



OUT OF TIME? Chronocracy and Ageism in Brexit– COVID-19 England

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During my ethnographic fieldwork between 2018 and 2020 in the North East of England on Brexit, identity, and everyday experiences, I often heard people assert, “It was old people who voted for Brexit.” Such statements were, on the face of it, factual. Numbers reported vary slightly depending on which poll one cites, but it tends to be within the over-forty-five age bracket that the Leave vote becomes supported by a majority, a majority that also steadily increased with relative chronological age (Kelly 2016). Thus, the older any particular cohort of voters was, the more statistically likely they were to vote in support of leaving the European Union.¹

Striking was the extent to which many public commentators, and many Remain supporters, felt at ease making ageist statements about “old people” and the Brexit referendum outcome in print, on social media, and in their everyday lives. Ageism can entail explicitly derogatory attitudes characterizing older people as inferior, repulsive, or lacking in value. Ageism can also operate in more implicit forms, characterizing aging and later life as undesired conditions both in oneself and in others. Both explicit and implicit forms of ageism stereotype, denigrate, and otherize older people on the basis of their relative age, lumping “them” into an undifferentiated group attributed with highly negative

characteristics. Ageism, already socially endemic, became widely prominent in relation to the referendum outcome.

Consider, for instance, what one of my research interlocutors, Phil, had to say. He is a white man in his mid-forties with a university education who works in trade unionism. He told me about a friend who had “kind of . . . slagged me off as being a fascist enabler” because Phil voted Leave. A few days later the same friend, a Remainer, posted statistics on Facebook about the majority of older people voting in support of Brexit. Phil recounted to me how “and at the top [of the post] he wrote, ‘What we need is a really harsh winter’! And I just . . . said to him, ‘We are not taking any political lessons for someone who wants old people to die.’” Or consider what Ella, a white, middle-class, university-educated teacher in her mid-thirties, who voted Remain, told me. She remembers “after the referendum, looking at old people on the street and wondering ‘Was it *you?*!’” in her mind each time she walked by, her voice rising accusatorily as she recounts the tale. Contemplate, too, an article by [Giles Coren \(2016\)](#) published in the *Times* on the day after the referendum outcome, pronouncing:

For make no mistake, it is the old people who did this to us. . . . The less time a person had left on earth to live and face up to their decision, in other words, the more likely they were to vote to leave the European Union. . . . From their stairlifts and their zimmer frames, . . . they reached out with their wizened old writing hands to make their wobbly crosses and screwed their children and their children's children for a thousand generations.

The ageist discourse in Coren's *Times* article also caught the attention of the social gerontologist Molly Andrews. She additionally points to a number of scathing posts on social media, including examples such as: “These fuckers should not have been allowed to vote for a long time. There's a reason why people grow old and die. If old people still had power, we would still be living in the stone age”; and, “You voted to leave the EU but you gonna die soon so it's not your problem” ([Andrews 2017](#), 160). Reflecting on these expressions of caustic anger, [Andrews \(2017, 160–61\)](#) writes that while “there is good reason why young people might feel robbed of a future by those who will be affected for a shorter time by the outcome of the Brexit vote,” that on its own “does not really explain why this resulted in such vociferous vitriol towards the old,” noting that had such posts been written about any other social group, they would have been challenged. But they were consistently not.

Why and how ageist attitudes become invisibilized and widely accepted—including often by older people themselves—demands closer anthropological scrutiny. During my Brexit research period, I came to the same conclusion as [Andrews \(2017, 161\)](#) about ageist discourse and the liberty with which I heard so many people express it: such intergenerational anger aligns with already widely held social beliefs about “this is what ‘old people are like.’” They mirror and mobilize ageist stereotypes, otherizing people who occupy this imagined category of “old” in stigmatizing and hateful ways. But how is it that such negative attitudes attributing such different value to different generational groups come to be reproduced? What sociocultural processes and practices contribute to reinforcing these unequal power dynamics?

My Brexit fieldwork period ended January 31, 2020. This was the same day the *Financial Times* ([Tighe et al. 2020](#)) reported the treatment of the first UK cases of COVID-19 in Newcastle at the Royal Victoria Infirmary, a few buildings away from my university office. A year later, the research team I worked with on the Brexit project received funding to conduct follow-up interviews with half our original interlocutors on their experiences of the pandemic. As I caught up with those people about how their lives had been affected by COVID-19—this time via Zoom calls and text messages because of lockdown restrictions—age and intergenerational relations once again preoccupied me. I heard many stories in those exchanges about “the old” and “the young.” Increasingly, I came to realize that these age categories were often couched in terms of relationships with time. Younger people, for instance, described feeling as though their lives were “on pause” during restrictive lockdown measures (as a then twenty-year-old interlocutor recounted to me, her voice cracking with frustration as she connected her experiences with the collective endeavor of protecting “old people”). The linking of age categories with time became explicitly ageist in some quarters of public discourse, voiced by prominent public figures including the former prime minister Boris Johnson, recorded in official government meetings to determine policy decisions as saying that COVID-19 “was just nature’s way of dealing with old people” ([Crerar 2023](#)) and arguing for “letting it all rip. Saying yes there will be more casualties, but so be it—‘they have had a good innings’” ([Walker 2023](#)).

Permeating these Brexit and COVID-19 era examples are the ways in which relationships with time—time left, futures “robbed,” having “had a good innings,” life being “on pause”—are imagined and used to ground ideas of generational difference. Such temporal aspects have received little critical thinking or analysis. Instead, they have become crystallized into unproblematized notions, representing fascinating ideas about a person’s relationship to time over the life

course, and reproducing an ageist status quo. While ageism has been well documented for the COVID-19 pandemic (Ayalon 2020; BSG 2020; Gullette 2024; Lichtenstein 2021; Verbruggen 2020), it remains unexplored in the growing literature on the mundane, ordinary everyday experiences of Brexit (Anderson and Wilson 2018; Degnen, Taylor, and Blamire 2024), and in neither case has ageism been explored in relation to temporality. I take up that challenge here. I argue that the examples of Brexit and the pandemic side by side offer theoretical insights into how temporality becomes enrolled in processes of ageism. That is to say, popular explanatory models of Brexit and everyday experiences of COVID-19 are both wound through with imaginings of people's relationships with time—pasts, presents, and futures—and often deny older people coevalness, or co-existence within the same timeframe. Temporal relations to pasts, presents, and futures are thus imbricated in the ageist casting of old people as other.

