

At the Andrus Center, physical health was a common theme through which aging was framed as a form of embodied decline. When I asked Marie, 65, an hour into our interview, “When do you think old starts?” her response focused on deteriorating physical characteristics as marking the onset of old age, shown below in Example 4.1.

Example 4.1 “Old starts when you can’t walk very well”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Marie:	old starts when you=
2		=can’t walk °very well
3	Julia:	mm
4	Marie:	°I think
5		you know
6		when um
7		when you start shuffling
8		[you know]
9	Julia:	[@ @]
10	Marie:	when you start going ↑ “EH?”
11		you know like that?
12	Julia:	yeah
13	Marie:	um
14		when you’re in diapers

Marie presents four physical qualities that, to her, characterize when old age begins. The first two, “can’t walk very well” (Line 2) and “start shuffling” (Line 7), present forms of decreased mobility. The third characteristic, “going ‘eh’” (Line 10), which Marie stylizes with louder volume, higher pitch, and rising intonation and gesturally accompanies by putting her hand to her ear, evokes the image of a hard-of-hearing older person. The fourth, “you’re in diapers” (Line 14), represents incontinence, an issue that is typically associated with physical decline from aging.[20] Each of these physical forms of decline decreases an individual’s independence while simultaneously increasing his or her dependence on other people or physical aids.

Later in the interview, Marie connects older age with physical pain and diminished quality of life when she pityingly labeled “a typical old person” as a “poor thing,” someone who “is getting ready to die,” and someone who “doesn’t really have any other options.” In Example 4.2, Marie appeals to the ideology of age as decline to explain why she does not want to live to an old age.

Example 4.2 “I don’t want to die when I’m old”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Marie:	when I get old=
2		=I don’t feel old right now
3	Julia:	right
4	Marie:	um
5		I’m hoping that I don’t=
6		=I hope I die young
7		let’s put it that way okay
8		I don’t want to die when I’m **old**
9		because
10		**old** is what I’m telling you
11	Julia:	yeah
12	Marie:	somebody who has more
13		aches and pains
14		than you know
15		feeling good
16	Julia:	yeah

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[20] The fact that incontinence is associated with older age is demonstrated in the July 2014 *NYT* article “Aiming to Reduce a Stigma, Depend’s New Pitch Is ‘Drop Your Pants’” (www.nytimes.com/2014/07/28/business/aiming-to-reduce-a-stigma-depends-new-pitch-is-drop-your-pants.html), which highlights the Depends “Underwareness” campaign (https://www.underwareness.com/). According to this article, “with an aging United States population, the incontinence underwear category has grown steadily, to $1.55 billion in 2013, from $1.19 billion in 2008, an increase of 30 percent, according to Euromonitor International, a market research firm.” This Depends campaign, however, aims to “reduce the stigma of the products by showing that bladder incontinence is common and affects younger people more than many people realize” by creating ads that feature people under 50 years of age, thus attempting to upend the stereotype that incontinence is a characteristic solely of older people.

Marie's wish, "I don't want to die when I'm old" (Line 8), implies that aging necessarily involves physical suffering; death when one is old means one has had to suffer through the process of aging before dying. She more explicitly characterizes aging as a undesirable process in Lines 10 and 12–15 when she explains, "old is what I'm telling you, somebody who has more aches and pains than you know feeling good," implicitly contrasting old age with youth, which is distinguished by "feeling good." Marie thus uses the ideology of age as decline as a justification for her apprehensive stance toward becoming and feeling old. Marie resists identifying as old through statements that all presuppose her relative youth: her reference to the future ("when I get old," Line 1), her explicit affective stance ("I don't feel old right now," Line 2), and her imagined future ("I hope I die young," Line 6).

Like Marie, other Andrus Center members also made this ideology of aging as decline relevant particularly in terms of their imagined futures, in which they anticipated worsening health. For example, during a Spanish conversation hour, while talking about their planned travels, Katie told Meryl that she was going to travel to Italy with her friends in two years ("en dos más años voy a ir con mi[s] amigas"). She explained her planning in terms of anticipating her future physical decline: "I'm scared I'm going to get too old to have fun traveling if we wait forever." After Meryl acknowledged having similar concerns ("Yeah, I think about that too"), Katie made her anxiety more explicit by saying forebodingly, "I mean we could have a stroke at our age, God forbid."

In these moments, Marie, Katie, and Meryl represented declining health as inevitable, although at other times, speakers portrayed decline as preventable to some degree. In particular, an ideology of individual responsibility emerged in discussions of preventing specific age-related health concerns. In the following series of examples, I show how two community members were held personally responsible for their health outcomes. During a discussion that emerged in a September 2013 session of the Story Collective oral history workshop, four members—Gloria, Dana, Barbara, and Leah—talked about Marilyn, a member of the center who had a long-lasting case of shingles. Example 4.3 begins after Dana, attempting to clarify whether she knew Gloria’s friend, Marilyn Davis, asked Gloria whether Marilyn was “the one that had the shingles a couple of weeks ago,” thus introducing the topic of shingles, a painful viral condition that manifests in people who have previously had chickenpox. Gloria’s excited response, “Yeah!,” affirmed that both she and Dana knew Marilyn and effectively redirected the conversation to the topic of shingles for the next 10 minutes.

Example 4.3 “Marilyn had them shingles for four years”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Gloria:	Marilyn’s
2		Marilyn’s ↑**still** got °the °shi:ngles
3	Dana:	oh no
4	Gloria:	(1.2) ((thumps table and makes glaring face at audience))
5	Dana:	oh.
6		(0.9)
7	Gloria:	Marilyn had (the) shingles for **four** <@ years @>
8	all:	<@ 2.3 @>
9	Gloria:	if you h-
10		i- if if you
11		((talking to recorder)) ↓and I’m talking about **you** Marilyn
12	all:	@ @
13	Gloria:	cause you’re my **girl**friend.
14		if you ta:lk to Marily:n
15		“↑I- you know I ↑st- I had the ↑shi:ngles a-”
16		if you know Marilyn
17		↓Marilyn had. them. shingles. for. **four**. **years**.
18	Barbara:	@ @
19	Gloria:	“and I ↑still got ↑such~and~such~a~thing”
20		but anyway
21		(1.8)
22		Marilyn-
23		Marilyn and I are frie:nds ((smiley voice))

Shingles, a marker of decline as the result of aging,[21] is a health condition that can be prevented by obtaining a vaccine,[22] which, importantly, these participants constructed as the responsibility of individuals like Marilyn. Gloria's critique of Marilyn opens with an expression of incredulity that "Marilyn's still got the shingles!" (Line 2), emphasizing the word "still" with a raised pitch and the words "the shingles" with lowered volume. Gloria's laughter in Line 7 and the extended period of laughter that follows it likely stem from the unexpectedness of Marilyn's prolonged condition; while individuals usually suffer from the shingles for weeks or months, it is relatively rare, although possible, to be afflicted with them for multiple years.[23]

Even though explicit evaluations do not appear, Gloria's critique of Marilyn seems to become pointed when, in Lines 10 and 12, she leans in toward the recorder, shifting to a low pitch and adopting emphatic prosody says, "And I'm talking about *you*, *Marilyn*, because you're my *girl*friend." Gloria thus takes a critical stance toward

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[21] The perception of shingles as a disease that disproportionately affects older people can be seen in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*) Patient Page, "Shingles" (jama.jamanetwork.com/data/Journals/JAMA/18250/jpg0112_212_212.pdf), which was produced by *JAMA* for distribution by doctors to patients. The single picture on this pamphlet depicts a drawing of a white-haired, presumably older, male examining the outbreak of shingles across his torso. Likewise, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) pamphlet entitled "What You Need to Know About Shingles and the Shingles Vaccine" (http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/patient-ed/adults/downloads/fs-shingles.pdf) also contains only one picture—of a smiling, apparently older, couple.

[22] The risk of developing shingles increases as the individual ages, with half of the 1 million annual shingles cases occurring in people 60 years and older, with and one in three adults over the age of 60 likely to get shingles (http://www.cdc.gov/shingles/about/overview.html). The recommendations for vaccination established by the CDC therefore single out Americans older than 60 as being the target population for receiving the shingles vaccine.

[23] Personal communication with Dr. Patrice Marcarelli, an infectious disease doctor with 30 years of clinical experience.

Marilyn by positioning this nonpresent interlocutor as a direct addressee of this scolding. Gloria mockingly imitates Marilyn’s passive language (“you know I had the shingles and” and “and I still got such and such a thing,” Lines 12 and 16, respectively), casting Marilyn as disengaged with her health through her raised pitch, softer volume, and faster speech rate. Finally, Gloria adds emphasis by repeating that “Marilyn had them shingles for four years” (Line 14) and seems to take an incredulous tone by using falling intonation after each word. Because Marilyn is the object of Gloria’s scolding, mocking, and disbelief, it seems that she, rather than her body’s inability to fight shingles, might be the target of Gloria’s critique. Gloria’s negative affective stances toward Marilyn’s situation, nonetheless, hold her up as a warning for the potentially dire consequences of not taking one’s personal responsibility to acquire the shingles shot seriously.

The ensuing conversation turns to the case of Dana, the only person in the group who had received the shingles vaccine. In contrast to how Marilyn was portrayed, Dana becomes collaboratively constructed as a model for the rest of the participants to be active and engaged in their healthcare as well. In Example 4.4, Dana demonstrates the correct way to take action, namely becoming informed about shingles and obtaining the shot against it, thus obeying the mandate of successful aging to engage in preventive healthcare.

Example 4.4 “Everybody was saying ‘get your shingles shot’”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Dana:	but no:
2		I remember her
3		from AARP
4	Gloria:	yeah [she’s °in AARP]
5	Dana:	[and she was sick **then**]
6		she had the shingles and
7		↑somebody else
8		that was in the group
9		had the shingles also.

10 and that's the ↓first time I'd heard about shingles
11 Gloria: yeah
12 Dana: and that was **the**: topic
13 because <@ everybody was saying @>
14 "get your shingles shot"
15 Gloria: yeah
16 Dana: and at the time
17 I wasn't **old** enough to get a shingles shot
18 Gloria: °oh
19 Dana: cause they said you had to be
20 Barbara: sixty [isn't it?]
21 Dana: [sixty]
22 Barbara: mmhmm
23 Dana: and so I got mine
24 I turned sixty
25 in February
26 this year
27 so
28 Leah: have you already gotten it
29 Dana: yeah.
30 Barbara: good for **you**

In this excerpt, Dana is established as a paragon of managing her health to prevent decline. She shares with the group that she initially learned about shingles during AARP meetings where she heard about Marilyn's experience with shingles (Lines 1–3 and 5–10). Dana's narration of this informative conversation constructs unvaccinated people who contracted shingles as sources of information ("and that's the first time I'd heard about shingles," Line 10) as well as cautionary examples who motivated others to take the appropriate action to prevent potential physical decline ("everybody was saying 'get your shingles shot,'" Lines 13 and 14). Dana also positions herself as an exemplar of healthy aging because, despite being too young to get the vaccination when she learned about it ("at the time I wasn't old enough to get a shingles shot," Lines 16 and 17), she proactively received the shot as soon after she was able to ("and so I got mine, I turned sixty in February this year," Lines 23–26). Barbara's subsequent praises of Dana for taking such initiative (“good for *you*,” Line 30) position her as a “good” example of responsible self-care.

For the subsequent ten minutes, this conversation evolved into a period of information requesting and giving, positioning Dana as a knowledgeable source for details regarding the shingles vaccine. Her interlocutors elicited facts about the shot, asking about its cost, safety, effectiveness, and availability, as well as possible pain and reactions to it. After a few minutes, Barbara too modeled the behavior of a “good” older person by interpreting the information she had gleaned from Dana as an imperative for action, announcing, “Well, we all need to go get our shingles shots now.” In response, her interlocutors continued to request and share information about shots, as well as about vaccinations for flu and pneumonia, for which older people are at higher risk. In addition, the four participants who had not yet gotten the shingles shot defended their own reasons for not yet doing so, primarily by taking unknowledgeable epistemic stances by asking information-eliciting questions (e.g., “Does it cause any reaction, or is it painful?…that’s the only thing I was afraid of”; “Can your doctor just call [the prescription] in”; and “Does your insurance cover it?”).

This conversation demonstrates a contrast between how the group evaluated Marilyn, who failed to both prevent and manage a case of shingles, and Dana, who had been proactive and gotten her shingles vaccine less than a year after she was eligible to. While the group positioned Dana as an expert despite her relatively young age, Marilyn was depicted as a model for an inappropriate way to age in the face of bodily decline. The effect of Gloria’s performance was to scold Marilyn, despite her absence, and to hold her case up as a cautionary tale. As Dana previously had, Barbara, Leah, and Gloria appeared to used Marilyn's suffering as an impetus to become more informed about the vaccine. This extended conversation also demonstrates how these discourses of successful aging circulated across two different spaces, from the AARP meeting to Story Collective, exemplifying how they circulated across spaces of the Andrus Center more generally.

4.3.2 Appearance

Not only were aging bodies characterized by a deterioration of abilities (e.g., walking more slowly, developing incontinence) and an increase of immunological susceptibilities (e.g., shingles), they were also constructed as less attractive, less fashionable, and less desirable. For example, in an interview I conducted with Katie, 63, and Lib, 73, Katie framed her own experience of aging primarily in terms of what she had lost. While she initially described aging in tentatively positive terms, saying that "it's interesting getting older" and acknowledging that "I think there's some good things about it," she then more assertively categorized aging in a negative way, referring to her body: "there are definitely some frustration[s]. . . you hate to lose anything that was part of you at one time, like a flat belly."

While some participants echoed Katie's example of losing a "flat belly" as a form of decline in physical appearance, others highlighted clothing choice as a way to maintain one's physical appearance in the face of impending decline. That is, for some members of the center, clothing was therefore understood as mediating the relationship between older age and the body (see Twigg 2007 for her discussion). While participants did not deny age-related decline of physical appearance, they framed preventing a display of decline as a matter of individual choice and duty, as illustrated by the excerpt from my interview with Jane and Rosalie that opened this chapter.

Example 4.5 "You can't help getting older, but you can help dressing older"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Jane:	I've always said.
2		you can't help getting older.
3		but you can help dressing older
4		and you can help getting fat=
5		=and that's one thing I-
6		really hold myself to the fire on=
7		=[that one]
8	Julia:	[@ @]
9	Jane:	because you really can help not
10		you know
11		doing those things=
12		=but I mean we can't help getting older
13		but we don't **have** to look old
14		we don't **have** to look decrepit

While Jane asserts that aging is inevitable (Lines 2 and 12), she disputes the possible assumption that people are destined to look older. Specifically, her repeated uses of the modal *can* in "you can help dressing older" (Line 3), "you can help getting fat" (Line 4), and "you really can help not doing those things" (Lines 9–11) construct the prevention of looking older as an individual's choice. Moreover, Jane's self-castigation in Lines 5 and 6 implies that preventing against "dressing older," "getting fat," and "looking old" is a moral responsibility.

Jane's moral stance on maintaining physical appearance invited Rosalie's alignment (in the subsequent conversation not shown here) as she held up her friend, Carol, as an example of someone who continued to make positively valued fashion choices as she aged. Rosalie reported that despite Carol's obvious signs of aging—she "repeated herself constantly"—she still disliked wearing clothes that she associated with being old: "She said, 'I don't like wide leg jeans. I like narrow ones.' She wore skinny jeans and she was seventy-nine!" Here, Rosalie juxtaposes Carol's age (79) and her youth-oriented fashion choice (i.e., wearing form-fitting "skinny" jeans). The admiring tone she uses, characterized by a rise in pitch and increase in volume, allows her to frame Carol's decision as an unexpected rejection of the "age-ordering" of clothing (Twigg 2007).

As seen in the above example, aligning with an ideology of bodily decline did not always entail preventing physical decline itself, but sometimes involved preventing the *appearance* of decline, for example, by paying attention to postural and sartorial choices. During my interview with Marie, she offered the following five suggestions for older people (including her) to avoid being viewed as in physical decline. Marie's first three instructions are postural: "you want to try" and "not stoop over," "walk and have a little bit of a spring in your step," and "be a little light on your feet." Her second set of commands are sartorial: "you don't want to dress dowdy" and "you never want to wear clothes that say 'I am not having sex.'" With this last suggestion, Marie highlights the tension between two common cultural narratives, what Jones (2002) refers to as the "storyline of asexual older people" (i.e., older people are asexual) and the "liberal storyline" (i.e., sexuality is a constant throughout adulthood). Thus, Marie's advice seems to indicate that clothing choice is a form of resistance against ageist assumptions about the deficient sexuality of older adults. From these recommendations, we also see that Marie associates certain physical characteristics with older people: walking frailly and dressing unfashionably. Marie's list recognizes that older people can appear physically desirable, but it also presupposes that looking old is undesirable and problematic.

Both Jane and Marie make it an individual's responsibility to prevent this unwanted reading, aligning with discourses of successful aging by constructing older people as having agency in how they age. Interestingly, both Jane and Marie emphasize the ways in which older people can prevent the appearance of physical decline, rather than the embodied decline itself. In other words, while people often lack agency in the aging process, they can maintain some agency by minimizing the external visibility of aging. For these speakers, while aging is still troublesome, the greater problem than aging itself is allowing such aging to become a visible fact.

4.3.3 Cognition

Though decline was conceptualized primarily as a physical consequence of aging, it was also understood as applying to changes in cognitive abilities. Lapses in mental function were noticed, remarked upon, and framed in terms of loss and embodied experiences, as speakers focused on these changes in terms of physical components (e.g., brain cells and capacity) and ways to keep them in shape (e.g., mental exercises). Both members and staff at the Andrus Center reproduced discourses of successful aging when talking about cognitive decline, constructing it as something that could be prevented if older people actively exercised their brains. One of the Center's quarterly newsletters, for example, featured on its front page a missive from the center director in which she cited research that showed that developing new skills for 15 hours per week with brain-stimulating activities can enhance cognitive function. The letter also pointed out which of the Center's programs fulfilled these aims: Spanish and Mind Play classes challenged the brain; balance and tai chi classes exercised both the body and brain. Maintaining cognitive health was thus framed as an individual responsibility that participation at the center facilitated.

These official center discourses were reproduced by members. In interviews, when I asked about their involvement at the center generally, participants mentioned taking the Mind Play class for cognitive reasons. Meryl described the class as presenting the participants with “exercises” like “say[ing] the alphabet backwards” and “ways of using your brain.” Lib noted that the instructor gave them “long lists of things to do or not to do, to eat or not to eat.” Referring to these recommendations, Lib reframed doing jigsaw puzzles, a recreational and diversionary pastime, as “one of the things that’s supposed to be good for your brain”; that is, as she aged, she began to do jigsaw puzzles for their potential cognitive benefit rather than solely for fun.

Likewise, participants in my Spanish classes justified learning Spanish by invoking discourses of cognitive improvement. At the start of each Beginning Spanish term, I would ask the students to introduce themselves and explain why they were taking Spanish; their answers regularly relied on the ideology of aging as decline: to forestall cognitive loss. This answer, illustrated in Example 4.6 below, reflected institutional discourses that touted the utility of foreign language classes for stimulating the brain and avoiding memory loss. As their teacher, I, too, unintentionally reproduced these discourses on occasion. After I understood their motivations for taking Spanish, I started each term with an opinion piece from *The New York Times*, “The Benefits of Failing at French.” In it, the 56-year-old author exhorted other older people to try to learn a foreign language, despite its challenges, for its potential benefits in terms of memory: “After a year of struggling with the language, I retook the cognitive assessment, and the results shocked me… Studying a language had been like drinking from a mental fountain of youth” (Alexander 2014).

Members of the class also invoked this ideology during Spanish classes. For example, after we had worked on a grammatical construction in class that my students felt was particularly difficult, one student announced to me, “You’ve stopped our brain cells from being extinguished.” In Example 4.6, Meryl’s metalinguistic description of her language learning practices reflected successful aging ideologies, as she points out her goal of “keep[ing] her brain active.”

Example 4.6 “The goal is just to keep my brain active”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Meryl:	I don’t worry too much about the ti:me
2	Julia:	mmhmm
3	Meryl:	but I try every day to do something to work my body and something to work my brai:n
4	Julia:	uh huh
5	Meryl:	and so the
6		th- the sort of (.) plan is to
7		work out for about an hour
8		and to do something with my brain for about an hour=
9		=and usually that something with my brain is Spanish
10		(0.9)
11		so I’ve got um
12		Spanish CDs that I work wi:th=
13		=[and I work with some of the programs]
14	Julia:	[mmhmm]
15	Meryl:	oh (0.9)
16		on my computer
17	Julia:	mmhmm
18	Meryl:	um (2.5)
19		and it **doesn’t** take <@ as you can tell @>
20	Julia:	[@ @]
21	Meryl:	[@ @]
22	Julia:	that’s not true.
23	Meryl:	but when I’ve finished I can tell that my brain has worked in a different way
24	Julia:	how?
25	Meryl:	I feel **exhausted** in a way that if you studied physics for an hour
26	Julia:	uh huh
27	Meryl:	and really worked at it
28	Julia:	uh huh
29	Meryl:	you would think “°oh **wow** that was a workout”
30		you know?
31	Julia:	yeah
32	Meryl:	it’s just a **different** way of thinking
33		and and I concentrate on it=
34		=in a way that I don’t concentrate on most things now
35	Julia:	yeah
36	Meryl:	cause I really have to **think**
37	Julia:	yeah

38 so
39 I don't know whether it's good for me?
40 [but it's kind of fun
41 Julia: [@ @
42 Meryl: but the goal is not **really** to learn Spanish
43 although I'd be delighted if I did=
44 =the goal is just to
45 keep my brain active

The language Meryl uses to describe her goals for learning Spanish are health-related and reflect discourses of successful aging in two ways. First, Meryl implies that her brain's activity has decreased and that Spanish helps her prevent decline. Her utterance in Lines 43 and 44, "the goal is just to keep my brain active" presupposes that her brain would otherwise be inactive if she did not undertake learning Spanish. She also contrasts her more relaxed retired lifestyle, which we had just been talking about prior to this excerpt, with the strong mental effort learning Spanish requires ("I concentrate on it in a way that I don't concentrate on most things now," Lines 33 and 34). This was a common theme among retired participants; retirement offered them freedom and greater choices, which many appreciated, but it also offered a less rigorous lifestyle than full-time employment, which they framed as precipitating cognitive decline. Meryl thus represents Spanish as a way to minimize the detrimental effect of retiring because Spanish forces her to maintain intense focus ("cause I really have to think," Line 36).

