

When Does Old Become Too Old?

Kathleen Woodward

Just about every American of voting age knows or has known someone in their 80s. We all know, from personal experience that the first few years of the decade may be OK, but there's almost always a decline, in many cases a steep decline, in physical health and cognitive ability. . . . It is not Biden's current health that is the concern, it is what will happen over the next five years.

--Steven (Brooklyn), Feb. 9, 2024

“For Voters, When Does Old Become Too Old?”: this question heads the February 9, 2024 subscriber-only piece by Nate Cohn in *The New York Times* referring to the presumptive presidential contest in the U.S. between Joseph Biden and Donald Trump. The answer? “Polling shows it’s a broad concern expressed about President Biden, not just one person’s opinion.” Cohn’s piece, which prompted 1236 comments that very day (they constitute my dataset for this reflection), is only one in an avalanche in the news and on social media in the U.S. and beyond that provides us with a window into attitudes toward aging in general and aging in relation to the American presidency in particular.

I found myself reading Cohn’s piece and the numerous appended comments with special interest because, nearing retirement, I was posing a similar question to myself. Early in my career I was asked by a program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities, “Aren’t you a little young to be a humanities center director?” Now, I find myself wondering if the faculty and the deans are silently asking the follow-up question, “Aren’t you a little old to be a humanities center director?” In the eyes of others as well as my own, understanding that both perspectives are intertwined and there is not one definitive answer (it’s complicated!), am I regarded as too old—or close to being so—to continue in my position in the academy? Thinking through the heated U.S. national

discussion about aging has sharpened my own thinking and my own feelings about this point in my life for the better. At the same time, the heightened national focus on aging—much of it conducted in harsh rhetorical terms correctly called out as ageist—has increased my sensitivity to it, leaving a residue of internalized ageism, or toxic feelings of what I call pre-risk. I will come back to this.

I was prompted to put some of my thoughts in writing for a talk I gave at the Modern Language Association in January 2024 in a session devoted to the subject of rereading. My title was “Rereading Age Criticism, Rereading Myself: The Difference Age Makes.”¹ My feelings were decidedly mixed. In my talk I looked back at an essay published twenty-five years ago in which I called on feminists to invent new ways of growing old and being old for women. Then I fully hoped to see the emergence of a collective feminist historical consciousness of older women. Twenty-five years later at the MLA convention, I had to ruefully acknowledge that in the U.S. women and aging is not high on the feminist agenda. We are still fighting for reproductive rights! I also had to confess that retirement from the academy was a pressing personal—indeed, existential—question for me and that I didn’t—and still don’t—have a distinct vision of how it might take shape. Actually, if truth be told, I don’t have one at all. I am definitely not thrilled by the prospect.

In my talk I noted that I was in my seventies. But I regret to say that I consciously avoided identifying my chronological age, thinking I might pass for younger (I realize there is no future in this as a long-term strategy); at the same time, I did feel it was a kind of accomplishment that I would be eighty when I

¹ In her wonderful essay “Rereading the Future,” Cynthia Port writes, “This practice of age-aware reading can help disrupt rigid models of cultural life scripts, expand the range of potential futures, and—through the vertiginous encounter with earlier selves and a critical eye on age ideologies—enable a sense of integration rather than alienation over time” (642). I am hoping for this!

concluded my most recent five-year appointment as director of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington (I am a tenured faculty member in the department of English). While the intellectually engaging academic work of a humanities center may not be a new way of growing old and being old for women, I'm proud to have had the opportunity to pursue change and development in higher education in the humanities, hopefully modeling full participation in academic life over a long span of time (I'm supremely aware that I'm fortunate to be employed by an institution where there is no mandatory retirement). But I was also relieved that none of my colleagues from the University of Washington came to my talk. I didn't want them to know I was thinking about retirement very, very soon. I didn't want them to know I was seventy-nine with a birthday coming up in the fall. I'm embarrassed by this. It represents for me a form of collusion with the broad culture of ageism in the U.S., internalized ageism that was only too visible to me.