In so doing, I draw inspiration from an emergent body of anthropological work theorizing older age, temporal differences, and temporal relations (Gron and Meinert 2025; Kavedžija 2020; Tsuji 2021), connecting it with recent work in sociological Brexit studies such as that by Katherine Davies and Adam Carter (2025), which examines timescapes of transformative political events experienced at the level of the everyday and the personal. In particular, I wish to think through ageism via the lens of Elisabeth Kirtsoglou and Bob Simpson's (2020, 3) concept of chronocracy, an exploration of the "discursive and practical ways in which temporal regimes are used in order to deny coevalness and . . . create deeply asymmetrical relationships of exclusion and domination." Kirtsoglou and Simpson deploy chronocracy to analyze how temporal regimes become tools of power that create and reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities. Examples they discuss include forcing migrants into bureaucratic structures of waiting. These structures strip away the temporal agency granted to individuals with full citizenship, but impose suspended futures and delayed presents to those without this status. Another example they explore is how development discourse frequently characterizes entire societies or regions as requiring modernization, describing them as temporally "behind" and denying them full presence in a shared now. Both examples illustrate chronocracy as an affective and existential force for those excluded from a shared contemporaneity (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020).

I argue that we can better understand and recognize the pervasiveness and taken-for-grantedness of ageism in contemporary Britain by considering it through the lens of temporal relations, and the ways such temporal relations

involve unequal workings of power. Theorizing Brexit and COVID-19 at the intersection of ageism and temporality expands anthropological scholarship on generations and contributes to emergent anthropological perspectives on older age and temporality. By asserting ageism as one of the modes of exclusion created via chronocracy, and by calling attention to how temporality is enrolled in imagining generational difference via exclusionary practices and discourses, I endeavor to expand anthropological work on generations in a new way. I seek to do so by contributing to a better understanding of the unequal workings of power in how temporality is used to imagine and reproduce ideas of generational difference in Western thought, and the consequences of that for how the category of “older person” is made and experienced.

AGEISM AND GENERATIONAL THINKING

Ageism as a form of social discrimination is grounded in unequal power relations that systematically exclude the “old” in ways that the “not old” are not subjected to, privilege the not old over the old, and measure the old against social norms defined by attributes of the not old (Calasanti 2016). Expressions of ageism are highly contingent on cultural and social understandings of old age. Western ideologies tend to model this part of the life course as a natural period of loss, decline, and decrepitude, something to be feared and loathed in equal measure (Degnen 2012). Negative attitudes toward aging are made and remade by factors including “cultural ideologies of personhood and independence, medical interventions, social hierarchies, and individual experiences” as prefaced on late modern capitalist notions of progress and productivity (Lamb 2019, 263). The emergence of the so-called successful-aging paradigm, now dominant in North America and Europe, has profoundly shaped normative ideals of later life. This cultural ideology seeks to eradicate the changes of later life and erase old age from the life course (Lamb 2019, 2023), as it is a paradigm that attempts to separate “bad old age” from “good long lives.” By virtue of individual effort and crafting a “project of the self” via diet, exercise, and positive mental attitude, the successful-aging paradigm promotes a vision of maintaining one’s normative self of younger years, seeks to evade the stigma of old age, and idealizes segueing from “vibrant, good health” into “a swift and painless end” (Lamb 2023, 108), a paradigm Sarah Lamb powerfully critiques. Ageist attitudes are regularly normalized and used to negatively characterize people deemed old, including by older people themselves, even though a great deal of indeterminacy exists around knowing definitively who is old and when oldness begins. People avoid self-identifying as old (even if others in the social world attribute it to them on

the basis of bodily, mental, or chronological age attributes), with the category of “older people” perceived as having a host of negative attributes relative to “younger people.”

The specificity of ageism as experienced in contemporary England co-exists and intersects with other social and cultural discourses. The ageism surfaced by both the twinned crises of the pandemic and aftermath of the referendum arrived within an already existing landscape of intergenerational conflict permeating British public discourse. British sociologists have noted a growth in the past two decades of media, public, and political narratives around intergenerational inequality, with generational differences blamed for many social ills including housing costs, student debt, environmental degradation, and the decline of the welfare state (White 2013; Bristow 2015). Jonathan White (2013, 241) terms this “generationalism—the systematic appeal to the concept of generation for narrating the social and the political.” He documents how in contemporary Britain, generationalism has become a master narrative employed by political elites in the battle over the future of the welfare state, pitting various generations against one another. These are significant and instructive insights, complemented and enhanced when considered in conversation with anthropological thinking on generations.

Anthropologists use the concept of generation in two key ways: first, to refer to a group of people whose lives are shaped by virtue of living together in a particular historical moment, with attendant collective identity, practices, and worldview; and second, to refer to genealogical notions of kinship and descent (Lamb 2015, 853). Classical social theory has long linked generation with socio-cultural change, temporality, and intergenerational contrast. For instance, summarizing the early contributions of August Comte in the 1800s, Lamb (2015, 853) notes Comte’s proposal that lengthening life expectancies would “slow down the tempo of social progress, because the conservative, restrictive influence of the older generation would operate for a longer time,” as they were living longer, in turn stunting the “impetus for social change [located] in the younger generation.” Karl Mannheim’s 1927 landmark text *The Problem of Generations* focuses on the role played by the emergence of new generations for historical and cultural change. He argues that it is the “fresh contact” of a new generation with existing sociocultural heritage and established behavioral norms that brings “a novel approach,” and “were there no change of generation . . . [a] radical form of ‘fresh contact’ would be missing” (Mannheim 1952, 293–94), impeding change. Mannheim (1952, 300) identifies early adulthood—“round about the age of 17”—as the moment when “fresh contact” is most potent and the potential for

change most radical. Thus, in addition to their formative contributions to the field, both Comte and Mannheim also demonstrate how dominant modes of classical Western thought have imagined and defined generational difference—older and younger—as organized around perceived relationships with time and tempo.

