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BOOK REVIEW

WHOSE OLD AGE IN BRAZIL? READING MARY DEL PRIORE'S *UMA HISTÓRIA DA VELHICE NO BRASIL*

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When Mary Del Priore set out in her 2025 book *Uma história da velhice no Brasil* ("A History of Old Age in Brazil") to examine representations and traces of older people across the centuries in Brazil, several questions immediately arose for the reader. For instance, what kind of "Brazilianness" is she addressing, given that colonial legacies allowed only very specific segments of society to record their historical events? What would be, then, her goals as a historian in portraying common or changing experiences of ageing in a country marked by stark social inequalities? Unfortunately, these questions remain largely unresolved in the author's overarching narrative, whose ellipses and elusive digressions fail to critically engage with issues of intersectional ageing, despite the complexity of the phenomenon across generations and social strata.

That said, the book explicitly seeks to offer *a* certain (not *the)* history of ageing – one less concerned with "theoretic-conceptual considerations about the theme" (Del Priore 2025, 11) and aware of the considerable documentary gaps concerning ageing individuals in both written and visual records. On one hand, this approach limits the work's analytical depth; on the other, it reflects an intimate

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perspective of an author who, as she acknowledges, is grappling with the realisation of her own ageing and that of her mother. Del Priore thus searches for vestiges of transformations in what it has meant – and continues to mean – to grow older in Brazil, examining how dominant perceptions of a healthy, desirable, or obscene ageing body are revealed in historical documents or shaped by cultural representations.

In its strongest moments, the book offers glimpses of a critique of how culture has negotiated socio-political divisions in Brazil and, in fact, has worked in tandem with power dynamics to mould perceptions of ageing that became naturalised over centuries. Since Del Priore adopts a chronological account beginning with the European invasion of Brazilian territories, one of the earliest and most striking examples is her discussion of Jean de Léry's account from the 16th century, telling of an old Tupinambá' view on the trade and accumulation of brazilwood:

> You are great madmen, for you cross the sea and endure great hardships to heap up riches for your children or for those who survive you! Will not the land that nourished you be sufficient to nourish them as well?" (Del Priore 2025, 23–24).

This passage illustrates how anthropocentric drives were already entrenched despite indigenous peoples' evident knowledge about natural resources – a phenomenon Krenak (2020, 17) describes as "abuse dressed up as reason", whereby extractivist behaviour is justified under the guise of family preservation. In this Western worldview, ageing was interpreted through immediate, self-interested perspectives and predatory notions of "progress" whose consequences persist today.

Del Priore also analyses Theodore de Bry's engravings portraying indigenous women with sagging breasts, depicting them from a violent colonial perspective as witches, untrustworthy, and barbaric. As she observes, de Bry never crossed the Atlantic Sea, so these images reveal more about European imaginaries than Brazilian realities, shaping the "New World" in cultural memory as both an Eden and a hellish place for colonisers, whose own actions exterminated entire populations.

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Figure 1: older native women in anthropophagic ritual, through the European eyes (1596). Source: Coleção Brasiliana Itaú.

In newly urbanised colonial territories, Del Priore highlights that love and sexual activity for older people were heavily restricted, and often attributed to witchcraft or insanity, and socially condemned (2025, 48). Age differentiation was normalised culturally through specific modes of recognition. For instance, the 17th-century Portuguese writer Francisco Manuel de Melo classified marriages into three categories: the Devil's (a young man with an old woman), God's (a young couple), and Death's (an old man with a young woman) (2025, 55), rigidly regulating social relations and age-appropriate partnerships.

In the 19th century, Del Priore notes the role of widows in matrifocal households, showing through historical documents how older women – whether free or enslaved – often assisted other women, leaving behind inherited or accumulated wealth (2025, 64). Yet the social life of widows remained tightly controlled by norms that limited their ability to express emotions or live autonomously.

For Afro-diasporic communities forcibly brought to Brazil, the transmission of oral, linguistic, and cultural traditions depended on older generations. The figure of Pai João, a centenarian who preserved chronicles and histories, embodied this intergenerational continuity (2025, 75). This underscores how conceptions of ageing in Brazil have historically been defined in opposition to Afro-descendants, who were largely denied written records of their origins. *Quilombos*, in particular, exemplified forms of resistance that highlight older black people's historical and cultural importance beyond anecdotal recognition.

