

GETTING  
WISE  
ABOUT  
GETTING  
OLD

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DEBUNKING MYTHS  
ABOUT AGING

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Edited by  
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# Introduction

## Multiple Perspectives on Diverse Aging Experiences

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*Anne-Marie Séguin, Véronique Billette, and Patrik Marier*

Aging is sometimes depicted as a demographic disaster or as a heavy social and financial burden on younger generations. In a society that places a high value on image and speed, slowness and other effects of the passage of time on the human body may be considered pathological or undesirable, while attachment to the past is viewed as old-fashioned. Population aging and old age are often subject to negative portrayals and persistent stereotypes – so much so that denying or fighting against aging is commonplace and even a regular part of everyday conversation.<sup>1</sup> The anti-aging industry has exploited this situation (and probably contributes to it as well) with a gamut of natural products, anti-aging creams, hair dyes, aesthetic treatments, medications, injections, surgical procedures, and other “remedies.” This global market, now worth an estimated US\$140.3 billion, is clearly booming!<sup>2</sup>

Are these negative portrayals of aging well founded? This book examines numerous commonly accepted myths, or false beliefs, about aging. To obtain an accurate portrait of seniors, experts from many different fields and disciplines were asked to describe a specific myth and then analyze all of its facets. Without compromising scientific integrity, the short and accessible articles in this book are designed to enable readers to explore many of the social issues that lie behind the common myths. The aim of this exercise is to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges – and advantages – of an aging society.

This book was written prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had unprecedented and widespread impacts around the world. Unfortunately, older adults have been particularly affected by the spread of the virus and by the governmental measures enacted in concert with public health officials. The majority of COVID-19 deaths have been in residential long-term care centres, and confinement measures have been the most restrictive for seniors. Consequently, the myths illustrated in this book have been under a far more intense spotlight. It is our hope that this book will contribute positively to enhance societal discussions in the aftermath of the pandemic.

### **What Is Meant by “Population Aging”?**

More and more Quebecers are joining the highly diversified sociodemographic category called “seniors,” which generally includes people 65 years of age and older, as well as, in some cases, adults over the age of 50 in particularly difficult circumstances (for example, people who are homeless, in prison, or living with HIV). Like all of Canada and many other countries, Quebec can be described as an aging society. A few statistics clearly substantiate this phenomenon. In 1970, 6.7 percent of the total population of Quebec consisted of people 65 and older, as opposed to 40.6 percent younger than 20. By 2016, the older age group had grown to 18.1 percent of the total Quebec population, and the younger group stood at 20.6 percent.<sup>3</sup> According to the Institut de la statistique du Québec, the proportion of seniors in Quebec will continue to climb, reaching 25.9 percent by 2036. The aging of Quebec’s population will thus continue to accelerate over the next 20 years. This trend, which began several decades ago, is caused by many factors, including a lower birth rate that can be partly attributed to women’s increased participation in the labour force and access to more reliable contraception. Population aging also results from longer life expectancy thanks to better overall living conditions, medical and technological advances, and improved understanding of health determinants.

### **The Social Issues of Aging**

Old age is a diverse and complex stage of life that takes many forms and multiple paths. Numerous factors in the past and present lives of individuals affect their experience of growing old. Collective or social factors also affect older adults’ experiences and living conditions. These varied social parameters of aging are central to the field of social gerontology, which takes

a multidisciplinary approach to the phenomenon – one that stresses the complex and varied dimensions of human aging and the social factors that influence both how older people are portrayed in society and their living conditions. Many social gerontologists around the world, including in Quebec, other Canadian provinces, and the UK, have analyzed aging from the standpoint of social exclusion.<sup>4</sup>

### *Growing Old and Social Exclusion*

In many societies, old age is perceived as the antithesis of beauty, efficiency, productivity, autonomy, and social utility, and seniors are often described in terms of vulnerability, dependency, apathy, and frailty. Such social representations can easily lead to the infantilization or social exclusion of seniors (for “convenience’s sake” or “for their own protection”). In Quebec’s public consultations on seniors’ living conditions, held in 2007, many seniors stated that they were ignored, treated as children, or subjected to long-standing prejudices – in short, they were victims of ageism.<sup>5</sup>