While acknowledging the usefulness of generation as a theoretical concept, anthropologists have also explored how popular discourse and academic literature often collapse the complexity of generational change in ways that overly simplify the unpredictable ways in which social and cultural shifts occur (Cole 2010, cited in Lamb 2015). Crucially, recent anthropological work takes up the explanatory power of generation as an analytic for thinking through contemporary processes such as modernization and globalization by emphasizing how age and generations are relational, focusing on the ways in which elements of the life course—young, middle aged, old—are not isolated categories, but are instead constituted and experienced in relation to each other among social, political, and economic processes (Cole and Durham 2007). Such scholarship demonstrates how supposedly fresh contact does not occur for each new generation in a vacuum, but instead indicates how “the practices associated with one generation necessarily affect either the ascending or descending generation,” whereby changes in one generation are negotiated, mediated, and experienced through relationships with other generations (Cole and Durham 2007, 18). A focus on the interconnectedness of generations for understanding social processes makes for a salient corrective to theories of social change centering only on youth: older people are also simultaneously “very often actively involved in fashioning new modes of life for themselves and their descendants” (Lamb 2015, 854). Demanding further scrutiny, however, are the regular erasures of interconnectedness and the relational by ageist discourse and beliefs. Such erasures flatten the complex realities of how time is lived and experienced in later life, and they contribute to otherizing older age, to which I now turn my attention.

TEMPORALITY AND OLDER AGE

Temporality—by which I mean the experience of time and experiences through time, as well as the understandings, ideologies, categories, forms of governance, and discourses regarding time—carries a depth, richness, and complexity in all human lives. And yet, pervasive attitudes in the United States and Britain often imagine an impoverished temporality in later life, stereotypes that seldom correspond with the lived experiences of older people. Yohko Tsuji (2021, 151) captures this beautifully in her long-term ethnographic account of an American seniors’ center in the northeastern United States when she notes

the “negative stereotypes of elders as useless people with obliterated pasts, no futures, and nothing to do but wait and to die.” She traces how a dominant cultural conception of time based on linear, irreversible, future-oriented “clock time” simplistically frames older Americans as both running out of time and “strips . . . [them] of their worth because their time is no longer salable” (Tsuji 2021, 129). In contrast, Tsuji (2021, 130) portrays older Americans’ lived realities of temporal complexity and multidimensionality. She explores how her interlocutors are “active players with time, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by it,” (2021, 130), living within multiple forms of temporality, including but not limited to clock time. Many of these temporal modalities are not linear (Tsuji 2021). Her findings echo earlier ones by Haim Hazan (1996, 34) in his British field sites with older people who “transform the chronological time of inevitable decline into a new, recursive, and non-linear temporality.” In contrast to ageist tropes depicting later life primarily as gradual deterioration, Tsuji’s interlocutors experience personal growth, new relationships, and “rebirth” through medical procedures, new hobbies, and lifestyle changes (2021, 139). Despite this, cultural stereotypes to the contrary persist, helping reproduce negative views of later life as beyond normative temporal forms.

Tsuji and Hazan demonstrate how temporalities are multiple in later life, and not rigidly linear. Elsewhere, I have explored the consequences of this dynamic for older age. I have argued that parallels exist between Johannes Fabian’s (1983, ix–35) scrutiny of temporal frameworks in anthropological practice—ones that create the Other by denying coevalness, conceptualizing these Others as in a different temporal flow from that of the observer or not contemporary—and how older people in England are also otherized via unspoken but widely held ageist assumptions that they are out of the flow of time, that they are past-facing, and do not engage with future-thinking (Degnen 2012). Such assumptions exclude older people from normative, middle-aged adult temporal frames and undermine the status of older people as full adult persons (Degnen 2018). Building on these insights, I wish to consider how imaginings of temporality and ageist othering work together to create inequalities of power and reproduce ideas of generational difference. Fabian’s (1983) work on coevalness, and Kirtsoglou and Simpson’s (2020) on chronocracy mentioned earlier, draw from critical analyses of historical Eurocentric narratives positing an evolution from savagery to barbarism to civilization—thereby attributing different contemporary groups to different and unequal phases in temporal development—and the related idea of modernity as progress, rendering some groups more “advanced” in a temporal imaginary, and others “backward.” These scholars, however, do not examine the life course and generational divides, which has motivated my analysis here.

Thinking about unequal relations of power and temporal discourses in relation to generation strike me as a fruitful set of issues to consider.

Unspoken assumptions that deny coevalness in later life too often go unchallenged in the social sciences. But in the introduction to a significant new anthropological volume exploring temporal differences, temporal relations, and growing older, [Lone Grøn and Lotte Meinert \(2025, 7\)](#) describe later life as a “temporal point of view” in which new things can come to matter in ways distinct from those of mid-life. They argue that anthropology can advance its own critical understanding of temporality by engaging with the uniqueness of time in later life. Taking into account the specificity of aging in terms of one’s relationship with one’s own body and its changing demands, changing relationships with work and other activities, and shifting relationships with material and social worlds, [Grøn and Meinert \(2025, 6–7\)](#) ask that if time “comes into being through experience, in relations, in practices, in memories of the past and anticipations of the future, what might we gain by including alternative and atypical ways of experiencing time? Could we embrace a more generous repertoire of temporal experiences?” [Grøn and Meinert \(2025, 10\)](#), as well as the other authors in their edited volume, highlight the rigidity of commonplace ideas about structures and practices of time with this critical perspective and argue for what might be achieved with more pluralistic approaches to temporality in older age.