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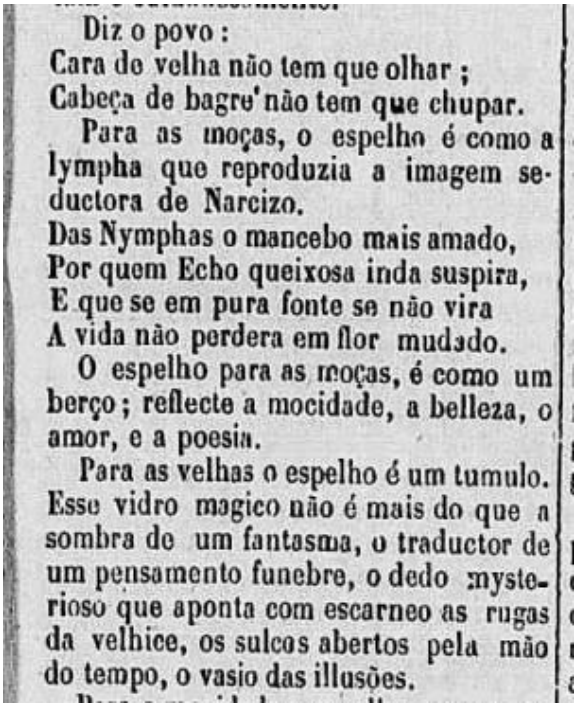
Advanced age also served as a basis for claims to liberation from slavery, as seen in letters sent to the king (2025, 80–81), highlighting the political dimensions of ageing and labour. Such documents reveal profound social disparities tied to class and ethnicity that continue to shape experiences of ageing in Brazil.

Del Priore further notes that in the 19th century, the concept of spleen or melancholy was strongly associated with old age (2025, 124), particularly during periods of urban modernisation and industrial growth, which dislocated older people from familiar social spaces. Women, in particular, faced age-related exclusion: newspapers claimed that "for the old women, the mirror is a tombstone" (2025, 131), reflecting pervasive ageist and gendered perceptions. The fear of ageing for women was often linked to remaining unmarried; for example, Júlia Lopes de Almeida's 1897 novel *The Widow Simões* portrays a protagonist who considers herself "old" at just 36 (2025, 143).



Diz o povo:
Cara de velha não tem que olhar;
Cabeça de bagre não tem que chupar.
Para as moças, o espelho é como a lympha que reproduzia a imagem seductora de Narcizo.
Das Nymphas o mancebo mais amado,
Por quem Echo queixosa inda suspira,
E que se em pura fonte se não vira
A vida não perdera em flor mudado.
O espelho para as moças, é como um berço; reflecte a mocidade, a belleza, o amor, e a poesia.
Para as velhas o espelho é um tumulo. Esse vidro magico não é mais do que a sombra de um fantasma, o traductor de um pensamento funebre, o dedo mysterioso que aponta com escarneo as rugas da velhice, os sulcos abertos pela mão do tempo, o vasio das illusões.

Figure 2: Section of "O Espírito Santense", 1871: a mirror, as a "magic glass, is no more than a shadow of a ghost" for the older women. Source: Hemeroteca Digital, Fundação Biblioteca Nacional.

In the most oppressed sectors of Brazilian society, legislation such as the 1885 Brazilian Sexagenarian Law had little practical effect, due to low life expectancy among enslaved populations and noncompliance by landowners (2025, 153). Nonetheless, older black individuals resisted, participating in revolts and legal

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claims for freedom, highlighting ongoing struggles for autonomy and ageing free from exploitation.

By the late 19th century, associations between old age and poverty rendered older populations increasingly vulnerable and linked to asylums. Institutions like São Luiz characterised old age as disability or decline, reflecting broader Western hygienist and medicalised approaches to ageing (2025, 184; Foucault 2003). Linguistic shifts, such as the widespread use of *você* (you), and the introduction of retirement in the early 20th century, further regulated social divisions and productivity, linking age to economic value (2025, 194–197).

More than ever, ageing was associated to how profitable a body was – time through the clocks and at the factories would govern people's perception of age and future (2025, 194). In 1923, a landmark in terms of the social security retirement benefit, which stated that one could retire after reaching 50 years old or after working for 30 years (2025, 197). This association of old age with retirement would be an enduring one, organising the social and cultural life around pensions, insurances and subjects of a life that is not anymore restricted to labour. Drawing on accounts from memorialists and biographies, Del Priore detects a variety of feelings associated to this retirement phase: "uselessness" was not rare, as one can imagine (2025, 203).

