

Old People Bodies, Resilient Lives: Critical Perspectives on Aging

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Abstract

This essay continues the discussion on aging in contexts of inequality, with particular attention to the experiences of the Black population in Brazil. Recognizing that aging is shaped by historical, social, and racial conditions, the text explores how aging bodies carry both the marks of exclusion and strategies of resistance. The analysis articulates social, cultural, and philosophical dimensions, showing that aging is not only a biological phenomenon but also a political and historical construction. By drawing on contributions from sociology, public health, and Afro-diasporic philosophy, the essay further argues that understanding practices of resistance, community solidarity, and the affirmation of ancestry is essential to rethinking aging as a space of dignity, empowerment, and social transformation.

Keywords: aging; resistance; structural racism; bodies; ancestry

INTRODUCTION

Aging, often reduced to a biological or chronological process, is in fact shaped by multiple social, cultural, and political factors. The experience of the Black elderly population in Brazil highlights how racial inequality extends across the life cycle, manifesting itself in health, income, housing, access to public policies, and social representation (Silva et al., 2025). Yet, alongside the marks of exclusion, practices of resistance, solidarity, and cultural affirmation emerge, reshaping old age.

This essay argues that aging bodies are not only repositories of accumulated vulnerabilities but also protagonists of forms of resistance and reinvention. By analyzing aging as a social and political construction, it seeks to broaden the understanding of how the Black population, despite the inequalities imposed by structural racism, affirms life through ancestry (Birman, 2005), memory, and community solidarity (Santos & Nascimento, 2020).

AGING AS A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION

The notion of aging as merely a biological destiny is increasingly insufficient to explain the complexities of growing old in unequal societies. As Geronimus (1992) demonstrated in the “weathering hypothesis,” the biological wear and tear produced by long-term exposure to structural inequalities accelerates physical decline and reduces life expectancy among marginalized populations. In Brazil, the concept of “racialized life cycles” illustrates how structural racism permeates every stage of life, producing cumulative disadvantages that explode in old age (Silva et al., 2025).

For Black Brazilians, aging is not simply the passage of time but a reflection of systemic barriers that began in childhood. Inequalities in education, access to healthcare, and opportunities for social mobility accumulate, making the aging process a mirror of social injustice. Ribeiro (2019) emphasizes that the social value of life itself is unevenly distributed, with Black lives being devalued and prematurely curtailed. Understanding aging as a political phenomenon thus challenges the myth of universality and neutrality, forcing us to consider how power and race structure time itself.

AGING BODIES AND THE MARKS OF EXCLUSION

Aging Black bodies are not only biological entities but also living archives of exclusion. Chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases occur disproportionately among Black populations in Brazil, often diagnosed late due to systemic neglect (Barbosa, Silva, & Sousa, 2021). Health inequities are compounded by limited access to preventive services and experiences of institutional racism in healthcare systems (Santos & Nascimento, 2020).

Moreover, the economic dimension of aging exposes how exclusion is materialized in everyday survival. Many elderly Black Brazilians were employed in informal or precarious sectors - domestic work, rural labor, or low-paid services - which left them without adequate social security coverage (Silva et al., 2025a; Silva et al., 2025b). Instead of retirement, old age often means continued work under exploitative conditions.

This reality reflects what Crenshaw (1989) described as intersectionality: the overlapping vulnerabilities of race, gender, and class. Elderly Black women, in particular, face compounded disadvantages, often bearing the double burden of economic precarity and the invisibility of their labor. Thus, exclusion is etched on the aging body, not only as illness but also as the visible outcome of structural neglect.

RESISTANCE AND COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

Despite these conditions, the narrative of Black aging is not confined to vulnerability. Resistance emerges in multiple forms, often organized at the community level. Gonçalves and Ribeiro (2021) show how grassroots networks in Brazilian peripheries provide food, healthcare assistance, and emotional support for elderly Black residents. These networks are not merely survival strategies but forms of collective resistance that reconfigure the meaning of care beyond state institutions.

Santos and Nascimento (2020) highlight that such community-based practices constitute epistemologies of care, rooted in ancestral traditions of solidarity and reciprocity. These practices challenge the biomedical model that dominates discussions on aging, offering alternative visions in which old age is celebrated as continuity rather than decline. Cultural initiatives, such as storytelling projects and intergenerational gatherings, enable elders to transmit memory and strengthen community identity (Silva, 2022).

Thus, community solidarity repositions elderly Black individuals not as passive recipients of aid but as active agents whose presence sustains cultural and social life. This dimension of resistance is crucial for reimagining aging as empowerment.

MEMORY, ANCESTRY, AND RACIAL SELF-ESTEEM

Ancestry is central to the construction of Black aging. Birman (2005) argues that Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé valorize the elderly as guardians of collective wisdom, offering symbolic and social recognition often denied in broader society. Unlike Western models that equate aging with loss, Afro-diasporic frameworks situate old age within a cycle of continuity, in which elders embody memory and legitimacy.

Kilomba (2019) further demonstrates that confronting racism involves reclaiming memory as a political tool. For elderly Black Brazilians, affirming narratives of survival and resilience is a way of resisting the erasure imposed by dominant society. Silva (2022) adds that the cultivation of racial self-esteem among elders is not only an individual matter but a collective one, reinforcing intergenerational pride and identity. In this sense, memory and ancestry transform the meaning of aging. They reframe old age not as marginality but as centrality—placing elders at the heart of cultural continuity and racial affirmation.

PHILOSOPHY AND THE ETHICS OF RESISTANCE IN AGING

From a philosophical perspective, aging can be understood as both a personal and collective ethical stance. Ribeiro (2019) argues that resisting the devaluation of Black lives requires affirming dignity even in contexts of systemic negation. For elderly Black

populations, this affirmation is not abstract but embodied: it is present in rituals, cultural practices, and everyday acts of survival.

The Afro-diasporic concept of ancestry places ethical responsibility on the community to honor elders, not only as individuals but as links in a chain of historical continuity (Santos & Nascimento, 2020). This framework contrasts with liberal, individualist notions of aging, which isolate elders from broader social processes. Instead, Afro-diasporic philosophy emphasizes collective belonging, memory, and reciprocity as ethical imperatives.

Thus, to age in resistance is to inhabit a political position: claiming visibility, demanding recognition, and reasserting the right to a dignified old age. It is a praxis that unites philosophy and lived experience, situating aging as a site of both struggle and transformation.

CONCLUSION

The aging of the Black population in Brazil is marked by structural inequalities that affect health, income, housing, and social visibility (Silva et al., 2025a; Silva et al., 2025c). Yet these aging bodies are not only victims of exclusion: they are also protagonists of strategies of resistance, memory, and solidarity.

Recognizing Black old age as a space of potential makes it possible to shift the dominant narrative that associates aging with deprivation toward one that affirms it as dignity and life. Rethinking aging therefore requires not only intersectional public policies (Crenshaw, 1989) but also a cultural transformation that values ancestry, memory, and the epistemologies of care created within Black communities (Santos & Nascimento, 2020).

In this way, aging bodies that resist are simultaneously a denunciation of inequality and an announcement of new possibilities of existence.

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