Second, Meryl constructs her "mind" as a body part that can be exercised through her juxtaposition of physical and mental exercise ("but I try every day to do something to work my body and something to work my brain," Line 3). She also talks about her brain as if it were a muscle by detailing her regimen ("do something with my brain for about an hour," "Spanish CDs that I work with," "programs on my computer," Lines 8, 12, and 13, respectively). Moreover, she represents the effects of her Spanish practice with similar language to describing physical exercise: “when I’ve finished I can tell that my brain has worked in a different way” (Line 23), “I feel exhausted” (Line 25), and “you would think ‘wow that was a workout’” (Line 29). Meryl’s discourse surrounding her project to learn Spanish seems to align her with the assumptions and goals of successful aging: inactivity in retirement can lead to mental decline, and the brain is a body part that can be maintained through regular exercise.

4.3.4 Independence

As the previous three sections have illustrated, while members of the center acknowledged that aging came with physical decline, they assumed the responsibility for forestalling this decline. For some participants, however, preventing decline did not only mean doing exercises for the brain and body to ward off a loss of physical independence. Instead, they rejected losing their independence and positioned themselves as individually responsible for maintaining their social status as self-reliant citizens.

Having witnessed the progression of her mother’s Alzheimer’s and her ensuing gradual decline, Lib explained that she wished to age differently than how her mother had; though she anticipated developing Alzheimer’s, she hoped to maintain her personal self-sufficiency through the process. She introduced the topic of planning ahead when she said, “I have a plan for me, which does not include going to a nursing home” and clarified: “[My mother] was in a nursing home for five years, and those were the worst years of my life, and certainly the worst years of her life.” Lib went on to explain the choices she had actively made in planning to sustain her independence in the face of anticipated cognitive decline. She introduces the details of her plan by announcing, “My plan is to not go to a nursing home. We have the house out in Ellis,” a nearby town. She also lists several modifications she and her husband had made to the house to make it wheelchair accessible, demonstrating that her plan to avoid institutional care has taken into account the possibility of both bodily and mental decline. Example 4.7, below, illustrates Lib framing her plan as intentional.

Example 4.7 "My plan is to stay there"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Lib:	my plan is to stay **there.**
2		(.)
3		[$_1$you know$_1$]
4	Julia:	[$_1$@ @$_1$]
5	Katie:	[$_1$@ @$_1$]
6	Lib:	with
7		and I h-
8		we both have long-term care insurance?
9		so which will
10		you know you can
11		have help for a limited number of years
12	Katie:	mmhmm
13	Lib:	then it runs out
14		I expect I'll live (.) long.
15		probably

In Line 1, Lib's utterance of the phrase "my plan" is the third repetition in two minutes, emphasizing her intentional orientation to her future lifestyle. In Line 1, by announcing, "my plan is to stay [at the house in Ellis]," Lib distinguishes between her current and future living situations; in the future, her house in Ellis will no longer be just a weekend home, but rather her permanent and final home. In Lines 8 through 11, Lib frames financial independence as important in her quest for sustained lifestyle independence. Not only does she have a house to live in, but she and her husband have also planned ahead with "long-term care insurance" (Line 8).

In Example 4.8, Lib goes on to describe the house in Ellis, specifically her future living arrangements that take into consideration her expected embodied decline.

Example 4.8 “I forgot to tell you that’s really why I’m taking Spanish”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Lib:	and so my plan is to stay down in the master bedroom
2		and have a young Spanish couple=
3		=a little Mexican couple living [$_1$<@ upstairs @> @ $_1$]
4	Julia:	[$_1$@ @$_1$]
5	Katie:	[$_1$@ @$_1$]
6	Julia:	I love the details of [$_2$your plan$_2$]
7	Lib:	[$_2$yeah yeah well$_2$]
8	Katie	[$_2$yeah:$_2$]
9	Lib:	the husband will help me in the garden?
10		and uh the wife will do the cooking and [$_3$<@ cleaning? @>$_3$] @ @
11	Katie:	[$_3$@ @$_3$]
12	Julia:	[$_3$@ @$_3$]
13	Katie:	you're going to have a **lot** better late life than **I** am
14	Lib:	that's my pla:n @ @
15		I forgot to tell you that’s **really** why <@ I’m [$_4$taking Spanish @>$_4$]
16	Katie:	[$_4$@ @$_4$]
17	Julia:	[$_4$@ @$_4$]
18		<@ so you can communicate with them @>
19	Katie:	yeah: (tell) them what you want to eat
20	Lib:	yeah
21		I’ve got a whole list of gardening and household um
22		the vocabulary that we haven't had in class but
23		it was in something else that I've done on the side you know
24		and (.)
26		on the Internet (.) or whatever
27		and so I know how to tell him how to
28		@ @ mow the lawn=
29		=how to pull the weeds=
30		=and “don’t bother that part” and
31	Katie:	@ @
32	Lib:	how to vacuum and iron @ @
33		I don’t have it in my head but
34	Julia:	you have that list ready
35	Lib:	ri:ght
36		exactly.
37		so that’s my pla:n

Here, Lib reveals that part of her proposal involves “a young Spanish couple, a little Mexican couple” (Lines 2–3) whom she plans to employ to take care of her and her husband and to whom she will yield the upstairs part of the house. Lines 7 and 8 both imply that Lib anticipates no longer being able to garden, cook, and clean, as a result of her expected physical and mental decline. Sharing this plan allows Lib to recontextualize her reasons for learning Spanish (Line 12), an explanation that she frames and Katie and I take up as humorous, as indicated by the many overlapping laugh tokens shown in the transcript. The list of steps that she has taken outside of class to prepare for her planned future (Lines 21–26) presupposes that these steps are part of an ongoing process of preparation for Lib. Through telling Katie and me about her plans, Lib constructs herself as maintaining self-sufficiency in the process of embodied decline that she so fears, particularly after her experience with her mother. Lib's repetition of "that's my plan" in Lines 14 and 37, as well as the five other times she repeated the noun phrase "my plan," serve to emphasize how planning for her decline allows her to reestablish her agency.

Throughout this example, Lib does not frame her anticipated cognitive decline in terms of prevention; she assumes that developing Alzheimer's is inexorable. Instead, what she constructs as preventable is the total loss of independence and the need for institutional care. Through her plan, Lib emphasizes the need for maintaining her self-sufficiency in the face of decline. Learning Spanish is thus framed as a way Lib can ensure good care for herself as she gets older and becomes unable to care for herself, though it erases the ways in which others (e.g., working-class Mexicans) will do the labor to allow her to maintain the semblance of independence. She constructs a model way of aging that counters the prescriptive (but unrealistic) ideal of preventing cognitive decline, though she also aligns with the socioeconomic aspects of neoliberal ideals that frame healthcare and contingency planning as an individual, rather than social, responsibility.

4.4 COUNTERING DISCOURSES OF SUCCESSFUL AGING

Community members may have typically reproduced dominant ideologies by constructing themselves as victims of the inescapable decline that comes with aging. In this section, however, I turn to three ways in which they found productive ways of coping with changes in their aging bodies. First, they resisted the premise that the changes their bodies had undergone necessarily led to negative experiences. Second, they rejected the assumption that aging should be prevented. Third, they absolved themselves of the sole responsibility for their decline, instead recognizing that coping with decline is not something that can always be accomplished by the individual. Through these three strategies, participants contested the dominant ideologies of aging presented in the previous section.

4.4.1 Highlighting the benefits of decline

Some participants rejected the dominant notion that aging categorically conferred decline by highlighting the benefits of aging; specifically, they reframed aging as a different rather than deficient experience. As the following set of examples show, Birdie countered the ideology of age as decline by humorously reframing physical decline as exposing her to novel experiences. This extended example took place at the beginning of a Story Collective workshop in January 2014, at which there were two first-time members, Shirley and Mary, and four returning members, Birdie, Leah, Barbara, and Kathy. I began the workshop by asking Birdie if she had come prepared with a story, which she often did; she responded, “Actually I’d like to talk about growing deaf.”

Prior to the story she tells, shown below in Example 4.9, Birdie begins her turn by quoting her younger self’s perspective on hearing loss through a fearful affective stance: “You can take everything else but please don’t take my hearing.” In this pleading quote, Birdie portrays her younger self as thinking that hearing loss was a catastrophic event and desperately wanting to maintain this capacity through the aging process. She shows that as a younger person she aligned with dominant views of aging—those that consider aging to be a form of decline and treat this decline as a dreaded outcome. However, as the rest of her narrative shows, Birdie's understanding of embodied decline undergoes a noteworthy shift. After talking about the hearing problems she began to experience, she narrates a story from the more recent past in which her inchoate hearing loss caused a misunderstanding while she was taking a yoga class. She introduces her narrative by saying, "I really found losing my hearing interesting," foreshadowing her story with connotations of curiosity. In the narrative presented in Example 4.9, Birdie elaborates on the ways in which losing her hearing was an intriguingly unfamiliar experience.

Example 4.9 "My ears heard, 'God is a preposition'"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Birdie:	and one morning she said
2		(1.3)
3		"let us now form lotus position"
4		but that's not what my **ears** heard
5		my hear-
6		**ears** heard (.)
7		uh "God is a preposition"
8	Barbara:	[@]
9	Julia:	[@]
10	Birdie:	and I was just h
11		I was struck
12		I thought "that is **true**"=
13		="that is [so **won**derful"
14	Julia:	[@ @]
15	Barbara:	[@ @]
16	Birdie:	"over within behind before"
17		you know
18		(1.9)
19		just everywhere
20		(1.0)
21		and then I looked at <@ @ the rest of the class @ @>
22		<@ @ and @ @>
23		they were doing something (else) @ @
24		and and so began the process

In some ways, this narrative does align with the familiar cultural script of going deaf as a passive process of decline. Similarly to the way she had positioned herself passively by framing the decline of her auditory faculty as something that she could not prevent, Birdie positions herself as lacking control in this experience of embodied decline. In Lines 4-6, rather than stating "I heard," she places "my ears" in the subject position of the clause, such that her body part is presented as the experiencer of the mishearing. She thus distances herself from her diminished physical faculties and emphasizes that the decline of her hearing is physiological. Her subsequent realization of her mishearing, upon seeing the rest of her class who had heard correctly, and her phrase "so began the process" (Line 24) suggested that her hearing loss had begun without her as the agent.

However, through the telling of her narrative, Birdie moves from this passive perspective to a more agentive one by recontextualizing the experience of losing her hearing, a potentially negative life event as humorous. Her selection of this humorous story as a formative experience of aging reframes her experience in a playful tone, conveyed by how she punctuates her narrative with laughter (Lines 21–23). The humor in Birdie's story in Example 4.9 is derived from her presentation of two incongruous frames: the actual utterance, through which the yoga teacher is giving a mundane request to her class to change position, and Birdie's fanciful interpretation of that utterance, in which her yoga teacher is talking about the immanence of a deity. Her interlocutors indicate that they have taken up her humor cues through their appreciative laughter (Lines 8–9 and 14–15). Birdie's metapragmatic commentary also treats hearing loss as expanding possibilities rather than limiting them. By explicitly valuing the "creativity" and “humor” of mishearing others, Birdie frames having an unexpected interpretation as a positive experience: her hearing loss allows her to be “off in [her] own little world,” which is “just delightful.”

In addition to recognizing the humor, she portrays herself as actually enjoying the moments she spent pondering the transcendence of God, rather than castigating herself for the misunderstanding. That is, she does not seem to see it as a moment of disability but as one of introspection and reflection instead. Moreover, it is important to note that Birdie challenges the cultural script of passivity in another way: though she is the passive recipient of physical decline, she is simultaneously the active experiencer of a quasi-religious revelation. Birdie thus counters successful aging ideals that would stress the importance of being able to interact socially with those who have not experienced hearing loss. Instead, she frames this misunderstanding as beneficial; because she misheard something, Birdie was able to have experiences and thoughts she otherwise would not have had.

Birdie juxtaposes positive qualities of losing her hearing—“creativity,” “delightful,” and “humor”—with negative ones—“exhausting” (repeated four times), “intense,” and “straining”—constructing her experience of hearing loss as neither wholly positive nor completely negative. She also acknowledges the difficulties of going deaf, identifying the primary source of her challenges as moments in which others are not responsive to her problems. And she admits that sometimes her hearing loss discourages her from partaking in activities with friends. She thus counters discourses of successful aging by admitting that there are things she cannot or chooses not to do as a result of her decline; rather than maintaining normative standards of health (in this case, hearing) to function normally in social interactions, she exercises her agency to participate partially or not at all.

Birdie's assertion of agency was reflected during the many moments I observed when she was unable to hear her interlocutors because she had no visual cues to help her interpret their speech. When this occurred, she consistently spoke up and requested that her interlocutors adapt how they were communicating to accommodate her needs, sometimes several times in one interaction. Birdie also commented on how she had changed how she listened to people, as shown in Example 4.10 below.

Example 4.10 "It's just a new experience"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Birdie:	and I've learned to=
2		=when people are talking just
3		smile (.)
4		and (.)
5		nod my (.)
6		head ((gesturing))
7		(2.1)
8		and it's o**kay**.
9		you know it's **okay**.
10		I'm not complaining.
11		it's just a new experience
12		um and
13		(1.5)
14		it's not really a bad experience=
15		=<@ there are a lot of things I really don't want to hear so @>
16	Barbara:	@ @
17	Birdie:	so it's got <@ its upside too @>

First, she makes clear in Lines 1–6 that she doesn't always expect others to accommodate her hearing needs. Second, Birdie rejects these discourses by accepting decline and reframing it as novel ("new," Line 11) rather than negative ("bad," Line 14). By repeating the phrase "it's okay" in Lines 8 and 9, she implies that she has accepted the necessity of both not hearing everything and pretending to hear when she cannot. It's also worth noting that she explicitly rejects the idea that by talking about hearing loss, she might be interpreted as complaining about it (Line 10). Third, Birdie rejects discourses of successful aging because she also reframes not being able to hear as explicitly positive (Lines 15 and 17). Birdie relies on humor again here, laughing through Lines 15 and 17 as she constructs an optimistic persona and emphasizes the value of missing out on some utterances.

Birdie thus represents her hearing loss, a process over which she has no control, as an altogether different—rather than deficient—sensory, cognitive, and affective experience. As she has little agency over the process by which she is "growing deaf," reframing her physical loss as a form of intellectual and philosophical opportunities allows her agency in how this loss is viewed by others. Moreover, Birdie does not make every effort to maintain normative standards of hearing and communication by getting hearing aids. Birdie thus accepts a new standard of living—in partial deafness—instead of trying to maintain the hearing abilities of a younger person, defying the neoliberal ideals of "successful aging" and, through this choice, maintains her agency over how she chooses to age. She voices her needs for accommodation, and, when those needs are not met or recognized, she reframes her deafness positively, in terms of having experiences she otherwise would not be privilege to.

Similarly to the ways in which Birdie found unintended positive consequences in the process of aging, Marie invokes an ideology of age as decline to point out the benefits of aging. In the following example, she reframes older age as a state one can embrace once one realizes that it is less demanding than being young, which comes burdened with high standards of physical ability and attractiveness. In contrast, she frames her expectations for being an older person as positive, implying that the disappearance of

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these demanding physical criteria actually makes aging an appealing embodied experience. She continues, as shown below in Example 4.11, by reframing old age as “fun.”

Example 4.11 “Why wouldn’t you like getting old?”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Marie:	when you’re old=
2		=all you have to do to have a good time is sit down.
3	Julia:	[@ @ yeah
4	Marie:	[you know @ @
5		<@ so @>
6		why ↑wouldn’t you like getting **old**.
7		it’s fun=
8		=I love it

Marie compares the expectations of “having fun” as a younger person to those as an older person. She laughingly claims that “When you’re old all you have to do to have a good time is sit down” (Lines 1–2). Here, Marie’s reframing of old age as “fun” presumes an ideology of age as decline; because the body can no longer “look good” and be “sexy” in old age, there are lowered expectations for fun as an older person. As indicated by her laughter in Lines 4 and 5, she jokingly poses the rhetorical question “why wouldn’t you like getting old?” (Line 6) and states as clear fact that “it’s fun” (Line 7). While Marie may be exaggerating the extent to which aging is fun, she does take a positive affective stance (“I love it,” Line 8) toward the release from high standards of appearance that it provides.

4.4.2 Resisting expectations of extended youth

At other moments, members of the Andrus Center accepted the ideology of aging as decline but explicitly rejected the idea that they should be responsible for maintaining middle-aged norms and expectations of health. I observed this theme of resisting younger standards of abilities—and thus implicitly accepting decline in aging—repeatedly during my fieldwork. In what follows, I present excerpts from a longer conversation from a May 2013 session of the Story Collective group, in which Dana, joined by Birdie and Kay, reflected on the expectations her family members held for her aging process. This conversation began when Dana told the story of a recent holiday during which she felt her family, particularly her younger siblings, demanded too much of her. She interpreted their family roles as constant even as she has felt the effects of aging ("and now that I'm sixty and they're…in their fifties, I'm still supposed to be able to fix everything"). Twenty minutes later, we returned to this topic when she explored her perspective on age after she turned 60.

Example 4.12 "I said, 'I can be old if I want to'"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Dana:	so I'm having (.) difficulty
2		(2.1)
3		realizing that (.) sixty is
4		(0.8)
5		not old.
4		so they tell me
5	Kay:	my children are almost sixty
6		@ @ [@]
7	Dana:	[@]
8		<@ but but I mean @> it's just like
9		I just ↑thought
10		(1.2)
11	Kay:	@
12	Dana:	you know sixty was (.) [$_1$you know$_1$]
13	Kay:	[$_1$<@ (it's not old) @>$_1$]
14	Dana:	[$_2$I I know @ @$_2$]
15	Birdie:	[$_2$**decrepit**.$_2$]
16	Dana:	°yeah.
17		(0.9)
18		but I realize that now because
19		you know
20		my nephew
21		(0.9)
22		and those all keep telling me
23		"you're not **old**"
24	Birdie:	that's [right]
25	Dana:	[I said] "I can be old if I **want** to."

26 all: @ @ @
27 Kay: <@ (well you're right) @>

Dana contrasts her perception of the age 60 with the perspectives of her family members who reject the idea that a 60 is an old age. At the start of Example 4.12, Dana implies that though she intellectually knows that sixty is not necessarily an old age, this insight has not corrected her past perception of it ("I'm having difficulty realizing that sixty is not old," Lines 1, 3, and 5). Birdie's use of the word "decrepit" (Line 15) to finish Dana's sentence "I just thought sixty was …" (Lines 9 and 12) explicitly invokes the ideology of aging as decline, which Dana agrees with (Line 16). While Dana accepts this ideology, her younger family members reject it through their exhortations that she change her attitude about age, which Dana reports in Lines 4, 22, and 23.

Dana's family's insistence that she age according to a certain model of aging threatens Dana's agency in the act of aging. In another excerpt immediately after Example 4.12 but not presented here, Dana twice mockingly performs her family members telling her, "you have to push yourself," demonstrating that this refrain, which echoes discourses of successful aging, is a frequently-heard and unwelcome refrain. She also interprets her family's critical stances of her aging by saying, "I guess it's like they're wanting me to be forever young." Dana thus frames her family's opinions as expectations of delaying aging, or extending youth. Dana resists these expectations through language that highlights her own volition and acceptance. She performs an agentive stance toward aging when she quotes her contradictory response to her nephew ("I *can* be old if I want," Line 25) using the deontic modal *can* and desire modal *want*, which reframes being old as a choice thus rejecting how others read age onto her.

4.4.3 Distributing responsibility for decline

A final way of challenging expectations of successful aging was by reframing the management of cognitive decline; such management was not an individual's responsibility but a social and collective endeavor. This form of challenge is observable in Example 4.13, in which Jane reinterprets a common complaint about older people—that they repeat themselves—as in fact the fault of younger people, who have failed to provide them with "enough new experiences" (Line 3). This challenge emerges in response to Rosalie mentioning the case of a friend who had begun to repeat herself frequently.