Although seniors do not make up a homogeneous, excluded population subjected to generalized ageism, many older individuals experience exclusion and discrimination in various aspects of their lives. Examples include recognition of their place in society and their social roles; social participation and the exercise of citizenship; access to necessary care and services; mobility in their daily environments; the ability to make choices and act on them until the end of their lives; having sufficient income and other resources to meet their needs; and growing older without rejection or mistreatment.<sup>6</sup>

### *Recognition: A Key Ingredient in the Social Inclusion of Seniors*

How can society be made more inclusive for its seniors? Inclusion requires respect and recognition, for a start. This requirement is highly relevant when we consider the insidious nature of the myths that tend to portray seniors in negative or reductionist terms. According to German philosopher Axel Honneth, lack of recognition of certain social groups can undermine societal values such as respect, integrity, justice, and ethics.<sup>7</sup> Recognition allows for every member of a society to be treated as a full-fledged partner in the life of that society, regardless of individual differences.<sup>8</sup> This concept can also be used to explore and better understand issues such as each person’s need to feel acknowledged, respected, and fairly treated. Recognition also requires taking individuals’ needs into account by offering them access to society’s resources: financial means; appropriate, adequate, and timely care and other services, such as accessible spaces; affordable and adequate housing; and



equal rights.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, talking about the recognition of seniors without provision of resources and capabilities needed for their health, well-being, and social participation would be an empty and misleading discussion.

### **Structure of the Book**

This book has six parts, each of which addresses a major theme. In Part 1, social representations of aging are compared with its realities. This section begins with an exploration of the various terms used – seniors, older adults, elders, and so on – in various societies. The authors also challenge the use of the term *ainé* in Quebec society to designate seniors, given the low consideration and lack of respect shown to seniors in general in that society (Olazabal and Simard). The myth that seniors are wealthy is then examined; the finding is that although poverty among seniors has dropped significantly, most of them are not financially well-off (Marier et al.). The blanket labelling of seniors as conservative is challenged in the following chapter by an analysis that reveals a wide variety of political leanings (Simard and Olazabal). The view that growing old is bound to be associated with loss of interest in the technologies that are increasingly predominant in society is then examined in depth (Sawchuk et al.). In the last chapter in this section, the latest research about age-related loss of memory and other cognitive functions is discussed, and the idea that all seniors suffer rapid linear cognitive decline is challenged (Lussier et al.).

In Part 2, seniors' living environments are explored. Many myths about living environments and specific senior populations are dispelled or debunked. For a start, the myth that most seniors live in residential long-term care facilities does not stand up to analysis (Séguin et al.). Maintaining seniors in their own homes, an approach advocated by seniors and public authorities alike, raises the question of the related adaptive measures that need to be taken in cities, towns, and villages. Although *Municipalité amie des aînés*, the Quebec government's age-friendly municipalities program, is often presented as favouring these adaptive measures, its effectiveness is open to scrutiny (Joy et al.). Given that many seniors still drive and try to keep their licences for as long as possible in order to maintain their independence, it might be assumed that they are somewhat obsessed with their vehicles; the accuracy of this view is explored (Negron-Poblete and Séguin). The last two chapters shed light on two groups of seniors who are largely invisible or subject to severe stigmatization: homeless seniors and

older prison inmates. The first describes how, contrary to popular opinion, homeless seniors, whose numbers are growing, present a wide variety of profiles and life histories (Burns). In the second, the view that prisons provide older inmates with living conditions that compare favourably with long-term care facilities is countered by an accurate portrait of the little-known world of older prison inmates (Gagnon and Dunn).

Part 3 focuses on the diversity of aging experiences. Seniors constitute a highly diversified population group: there is a huge difference between being 65 years old and being 100. Each senior has a life history with all its accompanying baggage. We age as we have lived throughout our lives – with our individuality, relationships, and community involvement; in other words, the diversity of our individual pasts is coupled with that of our individual futures as a result of the various events that continue to occur in our lives. Growing old with a diagnosis of mental illness or living with recent mental health problems at an advanced age triggers a host of prejudices, as explained by Aubin and Dallaire. The myth of the eternal child attached to individuals with an intellectual disability or a pervasive developmental disorder is explored, as is how older individuals in this group are perceived now that they have a much longer life expectancy (Dickson). The sexual life of seniors is the target of many myths and prejudices. For example, it might be assumed that HIV/AIDS poses no issues for older people, whereas the syndrome has serious repercussions for the lives and health of those living with it (Wallach). Another myth – that of the sexuality of the older women known as “cougars” – is also explored (Alarie). Since the life experience of some seniors involves difficult situations of violence, two chapters are devoted to violence, which is perpetrated mostly against women and persists with age. These chapters examine, respectively, false beliefs about sexual assault (Couture et al.) and spousal violence (Israel et al.).