Age, as many people will confidently say, is just a number.² In fact, this is exactly what Mary Fran (Alabama) said in her short response to Nate Cohn's piece. "Age is just a number. Competence, experience, honesty, integrity, and leadership matters. Anything else is ageism." Yes, chronological age is just a number. Indeed, that is its definition. But as readers of this journal know, there are many other modalities and meanings related to one's age (among them, biological age, social age, psychological age, legal age, cultural age, and statistical age),³ and they color the associations we as individuals and as a society will have to a number.

² In a commercial for Boost High Protein currently running in my cable market in Seattle, a woman declares confidently, "Age is just a number, and mine's unlisted," thus embodying contradictory attitudes toward aging, both dismissing the salience of chronological age and hiding her chronological age at the same time.

³ I gloss these modalities of age in my essay "Performing Age, Performing Gender."

Foremost among them is biological or functional age, indexed by physical and cognitive decline. “Anything else is ageism,” said Mary Fran. Not so! Vitality and energy, physical and mental stamina are, I fully believe, requirements of the presidency. I agree with several of the commentators who insist, as does Verity (Bethany, Connecticut), “It’s about fitness for the job. It’s not about age.”

But the discourse of age in terms of numbers is compelling. Significantly, across the course of the more than twelve hundred comments in “For Voters, When Does Old Become Too Old,” the age of eighty emerges as a phobic number, the decisive marker for being on the precipice of decline.⁴ As many mentioned, they perceive Biden, eighty-one, as “frail,” “debilitated,” “a doddering old man,” “absolutely impaired.” Noted Poppy (Seattle), referring to herself, “At least for this septuagenarian, seventy is too old to be president of the U.S. Eighty is beyond any serious consideration.” Wrote Independent Voter (USA), “The 80s is when things happen. Bad things.” Wrote Cliff (L.A.), “Like it or not, eighty really is a cliff.”

Commentators Cliff and Independent Voter reference a generally held conviction in our society that at a certain chronological age point—today, eighty—we can expect in ourselves and others a steep cascade of bodily changes, of deterioration and diminishment, including, of course, memory loss, even as many express the undeniable truth and common-sense view that the biological experience of being eighty will vary widely. In testimony to this are the many urgent calls in the comments to establish maximum age limits for running for president; they range from sixty-two to seventy-five. Furthermore, as Steven (Brooklyn) wrote, referring to people in their eighties, “It is not Biden’s current health that is the concern, it is what will happen over the next

⁴ The flip side is that eighty is perceived as a triumphant number when it is a matter of physical achievement in the domain of sports, formal or informal (see, for example, Ryan Lenora Brown).

five years.” The point of maximum age limits is to avoid the *risk* of prohibitive decline associated with aging. Quite a few commentators called on Biden to step down from running for the presidency. Now.

This view of the process of aging coincides with what British social theorists of aging Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard understand as a pervasive paradigm of aging that has two stages, the first distinguished by engagement in social life and relatively gradual diminishment of bodily function; the second, by grave insults to the body that are difficult to bear, by frailty, deep old age, and ultimately and irrevocably the period before death.⁵ These two periods are referred to as the third age and the fourth age, which can be translated into the American context as the young old and the old old. As with the number eighty, this blunt and two-part formulation of the process of aging—a before and an after divided by a number—has a powerful effect on individuals and on our society, an effect amplified by the very circulation of such stories and conversations in the media. Indeed, many commentators decried the deleterious role of *The New York Times* in producing such a negative view of Biden’s age, magnifying the affect of risk associated with aging and damaging his campaign for the American presidency. Biden, we could say, has been aged by the media.