Example 4.13 "Not all old people have the benefit of someone doing that for them"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Jane:	with old people=
2		=as far as I've found
3		the reason they repeat the same thing is they don't have enough new experiences.
4		so my mother=
5		=if she wants to or not
6		we we always take her out to do experiences in terms of restaurants
7	Rosalie:	mmhmm
8	Jane:	we take her new pla:ces:
9		even when my father was like in his late in his mid-nineties
10		we'd still haul him out
11	Julia:	@ @
12	Jane:	at least once a week he'd still go out somewhere to a restaurant
13		he'd see little kids come into a restaurant=
14		=he'd wave at them or something
15		you know
16		he'd hold the door for someone and
17		you know
18		I mean he's in the wheelchair
19		but he'd hold the door for someone.
20		I think as long as they have new experiences
21		lots of times we just take them for a ride or something whatever
22		so that when he sees somebody he can say "well this week I did this"
23		but if they **have** nothing to say (.) that they did
24		of **course** they're going to repeat.
25		"fifty years ago I went to a dance" ((nasal voice))
26		so I think part of it is
27		but not **all old** people have the benefit of someone doing that for them

Jane identifies the discursive practice of excessive repetition as a feature of "old people." Yet rather than blaming older people or cognitive decline for their repetition, she frames it as a communal failing; that is, she distributes the responsibilities for preventing this decline to other people. Jane, claiming the position of a younger person, claims responsibility for helping prevent decline in her mother (Lines 5–8) and father (Lines 9–16) by making sure they have a diversity of experiences. In contrast, through her verb choice ("haul"), she emphasizes her agency—and perhaps frames it as a burden—and minimizes her parents' agency when she says "we'd still haul him out" (Line 10). But, by recounting the specific ways her father continued to have new experiences, such as waving to children and holding doors open (Lines 16–19), she also constructs him as having maintained agency despite his advanced age ("mid-nineties") and his need for a wheelchair. Jane also constructs him as having maintained agency by voicing his report of his recent actions ("well this week I did this," Line 22) with age-neutral features. Her voicing of her father is contrasted how she voices a stereotypical older person without new diversions in Line 25 ("fifty years ago I went to a dance") when she uses a slower speech rate and a nasal voice as she stylizes a recognizably older voice.

Jane further challenges the idea that she solely bears the responsibility to prevent decline when she recognizes that, unlike her parents who have her to ensure that they have "new experiences," she will be vulnerable. In Example 4.13, Jane's use of the third-person pronouns "they" and "their" to refer to "old people," combined with her taking responsibility for providing new experiences, position her as a younger person who has not yet experienced these forms of embodied decline. Yet, as is shown in the following example, which immediately followed Example 4.13, because she frames this responsibility as distributed rather than individual, Jane imagines experiencing cognitive decline in her own future.

Example 4.14 “Nobody is going to take me out”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Jane:	I says “**I’m** the one who needs to worry”=
2		=because **I’m** the la:st of the family=
3		=I’m the **youngest**
4		when I’m ninety (.)
5		or a hundred and six (.)
6		nobody is going to take me out
7		I’m going to be one of these people wearing polyester=
8		=**big** shoes =
9		sitting there going
10		“when I: was back in two thousand fourtee:n we did this interview”= ((nasal voice))
11		=“with this you:ng girl” ((nasal voice))
12	Julia:	[<@ (4.0) @>]
13	Jane:	[“I remember that{dæt} day”] ((nasal voice))
14		@ @
15		<@ and I’ll tell you that day @>
16		<@ and I’ll tell you the next day @>
17	Rosalie:	@ @ yeah
18	Jane:	but I think part of that is
19		is t- letting people have new experiences

Jane specifies that the social responsibility for providing older people with stimulating experiences lies with family members. As we saw in Example 4.13, when an older person does not have stimulating experiences, Jane anticipates that they will talk about the past continuously and repeat themselves constantly. Example 4.14 illustrates the perspective that family holds the primary obligation to fulfill this duty. Her statements in Lines 1–3 imply that she foresees not having family to ensure she has new experiences, and she takes a negative affective stance (“worry”) toward this aspect of her future. Jane also foresees that because she will not have family members to take responsibility for her, she too will end up dressing like an old person (“wearing polyester,” Line 7 and “big shoes,” Line 8). In Lines 10 and 11, Jane again uses intonation and voice quality to voice an older person—this time voicing herself in thirty or forty years. She humorously uses our interview as a momentous event she will repeatedly tell people about (Lines 15 and 16) precisely because she will have nobody to expose her to new experiences as she ages. When Jane concludes the example with “but I think part of that is letting people have new experiences” (Lines 18–19), she places older people in the passive object position as recipients of new experiences, which are provided by family members/caregivers in the implicit active subject position.

Jane constructs the aging process as causing older people to inevitably lose agency because aging takes away their independence and ability to seek out new stimulating experiences. However, she constructs cognitive decline (e.g., excessive repetition) and sartorial decline (e.g., wearing polyester) as preventable by placing the responsibility for them on younger family members, therefore contradicting neoliberal discourses of aging, which cast the prevention of decline as the responsibility of the aging individual. By making it someone else’s responsibility, she imagines that the new experiences gained will then actually allow these older people to regain new agency: they can talk about subjects and events from present rather than past eras.

4.5 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I have shown how practices and discourses in this community were ideologically linked to certain types of bodies and cultural conceptions of aging. Analyzing Andrus Center members’ conversations from the framework of embodied sociolinguistics, I showed how their language produced, managed, and policed (Bucholtz & Hall forthcoming) aging bodies. The data examined here illustrated that discourses about the body were connected to the ideology of aging as embodied decline, which speakers generally did not disrupt.

The first section of my analysis illustrated three components to this ideology within the areas of health, appearance, cognition, and independence. First, participants understood the process of aging as leading to embodied decline. Second, they managed and policed the aging body through their discourses as they framed this decline as an event that needed to be prevented. Third, they identified the individual as responsible for preventing forms of decline. These components neatly line up with discourses of successful aging, a model for aging that has popularly been accepted and promoted, though critical gerontologists have recognized its shortcomings (e.g., similarities to neoliberal philosophies and biomedicalization of aging).

Given the pervasiveness of this ideology, it may not be surprising that speakers reproduced this widely held ideology of age as decline. Yet as I show in the first half of my analysis, speakers used discourses of successful aging to explain their motivation for their choices to forestall decline from age. These discourses seemed to give them agency in obviating the destructive march of aging across their bodies. In one conversation, Gloria and her conversational partners held Dana up as a model of taking appropriate action to address potential physical decline and used Marilyn’s negative example as inspiration to take individual responsibility to prevent developing shingles themselves. In this case, reproducing the ideology of aging as decline also had an important function: it served as a way of circulating information throughout the community and reinforcing the demands of the successful aging model on which the Andrus Center based its goals. Both Jane and Marie presented ways for older people to avoid being read as old by changing their physical comportment, constructing it as their responsibility not to be read by others as old. Meryl (and many other members of my Spanish classes) focused on the cognitive benefits of learning Spanish, taking on the individual imperative to keep her brain in good shape to forestall further decline. While Lib did not frame cognitive decline as preventable, instead accepting that she was likely to develop Alzheimer's, she took on the responsibility of maintaining her independence from institutional care by planning for her embodied decline.

While it might seem that embracing the model of successful aging offers the best path toward maintaining agency as people get older, I have shown that rejecting this ideology does not necessarily mean denying one's agency. Rather, as the second half of my analysis showed, speakers in this community rejected various components of ideology of decline in ways that gave themselves greater agency in the aging process. These speakers also suggested that while embodied decline may be inexorable, it can be coped with, managed, and planned for, often with a sense of humor. Birdie maintained agency by choosing not to use hearing aids despite some negative consequences, instead treating her imperfect hearing as an opportunity for humor and creativity. Dana, along with the assistance of Birdie and Kay, created a counterdiscourse by resisting successful aging discourses as represented by her family members' perspectives and opinions, instead insisting that she knew her own limitations and abilities as she aged. Jane claimed that distributing responsibility for bodily and cognitive maintenance paradoxically allows older people to reassert their own agency once given the opportunity.

Taken together, the excerpts analyzed in this final section fly in the face of the popular demand for older people fight decline and age productively; they construct accepting decline and allowing one's body to age as a viable option. At the same time, this strategy of acceptance does not entail that these speakers give up their agency.

Instead, by resisting discourses of successful aging and treating embodied aging as a legitimate option—when they accepted their age and its effects on their bodies—they reasserted their agency in the aging process.

CHAPTER 5

The Sage and the Nostalgic: Embodying Aged Personas to Talk about Race

We sat around an L-shaped table in August 2013 during the eleventh session of Story Collective. On this particular day, Birdie and Tom, both of whom were European American, had begun a lively discussion about race and ethnicity, a topic that frequently entered these conversations, despite being quietly avoided by some members of this community. After listening for several minutes, Dana, a 60-year-old woman who identified as black, shared with us her moral philosophy, one that she had learned over the years.

> And I know that I was brought up to be, you know, ‘Stand up for yourself. Make sure that you take responsibility for your actions…’ [gesturing to her heart] ‘And what’s more important than the color of your skin or your financial status is what you have in here.” [gesturing to her heart] ‘And what you have up here and how you treat people.’ But I would much rather, I have more respect for a person that is totally honest and that will say ‘I don’t like you because you’re black.’ ‘Hey that’s your business. I don’t like you because you’re stupid.’

Dana’s philosophical statement exhibited two culturally salient personas that are associated with older people. Most obviously, she personified a *sage*, by drawing on her lifetime of experiences and teaching her interlocutors about race. This persona reflected an ideology of aging as progress, according to which certain forms of knowledge, namely sapience, are acquired through lifelong personal experiences. Older people who embody the sage persona are seen as reflective, wise, and eager to give counsel based on their experiences. Notably, this view of progressing wisdom competes with the view discussed in the previous chapter, according to which the aging body, including cognition, is a locus of gradual decline.

Dana simultaneously embodied the persona of a *nostalgic* when articulating her preference for open, honest expression, a form of discourse that she implied was more common in past eras, even when discussing culturally weighty matters such as race. This cultural image, which circulates in discourses in the United States, depicts older people as unable to appreciate societal changes, reminiscing wistfully on past times and casting aspersions on current times.

In this chapter, I explore how the sage and the nostalgic personas were frequently enacted by Dana, specifically in her discussions about race and racism with other members of the Story Collective[24] group at the Andrus Center. I focus on discussions of these topics not only because they frequently emerged as relevant in this community but also because members' discussions yielded productive discursive possibilities, specifically for bringing about mutual understanding about racism—a culturally and morally loaded topic in the United States—particularly among black and white members with widely disparate racial experiences who have lived in the U.S. South. Across the six months of group conversations I analyze, from four different sessions, Dana adopted these personas as she critiqued or embraced contemporary discourses of race talk—political correctness, colormuteness, and colorblindness. By illustrating the ways Dana performed these cultural personas through her epistemic and affective stances, I show how she formulated a persuasive and nuanced view on language, race, and racism—one that became appreciated and accepted by other community members, many of whom were white. I suggest that the sage persona in particular, which presupposes a certain epistemic authority gained from past experience and the wisdom to find the nuances of a situation, can serve as a useful resource when coming to a shared understanding of the complex issues surrounding language and racism. This chapter thus presents an account of racial discourses that counters the popular perception of older people as narrow-minded and old-fashioned in their discourses about race, specifically by invoking alternative personas—personas of wisdom and nostalgia—both also stereotypically linked with older people.

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[24] This group is described further in Section 3.3.5, which focuses on the speech events that comprise my data.

This chapter thus investigates the intersection of age-related personas and contemporary discourses about race. In this sense, it differs qualitatively from Chapters 4 and 6, which both analyze conversations that are quite explicitly about aging; the present chapter focuses instead on implicit means of invoking ideologies of older age, specifically through the performance of sage and nostalgic personas that were recognized as more characteristic of older people than others by both members in this community as well as in broader discourses. Chapter 5 thus examines how figures of aging were adopted to talk about an issue (i.e., race) that may bear no essential connection to age. In other words, the cultural meanings of age sometimes can remain relevant even when topics other than age are discussed.

In the remainder of this chapter, I first define the social types of the sage and the nostalgic, providing examples from both popular culture and my field site. Second, I provide a brief background on discourses of race in the United States, including those that characterize older people as racially myopic. I then analyze how Dana used these two personas to engage with modern ideologies of race: political correctness, colorblindness, and colormuteness. This close investigation of the ways in which Dana took potentially conflicting positions toward modern ideologies of race—rejecting politically correct discourses while reproducing colorblind ones—illustrates how performing a sage and a nostalgic allowed Dana to both complexly, and even convincingly, position herself in relation to racism, to contribute to understandings of this issue in this local community.

5.1 THE SAGE AND THE NOSTALGIC

5.1.1 The sage

Older people are often recognizably identified—either by themselves or by others—as having a particular breadth of knowledge, namely wisdom that they can impart on others because of their advanced age. The epistemic position of the older sage, who imparts knowledge to those more naïve, resembles the cultural role of an expert, who also imparts knowledge to novices. Yet sages are culturally distinct from experts in that their knowledge moves beyond factual information or procedural instructions; it is specifically a form of wisdom, or "expertise in the conduct and meaning of life" (Baltes & Staudinger 2000:124). While the concept of wisdom certainly does include cognitive elements, one of which is knowledge, it is also incorporates affective and reflective components (Ardelt 2010a:308, drawing on Clayton & Birren 1980).

The idea that wisdom is acquired through age is commonly assumed, such as when the 57-year-old actor Frances McDormand declared in an interview on National Public Radio, "I want to be revered. I want to be an elder; I want to be an elderess. I have some things to talk about and say and help" (Block 2014). Likewise, in 2015, *The New York Times* published a six-part series featuring six New Yorkers 85 years and older; the final installment, published on December 26, 2015, was an article entitled, "Wisdom of the Aged," which summarized old age as "a mixture of happiness and sadness, with less time wasted on anger and worry," with wisdom becoming "more central to people's lives as they age" and "compensat[ing] for much of the decline" (Leland 2015).

As illustrated in the Frances McDormand quotation above, older people are not merely depicted as wise in American media, but also as storytellers eager to share their sagacity. Consumers of popular media are likely familiar with scenes invoking this image, such as on the comedic television show *Parks and Recreation*, in which a character in his early twenties, dressed up with grey hair, a cane, and brown sweater set for a dance at the senior center, implores his friend with creaky voice: "Come here, sonny, let me tell you about the Civil War."

At the same time, popular representations of older people as wiser do not necessarily mirror the results of scientific methods of assessing wisdom and age (Hoogland 2015:33). Social science research (e.g., Ardelt 2008, 2010b) has demonstrated that, while older people are perceived to be wiser, they do not categorically score higher on tests measuring wisdom than younger people. In contrast, Sternberg (2005) acknowledges the complexity of defining, identifying, and operationalizing wisdom. He argues that age is not the only variable that determines whether an individual acquires wisdom, but rather that other factors (e.g., cognitive variables, personality variables, and life experiences) influence the acquisition of wisdom (21).

Regardless of its scientifically based veracity, this familiar image of the sage was invoked by members at the center. In an interview in which we were discussing the benefits of aging, Lib remarked, "I do think you gain wisdom as you get older. And you realize what's important. And what's not important. And you think more deeply on subjects.” Lib was not alone in presupposing the cultural portrayal of older people as sages. Members of Story Collective collaboratively constructed and commented on this figure, as, for example, during a November 2013 session, when Joyce, Dana, Barbara, and Gloria framed the role of the older person as a sage in relation to children, who should listen to their elders as a matter of respect. In this same conversations, Dana also represented the sage as dependent on relative age: “If I’m sixty years old and there’s someone older than I am, I’m going to listen to what they say.” While Dana may be considered a wise elder by others (e.g., younger people), she positioned herself as potentially filling the listener role if her interlocutor were qualified (e.g., older and presumably wiser) to take on the sage role.

Though Dana represented the sage persona as a role based on relative age, I suggest that it is constructed through both age relations and relative epistemic stances. In adopting this role, the sage takes strong epistemic stances toward some object; these authoritative stances are derived from his or her extensive personal experiences with the object throughout his or her lifetime. In contrast, the sage’s audience, the recipient of the sage’s wisdom, takes weaker epistemic stances toward the object because he or she has had fewer personal life experiences with the object. Through the act of imparting and receiving wisdom, the sage and the recipient, respectively, align with each other. As I show in this chapter, it is in part because the sage persona is constructed by epistemic stances that Dana, a relatively young member of Story Collective, was able to embody the sage persona to talk about race in ways that her interlocutors accepted.

To be clear, the sage was not used only to talk about race; it emerged more generally in moments when members presented a moralizing and instructive wisdom based on their life experiences that seemed to be different from others' experiences. For example, during a March 2014 session of Story Collective, Birdie, a 73-year-old European American woman, adopted the sage persona as she responded to Joyce, a 73-year-old African American woman, and Leah, a 63-year-old European American woman. In their discussion, Joyce and Leah drew on a nostalgic discourse as they criticized the lack of activism and community involvement among younger people, prompting Birdie to counter their critique by drawing on knowledge as an older person:

> "So it's easy for us to say, "they don't do this they don't do that." But we're part of making that change…I think we who are older have to speak up about societal problems whether it's writing letters to the newspapers or going on the radio or just speaking up. Because we know when we were younger we didn't have time and we felt nervous. We felt like somebody would take it out on us. I figure now (I'm) 73, I defy Mayor Thomas to come and, you know, get me in the night because I spoke up about the way he's treating city council. That's just my opinion. But that gives other people the right to speak up if they don't agree. And also the people that agree with me begin to speak up. And then we become more of a healthy community and know who we are and where we are."

Birdie thus uses her age, experience as a politically active and engaged community member, and an instructive tone to construct herself as a sage as she recontextualized her interlocutors' nostalgic discourse. As this and other examples I present in this chapter show, the sage and nostalgic personas often emerged in the same conversation.

Participants not only constructed themselves as sages, as exemplified by Birdie in the above example, but they were also constructed as sages by their conversational partners. For example, during a session of Story Collective in September 2014, Ella, a 65-year-old European American woman, constructed Annie, an 86-year-old Asian American woman, as a sage—someone with experiences that others could learn from. Interestingly, Ella's construction of Annie as a sage was presented in response to Annie's modest self-positioning as someone who had not earned a college degree, unlike her present interlocutors, and someone who thus learned much from them. Annie self-effacingly noted, “But not only was I so fortunate to read the books, I have people like you all.” She added, “You teach me a lot of things,” constructing her interlocutors as experts—people with formal education. Rejecting Annie’s identification as a mere “learner,” Ella constructed Annie as a sage who reminded others that not everyone had had the same learning opportunities. Referring to her own adverse learning experiences, namely having reading difficulties as a child and professors in college who were discouraging, Ella told Annie, “You teach us, you remind us that we had these- I mean why should I get upset about this woman giving me a C? Because I didn’t read until I was in third grade…But sometimes you forget it.” Ella thus implies that Annie should not look down on herself: she, too, has had life experiences that can be used to teach the others.

While participants often granted and ratified their interlocutors’ claims to a sage position, at other times speakers denied others’ adoption of the sage persona. For example, during an August 2013 session of Story Collective, Birdie rejected Pearl’s performance of the sage persona, as Pearl claimed that she understood “community” because she had grown up during the Great Depression with poverty (“But being my age, I knew a lot of people that didn’t have…Daddy would get a bushel of meal ground for us and a bushel for another family down there cause he’d know they didn’t have anything to eat”). Birdie rejected Pearl’s claim to being a sage by presenting a similar story from her family, though suggesting that first-hand experience was not necessary to understand the importance of “community”: “Pearl, um my grandfather um during the Depression…He butchered his own hogs and just took it, took them from house to house. You know, that's community."

5.1.2 The nostalgic

In the course of depicting older people as sages in their Story Collective conversation in November 2013 (presented in the previous section), Joyce, Dana, Barbara, and Gloria invoked and embodied yet another persona associated with older people: nostalgics, or older people who yearn for the past because of perceived societal decline. In other parts of this conversation, these speakers together took on the role of the nostalgic by praising the social norms of the past, as when Joyce recalled that "old people to me always had something interesting to say because they lived a lot longer than we [did]…[and] had a lot to say." In contrast to their positive affective stances toward discourse practices of the past, they disparaged those of the present as morally deficient, such as when Barbara bemoaned the fact that the "respect" given to one's elders for their sapience had "gone away." Joyce aligned with Barbara's negative affective stance as she criticized modern younger people by saying, "But now they know more than you, and you can't tell them anything, and they'll tell you."

Besnier (2009) defines the discourse of nostalgia as one in which "people engage in these reminiscences and attribute positive value to them," and contrast them "with characterizations of the present time" (75–76). Moreover, in academic discussions of discourses of nostalgia (e.g., Hill 1998; Besnier 2009) these positive valuations of the past often revolve around crediting earlier times with being more respectful times. Storytelling and engaging with discourses of nostalgia are typically thought of as a discourse activity of older speakers, often stereotyped as being used for reminiscing fondly on the “good old days” while disparaging “kids these days.” From a modernist perspective that assumes that society has in fact progressed over time, nostalgics look out of touch with present-day society.