Part 4 deals with myths related to social roles. The term *seniors* often evokes stereotypical images – of retirees, low-performance workers, and people who engage in a wide range of recreational activities. This section begins with an analysis of recent changes in the labour market, revealing that the dependency ratio of retirees to the working population is far from being as catastrophic as has been portrayed in the media (Carrière et al.). Although the labels applied to workers aged 50, 55, or older are often negative, these workers possess knowledge and experience that can largely offset the effects of growing old. The question of whether they should be retained in their jobs and given appropriate working conditions is examined (Lord

and Therriault). Although old age and free time are often associated, the daily reality of many seniors involves severe time constraints due to factors such as numerous medical appointments, schedules imposed by medication, and a slower pace in performing domestic chores or getting around (Wiebe et al.). The last two chapters, which cover volunteering (Castonguay et al.) and social participation (Raymond et al.), describe the pressures on seniors to participate in volunteering or other social activities in order to “age well.” These two chapters also explore whether it is possible to live a “full life” in old age without succumbing to these pressures and whether steps are being taken to help seniors participate in society in appropriate and satisfying ways.

Part 5 of the book explores death and bereavement. The first chapter explores the successive bereavements of friends, acquaintances, and family members experienced by seniors and challenges the mistaken belief that, because death is such an integral part of seniors’ lives, it has less impact on them (Bourgeois-Guérin et al.). The topic of end of life is then covered in an attempt to understand why so few seniors have access to palliative care, and the question of whether seniors’ deaths are more peaceful and freer of suffering because of their age is also analyzed (Van Pevenage et al.). Lastly, the idea that all seniors want – and are able – to die at home is challenged. The current conditions available to them at the end of their lives are evaluated, as is whether they are really given comfort and respect at this stage of their lives (Van Pevenage et al.).

The last part of the book addresses issues relating to caregivers and the support provided to seniors and their family and friends. The first chapter debunks the myth that seniors are regularly abandoned by their families (Van Pevenage et al.). The next chapter addresses various concepts of independent living and highlights the role of evaluation tools used by professionals in decisions regarding the provision of services (Gilbert et al.). The last two chapters cover sources of support and care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender seniors (Beauchamp et al.) and for immigrant seniors and their families (Ferrer and Brotman).

## **Conclusion**

In the current social context, with its floods of simplified and contradictory information, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between myths and false beliefs, on the one hand, and the many nuanced realities of aging, on the other hand. This is why it is necessary to take stock of and carefully

analyze the social issues of aging. The purpose of this book is to stimulate thought about various approaches to these issues based on the varied expertise and knowledge of its authors in their respective fields. This book can thus serve as a tool not only for seniors but also for students, professionals, researchers, and all those who strive every day to ensure that society is more welcoming, inclusive, and kind toward all of its citizens, regardless of their age or identity.