Complementing Grøn and Meinert’s edited volume is another recent collected edition exploring temporality, purpose, fulfilment, and meaning for older people specifically approaching the end of life ([Kavedžija 2020](#)). As [Iza Kavedžija \(2020, 1\)](#) explains, authors in this second volume focus their ethnographic attention on examining how “ideas of meaning in life take shape or come into focus as people approach their final days,” probing how temporality and notions of the future can “tak[e] on a different form when one’s life is not seen as extending very far ahead.” Taken as a whole, across multiple ethnographic examples, the volume demonstrates how an awareness of the very transience of the human condition and the finiteness of time can also generate a sense of “a novel and productive time,” offering “something new and specific due precisely to its limitation,” which is perhaps unique to this particular part of life ([Kavedžija 2020, 6](#)). [Janelle Taylor \(2020, 91\)](#), in the volume’s afterword, signals how the pandemic fractured temporal norms, “reveal[ing] time to be newly multiple and malleable,” and she suggests that “our collective experience of the pandemic may perhaps position many of us to appreciate the variability of time as a central dimension of the experience of aging.” Both collections offer significant strands of emerging attention to how temporality and aging require scrutiny, a scrutiny applied to other forms of social inequality but seldom to later life.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH SETTING

This article is based on two periods of research I carried out across a range of cities, suburbs, towns, and rural villages in the North East of England. The first—multisited, residential, and ethnographic—ran from October 2018 through January 2020. It explored peoples' everyday experiences of and views on Brexit. The second, in the spring and summer of 2021, followed up with half of the original participants about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted both periods of research as part of a larger research project,² and on both I worked with a team of two other ethnographers carrying out parallel research in two other parts of England. In the Brexit research, each of us ethnographers conducted sixty conversational-style interviews lasting on average two hours, and a number of these participants were recruited from the multigenerational familial and friendship networks of our interlocutors. A range of other research materials complemented these interviews with people across a wide range of social positions of age, gender, class, migration status, nationality, ethnicity, race, Remain or Leave supporters, and non-voters. My youngest interlocutors were in their late teens, and the oldest were in their eighties; 41 percent of my original participants were over sixty, and 13 percent under thirty. Although the research materials used in this article are primarily based on interviews, the larger analysis from which it draws is grounded in a range of ethnographic interactions, including recording informal discussions about everyday experiences of Brexit in daily life; monitoring social media and news outlets; observing political rallies, election hustings, and other public Brexit-focused events; regular attendance at two community centers; and the curation of an Instagram feed where I visually documented Brexit-related aspects of material culture.

The North East of England has a strong regional identity that valorizes its history as a center of the Industrial Revolution and of coal mining, ship building, and engineering. In the 1800s, the “relentless rise of ‘carboniferous capitalism’” in the North East’s coalfields meant the region “controlled the market of the most important commodity in the world—coal” (Lancaster 1992, 55). It was, in the words of Chi Onwurah, one of the region’s members of Parliament, “a center of industrial change, like the Silicon Valley of the time” (BBC 2019). This prosperity collapsed in the 1980s with the decline of industry and manufacturing, triggering high unemployment and recession. Some economic recovery came with regional redefinition around cultural, digital, and creative industries alongside the night-time economy for which the area is also famous, but austerity measures since 2010 have proved difficult: Newcastle City Council alone has had

£369 million cut from its budgets over the past fourteen years (Holland 2024). Significantly, however, economic deindustrialization does not map neatly onto social or cultural deindustrialization: many in the North East regularly narrate family histories of industrial work as a key way to “situate and describe themselves” still today (Winkler-Reid 2024, 247).

The North East is a diverse region. It encompasses rural, pastoral, and agricultural Northumberland and County Durham; many former coal-mining villages in semi-rural landscapes; coastal villages and towns; university cities (Durham, Newcastle, Sunderland); and market towns. Economic, social, and health inequalities of post-industrial decline remain severe but unevenly distributed. The North East has some of the highest negative national health indices, including the lowest life expectancies and highest rates of economic inactivity from ill health or disability (Munford et al. 2023), the lowest full-time earnings, and steeply rising child-poverty rates.³ The largest employers are the health sector (124,000 jobs), followed by manufacturing, education, and retail (about 80,000 each), and, finally, the public sector (60,000).⁴

To help orientate the reader with some very basic indices from the North East during the two research periods, I summarize each briefly. During the Brexit referendum, Leave won 58 percent of the vote in the North East;⁵ Newcastle was the only regional urban area with a Remain majority, at 50.7 percent support (BBC 2016). The region featured in national Brexit debates in a number of ways: as home to the largest UK Nissan car factory where speculation over economic impacts of Brexit attracted much news coverage and public attention; the North East became known as the first Leave vote, as the Sunderland count was the first to be declared nationally in June 2016; and as part of extensive commentary on the “fall of the Red Wall” in the subsequent 2019 general election, where historically Labour-supporting areas “went Blue,” electing Conservative MPs campaigning “to get Brexit done.” The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected the North East, incurring significantly worse outcomes than the national English averages. The region endured the highest national mean number of days in Tier 2 lockdowns and the second-highest number in Tier 3 lockdowns; the second-highest COVID-19 mortality rate; and the highest care home deaths: 36 percent higher than the national average (Munford et al. 2021, 25). I turn now to the ways in which imagined generational relationships with time emerged during both periods of research when my interlocutors reflected on their everyday experiences of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic.