Such a nostalgic stance, complemented by a dismissive view of modern practices, is sometimes represented in U.S. popular media as manifesting in conflict between older and younger generations. For example, the online version of *The Week*, a news magazine, reviewed an episode of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, a late-night satire news show hosted by the comedian, John Oliver. The author characterized one of Oliver’s comments as “the perfect…response when your elderly relatives start sniping at you during Thanksgiving dinner” (Weber 2015). The author then quotes Oliver’s monologue, which introduced its advice to its listeners—ostensibly younger people—by saying, “‘When your grandmother is complaining about your new piercing, saying your generation is terrible…” (Weber 2015). The author and Oliver both use negative language (“sniping,” “complaining,” and “terrible”) to portray the relationship between the “elderly” and their grandchildren as fraught.

As these examples illustrate, the nostalgic is positioned relative to the notion of societal progress, as exhibited through modern ideologies, discourses, and practices. Assuming the nostalgic role, the speaker either takes positive affective stances toward practices of past eras or negative affective stances toward present-day practices. These affective stances place the nostalgic in opposition to the “progressive,” a role that takes positive affective stances toward social progress. The contrast in their affective stances results in disalignment between the nostalgic and the progressive.

5.2 MODERN AMERICAN DISCOURSES ABOUT RACE AND AGE

In recent years, it has become more common to hear assertions within mainstream American discourses—often by white figures—that characterize the United States as a postracial society. These claims typically point to legal and social changes following the Civil Rights Movement (Bonilla-Silva & Forman 2000), increased racial and ethnic diversity (Anagnostopoulos et al. 2013), and eventually the 2008 election of the nation's first African American president (Alim & Smitherman 2012; Wise 2010). These discourses align with a modernist ideology of progress, according to which society improves with the passage of time, and people in the present are less racist than those in the past, such that racism is no longer a societal problem. However, the progress claimed through these circulating discourses has not been borne out by scholarly research (e.g., Alim & Smitherman 2012; Hill 2008; Pollock 2004), which has shown instead that American culture is "hyperracial" (Alim & Reyes 2011). The tension between these two cultural narratives is articulated by the question asked by Roberts, Bell, and Murphy (2008): "What does it mean to live with and try to make sense of highly racialized experiences in a society that denies the significance of race?" (334).

This chapter addresses three related circulating discourse practices that are dominant in U.S. public space and that contribute to the myth of a "postracial" America: political correctness, colorblindness, and colormuteness. Political correctness, a practice of verbal hygiene (Cameron 1994, 1995) that took prominence in the national consciousness in the 1990s (see Suhr and Johnson 2003 for a more in-depth history), represents the "shift to 'cultural' politics, the politics of recognition, identity and difference" (Fairclough 2003:20). Politically correct language replaces "problematic" or "taboo" words, categorized as such on the basis of their history of being used toward members of minority groups in offensive ways. It thus assumes what Hill (2008) has called a "baptismal ideology" of meaning, according to which "there is a single correct meaning of a word" (38). Colorblindness, on the other hand, reduces the significance of race in public life, reflecting the belief that because progress toward racial equality has been made through the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, racial discrimination is a problem of the past rather than the present (Roberts et al. 2008). While the intent of colorblindness—"the hope that race might become nonsalient as a factor shaping social, economic, and political opportunities and outcomes" (Bucholtz 2010:166)—was to advocate for equal treatment of racial and ethnic minorities (McElhinny 2001), it has been transformed into a discourse that masks new and covert forms of racism (Bonilla-Silva & Forman 2000). This "new racetalk" allows European Americans to claim not to be racist while conflating "race with racism that reinforces inequalities, hierarchies, and racial divisions while insisting that race does not matter" (Roberts et al. 2008:337). Finally, colormuteness is a practice that is characterized by "talking as if race did not matter at all" (Pollock 2004:2), though with the paradoxical effect of "*mak[ing] race matter more*" particularly in the context of social policy (3).

With younger people imagined in mainstream U.S. discourses as being at the forefront of today's postracial culture, older people are, in contrast, stereotypically depicted as "backwards" and "racist." Often used as a comedic trope, this stereotype circulates on the Internet (e.g., a recent "racist grandma" meme that circulated widely) and in popular television shows. For example, a 2014 comedy sketch from the show

Inside Amy Schumer[25] was performed as an advertisement for a fictional facility intended to cure older people of their racism. In the opening scene, a white grandmother misidentifies her granddaughter's Latino boyfriend as both a busboy and a gardener. The voiceover in dulcet tones comments on this familiar faux pas and introduces a facility where politically correct language can be learned (Comedy Central 2014):

> Look familiar? Are you tired of your elderly relatives thinking their blatant racism is okay?...There is an answer: Generations, a revolutionary new facility where we give your elderly loved ones the politically correct social skills to get along in the modern world.

Though racists are often imagined as white in popular representations, this trope of the racist older person is not limited to whites. For example, in an episode of *Conan* (Team Coco 2013), a late-night comedy television show, Indian American comedian Aziz Ansari argued that American society was becoming less racist, primarily because there were fewer older people around:

> We all know there's still racist people around…But the racist people are slowly going away. Like I mean clap if you lost a racist grandma in the last year or two.' [Loud audience laughter and some clapping.] 'Anybody lose like a racist grandma? You know what I'm talking about. We all have, you have that one grandma who passes away and, it's like, 'Oh, it's so sad … Eh, she was kind of a racist piece of shit.'

Because Ansari is not white, his use of the inclusive first person plural pronoun *we*, implies that he does not distinguish people white and non-white racists. Likewise, an article in the *Chicago Tribune* (Witt 2008) generalizes this stereotype to older people who make prejudiced comments when talking about members of other ethnicities:

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[25] *Inside Amy Schumer*, a Comedy Central show, describes itself: "Straight from Amy Schumer's provocative and hilariously wicked mind, Inside Amy Schumer explores sex, relationships and the general clusterf**k that is life with sketches, stand-up comedy and woman-on-the-street interviews."

> The personality is familiar to us all: the sweet old aunt, the loving grandfather or the generous widow down the street, each of them unfailingly kind toward friends and family but given to flights of shocking prejudice when the conversation turns toward ethnic groups to which they don't belong.

This image of racist older people is often explained by generational differences that align with discourses of a postracial American society (i.e., older people are racist because they grew up in times that were more racist than contemporary society). However, studies in social psychology have found that the increased racial bias among older people also has cognitive explanations (von Hippel et al. 2000; Gonsalkorale et al. 2009); as people age, they rely on social stereotypes more and demonstrate less the cognitive ability to inhibit prejudicial bias. These studies propose that people of all ages have implicit racial bias, but that the age differences we may observe (and comedy reflects) are caused by cognitive deficits due to aging processes that cause older people to lose some of their ability to monitor automatic racial associations. However, as Radvansky et al. (2009) show, though older people access and rely on stereotypes more than younger people, when presented with counter-stereotypes, older people are able to integrate the additional contextual information they provide as well as young adults.

5.3 TALKING ABOUT RACE AS A SAGE AND NOSTALGIC

The remainder of this chapter turns to the specific case of Dana, the 60-year-old African American woman introduced at the opening of this chapter, and her embodiment of both the sage and nostalgic personas. In my analysis, I focus particularly on how Dana embodied these personas as she engaged with contemporary ideologies of race. While others in this community also adopted the sage and nostalgic personas, this chapter focuses on the complexities of sage construction for a single individual. In other words, I seek to illuminate specifically *how* Dana's identity as a sage became co-constructed through discourse, rather to make any claims about *whether* she adopted a consistent sage role in this community. Similarly, I focus on talk about racial issues, not because this topic has any intrinsic connection to the sage persona, but because it happened to be one among many topics that seemed to invite the sage persona. In her discussions, Dana referred to the past—her personal experiences of racialization as black woman—as shaping her knowledge of history and culture in the American South and informing her critical readings of race relations in the present. She constructed herself as an everyday philosopher on race whose wisdom emerged over the course of her individual life trajectory, specifically as it intersected with historical events and changing cultural mores. My point not to generalize about all instances of the sage construction but rather to focus on the discursive possibilities that are enabled by adopting a sage persona.

Like many other members at the center, Dana had lived through the Civil Rights Movement in the Southern United States as well as subsequent shifts in U.S. racial discourses. Yet her perspective on race relations resulted from her distinctive experiences as a black woman who lived both before and after legal integration: she had attended high school during the process of integration, went on to a state college shortly after it was integrated, and taught elementary school in a majority white community for 30 years after integration. Moreover, Dana had lived in various kinds of communities across the state: from the rural area where she was raised, the small town where she was a teacher for 30 years, and the urban area where she attended college and eventually retired.

The frequency with which Dana, as well as other members of the Story Collective group, talked openly about race was striking to me, particularly given that I was familiar with greater constraints on explicit race talk in white-dominated public space. Such forms of verbal hygiene (Cameron 1994, 1995) have led to the tendency of younger generations to be “colormute” (Pollock 2004). The willingness of participants to engage in discourses about race likely was related to the racial makeup of Story Collective, which varied each session. Generally consisting of between three and six participants, the meetings regularly included at least one African American and one European American participant. At its highest enrollment level, a typical session of Story Collective was attended by two African American participants and three or four European American participants. On rare occasions when the group was particularly small, all three members were African American, while at other times all three members were European American. And, from time to time one Asian American participant would enter the conversation about halfway through the session after her exercise class had ended. Those members of Story Collective who referred often to race did so in the following ways: talking about their personal genealogies; labeling others at the senior center in racially marked ways (e.g., Asian, black, white); situating well-known events and their own experiences in the past; and commenting on current social trends and discourses. While other speakers usually introduced the topic of race to the conversation, Dana often contributed her perspective once discussions came to be about race.

This frequent engagement with race was not characteristic of all members of this community; at the other extreme, some participants avoided talking about race, sometimes silencing discussions of racism in the past for fear of offending other members. During one Story Collective session, for example, participants told stories about state fairs during their childhood. At the end of the session, Kathy, a European American woman in her sixties, whispered to me, looking toward where Joyce, an

African American woman, had been sitting, “We couldn’t say this. I’m sure you wouldn’t know, when we were growing up [there was] a white fair.”[26] Kathy implied through her words, her lowered volume, and her gaze that it would not have been appropriate to introduce this past form of racism to the conversation because Joyce, an African American woman in her seventies had been present. In contrast, as the remainder of my analysis will show, Dana’s choice to reject colormuteness by talking about race relations in the past and present was an important way of constructing her aged persona as a sage and nostalgic.

5.3.1 Political correctness

The data presented below in Example 5.1 were collected during a session of Story Collective that Dana entered well after Tom, Birdie, and Leah had already begun sharing stories from their past. As with some of the Story Collective sessions, on this day there was no set topic of storytelling from the start; rather, the topic of race emerged from Birdie and Tom’s mostly good-natured verbal sparring in the midst of telling narratives. A playful tension between Tom and Birdie arose during this conversation because Tom often referred to race and ethnicity in an open way—because talking about difference in ethnic and religious backgrounds was “what makes things interesting”[27]—whereas Birdie resisted his doing so. As Leah explained to Dana when she arrived, the topic had “erupted on its own” and felt “a little bit chaotic,” and the whole conversation was “kind of all out of synch.” In typical fashion, regardless of the topic or group, Dana initially hesitated to join the conversation, saying she had been unsure what the topic of conversation was. However, she eventually joined the group’s discussion of “race and ethnicity,” which she referred to as “all that kind of good stuff.” As Dana said the word “good,” she emphasized and lengthened it, implying that these topics are contested and problematic. The ensuing twenty minutes consisted primarily of Dana’s race-related commentary and narratives; while the others occasionally agreed, commented, or asked questions, for the duration of this time the floor clearly belonged to Dana. Through her epistemic stances and claims to personal experiences, Dana took up the role of the sage in this group, as her interlocutors appeared to defer to her; her positioning continued even after Pearl, an 86-year-old African American woman, joined the conversation about 15 minutes later.

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[26] Kathy’s use of the second person singular pronoun *you* here referred to me; she correctly assumed that because I had not grown up in the Southern United States and would have been too young to have experienced this phenomenon first-hand, I had never heard of segregated fairs. According to Kathy and Barbara, a segregated state fair meant that attendance in the fair’s first week was restricted to white people, while during the second week attendance was limited to black people.

[27] In this conversation and in others, Tom was consistently constructed by Dana and Pearl, both African American, as well-aligned with their own views about race and race talk; they also constructed him as distinct from most European Americans, given his willingness to talk about race and his particular perspective on racial issues. Throughout

Specifically, Dana embodied both the sage and nostalgic personas in her critique of politically correct practices, or the practice of sanitizing language of contemporary linguistic taboos, such as overt or derogating references to race. Example 5.1 shows the ways in which Dana problematized this discursive practice of political correctness, implying that it allowed its adherents to use palatable language that disguised their racist sentiments. Crucially, it was through performing the sage persona—by invoking her past

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the session of Story Collective from which Examples 5.1 through 5.5 were taken, Dana took stances toward modern ideologies and discourses of race that aligned with those Tom had previously taken. Moreover, Pearl declared later during this session of Story Collective that Tom was “so different from most white men I run into; I’ve had big fights with most of them,” thus aligning with Tom’s perspective. Pearl repeated this sentiment to me after another session of Story Collective while we were walking to the center’s lobby. Finally, Tom’s discourse style aligned with Pearl’s and Gloria’s interest in genealogy, which they discussed during other sessions of this group.

experiences, taking authoritative stances, and elucidating nuances in race-related discourses—that she made this claim.

Example 5.1 "I know a lot of people get hung up on this label that label"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Dana:	there is
2		(3.9)
3		an unspoken o:r
4		(3.1)
5		well I guess? an unspoken thing of
6		(1.9)
7		"let's not."=
8		=unless you're just out~and~out
9		na:sty.
10		"let's not offend anybody."
11		rather tha:n
12		(1.5)
13		"I respect you (.) as a person"
14		there's a difference between
15		"I don't want to offend you"
16		and
17		the fact that "I respect you as a fellow hu-"
18		"human being"
19		because=
20		=you know
21		I was
22		a child of integration
23		because we had mandatory integration
24		in nineteen seventy:
25		something=
26		=I~don't~remember~whe:n
27		because
28		I know it was like
29		(1.9)
30		my last year in high school
31		(1.5)
32		and I graduated in ninetee:n (.) seventy-one?
33		°yeah
34		**I** don't know.
35		[[omitted lines]]
36		but the main thing that
37		I
38		(0.8)
39		was listening to what you all were saying
40		is that
41		I know a lot of people get hung up on (.) this label that label and whatever.
42	Tom:	°right

Dana rejects political correctness because it merely gives the appearance of racial equality and acceptance without ridding society of racism. The practice of political correctness demands the replacement of socially controversial and dangerous words with sanitized ones. It therefore relies on a baptismal ideology of racism (Hill 2008)—the belief that the offense in racist acts/discourses is inherent in the words themselves—such that an avoidance of words that are overtly problematic (i.e., racist) ostensibly shields the speaker from being perceived as racist. Dana highlights the incongruities between a baptismal ideology of racism focused on preventing potentially objectionable language ("an unspoken thing of…'let's not offend anybody,'" Lines 7–10) with a performative ideology that emphasizes what language achieves, as an act of speech, rather than merely what form it takes ("I respect you as a person," Line 13). Dana implies that a consequence of focusing on political correctness is that "a lot of people get hung up on this label that label and whatever" (Line 41). Crucially, Dana situates political correctness as a contemporary discourse by using the present tense to refer to it in Lines 1–18 ("is an unspoken. . . thing," "[are] just out and out nasty," "[is] a difference") and 40–41 ("get hung up"); this contrasts with her use of the past tense in Lines 21–34 ("was a child of integration," "had mandatory integration," "was. . . my last year in high school") as she refers to her own childhood, a time period characteristically not associated with political correctness.

Through her critique, Dana introduces the claim that racism comes in overt or covert forms. She highlights the tension between the overt racism that characterized earlier eras and the covert racism that scholars (e.g., Bonilla-Silva & Forman 2000; Pollock 2004; Wise 2010; Alim & Smitherman 2012) have argued typify the current "postracial" social climate. For Dana, overt racism is expressed through "out and out nast[iness]" (Lines 8 and 9), while covert racism involves prejudicial feelings that can be disguised by discourse such as "let's not offend anybody" (Line 10). She further contrasts covert racism (in Lines 14 and 15: "there's a difference between 'I don't want to offend you'") with the absence of racism altogether (in Lines 17 and 18: "'I respect you as a fellow human being'").

To differentiate between covert and overt racism, Dana positions herself as a sage by using her experiences in the past to inform her critical assessment of the present. Dana connects her criticism of the ideology of political correctness to her unique life experiences ("because I was a child of integration," Line 22), allowing her to take a knowledgeable epistemic stance. By citing the historical event ("because we had mandatory integration," Line 23) and its chronological period ("in nineteen seventy something," Line 24) as well as its connection to an ontogenetic timescale measured in relation to her personal lifetime (Lemke 2000; Wortham 2003) ("my last year in high school," Line 30), she positions herself as someone who is qualified to assess changes in race relations because she has lived through different racial climates. Moreover, shortly after her utterance in Line 41, Dana again positions herself as a sage as she critiques covert racism. She presented a generalizing narrative of times when she had been "the only black in a group" of white people as a way of illustrating a typical experience as the target of covert racism.

Example 5.2 "I'm a non-person to you"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Dana:	the thing about it is (.) just li:ke
2		(1.1)
3		there are people that do not.=
4		=want to say things.
5		or do things.

6 that they think (.) might offe:nd.
7 and then other people
8 (0.5)
9 consider you a non-person
10 (0.8)
11 and they don’t even make eye contact with you.=
12 =or even acknowledge that you’re **there**.
13 so you know you got the extremes.
14 I mean because
15 (1.2)
16 you can come in (.)
17 and (.) you know
18 you (.) look (.) straight through me
19 I’m a non-person to you
20 you know=
21 =I don’t exist.
22 you talk to **them**.
23 and then if I have the audacity (.)
24 to open my mouth and say something
25 it’s totally dismissed
26 it’s just like (.)
27 °↑“why is she talking? because”
28 °↑“this is our conversation.”

Dana’s description of this typical event of racial exclusion positions her as a sage in three ways. First, Dana’s use of the first-person singular pronouns *I* and *me* builds her ethos as someone with direct experience with and recognition of racism (“**I**'m a non-person to you,” “**I** don’t exist,” “if **I** have the audacity to open my mouth”). Second, Dana’s use of the generalized second-person pronoun *you* along with the simple present (“you look. . .,” “you talk. . .”) conveys the generalizable and recurring character of her experience, endowing it with cultural significance as a part of systemic acts of racism. Third, her repeated use of the generalized second-person pronoun *you*, juxtaposed with third- and first-person pronouns *they* and *I*/*me*, respectively, encourages her interlocutors to imagine acts of covert racism from two positions: first, as its recipients (“**they** don’t even make eye contact with **you** or even acknowledge that **you**’re there,” Lines 11–12) and, second, as its performers (“**you** look straight through **me**, **I**’m a non-person to **you**,” Lines 18–19). Dana thus acts as a teacher—a sage—who invites her audience to co-experience and learn about racism from multiple perspectives. Moreover, as Dana performs the sage persona, she demonstrates that she has experienced racism in both covert and overt forms, and she rejects both. Her authoritative stances toward identifying and differentiating between these two forms of racism seems to lend her credibility as someone who has experienced racism by implying that her reasons for not supporting political correctness are not about her not realizing that racism exists (she has in fact experienced it) but her realizing that it is merely a disguise for covert racism.

Shortly after the excerpt presented in Example 5.2, Dana constructs herself as a sage as well by highlighting her own ability to recognize a complex tension between the rights of racists and the rights of those who are the object of their racism. By saying, "I do have enough sense to know that everybody has the right to like or dislike whomever they please," Dana orients to a liberal ideology that privileges the rights of individuals, both the right to espouse racist views and the right to live unharmed by racist action. Her wisdom—her having "enough sense to know"—about this necessary tension between two kinds of rights is also displayed when she says, "As long as your nastiness is not infringing upon my rights I don't give a rat's behind what you do or what you say. I mean because you can't belittle me or tear me down unless I give you my power and allow you to do so." Positioning herself as a sage, Dana highlights the complexity of positions involved in issues of racism.

Dana's general critique of politically correct labeling practices is supported by her discussion of a specific example of a contemporary linguistic taboo: the cultural norm of replacing the historically racially loaded term “nigger” (Kennedy 2002) with the euphemistic phrase “the N-word” in public space.