### Notes

- 1 Amanda Grenier and Ilyan Ferrer (2010), “Âge, vieillesse et vieillissement. Définition controversée de l’âge,” in Michèle Charpentier, Nancy Gubennan, Véronique Billette, Jean-Pierre Lavoie, Amanda Grenier and Ignace Olazabal (eds.), *Vieillir au pluriel. Perspectives sociales* (Quebec City: Presses de l’Université du Québec), 35–54.
- 2 Zion Market Research (2016), *Anti-Aging (Baby Boomer, Generation X and Generation Y) Market, by Product (Botox, Anti-Wrinkle Products, Anti-Stretch Mark Products, and Others), by Services (Anti-Pigmentation Therapy, Anti-Adult Acne Therapy, Breast Augmentation, Liposuction, Chemical Peel, Hair Restoration Treatment, and Others), by Device (Microdermabrasion, Laser Aesthetics, Anti-Cellulite Treatment and Anti-Aging Radio Frequency Devices): Global Industry Perspective, Comprehensive Analysis, Size, Share, Growth, Segment, Trends and Forecast, 2015–2021*, <<https://www.zionmarketresearch.com/sample/anti-aging-market>>, accessed July 5, 2017.
- 3 Institut de la statistique du Québec (2014), *Tableau statistique, Effectif et poids démographique des grands groupes d’âge, scénario A – Référence, Québec, régions administratives et régions métropolitaines (RMR), 2011 et 2036*, <[http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/docs-hmi/statistiques/population-demographie/perspectives/population/age\\_reg\\_14.htm](http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/docs-hmi/statistiques/population-demographie/perspectives/population/age_reg_14.htm)>, accessed March 22, 2017; Institut de la statistique du Québec (2016), *Tableau statistique, Population par groupe d’âge, Canada et régions, 1er juillet 2016*, <<http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/statistiques/population-demographie/structure/104.htm>>, accessed July 12, 2017.
- 4 Véronique Billette and Jean-Pierre Lavoie (2010), “Vieillissements, exclusions sociales et solidarités,” in Michèle Charpentier, Nancy Guberman, Véronique Billette, Jean-Pierre Lavoie, Amanda Grenier, and Ignace Olazabal (eds.), *Vieillir au pluriel. Perspectives sociales* (Quebec City: Presses de l’Université du Québec), 1–22; Thomas Scharf and Norah Keating (eds.) (2012), *From Exclusion to Inclusion in Old Age: A Global Challenge* (Bristol: The Policy Press).
- 5 Lucie Gagnon and Annie Savoie (2008), *Préparons l’avenir avec nos aînés, Rapport de la consultation publique sur les conditions de vie des aînés* (Quebec City: Gouvernement du Québec – Secrétariat aux aînés), 26.
- 6 Billette and Lavoie (2010), op. cit.; Chris Phillipson (2012), “Globalization, Economic Recession and Social Exclusion: Policy Challenges and Responses,” in Scharf and Keating (eds.) (2012), op. cit., 17–32; Jane Jensen (2004), *Canada’s New Social Risks: Directions for a New Social Architecture*, Research Report F 43 (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks [CPRN]).

- 7 Axel Honneth (2006), “Les conflits sociaux sont des luttes pour la reconnaissance,” interview with philosopher Axel Honneth, *Sciences Humaines*, electronic edition, No. 172, June, <[https://www.scienceshumaines.com/articleprint2.php?lg=fr&id\\_article=14475](https://www.scienceshumaines.com/articleprint2.php?lg=fr&id_article=14475)>, accessed August 30, 2017.
- 8 Nancy Fraser (2005), *Qu'est-ce que la justice sociale? Reconnaissance et redistribution* (Paris: La Découverte).
- 9 *Ibid.*

# Part 1

## PORTRAYALS AND REALITIES OF AGING

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# 1

## Myths and Realities about Seniors

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*Ignace Olazabal and Julien Simard*

The French term *ainé*, which can be read as the translation of the English term *elder*, has now been enshrined in both Quebec media and Quebec government publications as the synonym for all the less consensual terms that designate old age (such as “old,” “elderly,” and “golden ager”) and is associated with the concept of old people in general. Semantically, *ainé* in French refers to the oldest sibling in a family. Being the oldest child often comes with the rights of the firstborn (especially with regard to the family estate) and certain responsibilities with regard to the younger siblings. Despite the fact that *ainé* is also employed in Canada to define a specific age group (people aged 65 and older), the use of the term to refer to a segment of the overall population is rarely questioned. For instance, the Dictionnaire Robert defines *ainé* in terms of the hierarchy among siblings, simply adding that the word is used by extension in literature to refer to ancestors or forebears.

Social anthropologists study the position of the older generation in traditional societies and the foundational myths that sustain the social phenomenon of the elderly. Various legends glorify old age as the culmination of a long, well-lived life. Some societies have venerated old age by attributing powers and often supernatural qualities to it that younger generations lack the necessary experience to possess. This idealized image of old age is perfectly encapsulated in the foundational myth of Judeo-Christian culture, as described in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. In that account, three

elderly patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Moses – led the Israelites through many trials and tribulations and were the only ones with the authority and status to converse with God.