BREXIT AND GENERATIONAL RELATIONS

During my ethnographic encounters, more than two years on from the referendum vote, my interlocutors shared a wide range of views across a range of ages about how generation had played out in their lived experiences. Their accounts present a textured and multifaceted story across Leave and Remain voting positions and relative age. These include Leavers upset to have been labeled as “old” by friends and family that did not agree with their vote, such as Judy, a white, working-class woman in her early sixties who married into a coal-mining family and worked as a stay-at-home mum, and then as a teaching assistant at the local school. She recounted to me that “on Facebook and things like that, people say . . . ‘If you voted to go out, you are old, you are racist,’ and, I mean, I don’t think I am old. And I am not racist. And you think, how can they get away with saying things like that about us? They don’t care what our ideas are and thoughts are. Just because they want to stay in.” Other more nuanced accounts of voting positions and relative age also include many Leavers, regardless of their age, who felt incensed by the argument that older people should not have had a vote. This includes Jackie, a white, middle-class retired teacher in her early seventies. Jackie tells me about a friend who “believes . . . nobody over sixty should be allowed to vote because ‘They’ve had their lives,’” her voice rising in disdain as she mimics her friend. “There is so much wrong with that,” Jackie continues, “but yeah, I hear that quite frequently.” Her sentiment is echoed by Chloe, age eighteen, a white, middle-class woman not old enough to vote but who sympathizes with Leave. Chloe tells me about her older brother’s friends’ “outrageous” comments, things like “You [young people] are the ones who should be getting the vote over them [older voters], because they are not going to be alive to be in it” and “Older people shouldn’t get the vote because . . . it is *our* future.” In contrast, some interlocutors recounted that they or others in their family had “granted” their vote to grandchildren who were not yet of voting age, and although they themselves might have voted Leave, they voted Remain instead in acknowledgment of their grandchild’s choice.

Indeed, many of my interlocutors—Remain and Leave—when considering generation and Brexit would point to examples of personally knowing individuals who bucked the trend of the “old” voting for Leave and the “young” for Remain. Julia, a white, middle-class EU national married to a British man in her forties, is one such person. When I ask her about older people and Brexit, she tells me about both her mother-in-law and a neighbor, both in their seventies: “It is quite funny, because my husband’s mum is actually a Remainer, and she is seventy. And . . . that is interesting, because when I talked to [a neighbor who is

a Leaver], he said, ‘Oh, everything was great before we joined the EU and then you know . . . it all started getting worse.’ And my mother-in-law said, ‘Well, I remember that it was crap before’ [Julia laughs]. So obviously she has a totally different memory of that time.”

Also emerging from the data in response to questions about generation is a scathing refrain of speakers personally knowing younger Remain supporters upset with the Leave outcome but who had not voted. For instance, Amanda, a white, upper middle-class, highly educated professional in her early sixties who voted Leave, described the scene at her home when her university-age son and his friends heard the results:

I came in from work and my son’s friends, about seven or eight of them, were sat here the night of the results . . . and they were all sat, [slumped] And I said, “What’s the matter with you all?” I said, “OK, put your hand up if you voted” Ah! Only [my son] voted. They were all home from uni, and they all could have gone and voted, but they probably just couldn’t get out of bed, and I said, “You should all look at yourselves in the mirror and blame yourself then.” . . . I don’t think you have a right to look upset if you didn’t even vote.

Lastly, interlocutors made complex assertions about responsibility with regard to relative age. Eighteen-year-old, white, middle-class Jess, a Remain supporter too young to vote in the Referendum, said:

Everyone my age was thinking, “Well, no offense, but you are not going to be here for much longer, and you are like deciding my whole future.” And it was also like people in older generations are living in a time that has gone, and a time that their beliefs and stuff are no longer applicable now. . . . I know a lot of people of my age on Twitter, when the actual . . . like, result came out, they were saying a lot to do with you know, “We are going to be cleaning up the messes of the older generations” and stuff.

Walter, in his late eighties, a white, working-class Leaver who worked first in ship-building and then in security, does not see the result as “mess.” He recounts his happy shock at the referendum outcome. But he then tells me with sadness that “none of this is going to make the slightest bit of difference to me, because by the time [the UK exits the EU] in two, three years down the line, I probably

won't be here. . . . It makes me feel bad that I won't be there to see it. . . . When I was a little bit younger, I suppose I would say it is my future. It is different when you have got no future." Chloe, the eighteen-year-old I introduced above, also feels generationally linked aspects of the referendum result, but for different reasons than Walter. She relays how "hard" she finds it when Remainers "apologize . . . [when] they go, 'Sorry, my generation did this to yours.'" She says she feels embarrassed for their mistaken assumption she is a Remainer based solely on her age.

It proves illuminating to read across these examples in conjunction with the ones with which I opened the article (Phil and his Facebook experiences, Ella's anger at "old people" in the street, and Coren writing in the *Times*). First, we find vitriolic and ageist language printed in newspapers, posted online, and reflected in people's everyday experiences. But this received wisdom and rhetoric always gloss over the questions of who all these old people are and who counts as old to begin with. Coren himself, aged forty-six when he wrote his piece, in fact forms part of the demographic band that tips in terms of chronological age from Remainer to Leaver majority. And yet, he adamantly distances himself from an imagined "'old' 'them.'" Second, older age does not make for a homogeneous experience or category easily defined or described. It does not have clear-cut boundaries: it is not something that starts at the end of working life, or when the body begins failing, or at a specific chronological number (Degnen 2007). It is all (and sometimes none) of these things and more. And it intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and gender in powerful ways that get erased in the prevailing, generalizing rhetoric. Third, running alongside simplistic stereotypes characterizing the assumed behaviors and beliefs of the "old" and the "young" are more nuanced accounts: examples that buck the trend, examples that challenge normative modes, and evidence offered of action for others across generational lines, such as intergenerational solidarity and "gifting" votes to grandchildren. I do not wish to overstate these counter examples—as they remain entwined with much intergenerational resentment, tension, and anger—but it is equally important not to lose sight of them altogether.

Ideas about temporal relationships also emerge: sociocultural notions about pasts, presents, futures, and the ways these are often spoken of in generational terms. Examples include Chloe being told "it is our future"; Walter's sadness at having "no future" in which to enjoy Brexit; Jess saying older people are living in "a time that has gone"; and Jackie's friend's assertion that older people have "had their lives." These examples use temporality as a way to stereotypically denote intergenerational difference: namely, the idea that older age means being part of

the past, while younger age denotes being part of the future. Such assumptions accelerate otherizing by denying coevalness to older people while granting it to younger ones. Older people are excluded from the same timeframe as the “non old” who are understood—unlike the old—to have a past, present, and future. Older people in contrast are framed as nearing death and irrelevance, occupying an impoverished time phase characterized as future-less. This constitutes a powerful symbolic frame underpinning ageism in many Western societies, and it is a pattern we see reproduced in the context of Brexit.