Example 5.3 “The word has never done anything to anybody”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Dana:	I mean you know=
2		=because=
3		=now every time you turn arou:nd
4		(0.5)
5		it’s like
6		(0.5)
7		↓“the **N**-wo:rd.”
8		(0.7)
9		the **word** has never done **any**thing to **any**body
10		(0.5)
11		it’s **how** (0.5) **you**
12		(1.3)
13		**use** it. (.)
14		and what you mean when (.) you (.) **say** it.
15	Tom:	°right
16	Dana:	you know
17		that’s just like saying “**coffee**”

A few important observations can be made about Dana’s critique of the current categorical proscription of the word “nigger” from the public lexicon. First, in Line 3, she situates her critique as one about the present (“now every time you turn around”[28]), implying that the ubiquity of this practice is a contemporary phenomenon. Second, she expresses her negative stance towards this practice of verbal hygiene though her specific stylization of the phrase “the N-word” in Line 7. By increasing the volume of “N” and elongating and lowering the pitch of “word,” she mockingly portrays others’ overly fearful affective stance toward the word “nigger” in discourses of political correctness. Third, she rejects the assumption that racism lay in the denotational content of words themselves, as according to a baptismal ideology,[29] and she does so explicitly—by stating that “the word has never done anything to anybody” (Line 9)—and implicitly—by juxtaposing the word “nigger” with the word “coffee” (Line 16). According to Dana, when these words are considered in the abstract, they merely refer to objects of dark color, such that connotations of racism and harm are not inherent in the words themselves. Instead, she proposes that racist or non-racist meanings of words are tied to their context of use (Spears 1998) including both the specific contextualization of a word (“how you use it,” Lines 11–13) and what is intended by its usage (“what you mean when you say it,” Line 14). Her opinion adopts a personalist ideology of language and racism (Hill 2008), according to which the racism lies in speaker intentions and beliefs rather than in lexical denotations.

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[28] Dana’s perception that “the N-word” is always used instead of “nigger” contrasts with metalinguistic accounts found elsewhere, such as the one given by one of the high school participants quoted in Roberts et al. (2008): “Nigger… I mean, everybody says it no matter what color they are, they just say it as a word now… The real meaning just died out and now nigger is referred to as a friend or “wassup nigger” or a greeting” (343). Dana’s view may also result from differences in how this euphemistic form is used across generations.

To further reject the contemporary adherence to a baptismal ideology that locates racism in words themselves, she turns to a different kind of example: deictic phrases and words (“them people” and “they”) that have, for many Americans, a recognizable usage in contexts of racial exclusion but that carries no explicitly racializing denotation. Dana’s critique is supported by both Tom and Pearl. Tom was a white man in his sixties who was very vocal about his anti-racist views, and Pearl was an African American woman in her mid-eighties who later joined the conversation.

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[29] It is interesting to note that Dana again rejects the baptismal ideology as part of a narrative (shown in full below in Example 5) several minutes later. As she criticizes the covert racism exhibited by white teachers in Taylorsville, she quotes them in the denotational text, saying abbreviatedly “that little nappy-headed.” She then comments, “and I don’t have a problem with the word,” before repeating the phrase in full: “little nappy-headed nigger.” This shows the intersection of practices and norms from different times; while her colleagues freely used the word “nigger,” Dana’s hesitation seems to indicate that while she claims not to “have a problem with the word,” she must acknowledge that her perspective on the issue is not standard for the present era.

Example 5.4 “Rather than saying ‘the N-word,’ ‘them people,’ or ‘they’”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Dana:	but you know
2		↓“**the:m** people.”
3		(0.8)
4		or the thing ↑**now** is.
5		(0.7)
6		rather than saying “the ↓N-wo:rd.”=
7		↓“the:m people.”
8	Tom:	(yeah)
9	Dana:	or (.)
10		↓“**they**.”
11	Tom:	°right
12	Dana:	and you want to say=
13		=“↑who the [↑hell is **they**.”]
14	Pearl:	[who is “**they**.”]
15	Tom:	right
16	Pearl:	I’ll ask “who’s ‘they’”
17		(0.9)
18		[<@ (2) @> <@ xxx @>]
19	Tom:	[<@ (2) @> <@ xxx @>]

Dana points out that “the N-word” has been replaced with the seemingly innocuous phrase “them people” and pronoun “they.” Yet as Dana and Pearl appeared to recognize, these new terms, seemingly non-racist on the surface, can convey racist meanings. In her critique, Dana performs stylized elongations of “them people” and “the N-word” with lowered pitch and raised volume to mockingly depict those who utter these terms (Lines 2, 6, and 7) and follows these mockeries by her own imagined rhetorical question, “who the hell is they” (Line 13), which expresses her frustration with racist terms that implicitly and derogatorily refer to African Americans. Pearl’s partial repetition of this question in Line 14 and emphatic restatement in Line 16 display her frustrated alignment with Dana. Once again, Dana situates her critique as specifically leveled against the present (“the thing now is,” Line 4), and we can understand her to be critical of the present-day drive for language sanitization, as exemplified by the ideology of political correctness.

In her critique of the use of “they” and “them people” as forms of racist speech, Dana embodies the sage persona by making connections across cultural trends and historical periods. Having recognized earlier that, though politically correct speech might superficially eradicate problematic and offensive language, it does not eliminate the hateful sentiment behind the words, Dana implies that getting rid of the word “nigger” also does not prevent people from inventing new coded language to serve the same racist purposes. In her role as a sage, it is chiefly because she has seen the progressively increasing sanitization of the linguistic norms and taboos over her lifetime (e.g., “nigger”—“N-word”—“them people”—“they”) that she is able to decode the hidden meanings behind the phrases “they” and “them people” and construct herself as an authority on racist language.[30] Dana’s dismissal of the baptismal ideology behind cultural taboos against using the “N-word” thus appears to be motivated by her observations of the consequences of these sociolinguistic changes across her lifetime. As an alternative to a baptismal ideology of racism, Dana adopts a personalist ideology, according to which the interpretation of a term that has potentially racist meanings (i.e., “nigger,” “N-word,” “them people,” or “they”) is determined by the speaker’s intent (“and you want to say ‘who the hell is they,’” Line 13). It is possible that Dana’s assumption of a personalist ideology of racism through her embodiment of the sage, a locally privileged persona, lends greater weight to the ideology.

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[30] Dana’s valued perspective on this semiotic history again contrasts with students quoted by Roberts et al. (2008), who “suggest that they don’t connect with the loaded meaning of the words because they have not explored the genesis of and history surrounding racial terms” (348).

Throughout Examples 5.2–5.4, Dana also implicitly embodies a nostalgic persona through her stance-taking moves. Through her criticism of political correctness, she takes negative affective stances toward a linguistic practice presented as a specifically contemporary one and disaligns from those—likely a generation of younger people—who have adopted practices of political correctness. Adopting this nostalgic role, Dana suggests that overt racism, more acceptable in the past, was not without its moral advantages to covert racism. In Example 5.5, which follows the example that opened this chapter, Dana shares a narrative that takes place at the start of her career in Taylorsville, where she was one of relatively few African American teachers. Specifically, she notes how she valued that some of her older white colleagues were "up front" in their expression of racism, rather than disguising it dishonestly.

Example 5.5 "I respected her because she was up front"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Dana:	but I would much rather=
2		=I have more respect (.)
3		for a person
4		that is totally honest (.)
5		and that will say.
6		(0.9)
7		"↑I don't like you (.) because you're black".
8		I mean=
9		="hey that's~your business".
10		(1.1)
11		"**I** don't like you because you're stupid".
12	all:	<@ (1.8) @> ((loud outburst of laughter))
13	Tom:	<@ (perfect) @>
14		[<@ (2.5) @>]
15	Dana:	[so (.) you know]
16		that's that's=
17		=that's the way I ↑see it.
18		you know because when we first-
19		when I first started teaching
20		there were some teachers=
21		=I taught at a predominantly (.) white school=
22		=in Taylorsville. (.)
23	Tom:	(right)

Dana: and ↑that’s the town (.)
that time forgot to touch.
Tom: right
Dana: **so**:.
(0.6)
there were ladies that were like in their sixties
teaching
and **I** (.) **know**
(1.5)
that
(0.8)
I was not their cup of tea
Tom: h
Dana: but I had respect for them=
=because they made it **clear** (.) you know
“I might have to go to the same faculty meetings you have to go to”
“and we might have to do this”=
=“and we might have to do that”=
=“but don’t make the mistake of thinking (.) I **like** you or I **respect** you.”
I can deal with that a lot better than I can (.) with (.)
“↑o:h ↑mmm”
because that’s a~bunch~of~crap.
you know=
=those teachers that I kne:w
Miss Ramsdale and Miss whatever her name was?
I respected her.
because she (.) was up front
you know
but don’t sit up there and go “↑hee hee hee”
and then you know say something and then go like “°↑ooh”
(1.8) ((gestures with hand over mouth and winces))
you know
(1.6)
you know that you really don’t mean

Dana’s positive portrayal of older white teachers who overtly expressed racial prejudice comments on a tension between two kinds of moral positions: public honesty about one’s own racism and public politeness with respect to racial issues. While Dana recognizes that present-day discourses privilege public politeness, exemplified by political correctness and the silencing of race talk (Pollock 2004), she nostalgically praises the kind of honesty embodied by her white colleagues of the past, particularly given how present-day public politeness can encourage covert forms of racism. Dana’s reflection that she “had respect for them” and “I respected her” (referring to the white teachers in Lines 37 and 49) because they were frank in expressing their racial prejudice toward her seems to reject modern ideologies of race that prioritize the outward acceptance of people regardless of their race. While it seems unlikely that Dana would actually want her acquaintances and coworkers to be overtly racist, she emphasizes that she “can deal a lot better with that [racist behavior]” (Line 43) than she can with the type of veiled racist behavior she describes other teachers as exhibiting.

After the above excerpt in Example 5.5 (though in an excerpt not shown here), Dana contrasts her praise of overt racism with her critique of covert racism, Specifically, other teachers in Taylorsville superficially acted as if they liked Dana (“you know they’d say, ‘we consider you as one of us”). In addition, to sensing that these apparently inclusive comments were “awkward because they were putting on,” Dana became aware that these outward comments did not reflect these teachers’ racist sentiments, given what they said about their African American students (“they would get comfortable talking among themselves,” “and when you were talking and then all of a sudden you refer to one of your students as that ‘little nappy-headed nigger.’”) In addition to their dishonesty, covert acts of racism were problematic to Dana because they did not afford targets the opportunity to challenge racism. The response she imagines to acts of overt racism, “I mean ‘hey that’s your business,’ ‘I don’t like you because you’re stupid’” (Example 5.5: Lines 8–11), frames them as negative events that nonetheless permit her to respond. She thus implies that covert racism, which she had previously depicted as a consequence of politically correct language, is problematic because it does not give its target the same opportunity.

Embodying the sage persona allows Dana to use her personal experiences to take a knowledgeable epistemic stance toward both alternatives of racist behavior—overt racism (characteristic of past eras) and covert racism (particular to current times). Moreover, Dana's negative affective stances toward current linguistic ideologies of race, which she argued can lead to forms of covert racism, implicitly lend her the nostalgic persona.

5.3.2 Colorblindness

As I demonstrated through the previous section of analysis, Dana responded to present-day social norms of political correctness by constructing herself as a sage, who draws on insights gained through her past experiences, as well as a nostalgic, who rejects modern ideologies of language and race. In this section, I examine the ways in which Dana used discourses of colorblindness to construct herself as a sage. Though colorblindness, like political correctness, may be seen as a modern ideology of language and race, Dana neither rejected it nor did she treat it as a modern linguistic ideology. The two examples in this section are from a conversation during the second Story Collective session. Kay, a European American woman, had been recalling her recent trip to Ireland in a session with Dana, Birdie, and me. Example 5.6 starts immediately after Kay, 83, anxiously realizes that several minutes prior she had potentially excluded Dana, the only African American in the group, through her use of the first person plural pronoun in her claim that "in Ireland they're all like **us**." As the following examples show, Dana uses discourses of colorblindness to enact the sage persona as she reassures Kay that she had felt neither excluded nor offended by her comment.

Example 5.6 “Race has never been an issue for me”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Dana:	but **no**:
2		you could ne:ve:r
3		(0.5)
4		↑uh uh.
5		I understood exactly what you were ↑talking about
6		I mean
7		and
8		(1.4)
9		be↑lieve it or not
10		(1.3)
11		race has never (.) been an issue (.) <@ for @> me.
12		(1.1)
13		a:nd you know=
14		=because (.) I like **people**
15		I don’t care what color you a:re
16	Kay:	°yeah
17	Dana:	o:r
18		(0.9)
19		how you sound=
20		=or whatever
21		(0.5)
22		I like people.=
23	Dana:	=[$_1$and if$_1$] [$_2$I ↑don’t$_2$]
24	Kay:	[$_1$yeah$_1$]
25	Birdie:	[$_2$because we can't ↑**help** what color we are.$_2$]
26	Dana:	°yeah
27		(0.5)
28		and if [I ↑don’t like you]
29	Birdie:	[(anyone)]
30		(0.5)
31	Dana:	you can be blacker than I am=
32		=and I ↑**still** don’t like you
33	Birdie:	right
34	Dana:	you know
35		so it's not the skin tone or anything and
36		you know
37		(1.8)
38		I ↑feel like.
39		if you're a decent person
40		and you’re sincere you can fit in anyway
41	Birdie:	ri:ght
42	Dana:	anywhere
43	Kay:	oh yeah
44	Dana:	and I **don’t take** exception if somebody says=

45 ="well we all did so~and~so~and~so~and~so"
46 I got enough sense to ↑**know**

Dana, in response to Kay's worries that her pronoun choice had unintentionally excluded her, embodies the sage with strategies similar to those previously discussed. Shifting the focus away from the specific linguistic form Kay has used, Dana highlights additional considerations in assessing linguistic meaning. Specifically, she tells Kay, "no you could never" (Line 2) and "I understood exactly what you were talking about" (Line 5), given that she is a "decent person" as well as "sincere" (Lines 39 and 40). In other words, Dana adopts a personalist ideology by privileging Kay's intended meaning, which Dana can retrieve in part from what she knows about Kay's moral character. Significantly, Dana frames her assessment of Kay's words as that of a sage by emphasizing her "sense" that she has acquired through life experience: "I don't take exception if somebody says, 'well we all did so and so and so and so.' I got enough sense to know" (Lines 44–46). Dana thus claims that her wisdom deems the performative effect of Kay's language as harmless.

Crucially, Dana uses a discourse of colorblindness to adopt the sage persona as she minimizes the relevance of race when assessing Kay's language. First, she explicitly states, "race has never been an issue for me" (Line 11), implying that she has a long personal history of being colorblind. Second, when she explains, "I don't care what color you are" (Line 15), she explicitly claims to disregard race when determining whether she likes someone. Third, she emphasizes moral personal qualities such as decency and sincerity (Lines 39 and 40), implying that she is wise enough to know that characteristics other than race matter more. Through her use of colorblind discourses, Dana thus reinforces her positioning as a sage by demonstrating her longtime experience with issues of race and the nuance with which she interprets Kay's comments—that race is not the most important factor in determining what Kay meant.

Though Dana appears to reproduce contemporary discourses of colorblindness, I would contend that the way she uses language of colorblindness is qualitatively different from its more common manifestation in public space. Rather than claiming not to see race (as present-day discourses of colorblindness do), Dana acknowledges that she does see race, but notes that this is not the only factor that determines her moral judgments.

Finally, as Example 5.7, below, demonstrates, Dana elaborates on the perspective she shares in Example 5.6 by narrating how her interracial personal experiences have shaped her colorblind approach to judging moral character.

Example 5.7 "I'm used to being in the minority"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Dana:	but that's not a problem.
2		because you know
3		(1.2)
4		I'm used to being the minority=
5		=in (.) situations
6		[[omitted lines]]
7		but you ↑know I learned
8		(.) because um
9		(2.4)
10		the majority of my friends when I was in high school=
11		=cause that was the year of integration
12		mandatory inte- integration
13		were whi:te
14		and then when um
15		(1.6)
16		because I just didn't fit in with the
17		some of the black kids=
18		=because they thought that they were just too
19		(1.5)
20		**above** me.
21		you know how some people get a-
22		(1.4)
23		have an attitude=
24		=as my mama used to say "they biggity-acting".
25		"they forget where they came from."

26	Birdie:	ri:ght
27	Dana:	and I was not ↑of the ↑chosen.
28		you know
29		we were
30	Kay:	the cho:sen (@)
31	Dana:	uh huh
32		↓poor
33		which was fine.
34		you know
35		because I didn't know any better
36		[[omitted lines]]
37		but it was just ↑like
38		(1.4)
39		I was **always** in situations like that.
40		where (.) you know=
41		=I would turn out to
42		be (.)
43		th-
44		the only black there?
45		and you know it was just like ↑whatever
46		as long as I was with people I knew
47	Birdie:	mmhmm
48	Dana:	and that I enjoyed being with
49		I'm good
50		so
51		don't ever feel like

Dana's narrative explains that she was familiar not only with being "the minority" (Line 4) given that "the majority of [her] friends. . . were white" (Lines 10–13) but also with being treated as a lesser person by "biggity-acting" African Americans (Lines 16–25) because of her socioeconomic status ("I was not 'of the chosen'…we were poor," Lines 27, 29, and 32). Importantly, she notes the familiarity and frequency of the experience ("I'm **used to** being the minority," Line 3, and "I was **always** in situations like that," Line 39), producing her knowledgeable epistemic position with respective to such experiences. The epistemic stance she produces allows Dana to present herself as a sage with respect to issues of race and marginalization, specifically providing her a colorblind view of the word.

Both examples in this section demonstrate Dana's use of colorblind discourses as a resource to construct herself as a sage as well as to negotiate a potentially problematic interactional moment. It is noteworthy that Dana took this colorblind stance in other conversations, as shown in the excerpt that began this chapter, when she said, gesturing to her heart, "What is more important than the color of your skin is what you have in here," and, gesturing to her head, "and what you have up here" as well as "how you treat people." In another conversation, Dana claimed, "I was brought up that you accept a person for who they are," implying that characteristics such as racial difference should not be relevant for social acceptance. In these cases, as in the examples I have analyzed in this chapter, she adopted both a colorblind and personalist ideology that emphasized personal character rather than outward racial appearance in judging both human and linguistic value. Referencing her upbringing was one way she established her credibility, and thus presented herself as a sage; given her diverse experiences, she had learned to accept people regardless of their race.

5.4 DISCUSSION

In this chapter I have shown how Dana, an African American member of the center, adopted two personas commonly linked with older people—the *sage* and the *nostalgic*—as she engaged in race talk with other members of the center, including an African American named Pearl and European Americans named Tom, Birdie, Leah, and Kay. While younger people, too, may presumably construct themselves as sages and nostalgics, these personas are likely more readily available to older people, who are often recognized as having had extensive experiences in their lifetimes and who are commonly associated with these personas in popular culture. Yet while these personas are associated with older age, they can be adopted to talk about subjects other than age. I have found that Dana's enactment of the sage persona, valued for its wisdom, allowed her to skillfully and productively bring about a shared understanding of race and racism—at least for the moment—specifically with respect to contemporary practices of political correctness. Importantly, her identity as an African American, as a person who had been overtly racialized during her lifetime in ways her non-African American counterparts had not experienced, likely legitimated her position of the sage as she talked about race.

As she embodied these personas, Dana variously aligned with modern discourses of race. While disaligning with political correctness and colormuteness, she aligned with colorblindness. First, talking explicitly about race in social relations allowed Dana to implicitly reject the modern ideology of colormuteness, which she alluded to when she called race and ethnicity "all that kind of good stuff." Second, she rejected discourses of political correctness, which privilege the original and referential meanings of words through their imposition of linguistic taboos, to critique contemporary linguistic practices that she implied have lead to covert racism. Third, she aligned with and produced colorblind discourses, relying on ideologies of race that prioritize the intent and effect of words, to emphasize the role of contextual rather than racial factors in how she interprets social action.

Dana's embodiment of these personas also allowed her to comment on racism in ways that might not otherwise have been possible. By shifting between reproducing dominant colorblind discourses and rejecting modern ideologies of political correctness, Dana was able to maintain both the sage and nostalgic personas as she constructed a complex ideology of race for her audience. Dana's negotiation between these discourses of race enabled her to contribute to her use of the sage persona because it allowed her to take a wiser view on present-day society and the ways in which is failing in its effort to prevent racism.

This analysis also demonstrates that older people like Dana and her center friends, all raised in the U.S. South, may not be as narrow-minded and old-fashioned about racial issues as popular imagery may construct them to be. Dana demonstrated the ways in which an older person can negotiate the complexities of ideologies characteristic of both the past and present while making a convincing argument for her perspective. Moreover, because she allowed for the nuances in the issue, she effectively communicated to her audience that these problems of race relations are not clear-cut and may not be sufficiently addressed by a one-size-fits-all ideology of race. Dana's diverse and familiar experiences of interracial encounters, and her ability and willingness to share them with others, had the potential to shape the views of other center members, and allow them to collectively reach new understandings, through interactions of the kind that regularly emerged at the Andrus Center.

CHAPTER 6

Aging Up: Genres of Aging

"Aren't you're too young to be here?"[31] Birdie whispered to Sandra on her first day with the Story Collective group in March 2014. Sandra responded, "I'm fifty-two." "Just barely,"[32] rejoined Birdie, alluding to the center's minimum age of 50. Leah added, "Well you don't look it." Sandra then explained that she had joined along with her mother so they could attend classes together and jokingly offered to leave.

Such conversations about age and belonging were typical at the Andrus Center during the 18 months I collected data there, and, as I noticed when I returned to the center after my fieldwork had ended, they continued to echo through its halls. Sandra, Birdie, and Leah's exchange, in particular, reflects the complicated notion of membership at the Andrus Center, where all of its members may have been identified institutionally as "seniors," but not every member was at the same stage of aging into the category of "older person." While some had recently crossed into this category, others had identified as such for decades. In this chapter, I illustrate how such everyday conversations, in which members took stances toward each other and aging up, reflected the local reality of heterogeneity with respect to age. More importantly, I show how these discourses constituted the very means by which members' age identities became constructed, differentiated, and evaluated within the broader category of older age.