In the sixteenth century, Michelangelo provided a superb material representation of the archetypal elder governing his community in his statue of Moses. In this Renaissance masterpiece, Moses is a very old man, but he is also wise, physically strong, and exudes a reassuring presence. He is the leader who sets the course for his people to follow.

The figure of the heroic elder is also found in cultural output of Antiquity, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, written by Greek poet Homer in the eighth century BCE. In such epics, heroic elders not only become wise with advancing years but conserve all of their mental and physical vigour despite their old age. During the same period, the militarily renowned Kingdom of Sparta revered its older men as heroes for having survived successive wars. Although two elderly kings ruled Sparta, ultimate authority was vested in a Council of Elders – “the *gerousia*, consisting of 30 old men chosen by acclamation among citizens aged over 60.”<sup>1</sup>

In many traditional preliterate societies, as in mythology, elders were highly valued because they were considered the repositories of knowledge and collective memory. Because writing did not exist, older people’s knowledge and experience were considered indispensable.

### **Older People in Preliterate Societies**

Various societies throughout history, albeit culturally very different in other respects, held their elders in high social esteem – for example, precolonial West African societies and all traditional societies that lived off hunting, fishing, and gathering (the situation of most precolonial Indigenous societies). In those societies, the oldest members actively participated in the transmission of both practical knowledge, such as plant-based healthcare, the art of hunting, and the ability to differentiate between edible and poisonous foodstuffs, and symbolic knowledge, such as religion and genealogy. Preliterate societies were perpetuated from generation to generation via oral tradition, with the individual memories of men and women who had considerable experiential and practical knowledge constituting the society’s collective archives. This reality was aptly expressed by Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ: “When an old person dies, it is as if a library goes up in flames.”<sup>2</sup> We should also bear in mind that longevity and life expectancy were much shorter in those societies than in contemporary Western societies.



Because people generally died young, older people were a somewhat exceptional social category.

In most early hunter-fisher-gatherer societies (by definition nomadic, organized into bands, and generally without a single leader), there were two opposing categories: between men and women, and between children and adults.<sup>3</sup> Quebec anthropologist Bernard Arcand notes that the elderly among the Cuiva Indians of Colombia were treated on the same footing as all adults. However, social status was based on social utility and respect for the group's rules of conduct, and these two qualities tended to develop with age. The oldest adults thus enjoyed special social standing thanks to their longer lives and greater accumulated knowledge. This knowledge, transmitted through collective memory, constituted the intergenerational driving force of the group, guaranteeing that the practical knowledge essential for survival would be transmitted. Knowledge could be jealously guarded by the elders until the end of their lives, implicitly ensuring that the demand for its transmission – and thus the elders' social value – was maintained despite their old age.<sup>4</sup> The elders were also recognized for their ability to interact with the realm of the sacred as mediators between the living and the dead in these societies, in which dead ancestors or forebears were always an integral part of the world of the living (through ancestor worship).

Still in preliterate times, a typical model of social respect for elders existed in many precolonial West African societies – sedentary societies in which it was easier for older adults to establish their power and authority and that contained, unlike the societies described above, highly differentiated social categories whereby men were totally dominant vis-à-vis women, as were elders vis-à-vis the young. Everyone belonged to a tribe, ethnic group, specific lineage, and predetermined caste, but, above all, men and women belonged to a given age-based class. The oldest men were considered *elders* in the true sense of the term: they enjoyed the highest social status and, simply by belonging to the oldest age group, they were generally rich and powerful.<sup>5</sup> But the elders were also the narrators of the traditional stories and transmitted cultural-identity values by conversing with the younger generation. This process has been described by Boucar Diouf, a Senegalese-born humourist, scientist, and broadcaster, in his stories about his grandfather.<sup>6</sup> Although the gerontocratic power of West African elders was not officially challenged prior to colonization, it was nonetheless coveted by the younger members of society. At the same time, the latter generally accepted the prevailing hierarchical order and waited their turn. In such societies, people moved from one age group to the next when the last representative

of the immediate older group died. All members of a single age group progressed simultaneously because they were class siblings throughout their lives, with this subjective variable being a particular feature of African societies of bygone days.