Yet, this experience of retirement would not apply to all segments of society: remnants of the slavery system (2025, 205) that were pushed to the fringes of society, several black people could be seen working until a very long age in functions as fishing, loaders and stevedores. With the changes in urban settings, a generational gap between the countryside and the cities widened and in different parts of the country there was a battle between the urban youth trying to demolish the old customs like the modernists did, but also in rural settings the figure of the local strongmen or oligarch who detained power was more alive than ever (2025, 2016). The rural force of old men who in the past were strong and connected to their roots is summed up by the great writer Graciliano Ramos in his book *Infância*, about his vigorous grandfather and frail urban father (2025, 2016). This contrast is interesting for the look that 20th century thinkers attributed to being old in light of the overwhelming effects of the modern lifestyle into everyone: losing social ties, connection to their own vigour and health, are changes that started to be opposed to

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another (maybe idealised) view into strong, vivacious older people from the previous centuries.

The portrait of President Getúlio Vargas, who came back to power in 1951, would be omnipresent in public spaces and Del Priore retrieves a Carnival parade song that would say about Vargas: "the smile of the little old man makes us feel happy" (2025, 252), revealing how politics has always been in tune with cultural manifestations and ageing would not escape the way of describing leaders. In this case, being old was an attribute which recuperated the traditional politics of centralising power and promoting masculine saviours who would bring security or utopian change – for problems they were responsible as an elite in the first place.

In 1971, as Del Priore writes (2025, 257), the concept of ageism was already being discussed in the civil society. In a newspaper article, physician Mário Filizzola spoke of how marginalised older people were – and the starting age for being consider old would be 40! The linguistic stigma associated to debile old people, stemming from work and health restrictions, would make up an era in which the hardships of being older were everywhere for their representations. In the arts and the press, it was not uncommon to see older people being characterised as square, suspicious and reactionary (not by chance, the military dictators were all old men).

In the 1980s, the author speaks of how the notion of "third age" was on the rise in Brazil, coupled with a "singular old person" view, mark of the individualistic era, insofar as having the same age would not mean same reality (2025, 261). This social distinction gained shape in the *velho*/*idoso* (old/senior) binary use, according to social class; the middle class, adopting the third age concept, was reshaping through habits and consumerist ideals how one could and should age better. For women, Del Priore remarks, an age of solitude, aesthetic pressure and sometimes abandonment can be understood in several artefacts – in contrast to previous centuries in which the matriarchs were more confident.

The *Estatuto da Pessoa Idosa*, in 2003, marked a major advancement in safeguarding older people's rights in Brazil, and intertwining this with class struggle, targeting people in more vulnerable situations such as poverty. However, the end of life had taken a turn also in terms of hospitalisation, so much so that for several people that would mean to die alone in a sanitised way, away from everyone and even "hidden" from society (2025, 276). A sign of ever more individualised

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times, it also speaks of a growing concern that older people have to be a problem to be dealt with, a burden.

Speaking of contemporary times, Mary Del Priore appeals for a more inclusive and fluid idea of the older people: for the sexagenarians in 2024/2025/2026, growing older could reflect conquering a stage in life rather than representing a problem (2025, 278), however the promotion of old age, the author posits, is often shallow, connected to ideals that discard the complexity, diversity and disparity of social realities in Brazil. In gathering testimonies that relate to those broad ways of getting old, Del Priore set to compound a mosaic of experiences that are particular to the Brazilian experience of ageing.

However, and precisely for this ambitious goal, the author ends up not problematising the very concept of historicising age in Brazil, which would involve questioning her sources (that are hegemonic par excellence) or offering counter-perspectives from the same periods in analysis to make a case the age is (obviously) affected by social class, race and gender. For this reason, the reader keeps finding glimpses of precious data that could, if read in depth, lead to a more critical take into the cultural and social change in the makeup of ageing populations. For this generalising term "in Brazil", Del Priore engages in a historical wandering around the theme that never fulfils the encompassing desire to attain what ageing even means – and lets the actual interesting challenges along the process underexplored.

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