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[31] This was the second time during that particular Story Collective session that Birdie had asked someone this question. Earlier in the session she had called out to Peggy, a woman standing at the door, "You're too young to be here! Card that girl!" Peggy responded, laughing, "Bless your heart! Love you!" Other members also took a similar gatekeeping stance, particularly towards newer and younger-looking members.

[32] Sandra's age, 52, was just two years older than the age minimum for the center. She was the youngest member of the center with whom I came into contact.

I focus in particular on discursive moments in which members negotiated the "shift" to older age, as this process is often ideologized as only partially resembling change across other identity dimensions. While dimensions such as race, gender, sexuality, and class may be viewed as open to change for some individuals, such as when racially "passing," undergoing a "sex change" operation, "turning straight," or moving from "rags to riches," it is only the social dimension of age that change is imagined as universal; every individual is typically assumed to have the experience of changing categories, eventually shifting into the stigmatized category of older age. Such universality derives from its ideological status as an inevitable, or naturally guaranteed shift across an individual's lifetime. As Degnen (2012) notes, older age should not be the "Other," though it is often popularly constructed as such: "old age is the shared destination for the vast majority of the younger and middle-aged people alive today" (2).[33]

Because changing age identity is felt to be both universal and inevitable, it is often also assumed to be incremental and quite ordinary. By contrast, changes of gender, race, or sexuality may require relatively visible acts of authentication that allow an individual's move across clearly defined boundaries of identity (e.g., Zimman 2009). Yet despite the ostensibly unremarkable status of aging, the brief anecdote above suggests that it is hardly a natural outcome as individuals and their bodies pass through time. Age identity may certainly depend on certain “natural” markers of biology and chronology, but as I show here, it is also centrally dependent on how age is discursively constructed and transformed; age identities, as well as the value of these identities, are locally constructed and necessarily contestable. Individuals like Sandra—whom the Andrus Center may classify as a senior and are eligible for membership—are discursively transformed to dubiously legitimate members in this community.

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[33] This observation echoes Myerhoff's (1994[1979]) claim that ethnographic research of older communities is inherently different from participant observation of other groups: "Identifying with the 'Other'—Indians, Chicanos, if one is Anglo, blacks if one is white, males if one is female—is an act of imagination, a means for discovering what one is not and will never be. Identifying with what one is now and will be someday is quite a different process" (18).

This final analysis chapter thus focuses on three regularly occurring “aging genres” performed by individuals who had recently experienced a shift into the category of old age—the “young-old” members of the center, who usually identified as being as old as 85 but who crucially distinguished themselves from the “old-old” members (cf. Degnen 2007). I argue that these genres offered culturally acceptable, regularly occurring ways for young-old members to not only construct their identities, locating themselves meaningfully in relation to others (and past selves), but also to do so in ways that valued their identities and the aging process, specifically in a context in which the value of older identities was sometimes questioned. First, through *aging up narratives*, they described their experience of aging in relation to a past self; the process of aging, whether when recognizing oneself as old or joining the senior center, was depicted not simply as a shift across an age boundary, but rather as a decision fraught with potentially problematic ideological implications. Second, through *age co-construction*, they negotiated their age identities relative to other individuals at the center by using several discursive strategies that established, evaluated, and contrasted relevant age types (e.g., “old,” “geriatric,” and

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"babies") and that sorted specific members as tokens of those types. These negotiations showed that age identities were established not just by announcing one's own chronological age but also by collaboratively positioning and evaluating one another's ages. Third, through *stereotype alignment and disalignment*, they positioned themselves relative to recognizable social types across recursive scales of age. By disaligning with the category of "old" when classified by younger people yet aligning with particular ideal types of old-old members, young-old members delicately situated their age identities as between younger people and old-old.

As my analysis of aging genres illustrates, identity at the center was not a given fact about an individual—it was hardly bestowed upon entrance into the center—but a position that individuals occupied and negotiated in relation to other individuals and social groups. In other words, age identity was an achievement, accomplished through discourse, rather than a natural outcome of biological aging over time. In addition, this analysis speaks to the possibilities for these regularly occurring genres to contribute to positive understandings about older people. I suggest that individuals inhabited these positions as a way to manage their belonging at the Andrus Center, a community where becoming a member saliently marked their entrance into an ostensibly shared institutional category yet where members' own experiences of aging up differed greatly.

6.1 AGING UP NARRATIVES

One important genre participants used to construct their age identities was through personal narratives in which they invoked past and present selves as they described their experiences shifting into older age. Through these aging up narratives, they framed this change as an internal struggle of self-recognition. Although the aging up narratives had generic themes and structures, the outcomes were not uniform, as members accepted their transition into older age to varying degrees; while some members seemed to embrace aging, others remained ambivalent. These narratives demonstrate that aging up, or moving across the boundary of older age was understood not simply as a biological or chronological event; rather, participants constructed it as a discursive, affective, and epistemic process of accepting one's new, older identity.

6.1.1 Recognizing and accepting oneself as older

Participants' narratives of aging up often included the moment in which they realized that they had aged into an older category, depicting this process as something they had to confront and eventually accept. These narratives of self-recognition were not ideologically neutral; rather, their stories of changing age perspectives typically had a confessional tone, as speakers narrated moments of indignation, epiphany, and acceptance. The example I present below from an interview resembled other narratives of recognition and acceptance that I heard in informal conversations among members at the center throughout my fieldwork. In Examples 6.1 and 6.2 below, Henry answers my question, "How would you describe yourselves in terms of age?" during my interview with him and his wife Susan. While he admits that he no longer sees a youthful self when he looks in the mirror, he has come to accept the older self that he sees.

Example 6.1 "I don't see that nineteen-year-old that I used to see"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Henry:	I couldn't believe that that
2		here I am almost seventy years old.
3		I'm sixty-nine
4		and that used to sound **so old**
5		(.) but not anymore
6		I mean @ @ **good grief** it doesn't.
7		[[omitted lines]]
8		no I I see myself as older (.) **definitely**.
9		and I look in the mirror=

10 =I don’t see that nineteen year old
11 that I used to see
12 <@ for the **lo:ngest** ti:me @>
13 I don’t see him anymore=
14 =and I don’t know what that means
15 °maybe it’s acceptance or something like that
16 being comfortable with oneself
17 which I am fairly
18 you know
19 (3.5)
20 pretty much

Henry’s aging up narrative, in which he ultimately accepts his identity as “older,” focuses on two themes that were common to this genre: changing his perspective of age and recognizing himself as older. Henry’s first response to my question presents his age as an objective fact of time, as he names his current age and (Line 3) and next milestone birthday (Line 2). Though he concedes that he nonetheless now sees himself as “older” (Line 8), he emphatically recognizes that his perception of “old” has changed (Lines 4–6). That is, although he no longer views 70 as “so old,” he admits that he actually does view himself as “older.” Not only has his perspective of old age changed, but so has his self-recognition, which he shows through his description of looking at himself in the mirror. Though admitting the disappearance of his 19-year-old self might be expected to be problematic, Henry presents untroubled affective stances as he attributes the disappearance of his 19-year-old self to his own “acceptance” and “being comfortable with oneself.” The aged identity Henry presents here is confident, accomplished by his positive affective stance-taking in Lines 15 and 16 as he reads his image in the mirror as no longer being young.

In contrast to Example 6.1, in which Henry presents himself as having accepted his shift into older age, his subsequent narrative demonstrates that this acceptance was an unsteady process for him. In Example 6.2, shortly after the excerpt presented in Example

6.1,[34] Henry narrates the first time he realized that others had begun to read him as older, framing this realization as something with which he had to grapple. His narration of the moment when this process began is characterized by his affective stance of indignation and epistemic stance of epiphany.

Example 6.2 “Darn I’m beginning to look old enough to be a grandfather”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Henry:	I remember about uh
2		it must have been
3		eleven years ago my sister’s granddaughter was born
4		and uh I went to Belk’s to get her a baby gift
5		and the woma:n=
6		=she was wrapping it
7		she said “↑oh for your grand-”
8		you know
9		“for your grandchild?”
10		I realized **then** that I-
11		I said “no. my sister’s”
12		and I was °kind of uh irritated at first
13		but that doesn’t bother me anymore.
14		the girls (.)
15		Susan has been asked if she was their grandmother=
16		=and I’ve been asked if I was their grandfather
17		and uh
18		assume=
19		=you know people assume that that’s the case
20		it doesn’t bother me at all.
21		now.
22	Susan:	it’s fine.
23	Henry:	yeah just **fine**.
24	Julia:	but just the ↑first time it happened?
25	Henry:	the first time at Belk’s eleven years ago
26		when Kory was born
27		yeah that
28		that ↑(was a little bit of you know)=
29		=<@ (darn [$_1$I’m~beginning~to~**look**~it) @>
30	Susan:	[$_{1<}$@ (5.6) @>$_1$]
31	Julia:	[$_1$<@ (5) @>$_2$]]
32	Henry:	I didn’t realize
33		I realized that
34	Susan:	that if you had a grandchild
35		then that <@ would have been @>

---

[34] Examples 6.1 and 6.2 were separated by a story from Susan, which I present and discuss in Examples 6.6 and 6.7.

36 Henry: yeah.
37 I'm beginning to [$_2$look old enough to be a grandfather$_2$]
38 Susan: [$_2$the same age$_2$]
39 [$_3$of course$_3$]
40 Henry: [$_3$yeah$_3$]

The contrast between Examples 6.1 and 6.2 highlights the ways in which Henry's aging up narrative constructs self-recognition and acceptance of aging as a process. Henry explains that it was difficult to have age read onto his body ("she said 'oh grandchild?'" Lines 7 and 9) before he had realized that he looked older ("I didn't realize- I realized that…I'm beginning to look old enough to be a grandfather," Lines 32–33 and 37). Here, being falsely recognized as a grandfather was problematic not because Henry wasn't a grandfather—he still isn't—but because it meant that age was written on his body in a way that did not coincide with the image he saw in the mirror. The contrast in Henry's affective stances toward being identified as a grandfather eleven years ago ("I was kind of irritated," Line 12) and now ("that doesn't bother me anymore," Line 13 and repeated, "it doesn't bother me at all now," Lines 20–21) depicts being older as a dimension of his identity with which he used to grapple but no longer does. As in Example 6.1, his image in the mirror has come to match the age both he and others read onto him.

These narratives indicate the mutability of older age as a category as well as its negotiation by self and others; though an individual might view himself as not being old, this self-image can be disrupted by someone else's reading signs of a certain age onto his body. It is interesting to note that for Henry, the problematic age category was not necessarily "older," but rather "grandfather." Henry's rejection of this label seemed to have two sources: first, a disjuncture between how he viewed himself and how others viewed him; and second, an understanding of what it means to "look old enough to be a grandfather" based on the ideology of aging as decline. Through these two examples, Henry constructed recognizing his status as an older person as a process with which he grappled before reaching acceptance. His eventual accepting affective stances toward his older identity implicitly positively values older identities.

6.1.2 Joining older age

In contrast to Henry's aging up narrative, which portrays him as having accepted his older age after a difficult process, other young-old members told stories in which they were still in the process of recognizing themselves as older. A second genre of the aging up narrative depicted the decision to join the senior center as a step that brought these participants closer to recognizing themselves as older, though this acceptance was not without ambivalence and struggle. These narratives were told to me in interviews, sessions of Story Collective, and other occasions when I talked to young-old members of the Andrus Center. Across the numerous times I heard these narratives, I noticed that they followed similar patterns and usually had four distinct parts. First, speakers reported the first time they encountered or heard about the senior center. Second, they recalled rejecting the notion of a senior center, because they were not ready to identify as an older person. Third, they reported an experience in which they tried out the senior center and realized that its opportunities were both numerous and agreeable. Finally, they revealed that they still do not identify as an old person, though they have found the Andrus Center to be a place where they enjoy going.

Through these narratives, members such as Leah, whose narrative is shown below in Examples 6.3 and 6.4, depict joining the senior center as a decision with which they wrestled because of its potentially problematic ideological implications for their age identities. Leah, 63, told her narrative in a session of Story Collective after Birdie narrated an experience in her forties when she first discovered that senior centers are places for older people to socialize and be active. Leah began her narrative by describing her ambivalent affective stance, or having “mixed feelings about it.”

Example 6.3 “I don’t like…identifying with a bunch of old people”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Leah:	↑I have mixed feelings about it.
2		I’m not a joiner
3		I °**hate**
4		joining and identifying with groups=
5		=I will contribute to a cause
6		that I think is good
7		and I think any cause that encourages people maybe even disabled people
8		to be active
9		to have interests=
10		=to use their minds=
11		not get (.) to be a bunch of frogs sitting on a rock
12		is a good idea
13		and I had known about the senior center for a while
14		(I had thought) ↑senior center ↓mm.
15		and then a friend started coming to tai chi classes here
16		so I knew they offered classes
17		and
18		I guess it was last year?
19		I was looking for classes
20		I thought I’d like to do some classes.
21		[[omitted lines]]
22		so then I thought
23		we:ll I know the senior center offers classes
24		and they’re pretty cheap.
25		so I looked into it
26		and I found some I liked
27		so I started coming.
28		I kind of (.) am of the feeling with some other people
29		you know
30		I don’t like viewing myself
31		although I know I'm an old fart
32		I don’t like viewing myself as one
33		you know identifying with a bunch of **old** (1.5) people
34		because in my mind I’m still not that age.
35		but on the other hand
36		I **deplore** the fact that the healthcare system does not specialize in geriatric care
37		[[omitted lines]]
38		I **don’t** find older people to be as flexible.

39 in in their attitudes as young people
40 Birdie: on what level
41 Leah: uh
42 (1.8)
43 they're set in their ways
44 and I am too in some cases=
45 but I try to keep an open mind
46 about you know
47 maybe not everything is black and white
48 there's a lot of grey
49 a lot of color
50 and I find
51 I mean I have become part of that generation
52 in the fact that I am not shy about stating my opinion

Leah's aging up narrative demonstrates a shift from negative to positive affective stances toward the center, though she maintains a negative affective stance toward her own identity as an older person. Her positive stances toward the center are rooted in the benefits she and others have received from the center: it is a resource for older people "to be active, to have interests, to use their minds" (Lines 8–10), opportunities that older people did not get from other resources such as the healthcare system (Line 36).[35] A consistent member of the Spanish, tai chi, Story Collective, and balance classes at the center, Leah's reluctance to join groups or identify as an old person did not preclude her consistent participation at the center during the three years in which I spent time there. Yet, as the end of this narrative shows, Leah insists that she as well as "some other people" rejects the idea that they are old. While she takes a knowledgeable epistemic stance toward her age categorization ("although I know I'm an old fart," Line 31), she affectively rejects this classification ("I don't like viewing myself as one, you know identifying with a bunch of old people," Lines 32–33). Through these stances and referential labels, Leah assigns older identities negative values, reproducing common ideologies of aging.

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[35] Leah's narrative led into a further discussion of the ways in which the modern American medical system fails in its attempts at "geriatric care," a lament I heard frequently at the center, Members across several groups rued the medicalization of old age, disliking the many medications they were given and the sense that they were ignored by medical practitioners.

Both Henry's initial rejection of his older age identity (shown in Example 6.2) and Leah's resistance to being grouped with old people are based on ideologies of aging as decline described in detail in Chapter 4; while Henry's is connected to physical decline, Leah's is linked to social decline.[36] Leah explains her negative perception of older people as inflexible and "set in their ways" (Line 43). While she does acknowledge, "I have become part of that generation in that I am not shy about stating my opinion," she maintains that she is different from her conception of old people because she does "try to keep an open mind" (Line 45). However, several minutes later, Leah's narrative continued to illustrate her "mixed feelings" toward aging by describing her first realization that older people were not as narrow-minded and closed off from new experiences as she had previously thought.

Example 6.4 "Older groups do have people who are open-minded"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Leah:	I didn't know they existed either =
2		=until they invited me to come give a talk
3		on (.) my field
4		and they were
5		**if anything**
6		**more** interested
7		more **eager**
8		than the schoolchildren
9		to touch the artifacts
10		and a:sk questions
11		and they were quick on making associations
12		they had life experience
13		they knew how to make connections

---

[36] As Leah's narrative shows, the ideology of aging as decline manifested in forms of social and emotional decline. Older people were depicted as more isolated and afraid as well as less articulate and flexible.

14 among things
15 Birdie: **we** have life experiences
16 Leah: **yes**
17 and I just adored
18 that was probably the turning point
19 in my idea of how older groups
20 **do** have (.) folks who are wiling to be open-minded=
21 =who are eager to learn
22 who are still thinking (.) young
23 who are getting up
24 I mean-
25 some of these people were in wheelchairs
26 but their minds were just
27 and that's what I feel like is=
28 =you know
29 I have mixed feelings about getting older
30 I don't want to be trapped with a good mind (in my body)

While Leah remained ambivalent toward her own aging, in this second part of her aging up narrative, she tentatively assigns positive value to getting older as she reflects on a time when she first encountered members of a senior center. In this narrative she also demonstrates a shift in affective stances toward older people as her epistemic stance changed from ignorant (Line 1) to knowledgeable (Lines 2–14). That is, Leah's experience with older people taught her that her stereotypes of them had been erroneous and offered her a "turning point" in how she viewed them (Line 18). Her encounter with a particular group of older people demonstrated the diversity that is inherent but relatively unrecognized in older age, particularly in an institutional setting like the Andrus Center. Leah's narrative, therefore, also exhibits a changing perspective of older age: while some older people are undoubtedly close-minded and resistant to new experiences, the wide variety of older identities mean that some inevitably "are still thinking young" (Line 22), as Leah admiringly observed.

Though Leah had not embraced identifying as an older person, through her narrative she demonstrated the process by which she was beginning to accept her status as an older person. Other participants' narratives of joining the Andrus Center reflected these shifts from negative to positive affective stances as a result of having positive experiences with older people and at senior centers. From this, it might be concluded that crossing this age boundary, while initially resisted, is a process that members like Leah came to gradually over multiple favorable experiences with older people who successfully modeled a positive version of aging that contradicted images according to an ideology of decline. Joining a senior center, then, is one possible avenue for older people to negotiate this transition into the category of older age.

6.2 AGE CO-CONSTRUCTION

In contrast to the aging up narrative, in which participants positioned their present selves in relation to their past selves to construct a young-old age identity, age co-construction relied on the relational positioning of individuals at the center to construct age identity. A key component of this second genre of age-talk involved participants explicitly eliciting and disclosing information about their chronological ages, allowing speakers to categorize themselves and others based on these year-marked categories. In the Story Collective group, for example, participants almost always disclosed their ages when they introduced themselves; when they did not, their ages usually came up later in conversation.[37] In response to such age disclosures, long stretches of age co-construction sometimes emerged as a relational activity in which both the status and value of co-participants' ages were collaboratively negotiated via sequentially occurring speech acts. As Example 6.5 highlights, this genre was an important and commonly used resource for performing acts of adequation and distinction (Bucholtz & Hall 2004), highlighting members' sameness or differences, and for performing acts of evaluation. It was performed not merely by announcing age but also through various stance-taking moves that the age identities and their values emerged through the course of an interaction.

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[37] By the time I conducted interviews with some of my participants, I already knew most of their ages or birth years from other conversational contexts; though I did ask their ages in interviews as part of collecting demographic information, this question ended up being largely unnecessary.

The interaction in Example 6.5 took place during a meeting of an informal Spanish conversation group[38] at the Andrus Center. Shortly after we had convened one Thursday morning in April 2014, the participants began discussing their ages in English after Meryl realized she had grown up in the same town as Katie's husband.

Example 6.5 "And now everybody's telling their age"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Meryl:	I graduated from high school in fifty-↓**n:ine**
2	Katie:	↑oh:
3	Lib:	so did [$_1$**I**$_1$]
4	Meryl:	[$_1$I'm **old**$_1$]
5	Lib:	so did **I**
6	Meryl:	[$_2$<@ (1.2) @>$_2$]
7	Katie:	[$_2$I had **no** idea: $_2$]
8		yeah I I-
9		(you [$_3$don't)$_3$]
10	Lib:	[$_3$you **knew**.$_3$]
11		[$_4$@ @
12	Meryl:	[$_4$@ @
13	Katie	you to:ld me @ @
14		<@ I did not @>
15	Meryl:	@ @
16	Katie:	I was **stunned** when you first told me
17		@ @
18		[[omitted lines]]
19	Rosalie:	**I** left school in nineteen **fifty** @ @
20	Leah:	I was ↑born that year.
21		nineteen fifty
22	Rosalie:	↑were you?
18		(you're a baby)
19		[[omitted lines]]
20	Katie:	and now everybody's telling °their age

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[38] As the teacher of the Spanish grammar classes, I was asked by members of the advanced Spanish class to facilitate a loosely organized Spanish conversation group when our formal classes were on hiatus between terms.