In the past half-century, all traditional societies have undergone major social transformations. Not only do they now use writing and documentary records, but many of their members pursue higher education and have fully adopted information and communications technologies. Oral traditions are gradually becoming less important, and the knowledge that was previously held secret or sparingly transmitted by the elders is now recorded in books and accessible via Google. As a consequence, knowledge transmitted by collective memory is no longer considered sacred or indispensable, which has resulted in a considerable decline in older adults' power in those societies as Western technical and legal knowledge, invariably transmitted in written form, is integrated. Older people's privileges have also been diminished as monotheistic religions and capitalist values have taken hold. Older adults are thus gradually losing their prestige and social utility and are now more likely to be considered, simply, old. This social change can also be observed in Quebec and in the West in general, where literacy, the importance of academic education, and access to technologies have contributed to devaluation of the traditional knowledge transmitted by the oldest practitioners of certain trades.

In the 1970s, anthropologists who compared the social status of older people in modern societies with that in ancestral societies observed that this status has declined with modernization.<sup>7</sup> Social change, especially in technological terms, has accelerated in advanced modern societies; this can be a handicap for many older people as societies focus on the future without regard for the past. The social utility of the elderly and the need for younger people to receive knowledge from them have therefore declined accordingly.

### **The Elderly and the *Âînés*: The Quebec Reality**

A Quebec government publication states that "in Quebec, old people are generally designated by the term *âînés*. In other parts of the Francophone world, the terms '*seniors*,' '*personnes de l'âge d'or*' [golden-agers], '*personnes du troisième âge*' [senior citizens], '*personnes du quatrième âge*' [elderly], and '*adultes vieillissants*' [aging adults] are also used."<sup>8</sup>

The concept of *ainés* to designate everyone aged 65 or older came into effect in Quebec without much fanfare in the early 1990s. It became the official term in public policy and was also adopted for this segment of the population by civil society, the media, and scientific literature. Does the concept of *ainé* have an explicit meaning, other than simply being 65 or older? And why was a concept with ancestral connotations chosen as a term of reference? It is, in fact, relevant to question the terminology used to describe old age, because the meaning of words is not value-neutral.<sup>9</sup> Could it be that the term *ainé* is being used to valorize elders on the basis of the sacred and mythical character of elders in the past – whereas, in reality, many older people these days are either abandoned or, at best, excluded? Moreover, their knowledge is seldom considered to be worthy of transmission.

In Quebec, there are greater numbers of *ainés* – or the people designated as such when they reach “pension age” – than ever before, and they will become even more numerous over the next 30 years, as the baby-boomer generation gets older. This reality is accentuated by another variable, that of greater longevity. There are actually several categories of old age now due to higher life expectancy, which is currently 81 years for men and over 84 years for women. Increasing numbers of people have exceeded these ages and are said to have reached “old-old age.” Between the beginning of old age, in the early 60s, and end of life, two or three stages of old age may occur, with the parents of the current 65-to-70-year-old age group now constituting the oldest of the *ainés*. Moreover, given the increased variability in quality of aging, the 65-and-older age group has become totally heterogeneous.<sup>10</sup>

Some people considered *elders*, in the anthropological sense of the term, do exist, but they are the exception rather than the rule. These people represent a benchmark outside the sphere of their own family because their experience and expertise are valued and they are socially involved, primarily through the quality of what they say and the respect that their words evoke. Many of them are intellectuals, scientists, artists, entrepreneurs, administrators, politicians, media personalities, and other notables – for example, poet and singer-songwriter Gilles Vigneault and former Quebec politician Françoise David. Another example is Janette Bertrand, whose autobiography describes what life is like for her as an elder (although she says she is simply old rather than an elder), because her life experience is also of interest to younger people.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, we must not forget that it is largely the media that determine which older people deserve to be heard and seen – and it is the media that reflect prevailing ageist prejudices.<sup>12</sup> Society often derides old age by infantilizing older people even though, in reality, many older people are actively involved in their families and communities, and thus in society. Their voices receive scant media coverage: old age, it seems, is a “hard sell.”

