

Why We Need to Talk About 'Aging While Black'

Ageism takes a particular toll on those already bearing the weight of racism.

According to the *The Huffington Post* of March 7, 2017, “aging while black” is an act of survival. The story of Africans in America is a story of continuous systematic efforts to bring about our subjugation and demise; but miraculously we have thrived. While old age and death are linked in the dominant American consciousness, too often for African-Americans, age does not predict when death will come knocking.

Aging While Black

We have seen death take our babies, our youth, our middle-aged folks and our elders. Death by police firearms, death due to lack of health care, death from drinking polluted water. So, what does it mean to age as a black person in America? When incarceration and murder steal the lives of thousands of black men and boys under the age of 30 each year, how do we make sense of life at later ages?

The Stress of Staying Strong

We can settle these inequalities by fostering a mentality centered in Black sustainability and in an appreciation for the revolutions of the aging process. Because the stress of being an African in America is literally producing greater wear on our internal organs than those of other ethnic groups, making us more susceptible to heart disease, stroke, disabilities and other chronic illnesses, African-Americans cannot afford to be concerned with superficial aspects of aging like wrinkles and sagging skin.

The “black don’t crack” mantra is one that black folks have proudly exclaimed for years, but the expression contradicts old age and correlates aging with a descent from desirability and attractiveness. The pressures that come along with being a “strong black woman” who maintains a household, works outside of the home, and retains youthful features come at a major cost to black women's health - a cost whose only return is the reaffirmation of dominant white standards of beauty that exclude black women.

The Need for Intergenerational Activism

Young activists have made claims of “reverse ageism”, elders perceiving younger generations as foolish and inexperienced. On another side, some elders believe that young activists have failed to seek the mentorship of older folks or to be guided by freedom traditions of the past. As a result, a divisive battle of wills centered on age stifles black progress. **As freedom fighters, we must work together because there is no black future without black youth and black elders working together in solidarity.**

In fact, we can already see some of the fruits of intergenerational and intersectional black activism in the 21st century. Resistance movements like Black Lives Matter have shown us that leadership is not dependent on age. While it may be important to give age-specific groups space to gather and commune, we should always ensure that there is also space for the contributions of folks of all ages.

We must stretch and strengthen our capacity for our elders !