Additionally, this frame silences the fact that all my interlocutors—older, younger, Leave, Remain—imagine futures. When talking about Brexit and making sense of it, all my participants imagined futures by discussing how they worried or felt unsure or confident about the UK’s future, and also as they gave their rationales for their particular votes. Nearly everyone thought their vote was for the side that would ensure a better, socially just future—even if there were profound differences in what that might mean, such as Hannah, a white, highly educated professional woman in her mid-fifties who voted Leave, saying, “My sister’s point to me was that she voted Remain because it was all about the kids and she was voting for them, and, like, I said to her, ‘But do you seriously think I would have voted for something that would compromise my children’s future?’ You know, you’d do anything for your kids.”

Furthermore, many of my participants drew from various registers of the *past* (individual pasts, family pasts, pasts in living memory, historical pasts, mythical pasts) to explain their take on Brexit—though, of course, they again differed on which pasts they invoked to make sense of their and others’ votes. We can see here that generational and temporal relations to Brexit are not simply clear cut along generational lines. Both older and younger people looked to the past and future in similar and overlapping ways to produce similar and different narratives about how they voted on Brexit. Some, like Jackie (in her seventies) and Chloe (in her late teens), resist cultural scripts and temporal stereotypes that assign older people to diminished, future-less selves. Many others, including Walter (in his eighties), have internalized such stereotypes. But what about generational and temporal relations during the COVID-19 pandemic?

COVID-19 AND GENERATIONAL RELATIONS

Here, the ethnographic data also shows nuance and variety when considering generation. First, ageism was again in evidence. Consider James, a middle-class white man and business owner in his mid-fifties. He disagreed with the government providing vaccinations to older people first instead of younger

people, such as teachers, saying that “I don’t know why they started with the old people first. . . . The only reason you deal with the old people is to experiment with them on the vaccine.” When I asked him, “Who are the older people?” he replied, “Anybody over sixty-five.” James favors getting “this country through this economically, . . . and the way you do that is to look after the kids and the teachers and the people who go to work to support that.” His logic is grounded in economic value, a logic that bunches the 65+ cohort as inherently less valuable, used better as experimental guinea pigs than as credible candidates for vaccination. James’s thoughts are paralleled by another interlocutor, Dan, a university-educated, working-class white man in his mid-fifties employed by the local government. He confided in me that he thought “old people” should sacrifice themselves for the good of the rest of society, saying, “I am sorry, but, you know, Gran, there’s the ice floe over there.” And lastly David, nearly seventy, an upper middle-class, highly educated medical professional, explains that many people who died of COVID-19 “have been people who didn’t have long left anyway.” He continued, saying, “One death of a twenty-year-old aspiring university student, well. It takes an awful lot of eighty-year-olds to balance that. I don’t believe they are equal . . . one twenty-year-old dying . . . is far more important than the lives of a lot of eighty-five-year-olds.” All three men’s perspectives reflect the kinds of explicit ageism I cited earlier in this article at the highest levels of UK government decision-making, and they offer stark examples of what the medical anthropologist [Lawrence Cohen \(2020\)](#) has termed “gerocide” and [Margaret Gullette \(2024\)](#) “eldercide”: They attribute value to the lives of younger people that is not extended to the lives of older people, denigrating older people as lesser, reduced versions of full personhood enjoyed by those younger than them.

Yet, second, not all responses were straightforwardly ageist: I noted widespread outrage about the death rates of older people in UK care homes during the pandemic ([Buchanan 2020](#)), and I heard heart-wrenching stories of being only able to visit older kin through glass, without being able to comfort each other physically. Many of my interlocutors sought to protect older family members identified as vulnerable (the UK government defined this as age seventy and above), often with complicated routines to both facilitate shielding and maintain contact. Jess and her family, for instance, took turns to drive the half hour to visit her grandmother’s house: “Obviously, we couldn’t go inside or anything, but she would sit in the kitchen and we’d have the front door open and just stand there with our masks on.” Others went to great lengths to protect themselves, like June, an eighty-six-year-old, white, middle-class woman, a retired nurse who was “extremely strict on the shielding,” staying home, “because I did

not want to be a burden” by falling ill. She described the point of COVID-19 restrictions as “protecting the elderlies like me.” I heard stories, too, of offers of help from neighbors: Nick and Valerie, a white, married, middle-class couple in their seventies recounted how a “youngish, recently retired couple” offered to get groceries for them and other older people in the village. They refused because “we’re physically active. . . . We’re only in our seventies.” They pointed to other people in their eighties in the village who might be more in need. Later on, Valerie tells me about church services that have gone online and how she’s “perfectly capable of Zooming, as you know,” but she does not want to attend virtually. She says, “I am not alone with that, there’s two or three of the oldies who won’t do it. I mean Mrs. Vicar gets very cross with me. She says I am very stubborn.”

June, Nick, and Valerie’s pandemic management strategies point to larger patterns in how people often simultaneously acknowledge and push back against the label of “old,” stigmatized as it is in an ageist society. All three could be seen as examples of successful agers, still living good, long lives and not yet in bad old age, protecting their independence and autonomy, while signaling that they are not a “burden,” still “physically active,” and “perfectly capable.” But they also know that they are perceived as inhabiting the category of “the elderlies” and “the oldies.” They tread a fine line with these words. June, for instance, is well aware that “elderlies” is not standard English; she uses it in a playful way, simultaneously acknowledging her relative age while resisting its negative inflections. Robert, a seventy-nine-year-old friend of June’s, who also sees himself as a successful ager, similarly reflects to me how “people my age, you know, probably we’re all getting into borrowed time.” Later on in the same conversation he makes a wry joke that being seventy-nine means “I am nearly dead”—something he both does and does not mean. And while playfully using “the elderlies,” June also muses at one point that “even at eighty-six, you still have this yearning to know who you are.” Her words point to a contradiction experienced by many, namely, internalized social norms of the inability to or disinterest in learning anything new in old age, juxtaposed with her own lived understanding that this is simply not true—June “still” yearns to grow her self-knowledge. This marks a future-facing desire for and imagining of self, yet it stands in such contrast to ageist attitudes that June feels she must preface it with “even at.” Fleeting moments of reflexivity such as these about negative social positioning due to relative age demonstrate what it is like to age and live within a society that condemns later life. Even though successful agers work hard to evade the stigmatizing category “old” (Lamb 2019), they cannot always deflect or avoid ageist attitudes and beliefs, ones often lodged in temporal frameworks. This is partly because the

notion of “successful aging” rests on its implied opposite, “failed aging,” and thus is itself ageist in many respects: the only way to age well or “successfully” is to not show signs of age.