I have not been immune to the effects of this conversation about aging. In point of fact, I’ve been thinking more frequently about internalized ageism. In the last year or so I’ve realized with misgiving that when I’m asked an age-related question, say, “How long have you been director of the Simpson Center?” I find myself self-consciously wanting to avoid answering, as if my long term in the position would give me away, revealing my age as *too old* (I became director in the fall of 2000). Internalized ageism also is manifesting itself as an alertness to minor physical changes or to the potentiality of everyday-life

⁵ For a discussion of the third age/fourth age paradigm, see my essay “Aging in the Anthropocene.”

accidents, prompting me to preoccupy myself, for example, with the possibility of falling. What was a vague and little-held concern has evolved into an intermittent watchfulness that can be intrusive, an affective anxiety, the feeling of being at risk, a lived experience, a phenomenology of bodily aging *before the condition could be said to exist*. There is such a thing as pre-diabetes. Is there a toxic feeling of pre-risk? I do not mean to be melodramatic. This feeling comes and goes every now and then. Still, if before I had optimistic ideas about aging, now the social imaginary of the fourth age, a cultural view of biological old age codified in multiple and multiplying discourses that are, I would say, *contagious*, surprises me by invading my thoughts, becoming personal.

We must reject these far too crude and strangely numerical generalizations about aging. These numbers—eighty, three, four—cannot begin to capture the vast heterogeneity of the experience of aging. Compressing the sociobiology of aging into these numbers constricts our sense of the possibilities and potentialities of growing older. We must also resist the lure of this simplistic framework of understanding aging because of what we might call its toxic side effects, including the very production of anxiety about aging that might lead to a self-diagnosis that one is on the brink of an inevitable stage four. A *cliff*! In particular, we must recognize the fatalistic and monolithic medical dimensions of the concept of the fourth age.

What if we refused to accept the distinction between three and four, divided by the number eighty—it feels affectively so irrevocable, as four necessarily follows three—and worked instead with the concept of a spectrum of ambiguities that does not prioritize continuous declining health (physical and mental) as our primary criterion for identifying and living out the last years of our lives?

While most of the comments addressed Biden's age through the lens of the medicalized body, a very few focused on what I would call his *generational* age,

that is, the extent to which at eighty-one he understands the lived experience of people who are growing up in a world so vastly different from his own. Said Chris (Brooklyn), referring to Biden and Trump by age, “Neither an eighty-one-year-old nor a seventy-seven-year-old can see the world as it is and they certainly can’t envision the future—not the future this county needs to embrace.” MBD (Indiana) remarked, “It is time for a new generation of leadership that can speak to the issues that directly affect younger voters.” This is, in my view, an exceedingly valuable criterion for the presidency of a country. As arguments for a second term, others stressed Biden’s bedrock ethical and moral values, experience, team of talented energetic advisors, and accomplishments, all of which eclipse the matter of his age. Still others underscored what is undeniably the all-important context of his specific candidacy for the presidency in 2024: Biden is running against Donald Trump. When does Biden become too old to run for the presidency? As R. Thompson (Arlington, VA) quipped, “He becomes too old when Trump is not running.”

Ultimately, when does old become too old? It depends!⁶

As for me, if you are wondering about my situation, let me mention that I’m in good health with virtually the only risk factor on the horizon being aging itself (I take no prescription medications, sleep well, and haven’t had a major illness). What did I conclude? I decided not to put myself forward for another year, or two, or for another five-year term. I would be eighty-five at the conclusion of a full term, and that seems, in this day and age, well, inappropriate, “too old for the job.”

⁶“It depends on the context”: I am here echoing Harvard’s former president Claudine Gay who ultimately resigned her position in the wake of the firestorm occasioned by her testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Education Committee on December 5, 2023, regarding Harvard’s actions in relation to the tense educational atmosphere at Harvard in the midst of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Her response was, in my judgment, absolutely correct about this complicated issue.

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Kathleen Woodward, Director of the Simpson Center for the Humanities, is Lockwood Professor in the Humanities and Professor of English at the University of Washington. She is the author of *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of Emotions* (2009), *Ageing and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991), and *At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing: The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams* (1980). She is also the editor of *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (1999) as well as the coeditor of *Memory and Desire: Aging--Literature--Psychoanalysis* (1986), and *Ageing and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology* (1978).