## Conclusion

In social anthropology, the term *ainé* in French, like the term *elder* in English, refers to an old person who, simply by virtue of being old, enjoys high social standing and respect within his or her family and community. The term also evokes knowledge transmission and social utility in general. In some ancestral societies, elders possessed experiential knowledge and enjoyed rights that their younger counterparts did not; they were positioned at the top of the parental and social hierarchy (the right of seniority). However, those called *ainés* in Quebec are generally deprived of such attributes. The concept therefore seems to be out of sync with the observable reality of ageism prevalent in hypermodern societies: those whom we call our elders are simply considered old.

However, we should not view the choice of this concept, which applies more accurately to bygone societies, as a deliberate strategy of paying lip service by its proponents (especially the Quebec government). In practice, the discourses of governments and civil society promote appreciation for people aged 65 and older, especially the oldest among them. Many political initiatives have been envisaged, such as the World Health Organization’s strategy for maintaining the vitality and social participation of older people. But social recognition is also largely measured in words and how people are labelled, and there doesn’t seem to be an easy answer to what to call such a diversified population category, while also avoiding the discomfort that can arise with terms such as “old,” “elderly,” “senior,” and “golden-ager.” However, as Cameroonian anthropologist Manga Bekombo points out, “Speaking about old age consists not solely of pronouncing words from a glossary, but, even more, of attempting to access an entire system of thought and behaviour all at once.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the problem is that the true meaning of this now-official term, which is associated with respect and social recognition, is generally overlooked.

We are living in a society that favours youth and perpetual social change and that tends to view everything that is “dated” with contempt. The value

placed on collective memory (emblems, historical figures, historical dates, and other “sites of memory”) is directly proportional to the value accorded to the knowledge accumulated by the oldest among us, bearing in mind that anyone who has lived a long life has the potential to transmit his or her varied experience and knowledge, which could be very useful socially. A society that looks only to the future and never to the past is one that, by definition, places little value on the knowledge of its oldest members. It is therefore legitimate to question whether our consciences should be clear when we use the term *ainé* in a society that is not overly enamoured of old age.

### Notes

- 1 Georges Minois (1989), *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 64.
- 2 Amadou Hampâthé Bâ (1991), *Amkoullel l'enfant peul* (Mémoires 1) (Paris: J'ai lu éditions) (our translation).
- 3 Bernard Arcand (1982), “La construction culturelle de la vieillesse,” *Anthropologie et sociétés*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 7–23.
- 4 Jared Diamond (2012), *The World until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (New York: Viking).
- 5 Marc Abélès and Chantal Collard (eds.) (1985), *Âge, pouvoir et société en Afrique noire* (Paris, Montreal, and Khartala: Presses de L'Université de Montréal); Denise Paulme (ed.) (1971), *Classes et associations d'âge en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Paris: Plon).
- 6 Boucar Diouf (2007), *Sous l'arbre à palabres, mon grand-père disait* (Montreal: Les Intouchables).
- 7 Donald Cowgill and Lowell D. Holmes (eds.) (1972), *Aging and Modernization* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts).
- 8 Gouvernement du Québec (2002), *L'activité physique, déterminant de la qualité de vie des personnes âgées de 65 ans et plus* (Quebec City: Kino-Québec), 7 (our translation).
- 9 Alain Montandon (ed.) (2004), *Les mots du vieillir* (Clermont-Ferrand: Centre de recherches sur les littératures modernes et contemporaines); Jacqueline Trincas, Bernadette Puijalon, and Cédric Humbert (2011), “Dire la vieillesse et les vieux,” *Gérontologie et société*, No. 138, September, 113–26.
- 10 We define “quality of aging” as the level of health and autonomy and the quality of social circles and meaning in life, especially the feeling of social utility, a feeling that gradually declines in society after retirement.
- 11 Janette Bertrand (2016), *La vieillesse par une vraie vieille* (Montreal: Québec Loisirs).
- 12 Martine Lagacé, Joëlle Laplante, and André Davignon (2011), “Construction sociale du vieillir dans les médias écrits canadiens: de la lourdeur de la vulnérabilité à l'insoutenable légèreté de l'être,” *Communication et organisation*, Vol. 40, 87–101.
- 13 Manga Bekombo (2004), “Percevoir et dire le vieillir chez les Dwala,” in Alain Montandon (ed.), *Les mots du vieillir* (Clermont-Ferrand: CRLMC, Presses universitaires Blaise Pascal), 49 (our translation).

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