A final thread concerning generation and temporal flows emerged from many of my interlocutors in their twenties and their parents in their late fifties and early sixties. I was struck by how many of the middle-class families in the research had young adult children who moved back into family homes in the first several months of UK lockdowns. It resulted from their housing conditions, often in shared urban rental properties, which meant they were stuck living in very limited spaces (often only bedrooms) and so chose to return to the relative luxury of the family home. While most people recounted this return to the family home as a positive experience, the resulting intergenerational family dynamics made for a strange temporal reversal in life course—the empty nests were suddenly no longer empty and the young adults were matter out of intergenerational place. And, as much as Mary, in her early sixties, a retired professional and one of the participants in this position, loved having her adult children (aged twenty-nine and thirty-one) living back at home with her again, she flagged the pressures it incurred:

My kids, they're entrapped. I mean [daughter] has had a year of not being allowed to date, you know, biological clock ticking, not that she wants kids, but nonetheless. You know, giving up a year or two at my age, which is neither very old nor very young, is not a problem. A year or two out of [daughter]'s life, when a relationship's broken up, is huge.

Lizzie, in her early twenties, had also moved back to the family home. She told me “Older people have been lonely [while shielding], but my entire life has been on PAUSE,” revealing through her words how she had experienced lockdown restrictions as a temporal block. Mary's and Lizzie's thoughts mirror those of many of my participants (younger and older) who felt that these adult children were not getting to do the things they “should” be doing at their age: adventure, learning how to adult, meeting new sexual partners, beginning or ending relationships, living independently. Instead, they were enduring severely disrupted education and work pathways and missing rites of passage and age-specific transitions such as graduations, sitting exams, or driving lessons.

Pandemic disruptions were linked to aging bodies and older selves, too: hip and knee operations delayed, interrupted post-operation care, retirements begun without any way to mark them, and no “normal” rites of passage to ease that

transition. Victoria, for instance, a highly educated, upper middle-class white woman working in a high-status profession, was due to retire in April 2020. She had wanted to start getting “much more involved in village life by joining dance and yoga,” but instead found herself cooking and cleaning for three of her adult children, her ninety-year-old mother, her husband, and a son’s girlfriend, all of whom returned to the family home during the pandemic.

Taken together, these examples illustrate nuanced differences in how temporality is understood to matter at different points in the life course, complicately linked to normative assumptions about time’s linear developmental progression. Arguably, what emerges is a perceived urgency around younger people’s temporality, understood as requiring advancement along the arrow of time toward full adulthood and life-course milestones. In this linear mode of generational thought, perhaps pausing is considered more dangerous and disturbing than it is for older people who are, conversely, understood as having already achieved important milestones. Pandemic disruptions were linked to any number of life course–relevant transitions that became topsy-turvy, but which sometimes became framed in terms of opposing generational needs such as in Lizzie’s experience. An instructive contrast is Victoria’s and Mary’s worlds which were also turned upside down, but perhaps their requirements for progression are not assumed to need to happen in the same way as Mary’s daughter and Lizzie, due to their relatively older age.

CONCLUSIONS

Social imaginaries and forms of public discourse that pivot around and emphasize intergenerational difference have sharply marked both the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and the COVID-19 pandemic in England. They demonstrate how in this cultural setting, imagined generational relations with time can create the aged other in a chronocratic regime of ageism, that is, the denial of coevalness or coexistence in time via everyday temporal regimes. Sometimes these dynamics are clearly apparent, such as explicit and implicit forms of ageism in both the Brexit and COVID-19 examples. At other moments, the dynamics are more nuanced and not always patently ageist, such as when the perceived urgency of time differed for older and younger generations during the pandemic. And yet, time and temporality are woven through all I have been describing here: notions of older people as malign agents robbing the young of the future and creating “messes” that will need to be rectified; older people as not deserving of referendum votes because they form “part of” the past; older people who require shielding, in turn meaning that younger people’s lives are “on pause,”

blocking their temporal flows; older people who “have reached their time” and so should not resist dying in a pandemic; disputes over who the future belongs to.

As a social grouping or social category, older people are often conceptualized as out of time, both in the sense of having run out of time, given the inevitability of death for us all, and in the sense of being out of step with the normative timescape of socially dominant middle-aged and young adults. A cascade of social consequences spill forth from these cultural assumptions about the characteristics of temporality and older age, assumptions that threaten to undermine older people’s social status, social equality, status as full adult persons, and citizenship rights such as voting. In such heavily temporalized discourse, older people—unlike younger and middle-aged normative adults—are not always held in the same temporal moment. They are not always understood as coeval, and when this occurs, they are not “us”—they are *them*, they are *other*. Generational power relations are expressed via the entanglements of time becoming “our ‘everyday’ and structure[ing] our ordinary experiences” (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020, 6), with ageism too often riding under the radar and going unchecked.

