

“Too Old for the Job?”

Ashton Applewhite in Conversation with Anita Wohlmann

The following interview is part of the forum “Too old for the job? The 2024 US American Presidential Elections.” The interview was recorded on April 10, 2024, transcribed with *otter.ai*, and edited for clarity by Ashton Applewhite. An audio version is available [here](#).

Anita Wohlmann (AW) It is April 2024, and the US American presidential election is roughly six months away. My name is Anita Wohlmann, and I’m delighted to speak with Ashton Applewhite, who is one of *the* prominent US American spokespeople on ageism. Ashton, this year’s election is characterized by an extraordinary focus on the candidates’ age. When did age become such a pressing topic in the current debate?

Ashton Applewhite (AA) Ageism, and its evil twin ableism, rear their ugly heads every electoral cycle. The lead up to the 2022 midterms also featured an outbreak of major media studies that blamed “gerontocracy” for our broken democracy. So, it’s been around for a while.

AW Was there a statement or a report or any kind of visualization that particularly stood out to you the past couple of months?

AA What sticks out to me is the relentlessness. And the lazy journalism. Professional journalist friends of mine, who cover the “age beat” in the US, are incensed about it. Too often political writers just get it wrong. This isn’t a left/right, partisan issue. Too often writers cite averages about increasing

dementia or physical decline past age 80 that do not bear out on examination. As geriatricians say, “If you’ve seen one 80-year-old, you’ve seen **one** 80-year-old.” The older the person, the less accurate it is to make any generalizations about them on the basis of their chronological age.

But this year we have the first octogenarian president running against someone only slightly younger, and it’s bringing the haters out. And not just the haters, an apprehensive general public. It’s a placeholder for generalized anxiety about growing older and around population aging. In anxious times, we look for scapegoats. We project a lot of our fears onto oldness. This election cycle, a counter-discourse has emerged, which is welcome. A lot of geriatricians like Louise Aronson, and demographers like Jay Olshansky, have spoken out to recommend focusing on cognitive and physical health instead of age when evaluating whether someone is capable of office. I think *Age, Culture, Humanities* readers already know this.

The bottom line is that generalizations about the capacities of older people are no more acceptable than racial or gender stereotypes. You would never say someone is “too fat to be president,” or “too gay to be president,” or “too dark to be president.” It is just as hateful and biased and ignorant to say someone is “too old.”

The conversation shouldn’t center age, it should center capacity. In a political context, it should center ideology. What are the candidates saying? What change do they want to make in the world? Let’s judge them for the quality of their ideas and their records, rather than something for which they have no control over, which is their age. Of course, we should apply that standard to everyone.

The distinction between age and capacity is fundamental. The current discourse conflates the two. It’s a bit of a smokescreen. It obscures the heart of the matter: is the person mentally and physically up to the job? Focusing on age is misguided. Questions about competence, on the other hand, are completely legitimate and utterly necessary. We have every right to know whether the people who represent us are up to the job.

AW And that pertains to any kind of age they have...

AA Absolutely. Age bias also affects younger people who want to get ahead in politics or the job market. What are they capable of? Look at their records.

AW When Nikki Haley, who is younger than Biden and Trump, was still part of the race, she released a controversial ad campaign which pigeonholed Biden and Trump in equal ways. Both of them were likened to “Grumpy Old Men” (Fig. 1). Of course, that was supposed to be funny. But now, with Haley being sidelined, Biden’s and Trump’s older age are pitted against each other. And Biden seems to be worse off in the public perception. Why is Biden perceived as old, while Trump is not, or less so? And in what ways are both candidates represented differently?



Figure 1. Doug Most. www.bu.edu *“Is Nikki Haley Guilty of Ageism with Her ‘Grumpy Old Men’ Ad?”* Accessed 11 April 2024.

AA My semi-serious, intuitive answer is that “old” is a proxy for “dull.” Right? You shuffle off to join a gray group of elderly people who don’t make a fuss and sit quietly in the corner. One thing you have to say about Trump: he’s not dull. He is physically aggressive, he’s incautious, he makes a lot of noise. Those are characteristics that we do not typically attribute to older people. Americans in particular, God help us, tend to prioritize appearance over substance, aspire endlessly to youth and “vitality.” Trump possesses those attributes in greater measure than Biden does. It’s not fair. It’s not thoughtful. But it is the case. Americans elected Reagan because he was a movie star with great hair, after all, and we got what we deserved.