21	Rosalie:	we **know** our ages=
22		=you're a baby
23	Katie:	[$_5$@ @$_5$]
24	Leah:	[$_5$yeah you're the youngest$_5$]
25	Rosalie:	[$_6$oh: **you're** a baby$_6$]
26	Katie:	[$_6$am I?$_6$]
27	Rosalie:	[$_7$she's a baby too$_7$]
28	Katie:	[$_7$how$_7$] [$_8$old are you$_8$]
29	Leah:	[$_8$you're under sixty aren't you$_8$]
30	Katie:	**no:**
31		I-
32		but tha:nk [$_9$you$_9$]
33	Rosalie:	[$_9$you're over sixty?$_9$]
34	Katie:	yes.
35		sixty-three:
36	Rosalie	oh you're over sixty=
37	Meryl:	=well you're a [$_{10}$baby @ @$_{10}$]
38	Rosalie:	[$_{10}$but you're not sixty-**five**$_{10}$]
39	Katie:	@ @
40	Leah:	I'm her age.
41		@ @
42	Rosalie:	are you?
43	Lib:	that's ten years
44		from my birthday is ten
45		you're ten **years** younger than I am
46	Katie:	you'll be seventy-three:?
47	Lib:	mmhmm
48	Katie:	[$_{11}$I thought you'd be seventy-two$_{11}$]
49	Rosalie:	[$_{11}$really$_{11}$]
50	Meryl:	I'll be [$_{12}$seventy-two in (July)$_{12}$]
51	Rosalie:	[$_{12}$we missed a year$_{12}$]
52		I remember when she was
53		**I'll** be seventy-**ni:ne**
54	Leah:	(you and I are the same age)? @ @
55	Katie	mmhmm
56		[$_{13}$yes @ @$_{13}$]
57	Lib:	[$_{13}$ you will$_{13}$]
58	Meryl:	will you really?
59	Katie:	we're the **ba:bies**
60	Lib:	you've got one more year of grace
61	Meryl:	okay you win @ @
62		you win
63	Katie:	we tie

Though participants often self-disclosed their ages, this act was often the starting point for these other, more evaluative strategies. *Self-disclosing* age—announcing one's age without others eliciting it—was a strategy commonly used, as Meryl (Lines 1 and 50), Rosalie (Line 53), and Leah (Line 54) illustrate. While this episode of age co-construction lasted longer than other excerpts in my data, it demonstrates that there are many ways in which age identity is performed, not merely by naming a number or placing in a category. Throughout this excerpt, Katie, Meryl, Lib, Rosalie, and Leah use several strategies in addition to self-disclosure to construct their age identities and relate to each other through the lens of age: *guessing, questioning, challenging, comparing, judging,* and *labeling.*

The acts of *guessing* and *questioning* became moments in which participants compared their perceptions of others' age identities with their chronological ages. For example, when Leah asks Katie, "you're under sixty aren't you?" (Line 29), she does more than just elicit Katie's age identity; she also positively evaluates Katie's appearance by guessing that she is younger than her chronological age. Katie's reaction, "no but thank you" (Lines 30 and 32) illustrates that appearing younger is taken up as a favorable evaluation. Questioning someone's disclosure of age was also an act of evaluating his or her trajectory through the aging process. For example, when Lib and Meryl ask Rosalie, "you will?" and "will you really?" (Lines 56 and 57, respectively) after Rosalie discloses that she would turn 79 that year (Line 53), their disbelief implies that they had thought she was younger, favorably evaluating her aging. Though the acts of guessing and questioning might appear simply to be forms of factual exchange, they were ways for participants to implicitly evaluate each others' aging processes, as they required speakers to interpret the physical and behavioral evidence of aging and to compare it with chronological age.

Another way participants evaluated the age disclosures of their interlocutors was through moments in which age was not simply presented and received as fact; rather, it became open for negotiation. They *challenged* the age revelation, as when Rosalie tells Katie, "you're over sixty but not over sixty-five" (Lines 36 and 38), placing emphasis on the number "five" to draw contrast between the two ages.[39] Rosalie's challenge to Katie's age disclosure acknowledges that though Katie was "older," she had not yet reached a more important milestone age, thus negotiating the relative importance of turning 60. Participants also used age disclosures as moments for *comparing* their own age with those of their interlocutors, as a form of distinction (Bucholtz & Hall 2004) such as when Lib tells Katie and Leah "you're ten years younger than I am" (Line 45), or as a form of adequation (Bucholtz & Hall 2004) like when Katie informs Leah "we tie" (Line 63). Through these discursive moves of similarity and difference, participants established a hierarchy of ages, making significant the relativity of their ages.

Finally, participants *judged* one another by taking evaluative stances towards to others' ages that invoked value-laden ideologies of aging. For example, when Lib tells Rosalie, "you've got one more year of grace" (Line 60) after finding out that Rosalie was 79, she seems to imply that 80 would be a landmark birthday with negative implications. These participants also judged others' ages by *labeling*, as when Meryl reveals that she had graduated in 1959, and then explicitly and laughingly labels and evaluates her own age ("I'm old," Line 4). Though her use of the term "old" might have negative connotations for others, for her, the laughter seemed to assign it a neutral if not positive value. A second age-related term, “baby” is used when Meryl and Rosalie each tell Leah and Katie, “you’re a baby” (Lines 37 and 22, respectively). This term, “baby,”[40] might in other circumstances have negative connotations such as naïveté or inexperience, but when it was used by center members, as it often was, it was usually the basis for a moment of shared humor about age.[41]

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[39] Rosalie's emphasis implied that 60 is a less significant age than 65, likely because turning 65 is socially seen as a watershed in terms of age; since the 1940s it has historically been the age at which individuals in America have been able to collect government retirement benefits.

Importantly, Example 6.5 demonstrates a history of age co-construction; it appears that participants had previously talked about age together. In Line 16, Katie reports being “stunned” when Lib had previously disclosed her age demonstrating that previous self-disclosure and evaluation of age had taken place. When Rosalie says, “we know our ages” (Line 21), she takes a knowledgeable epistemic stance toward the ages of the present speakers. Furthermore, when Rosalie says “we missed a year” because both she and Katie thought Lib was 72 when she had already turned 73, she implies that they both had already known and kept track of Lib’s age.

In this community, the genre of age co-construction was an everyday genre for social differentiation and identification that involved various kinds of sequential strategies of collaborative age positioning and invoked ideologies of age. Although according to institutional definition as well as from the perspective of outsiders, these members ostensibly belonged to a shared age class, the frequent use of this genre indicated that age was the primary feature of identity by which members organized themselves socially and relationally. Moreover, constructing one's age identity was often more complex than simply announcing one's age and having it accepted as fact by interlocutors. Through their use of age co-construction as a genre, members of the center negotiated and evaluated the meanings of their relative ages, processes through which the speakers collectively made sense of what the boundaries of age meant within this particular social context and relative to broader ideologies of aging.

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[40] It is noteworthy that at the very end of this interaction (after Line 61), Leah attempted to include me in their age-talk by referring to me with the term “baby,” a classification that Katie jokingly rejected by discounting my relevance to the conversation: “we didn’t even count you, you’re so young.”

[41] For example, during a Story Collective session, when Joyce, who was 72, told Dana, 60, “You’re a baby,” and Gloria, 76, agreed, Dana self-deprecatingly responded by joking about her physique, “Yeah and this is my baby fat.” As Barbara, Joyce, Gloria, and I laughed, Dana explained, “Because when I was growing up they kept saying, ‘This is your baby fat. You’ll grow out of it.’ Sixty years later I’m still waiting to grow out of my baby fat.” Because Dana responded within a play frame, it implies that she did interpret Joyce’s use of the term “baby” as also within a play frame. Her interlocutors’ uptake of her joke with loud, lasting laughter also indicates that they interpreted her comment as a form of word play rather than a genuine critique of her physical body.

6.3 STEREOTYPE ALIGNMENT AND DISALIGNMENT

In addition to negotiating and evaluating the meanings of age relative other individuals in their community, participants did so by positioning themselves in relation to other social groups through the genre of stereotype alignment and disalignment. Through this genre, participants identified and evaluated older stereotypes who they resisted becoming (disalignment) or aspired to become (alignment). In particular, by taking affective stances that positioned them relative to other age groups imagined at two ends of the age spectrum—between non-old (or younger) and old-old people—member carved out a meaningful category within old age to identify with: young-old. Though many of my participants acknowledged that they were older, they did not identify as "old" and emphasized the distinction between young-old and old-old to construct their age identities (cf. Hurd (1999) whose participants distinguished between "old" and "not old").

In gerontology, the terms “young-old” and “old-old” (credited to Neugarten 1974 by Baltes & Smith 2003) generally correspond to the “third age” and “fourth age” (Laslett 1991, cited by Baltes & Smith 2003), which are characterized by a difference in wellness: “young-old referred to the part of a life course in which an individual was still ‘doing well’, while old-old was characterised by losses” (Bülow & Söderqvist 2014:146). Gerontology literature defines these life stages for populations in developed countries in terms of chronological age: the young-old period ends between 75 and 80 or between 80 and 85, according to a population-based definition, and between 60 and 90, following an individual-based definition (Baltes & Smith 2003:125). Although there is wide variation regarding at what chronological age people transition from young-old to old-old, the definitions of these categories are relatively fixed; this shift is “characterized by a focus either on a predominantly positive versus negative view of the future potential to sustain and improve life quality during the period of old age” (Baltes & Smith 2003:125).

My participants had similar definitions for the chronological age at which people become move from “young-old” to “old-old”: between 80 and 85 or 85 and 90. However, in contrast to gerontological definitions, the young-old category did not refer to a fixed age range for members of the center, given that they produced this category primarily through its relative contrast to old-old people. Drawing on the genre of stereotype alignment and disalignment, participants drew distinctions between young-old and old-old in according to two different sets of values, demonstrating that age was not necessarily distinguished by decades, but in terms of fractally recursive binaries (Irvine & Gal 2000) of differentiation. That is, the oppositions that were produced on one level of social structure were reproduced at other levels; the stances that young people took toward old people were replicated in the stances that young-old people took toward old-old people. In so doing, these young-old speakers constructed a liminal space that mediated the ideologically weighted expectations and norms of their age category. Examples 6.6 and 6.7 examine moments in which participants engaged with the practice of age categorization and shows the tension between the ways in which these younger-old members resisted being stereotyped as old by younger people and the negative ways in which they stereotyped old-old people as objects of aging. Examples 6.7, 6.8, and 6.9 look at a similar process from a more positive light in moments of inspiring aging; young-old members reported trying to set an example of lighthearted aging for the younger people with whom they came into contact in addition to picking out models of aging, the old-old members of the center who inspired them to age well.

6.3.1 Stereotype disalignment

The genre of stereotype disalignment often emerged when participants reported intergenerational interactions that highlighted age categorization—the discursive practice by which the negative qualities of older age are highlighted and determinative of how older people are treated. Age categorization identifies and evaluates older people according to the features of old age that rely on the ideology of decline (see Chapter 4). In this section, I analyze two narratives of age categorization told by Henry's wife, Susan, who was 68; these narratives feature, first, moments in which Susan recounted being classified as old by younger people and, second, moments in which she negatively categorized others as old-old. In both narratives, Susan identifies and evaluates older stereotypes who she avoids becoming.

When speakers talked about experiences with younger people, either those with whom they had specific interactions or young people more generally, they reported being stereotyped negatively. My participants described becoming the objects of “reading age,”[42] or processes of age categorization that were rooted in the negative ideology of aging as decline, and resisting being judged as physically incapable because they were read as “older.” During my interview with Henry and Susan, she narrated a time she felt read as old by a younger person during a recent kayaking excursion. Before the start of the excerpt shown in Example 6.6, Susan explains that at the start of the trip, their guides asked the customers to help unload and carry the kayaks.

Example 6.6 “They…look at your grey hair and go, ‘You need some help here’”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Susan:	and it’s kind of like
2		↑“can you manage that?”
3		<@ you know @>
4		<@ I’m picking up kayaks @>
5		and you know they’re
6		somebody **young** is trying to you know help me out of the kayak
7		and it’s like °“okay I can handle this”
8		<@ (2.7) @>
9	Julia:	@ @
10		so do you feel like that happens a lot?
11	Susan:	no:?
12		not a huge amount=
13		but just there are times when it happens=
14		=you know they kind of look at your gray hair and go
15		[((makes condescending face with raised eyebrows and tipped head))
16	Julia:	[@ @
17	Susan:	“you need some help here?”
18		@ @ “okay I'm still moving”
19		“I have no ca:ne”
20	Julia:	@ @

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[42] The term “reading age” is adapted from Chun’s (2011) term, “reading race,” which refers to a type of racialization practices that “entails the assignment of racial meanings to cultural signs that might have been read in other ways. By naming the world with race terms, speakers designate the axis of race as central to its logic” (404).

This brief narrative, in which Susan describes being offered help (Line 6) and asked "can you manage that?" (Line 2) by a younger person, becomes a moment for her to resist age categorization ("'it's okay I can handle this,'" Line 7). This narrative highlights the tension between how an older individual assesses physical abilities and how the semiotics of physical decline are read onto the body according to the age of the observer. Susan seems to imply that gray hair, while a marker of age, should not be a sign of disability. While it appears that gray hair functions as a symbol of decline to her younger interlocutors, other physical signs (e.g., a cane and lack of movement) must be present for Susan to read disability, and therefore old age, onto bodies. Her resistance to being stereotyped as old, a form of disalignment from older and ostensibly less able people, therefore, results from having decline read onto her body in a way that contrasted with how she herself perceived (and later described) it—as "active."

For other participants, this type of resistance was framed as a educational moment in which they could help younger people abandon their stereotypes of older people. Meryl, a former theater instructor, used her interactions with her college-aged students to disrupt their mistaken understandings of age categories. Meryl recalled that when her students "play[ed] someone who's fifty or older" they would "want to play them with a waver in the voice." As she described how her students performed oldness, Meryl acted it out for me: she stood up from the couch, hunched her back and shoulders, mimed gripping a cane, and spoke using a slow speed and creaky voice. Faced with this form of negative stereotyping, Meryl's teaching became a way to fight against younger people stereotyping older people according to the ideology of aging as decline: "And I have to say, 'Look around you. How old is your grandmother? Does she walk like that? Does she talk like that?'" Concluding her narrative, she noted that "young people tend to stereotype old people more than older people do." Yet, as Example 6.7, below, illustrates, in my conversations with members at the center, young-old people often stereotyped old-old people, thus reproducing the very same discourses they resisted.

Though they resisted being stereotyped by non-old people, members frequently disaligned with old-old people by stereotyping them as other. For example, as we were walking into the Story Collective room one Thursday morning, Ella, 65, explained in terms of age why she went to the earlier of two exercise classes at the Andrus Center: "That's the old people's class. We're in the young people's class." Because aging was so often seen as a form of decline, in the context of her exercise class, her use of the term "old people" connotes diminished physical abilities; her use of the term "young people" and the first person pronoun "we" refer to her relative youth and distinguish her from the old people. Similarly, in an interview I conducted with Susan, 68, and her husband, Henry, 69, Susan expounded on the idea that age is relative. She explained that age is "not just one feeling" but "it changes depending on what's going on" and "so it's like who you're with and what you're doing." As an illustration of this concept, shown in Example 6.7, she described going to the grocery store on "senior day,"[43] categorizing "old-old people"[44] according to their presumed physical decline.

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[43] Many grocery stores (as well as other businesses) in Fairview and other cities across the United States offer "senior day," a day in the middle of the week (often Wednesday) on which they offer people older than 65 a 5–10 percent discount.

[44] When I later asked Susan and Henry what age they considered to be "old-old," they answered, "eighty-five, ninety" and "eighty-five plus, definitely late eighties," respectively.

Example 6.7 “We want to get there before the old-old people”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Susan:	we tease about when we go to the grocery store on senior day?
2		and you know we want to get there before the °↑old-old people?
3		<@ (1.0) @>
4	Julia:	<@ (1.4) @>
5	Susan:	because they're clogging up the [**ai:sles**]
6	Julia:	[<@ (1.4) @>]
7	Susan:	they’re moving so: slow:
8		and
9		they're asking you to read <@ labels for them @>
10		[<@ (3.2) @>]
11	Henry:	[yeah]
12		we consider ourselves a **young**-old
13		we’re not (the) **old**-old

“Senior day” at the grocery store for Susan and Henry becomes an opportunity to joke about avoiding interactions with older people from whom they disalign. While elsewhere in the interview, Susan had accepted her status as an older person, the picture she paints shows the old-old as dependent on and burdensome to those who are younger, reflecting the ideology of time as decline (discussed in Chapter 4). While she frames this anecdote playfully (Line 1), her negative avoidant stance toward old-old people and their physical disabilities serves to draw a line between herself and other seniors (“we want to get there before the old-old people,” Line 2). Characterizing the old-old as the other, she implies that she and Henry are not that type of old; they are not the ones who are “clogging up the aisles,” “moving so slow,” and “asking you to read labels for them” (Lines 5, 7, and 9). Henry’s self-classification in Lines 12 and 13 as “young-old” rather than “old-old” was echoed by other participants at the center. Members of a wide variety of ages engaged with this metapragmatic ordering of bodies according to age and decline. For example, Rosalie, 79, metapragmatically noted that, despite being almost 80 herself, she “still talk[s] about old ladies” and when she sees someone she perceives to be old, she thinks, “oh that poor old lady.”[45] Stereotyping older people as physically limited, that is, invoking an ideology of aging as decline, thus became a strategy of disalignment between my young-old participants and the old-old people with whom they came into contact.

6.3.2 Stereotype alignment

Yet participants did not always disalign with older stereotypes, and in some cases, they used a stereotype *alignment* genre to invoke older stereotypes who acted as an inspirational ager for younger people. The following examples demonstrate, respectively, that young-old members positioned themselves as models of aging for younger people and constructed old-old members of the center as models for their own aging. While the examples in this section could also be read as members’ alignment with discourses of successful aging (see Chapter 4), in my analysis I focus on the ways in which aging well is framed not just in terms of its physicality; rather, in their commentary, these speakers focus on the attitude and mental perspective that they admire and emulate as well as seek to exemplify for younger others.

While they objected to being stereotyped negatively by younger people, my participants were willing to take on the role of ambassadors of aging, a stereotype of a successful ager. Through their willingness to talk about aging positively with younger people, they hoped they could take some of the trepidation of aging away. Birdie, for example, aligned with this stereotype when she described taking on the role of an ambassador of aging to her own milestone fiftieth birthday: “When I turned fifty, I said…'I owe it to younger people to say age is not a dread(ed) disease.' And so I started telling people how old I am. . . so they feel good about getting older." She similarly modeled a positive outlook on aging in the context of Story Collective (in addition to in our later interview) as she explained that she did not mind a new scar she had developed after a recent fall. She compared herself to hickory nut cookies from her childhood: "When I'm old I want to be wrinkled and chewy and sweet and brown and a few nuts thrown in…like the refrigerator cookies that my grandmother used to make." Birdie uses the metaphor of cookies, an object of which she has fond memories, to take a positive affective stance toward characteristics of old age that might normally be seen as problematic (e.g., wrinkled, nutty) along with its more positive characteristics (e.g., sweet, chewy). Her scar forming a new wrinkle on her forehead was thus contextualized as part of her aging process, which she positioned herself as looking forward to, like one would a good cookie. By reframing negative aspects of aging (e.g., wrinkles, injurious falls) as a step on her positive aging journey, Birdie thus embodied this ambassador of aging role, aligning with the stereotype of a person who has maintained a positive attitude toward aging.

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[45] In the same interview, however, Rosalie spoke of needing to change how she thought about her own age, as she approached turning 80: “but now I have to think you know I’m definitely getting into that age group, eighty. And I’m definitely a geriatric.” Similarly to the way Henry talked about aging up (Examples 1 and 2), Rosalie implied that transitioning between young-old and old-old was also an affective and philosophical endeavor.

Likewise, Meryl both modeled and commented on this ambassador of aging role during our interview. I had asked her to describe a stereotypical older person; her answer ("I'm not sure there is a stereotypical older person although there is one that exists in popular culture and in people's minds") led her to tell me a narrative, shown in Example 6.8, about a time when she became and was recognized as an ambassador of aging to her college students.

Example 6.8 “[You] totally changed my attitude about aging”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Meryl:	but I have never been secretive about my a:ge=
2		=even with students
3		and I might have told you this story?
4		I was
5		(2.5)
6		in (.) in class one day and one of my students said “can we ask you something”
7		and I said “you can ask I may not answer but”
8		and she said “↑how old are you?”
9		and so I told her.
10		and at the time it was like (.) sixty-ni:ne.
11		at the end of that-
12		and everybody just went ↑“oh really God”
13		and at the end of that semester on her (.)course evaluation
14		she wrote
15		“the thing that I will remember most from this class is that you told us your age”
16		“and that it totally changed my attitude toward aging”
17		“I would have thought that a person your age would have been really really **old**”
18		“and now I <@ know that you can continue to be active and youthful at that age @>”
19		@ @ and so I thought
20		“okay good.”