In calling attention to conceptualizations of temporality that denied coevalness and fostered ageism during the turmoil of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, I have sought to extend earlier anthropological thinking on generations by considering the unequal workings of power in how temporality is used to imagine and reproduce ideas of generational difference. Thinking time, temporality, and intergenerational relations together through the lens of Brexit and the pandemic reveal the pernicious forms ageism takes in everyday, ordinary language, discourse, practices, and beliefs. Ageism casually promotes damaging forms of discrimination and dehumanization, but I also wish to remain mindful of the many layers of contradictions, nuance, and variability in the practices and beliefs around conceptualizing generational difference. Older people are blamed by some for Brexit and for stealing their futures, while others thank them for granting their votes. Older people are seen as pandemic liabilities by some, while others rage at the COVID-19 death toll in nursing homes. Ageist attitudes are endemic but not straightforward, and temporal regimes are but one of many in what Lamb (2019, 265) calls a “confluence of factors” contributing to how older age is stigmatized.

The Euro-Western concept of generation is bound up in broader Enlightenment notions of linear progress, where each generation is understood to follow the next, in what Tim Ingold (2023, x) describes as a “model of generational replacement and succession.” Comparing this model to imagining generations as a stack of cards, Ingold (2023, 3) shows how this mode of thinking naturalizes the

idea of generations as serial replacement rather than continuity. Drawing from the ethnographic record, which demonstrates how atypical this understanding of age relations has been historically and cross-culturally, Ingold (2023, 1–5) asks what would happen if we conceptualized human lives and generations as ropes instead of layers that stack up in a linear temporal flow of time. Instead of one generation’s time eventually “being up” or “running out,” what if, like rope-making, human lives and generations require twisting a double strand, one in opposing tensile direction to the other, giving the rope its strength (Ingold 2023, 1–5)? As he reminds us, lengths of rope are much longer than any single fiber, as multiple shorter fibers are twisted in, producing something significantly greater than the sum of any of its parts. Ingold (2023, 3) suggests a processual approach to generation, “a bringing forth of life, not just at conception or birth but in every moment of existence. Living . . . is what we do, but it is also what we undergo as, winding along together, we actively generate ourselves and one another” via collaboration and overlap.

I find myself wondering what such a mode of thinking might do to chronocracy and ageism. What blocks our imagination about what it will be like to be an older person ourselves one day, and to act accordingly in public, civic, spheres with those more aged than us? Are the tensions required in ropes ones paralleled with those between generations, and would a shift from conceptualizing stacks and replacement to fibers and overlap suffice to rectify it? Is there scope to bring us from intergenerational othering and adversity to intergenerational empathy and perhaps even explicit solidarity? Perhaps we might release later life from stereotyped assumptions of linear modes of temporality. And perhaps then time might become not a weapon to create or exclude an aging other, but rather generative both of ourselves and of each other, regardless of relative age.

ABSTRACT

Generation or relative age is a common way humans define social difference. In Europe and North America, old age is frequently perceived as a period of decline and loss, a condition “successful aging” paradigms exhort individuals to avoid for as long as possible. Explicit and implicit ageist beliefs, discourses, and practices marginalize later life, portraying it as undesirable and inferior. This essay explores how imagined generational relationships with time—younger people as future facing, older people as out of time—enrol linear, future-oriented temporal perspectives in reproducing ageism. The aftermath of the Brexit referendum, followed closely by the COVID-19 pandemic, serve as my ethnographic examples. These two extraordinary events permit me to highlight how chronocracy (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020)—that is, the denial of coevalness or coexistence in time through everyday temporal

regimes—reinforces unequal power dynamics, and to explore how generational groups are differently valued in contemporary England. [older age; generations; ageism; temporality; England; chronocracy; temporal relations]

NOTES

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1. Most polling bundled older voters into a “65+ category” and did not disaggregate them into further cohorts, such as 80, 90, and 100. It is worth noting however that in a post by [Kieran Devine \(2019\)](#), published on the LSE blog, he argues that amongst voters aged 80 and above, there is some evidence that with higher chronological age came a declining support for Leave. Devine postulates that this might be due to a closer sense of affiliation and connection of people in these older cohorts—who had personally endured the Second World War—to the foundational principles of the EU project: peace.
2. While this article draws solely on my own research and analysis in the North East of England, the ethnographic team (myself, Katharine Tyler, and Joshua Blamire) met regularly to discuss fieldwork as it occurred in our respective fieldwork sites and collaborated over a number of years before and after the fieldwork periods. The account presented here has thus benefited from insights generated across the other fieldsites and from intellectual exchange across the research collaboration. This article is based on two larger projects, both funded by the UKRI Economic and Social Research Council, with largely overlapping team members across both projects. The first was titled “Identity, Belonging, and the Role of the Media in Brexit Britain” (2018–2022) (ES/R005133/1), and the second “Identity, Inequality, and the Media in Brexit-Covid-19-Britain” (2020–2022) (ES/V006320/1; see <https://brexit-studies.org> for more on both projects). Katharine Tyler (University of Exeter) served as the projects' principal investigator, Cathrine Degnen (Newcastle University), Susan Banducci, Travis Coan, and Daniel Stevens (all at the University of Exeter) as co-investigators, and Helen Snell as artist in residence. The postdoctoral researchers at the University of Exeter were Joshua Blamire, Laszlo Horvath, Janice Hoang, Andrew Jones, and DeDe Patterson. The project dataset was submitted to the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex. Ethical approval was granted by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, Newcastle University, and by the College of Social Sciences and International Studies at the University of Exeter. Steps have been taken to protect the identities of interlocutors, including using pseudonyms throughout this article, with some highly identifying characteristics changed or removed.
3. See Statista, “Median Annual Earnings for Full-time Employees in the United Kingdom in 2023, by Region,” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/416139/full-time-annual-salary-in-the-uk-by-region/>, last accessed July 15, 2024; and North East Child

- Poverty Commission, “Facts and Figures Information Sheet,” 2024, <https://www.nechildpoverty.org.uk/facts/>, last accessed July 12, 2024.
4. See North East Evidence Hub, “Employment by Sector,” 2024, <https://evidencehub.northeast-ca.gov.uk/report/employment-sector>, last accessed July 12, 2024.
 5. See Electoral Commission, “EU referendum results by region: North East,” 2016, available at <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/results-and-turnout-eu-referendum/eu-referendum-results-region-north-east>

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