AW A couple of weeks ago, another soundbite that made the news and came from special counsel Robert Hur, who characterized Biden as a “well-meaning, elderly man with poor memory.” Obviously, this description was especially harmful to Biden. On your [blog](#), you argue that it is “ableist to shame people for memory lapses.” So, not only is the discourse ageist, but it’s also ableist. And problematically so, both ageism and ableism are conflated. Could you help disentangle these two forms of discrimination in relation to the campaign?

AA It’s an important distinction. Biden supporters cried foul about Hur putting these remarks into his decision. They might have been right about that, but they said it was ageist to say “these people are old.” I disagree. Age is real, and they’re old! Age-related decline is real too. It’s important not to pretend that raising these issues is in itself problematic. In fact, it’s essential. Brushing voters’ concerns about capacity under the rug does no one any favors. The problem is when we attribute a value, whether positive or negative, to a candidate’s age.

Much of what we think of as ageism is actually ableism, meaning prejudice and stigma around physical and cognitive function. Most people’s greatest fears around growing older involve the loss of capacity. That fear is human. Where we get into trouble is when we assume that by age X, such-and-such a

thing will have fallen apart. This is never the case. Pick an age, pick a job: there are always people over that age who could do it and people under that age who couldn't, and vice versa. Generalizing on the basis of age is always wrong.

It is appalling to mock Biden for a stutter that he has worked to overcome his entire life. According to people who stutter, the pauses that Biden makes are typical of someone who is struggling not to stutter. Whether or not that's the case, it's unacceptable to make fun of anyone, of any age, for being unable to perform like someone without that disability. It's a distressing and degrading discourse.

Because everything is complicated, we also need to call out the ableism in this discourse. Experts in aging have pointed out that Biden and Trump are likely to be "super-agers," a subgroup of people who surpass typical biological and cognitive milestones and tend to live longer than others their age. This is a real category. But the framing is often elitist, and ableist. Well-off Americans tend to be healthier and more active because they have access to good doctors and healthy food, and leisure, and gyms. There are many people who cannot walk around the block whose minds are incredibly sharp.

We can correct for ableism by pointing out that super-agers are exceptional. It's important not to hold them up as a standard that anyone could achieve. Also to recognize that there are many people who do not meet these benchmarks who are nevertheless eminently capable—ethically, cognitively, socially—of participating in the world in important ways, and leading lives of value.

An underlying issue is how our society addresses the loss of capacity—or fails to. This came out very clearly around California Senator Dianne Feinstein, who finally became extremely ill and stepped down from office. Imagine if we had a culture where people could discuss cognitive decline openly and with empathy. Where people wouldn't have to hide it, and would be supported instead of stigmatized. Where people could transition out of the workforce gradually, and others wouldn't have to cover up for them.

But we live in a culture also that values people according to how “productive” they are, which typically means having a job and getting paid to do it. As is, too few women hold positions of power. Of course, Dianne Feinstein didn’t want to leave the Senate. Of course, Ruth Bader Ginsburg didn’t want to retire from the Supreme Court. I hope more elected officials will follow the examples of Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell and House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi and retire on their own terms rather than because of a health crisis. That’s far preferable to denial or to pretending everything’s fine until circumstances prove otherwise, and then exiting in shame. Yet those scenarios are characteristic of our ableist culture.

AW I would like to shift the focus to the role of the media and to the question of how ageism and ableism are represented in our media. On social media, we have endless clips and memes that ridicule Biden’s stumbles and falls and stutters and his mistakes. However, the classic media, it seems to me, also are trapped in an equally repetitive cycle that foregrounds the candidates’ age. I wonder, have you observed any specific patterns or rhetorical strategies in the news coverage?