Meryl presents herself as an ambassador of aging in two ways. First, she notes that she did not hesitate to disclose her age, contradicting the social axiom that older women do not tell and should not be asked their ages, as presupposed by Meryl as she notes in Line 1, “I have never been secretive about my age.” This cultural expectation relies on the ideology of aging as decline because it treats older age as something to be ashamed of; Meryl’s refusal to follow it is one way she models a fearless and unabashed stance toward aging. By the end of the narrative, this choice is framed as a positive decision in service of becoming a model of aging: her age disclosure, indicating that she was not embarrassed of her age, had a lasting effect on her students (Lines 15–16). Second, Meryl illustrates how she encouraged a more positive understanding of what it meant to be almost 70, indicated by her students’ surprised reactions to her age disclosure (“and everybody just went ‘oh really God,’ Line 12; “I would have thought that a person your age would have been really really old," Line 16). Their reported response indicates that chronological age typically, has different meanings (e.g., inactivity, decrepitude) to college students than it might to people who are actually almost 70, yet such meanings can change, as Meryl's student admitted in her course evaluation: "it totally changed my attitude toward aging" (Line 15). The positive stance reportedly adopted by this student constructs Meryl as an example of successful aging ("you can continue to be active and youthful at that age," Line 17).

In addition to constructing themselves as models of aging for younger people, new-old members sometimes looked to older members of the center as inspirational agers. These inspirational agers were the oldest-old members who became celebrated by other center members. Because classes at the center were not segregated by age, the oldest-old members often took classes with the younger members and were recognized and revered for their advanced age and positive attitude. In particular, one of the oldest-old members of the center appeared to be the best known within the center for both her age and vitality; at 95, Miss Eve[46] came to the center several times each week and participated in exercise and, occasionally, educational classes. Miss Eve came up in conversation among several groups I observed at the center. Example 6.9 illustrates how three members of a Story Collective session in January 2014 aligned with Miss Eve. In this example, after I had noted that "one of the women is ninety-five" in my Spanish class in reference to Eve, Joyce picked up the topic and her interlocutors followed suit.

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[46] Some of the older female members at the center were accorded the Southern honorific title "Miss (first name)." During one Story Collective session, Leah pointed out the pragmatics of this naming practice: "Like now we'll say Miss [Eve] around here. It's a mark of respect for an older lady. And when I heard people using it here I thought, 'Isn't that interesting? A bunch of older people. And we still will call the oldest among us by some honorific.' But that's a Southernism I think."

Example 6.9 “The lady who’s ninety-five is Miss Eve, right?”

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Joyce:	the lady who’s ninety-five that’s Miss Eve right
2	Julia:	mmhmm
3	Joyce:	she takes tai chi and qi gong too
4	Julia:	[$_1$o:h yeah
5	Birdie:	[$_1$(and yoga)$_1$]
6	Joyce:	[$_1$and Pilates$_1$]
7	Barbara:	and [$_2$yoga$_2$]
8	Joyce:	[$_2$Pilates I think=$_2$]
9		=she does all of it
10	Julia:	she’s so active
11	Joyce:	yes she is
12		very inspiring
13	Birdie:	she’s so beautiful
14	Joyce:	mmhmm
15	Barbara:	she’s done yoga for thirty years
16	Julia:	wow
17	Barbara:	she comes in with her wa:lker
18	Joyce:	mmhmm mmhmm
19	Barbara:	she’s amazing

As a group, Joyce, Barbara, and Birdie positively evaluate and align with Miss Eve. In Line 1, when Joyce introduces this conversation topic, her question directly links Miss Eve and her age. Three of the five present speakers[47] then collaboratively list her activities at the Center in Lines 3, 5, 6-8, and Joyce summarizes in Line 9, “she does all of it.” This type of cooperative listing of attributes and activities was common across conversations of this genre. In Line 10, in response to this list, I admiringly summarize, “she’s so active,” prompting participants to similarly engage in positive evaluations and to credit her with influencing them positively. Joyce agrees with my assessment of Miss Eve as active (Line 11), and in Line 12 by calling her “very inspiring,” she takes a positive affective stance toward Miss Eve’s relatively high activity level. Birdie calls her

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[47] Though only three of the five participants (Joyce, Birdie, and Barbara) talked about Miss Eve, it is likely that the other two, Mary and Shirley, did not contribute to this part of the conversation because they had belonged to the center for less than a month while the other three had been members for longer.

"so beautiful" (Line 13), which Joyce agrees with (Line 14). Barbara's three comments in Lines 15, 17, and 19 indicate the extent to which Miss Eve is well-known and admired in this community. Not only does Barbara know Miss Eve's lengthy yoga history (Line 15), she has also observed her bodily habitus around the center (Line 17), and has concluded that Miss Eve is "amazing" (Line 19). This latter part of the excerpt seemed to emphasize Miss Eve's spirit—her persistence with yoga despite having to use a walker—over her actual activity level, and it seems that this inspirational tenacity is what other members at the Andrus Center emphasize in each of these conversations.

In a Life Stories session with Birdie, Leah, and Annie in October 2014 (nine months after the one shown in Example 6.9), Miss Eve again became a model for aging with whom these members aligned. Here, Birdie tells me a "humorous…fantasy" she has for her future if she lives long enough, and shortly thereafter, during a lull in the conversation, I suggest she repeat it to Leah and Annie. This interaction is transcribed in Example 6.10.

Example 6.10 "You know what my dream is?"

Line	*Speaker*	*Text*
1	Birdie:	((to Julia)) you know what my dream is?
2		that when I'm ninety-ni:ne
3		you know I still
4		I have (.) little biceps that I'm proud of
5		there will be a picture of me on the cover of AARP
6		like °this ((gesturing with flexed biceps and smiling))
7		[[omitted lines]]
8	Julia:	((to Birdie)) you should tell them about your dream
9		(3.3)
10	Birdie:	oh yeah
11		I have this (.) k- humorous dream=
12		=a fantasy
13		you know that when I'm ninety-nine?
14		I've still got ((gesturing))
15		<@ ↑they're there @>
16		you can't see them
17		little bumps

18 but I'm beaming at the photographer and I'm
19 on the front cover of AARP ((smiley voice)) @ @
20 all: <@ (4.0) @>
21 Birdie: ↓do you all know
22 uh do you know Eve Arnold?
23 Annie: yeah
24 she is almost ninety-six
25 she is in our balance class
26 she is so cool
27 you know her
28 Julia: [$_1$yeah$_1$]
29 Leah: [$_1$I think she's$_1$] in [$_2$there right now$_2$]
30 Julia: [$_2$she's in yoga right now$_2$]
31 Birdie: she is so cool
32 that's right she takes that

In this conversation, Birdie aligns with the positive model of aging stereotype in two ways: by imagining herself in this role and by constructing Miss Eve as a positive model. Birdie enacts her imagined future in which she is smiling (Line 5) or "beaming" (Line 14) at the photographer, showing off her muscles (Lines 5 and 11), and by being featured on the front cover of the AARP magazine, held up as model for aging for others (Lines 4 and 15). The amusing characteristics of her imagined old age are noteworthy because they are not purely about her physical abilities but rather about her hyperbolically plucky and vibrant persona. In Line 17, by introducing Miss Eve into the conversation, Birdie implies that there is a connection between her spirited future self image and Miss Eve, an example of someone who is widely talked about as an active and engaged 95-year-old. Here, as in Example 6.9, Birdie introduces Miss Eve by her age ("she is almost ninety-six," Line 18), activity ("she is in our balance class," Line 19), and positive attribute ("she is so cool," Line 20), which she repeats. It is interesting to note that, in Lines 21 and 22, Leah and I both are able to comment on Miss Eve's activity at the center at that very moment. Miss Eve's presence at the center was similarly noticed and remarked on by other members, and as she walked down the halls, she was consistently greeted by other members. Eve's mythical status at the Andrus Center connected her age not only with her activity level, but more importantly her lively spirit. When members at the center talked about Eve, they constructed her as a model of aging, positioning themselves as wanting to emulate her, and, as Birdie said, to also be models for aging when they become old-old.

A question that remains is whether the celebration of models of aging such as Miss Eve in fact contests discourses of aging as decline. While it may be argued that the positive evaluation of any older figure serves as ideological contestation, the fact that such admirable figures are identified precisely because of their exceptionality depends on the presupposition of a less admirable image of the "common" older person. This critique has been wielded in the context of mythical figures in popular contexts, for example in discourses about mythical figure Betty White (now 94). In a February 16, 2012 post on *The New York Times'* health blog, "Well," Robert Leleux reflects on his grandmother's experience with Alzheimer's and argues that our expectations for older age need to change as an increasing portion of the population lives to old-old age. Given the reality of this context, he notes the problematic assumptions in the way we talk about mythical figures of aging as a society (Leleux 2012):

> Those seniors who are celebrated, like the divine Betty White, are the exceptions who prove the rule — the Shirley Temples of the senior set, these "precocious" elders are rewarded for continuing to exhibit the characteristics of middle age rather than old age. "They've still got it," it is said of them, "still as sharp as ever."

In a similarly critical vein, a July 5, 2010 post by Paula Span on another *New York Times* blog, "The New Old Age: Caring and Coping,"[48] argues that, though older age often comes with losing one's independence, in America, this loss is resisted because of our orientation to independence and, to some extent the limited ways we do talk about aging in public discourses (Span 2010):

> When we do talk or think about aging, not a favorite activity among the general public, we applaud the astonishing outliers, the silver-haired marathoner, the 90-year-old senator, the 88-year-old Betty White — the ones who don't have to stop doing what they've always done…Here [in America], the ideal is Clint Eastwood. He's not only doing great work at 80; he's the self-sufficient loner, the outlaw, the Man With No Name.

The ways in which members of the Andrus Center aligned with local models of age may appear to mirror those produced in popular culture, but I suggest that there are some significant differences across these two contexts. Younger members aligned with Miss Eve by admiring her aging, emphasizing her positive attitude in addition to her continued physical activity. Yet this admiration was within the context of the realities of aging. This contrasts to the ways in which social discourses lionize models of aging, turning them into mythical figures, for maintaining the activity of a younger person. Though Miss Eve certainly was an outlier in the center—there were only several other members who were as old as or older than her and often came to the center—the discourses constructing her as a model was qualitatively different from these broader social discourses. I would argue that Miss Eve served as a model for aging for these other members precisely because they encountered her on a day-to-day basis, observing that she used her walker to perambulate down the center's long hallway and participated in Spanish and yoga classes, and this then gave them the opportunity to imagine themselves in a similar role. Our popular culture model of aging do not afford us these same opportunities, instead remaining anomalies from the realities of aging and reminders of who most of us will not be fortunate enough to become in our old age.

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[48] This blog, which ran from 2008 to January 2015, focused on aging and caregiving "from a variety of perspectives: medical decision-making, housing and long-term care, government policies, the latest geriatrics research, end-of-life choices, the personal rewards and headaches of caring for aging loved ones," and featured posts from a variety of authors. Since January 2015, the blog, now written by Paula Span, has run twice a month online as "The New Old Age" in *The New York Times* health section (http://newoldage.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/a-new-direction/).

6.4 DISCUSSION

Older age is a dimension of social identification that bears significant ideological burdens in the United States. As a result of the stigmatization of older age, older people are discriminated against, both of which are "key components of how older people are continually made and remade as 'Other'" (Degnen 2012:1). The Andrus Center, a community that was defined by this stigmatized dimension of social identification—older age—presented a particular complication for its members. Though all of its members were institutionally categorized as "older" because they were over 50 years of age, there was a wide variety in the actual ages of its members. Several factors at the Andrus Center—the stigma carried by older age, universal and inevitable shifting across age categories, and the age diversity of the center's members—coalesced to create a community in which age identity was highlighted, particularly by young-old members who were grappling with their own processes of aging. This chapter has therefore focused on three aging genres that the young-old members of the Andrus Center used to construct their age identities. Through these aging genres, young-old members constructed their age identities in relation to ideologies of older identity, showing the potential for these genres to contribute to positive understandings of aging.

First, through a close analysis of *aging up narratives*, I examined the ways in which speakers recognized and joined older age. These narratives constructed the shift into the category of older age as events with which these participants struggled and positioned their present selves in relation to their past selves. Henry poignantly recalled the affective shift he experienced as he recognized that he had become older, demonstrating that this change was one he had to manage. The choice to join the senior center, as Leah's narrative showed, was not a merely matter of reaching a milestone birthday; instead, as Leah and other members demonstrated, it was a choice that was constructed as affectively problematic. While Leah benefitted from programs at the Andrus Center and had found examples of older people aging well, she still resisted identifying as old. Through these aging up narratives, we can see how members of this community complicated the transformation from younger to older age as they constructed aging as a process of self-recognition and acceptance.

Second, I demonstrated how *age co-construction*, a genre through which members explicitly elicited and shared information about their ages, was an essential means of social differentiation. Significantly, it was not accomplished through simply announcing one's age, but rather through various emergent stance-taking strategies. I have argued that by using multiple strategies—self-disclosing, guessing, questioning, challenging, comparing, judging, and labeling—participants negotiated the spaces that they occupy between the boundaries of older age. That is, they focused on the relational locations of individuals within the age category of young-old, drawing finer distinctions between types of older people and thus complicating what it means to be "old." Within this community, this genre was not merely a reflection of age heterogeneity, but an important semiotic resource for age identity construction.

Finally, I argued that these young-old participants positioned themselves between the not-old and the old-old through their *alignment and disalignment with stereotypes* of aging. I demonstrated that they disaligned from stereotypes of physically dependent older people both by resisting being read as old by younger people and how they talked about old-old people. My young-old participants situated themselves as inspirational agers themselves for younger people but also as young-old members who were inspired by old-old inspirational agers at the center. Though at first glance, it might seem that their practices were simply reproducing ideologies of successful aging, I have argued instead that their focus on admiring the personal rather than physical qualities of aging well is what enables these other members to function as mythical figures of aging within the Andrus Center community.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusions

In this dissertation, I have examined how the members of the Andrus Center constructed their age identities in the context of widely circulating ideologies about older people. In particular, I have focused on the discourses of the "young-old," or those members who had more recently moved into the category of older age. This study has shown that mainstream U.S. ideologies of aging were salient even within local communities like the Andrus Center, yet the specific cultural meanings and values of being "old" were locally negotiated and evaluated. As I argued in my analyses, center members necessarily invoked mainstream ideologies that marginalized older people, yet they found ways to ascribe positive value to their identities as well, sometimes by rejecting the assumption that aging is a form of decline, though at other times by depending on it. By drawing on interactional methods, I also highlighted how it is through collaborative talk with other older people—those who faced similar experiences—that members were able to highlight and co-construct the positive value of their older identities.

Importantly, discourses at the center often invoked a widely circulating ideology of aging as physiological decline. The goal of "successful aging," which has, over the past two decades, become the most popular model in the United States for growing older, invokes this particular ideology. This model not only assumes that an individual's health declines as he or she ages, but it also promotes the individual as the responsible agent for preventing that decline. As such, discourses of successful aging are a prevailing form of policing and managing the older body. As I showed in Chapter 4, speakers like Dana and Gloria engaged with the ideology of aging as decline when they talked about their bodies' recent increase in susceptibility to shingles, and they drew on discourses of successful aging when they depicted it as their responsibility to prevent developing shingles.

Yet, as the latter half of my analysis in Chapter 4 showed, participants did not always follow the hegemonic template for successful aging, and importantly, they maintained their agency when doing so by modeling and valuing alternative ways to age. For example, Birdie interpreted her hearing loss—potentially construable as "unsuccessful" aging—as in fact having positive benefits, and she maintained an agentive role as she invited others to accommodate to her new ways of hearing. Likewise, Dana, Birdie, and Kay collectively resisted expectations of agelessness—that getting older should be a form of extended youth. And in another case, Jane distributed the responsibility for aging well to younger family members, as she rejected the premise that the onus should be placed on the aging individual alone. In each of these examples, these participants resisted the dominant model of successful aging by framing decline as a legitimate option. Moreover, by constructing this acceptance of older age as a choice, they reasserted their agency in the aging process.

Chapter 5 similarly focused on how center members drew on and contested with mainstream ideologies of older age, though in this case they did so by embodying recognizable personas associated with older people and doing so for positive effects. Such positive embodiments must be understood in a cultural context in which older people are typically marginalized as socially irrelevant and in decline. I have argued that by embodying the recognizably older persona of the sage, whose wisdom and ethos derive from a personal history of experiences, older people talked persuasively about culturally loaded social issues such as race in productive and complex ways, even among racial others. Enacting the nostalgic persona was one avenue for older people to advocate for more open discussions of race in a society that has increasingly become "postracial," a development that some laypeople view as progress. As an African American woman named Dana took on the *sage* and *nostalgic* personas, she was able to discuss contemporary ideologies of racism in the United States—political correctness, colorblindness, and colormuteness—with black and white friends of the center. Dana's rejection of some contemporary racial ideologies, such as political correctness and colormuteness, and acceptance of others, such as colorblindness, may diverge from dominant U.S. images that typically depict older people as backwards and myopic with respect to race issues, relative to their younger counterparts.

In Chapter 6, I focused on the specific "aging genres" that members regularly drew on in their construction and negotiation of age identities in their everyday interactions: *aging up narratives*, through which participants represented past struggles of self-acceptance during the aging process; *age co-construction*, through which participants relationally located and evaluated selves and others along an age dimension; and *stereotype disalignment and alignment*, through which participants described stereotypes of older people they either avoided or aspired to be. Given that each of these genres involved the evaluative positioning of the self in relation to others, I have argued that they offered members of the Andrus Center the possibility of coming to positive understandings of what it means to become an older person.

7.1 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF AGE IDENTITY

The findings of this dissertation support a social constructionist view of age identity as relationally, emergently, and collaboratively constructed through language. While the social constructedness of other social dimensions of identity (e.g., gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class) has been increasingly acknowledged in sociolinguistics, the dimension of age has been more commonly treated as a fact of chronology, represented by the objective number years a person has lived. In fact, age, unlike other social dimensions, inherently involves change across categories, such that a focus on age identity construction can enable sociolinguists to understand how individuals negotiate these identity changes. Although the call to study the social construction of aging has been sounded by some scholars (e.g., Coupland 2001a; Coupland 2009), this call has been heeded by few. By focusing on the ways in which both the categories and values of age are negotiated in the course of interaction, I hope to have shown that age identity, including how it is constructed through language, is far more complex than we often assume it to be.

Second, I have shown that these age identities are value laden; they are not neutral identifications of individuals' chronological ages but often located in a moral landscape. In both circulating U.S. cultural discourses and conversations at the Andrus Center, older age was typically devalued; the ideology of aging as decline seemed to prevail more than the ideology of aging as progress. Members of the Andrus Center incorporated ideologically weighted circulating discourses into their local community, but it was through their interactions that they were able to make sense of these and find new possibilities for aging well on their terms.

A third contribution of my research emerges from its approach to treating language as social action and thus my interactional approach to analysis: my project has placed units such as *cultural personas, stances,* and *alignments* at the center of sociolinguistic analysis. By doing so, I have looked at how different kinds of social personas, ostensibly belonging to the same group and identified with the same social variable, may be differently valued in a single community. Examining various cultural personas may help us better understand the complexities, and seeming contradictions, of how social groups, such as older people, are evaluated as well as how people are never defined by a single dimension of identity, such as age. But more importantly, personas are certain kinds of people who are imagined as—and constituted by—performing certain kinds of actions. In Chapter 5, I focused on linguistic actions, namely stances and alignments, in the constitution of nostalgic and sage personas to show that personas are constructed not merely through linguistic features (e.g., creaky voice, "dated" lexicon) that are distinctive to them (cf. Mendoza-Denton 2011; Podesva 2007), but crucially also through the cultural positions that people take in relation to the content of their discourse as well as to other people.

7.2 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This dissertation describes the possibilities of language and identity, shedding light on how identities can emerge through discursive processes within a particular community. Rather than generalizing about older people overall, the analysis is situated at a particular cultural moment; demographic changes in the United States are significantly increasing the percentage of older adults in the population. As I discussed in Chapter 3, the collective aging up of the Baby Boomer generation figures heavily into mainstream U.S. discourses. Throughout my fieldwork, it became clear that, in addition to their own personal experiences of aging, this population shift was relevant to my participants. This study has demonstrated how institutions like the Andrus Center offer opportunities for their members to collaboratively manage the process of aging up and evaluate mainstream U.S. discourses of aging.

Given the situated and particular nature of the community I examined, the analysis presented here is partial; it fails to capture broad generalizations about older people and their language, both across the United States and elsewhere. It should be recognized as well that I primarily focused on young-old members of the center. While I had contact with old-old members, I did not analyze their language to the same extent that I did the young-old members. I recognize that this presents only a partial picture of how older age identities are constructed rather than representing the diversity among older people. Further research might not only examine other kinds of cultural spaces where older people gather but also investigate how old-old speakers construct their age identities and how the young-old shift into constructing old-old identities. In addition, while I have suggested that age identity is multidimensional, future studies would benefit from investigating more closely how age intersects with other axes of social identification, such as race, class, or gender.

Finally, it is also important to note that my goal has not been to identify language features that are distinctively indexical of older people, whether because of their greater frequency of use or because of their salience in stereotypical representations. However, I observed that when my participants stylized, it was often to depict older voices, suggesting that they drew on culturally salient linguistic stereotypes of older people.

Future research would do well to examine the stylistic resources people use to both embody and depict older people. It would be interesting to ask how old voices are stylized and what those stylizations and linguistic resources mean.

I hope that my exploration of how language relates to age identity provides new perspectives and guides further research in this area. In particular, my dissertation suggests that while the language practices of older people have been understudied, they are, indeed, worth further study. And crucially, I have highlighted how age—like other dimensions of identity—is never value-neutral: how we represent age in discourse necessarily has ideological consequences, whether in our everyday conversations or in our sociolinguistic scholarship.

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