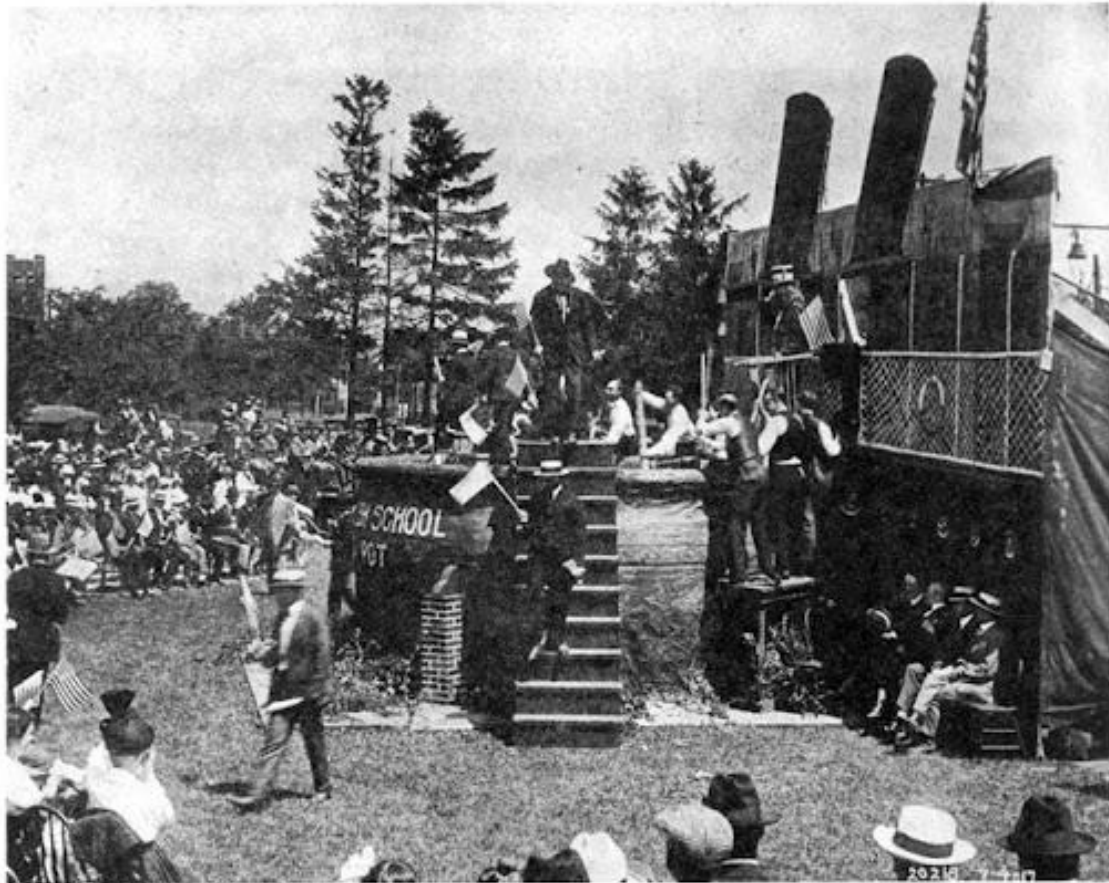
AA My not very satisfying answer is that a stumble or fall happens fast. And it’s eminently watchable. Maybe it goes back to the basic human impulse to laugh at physical comedy, a pratfall, someone running into a wall. We can’t help it, we laugh. Social media is increasingly driven by short video clips. Too few of us stop and think “Geez, why is this getting picked up the way it is? Why am I not seeing context for this clip? We’re entertained, or shocked, or perhaps both. And we all know that a strong emotional response propels us to share and propels the algorithm to send us more of those kinds of clips.

AW It’s a mutually reinforcing structure.

AA It's shallow. It's much easier to be shocked or astonished or whatever, and respond instantly, then to think critically about the context in which the event occurred, and why it's being circulated.

AW I'm coming to my last question which leads us back in time and also to a comparative analysis. If we compare the US American election to other elections around the globe, then it's interesting, I think, that the US election right now has such an enormous focus on age because, historically speaking, the United States has drawn much of its national identity from being considered a *young* nation, being associated with youth and youthfulness. In the 1950s, for instance, when the field of American Studies came into existence, R.W.B. Lewis published his *American Adam*, in which he defined Americans as having a "radically new personality" (5). He characterized the American people as "untouched" by ancestry, "self-reliant and self-propelling," "new" and "innocent" (5). In other words, there might be more at stake here, namely a national self-image that fundamentally jars with the concept of older age in more ways than Biden and Trump individually represent. To what extent is this particular dimension of national identity present in the current conversation?

AA I wish it were more present. I think it's a really, really good question. Imagine being "untouched by ancestry." Nationalism and racism have indeed whitewashed where Americans come from. There's an amazing photo of a "melting pot ceremony" hosted by the Henry Ford Motor English School (Fig. 2). They built a giant "pot," representing the metaphor for the United States as a place where all people of all different ethnicities could come together as Americans. People climbed up into the pot dressed in clothing from the countries and cultures they had left behind, and climbed out the other side wearing suits. The idea of forging a shared identity is beautiful. It also involves profound loss.



From the Collections of The Henry Ford

Figure 2. “[Ford English School](#)” *Automobile in American Life and Society*. Accessed 11 April 2024.

The aspect of American identity I dislike the most, and there are many, is the delusion of exceptionalism: that the US is somehow superior to other countries. It requires ignorance of geography and world history. I think that aspect of national identity connects to those characteristics you mentioned: “newness,” self-reliance, individualism. They’re deeply American, and deeply impoverishing.

I’d like to take the word “independent” out of all discourse related to aging. It’s anti-communitarian, and we need exactly the opposite ethos if we are to support longer lives, and people of all ages who need help. All of us are *interdependent* from childhood on. So I like this question a lot, because I think there’s tension along the lines that you draw, and I think it’s largely unexamined.

Take the call for “generational change” that crops up in American politics. First of all, it’s magical thinking. It’s not as though if you swapped all the gray-

haired heads for dark-haired ones, so to speak, it would improve our politics. That depends on what goes on inside those heads. Calls for “generational change” are the age-based equivalent of calls for change based on ethnicity or gender. Think of it as “age cleansing.” I hope that coinage isn’t offensive; for many, ethnic cleansing has meant violent death. But there is something hateful about the concept that age alone legitimizes your removal.

It is ironic that the politicians now being targeted came of age, as I did—I was born in 1952—alongside the invention of youth culture. “Don’t trust anyone over 30” was a saying back then, and boy has that come back to bite us!

The persistence of the discourse around the age of political candidates makes it really clear that we need culture change and that the stakes are really, really high. So I’m glad you and I are talking about this. and I’m glad others are too. It’s gotten more and more people than ever before, across the political spectrum, talking about age and ageism. People will say, “I know that this is ageist, but we need to get rid of the old guys.” It’s fantastic they’re acknowledging their own ageism, because most bias is unconscious. Because ageism has gone largely under the radar until recently. Because change requires awareness. All these articles and conversations are helping to catalyze genuine cultural change. *Age, Culture, Humanities* is informing it.

I also think the conversation is starting to educate people to distinguish between age and capacity, which is also really valuable, too. Age-related decline is real. We can’t, and shouldn’t, pretend otherwise. But it affects each of us in different ways, and at different rates. Some part of your body is going to fall apart, but not the whole machine, and not at the same time. The more we understand these distinctions, the better we can prepare ourselves for losses that are inevitable and unpreventable and the more clearly we can see which fears are out of proportion to reality. That’s important, because those stresses and anxieties make us more vulnerable to exactly that fear.

If Biden’s candidacy fails because voters perceive him as “too old,” don’t blame age. Blame the culture. Blame ageism and ableism. Blame capitalism: a system under which people are either employed or worthless. An appearance-

obsessed culture that values entertainment over substance. Blame a political system that is hostage to corporate interests. Electing younger people won't change the fundamental template of political power. That's what we need to challenge, although it's more fun to fixate on *TikTok's* latest age filter. In that sense, the whole discourse is a tragic distraction from where these corrupt systems are leading us: into genocide, climate disaster, and very possibly into World War III. I'll leave you on that cheerful note.

AA Thank you for this interview.

WORKS CITED

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An internationally recognized expert on ageism, **Ashton Applewhite** is the author of *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* (2016, 2019) and *Cutting Loose: Why Women Who End Their Marriages Do So Well* (1997). She blogs at [This Chair Rocks](#), is the voice of [Yo, Is This Ageist?](#), and co-founded the [Old School Anti-Ageism Clearinghouse](#). Ashton speaks widely, at venues that have included the United Nations and the TED mainstage, and is at the forefront of the emerging global movement to dismantle ageism. She can be reached at ashton@thischairrocks.com.