Coming of Age in the Era of Acceleration: Rethinking Literacy Narratives as Pedagogies of Lifelong Learning

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"Although literacy is constantly accumulating and accelerating, demanding more and more from literacy learners and teachers, we are not powerless in the face of such demands."
—Daniel Keller, *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in the Age of Acceleration*

"Work with it a little bit every day to try to keep up with it because it's changing so fast."
—E'Rich Harrington, "My Struggles with Technology"

This article argues for the fields of literacy and composition studies to develop more progressive understandings of the aging process not only as biological, but also as culturally and socially situated. As more people live longer lives, social structures and institutions will need to change in ways that are not yet clear. Recognizing and determining, in ethical ways, the kinds of changes that can nurture fulfilling experiences and support older adults requires more nuanced attitudes about "old age." Even though, as Simone de Beauvoir's *Coming of Age* illustrates, people do not have complete autonomy of their health or their goals, we do have the capacity to compose social parameters and personal relationships to support our ways of aging with one another. We draw on new literacy studies (NLS) and age studies because when considered together, lessons from the two fields do the combined work of broadening understandings of the relationship of literacy to aging while also providing a language and theoretical perspective from which to interrogate this relationship. While working at the intersection of NLS and age studies has implications across a broad range of disciplines, composition studies is particularly well suited because of its emphasis on pedagogy. Further, integrating NLS and age studies seems well suited to consider Jonathan Alexander's recent call for "a phenomenological approach that will account better for the complexities of literacies that are not just sponsored, but that emerge out of deep needs for affinity and affiliation. And then we need also to figure out how our pedagogies might benefit from such approaches" (532).

Currently, age studies scholars such as Sarah Lamb "invite critical dialogue on a wider set of possibilities for imagining what it is to live meaningfully in later life" (Lamb xii). Her invitation

beckons scholars to discuss the lived experiences of older adults as a way to create more dynamic, dexterous models of aging because, as she argues, "[a] binary paradigm of aging as good or bad, successful or failed, is too simple a model, and too evaluative, to capture the complexity and ambiguity of life as lived" (Lamb xii). Lamb's invitation to engage in a critical dialogue about living meaningfully offers composition scholars opportunities to consider reading and writing within the experiences of an entire life. Taking up a critical discussion about living meaningfully is especially relevant in our current moment that prioritizes digital texts. Recent work from rhetoric/composition scholars such as Daniel Keller raises important questions surrounding the accelerated life cycle of digital materials. Building on Deborah Brandt's work, Keller notes the changes in digital environments now happen on a scale of years rather than decades as they did during the 20th century. He provides a compelling list of changes that have taken place over the past decade to advance his argument: "If we take accumulation and acceleration as defining features of contemporary literacy, then a goal for educators should include helping students gain versatile, dexterous approaches to both reading and writing so they are prepared to navigate a wide range of ever-changing literacy contexts" (8-9).

While Keller is right to call for versatile and dexterous models of literacy, Lamb's invitation from age studies offers a powerful reminder that chasing digital literacies is not the primary goal for composition scholars. Nor should it be. Instead, nurturing literacy practices that help build and maintain the constructive relationships that contribute to a meaningful life must remain our central focus. Literacy, then, is best understood as a means to an end—and an especially important means, to be sure, since it helps us define and promote what "that end" can mean. Considering age studies alongside Keller and Alexander prompts vital questions about literacy. In particular, how do we encourage younger adults to consider literacy not as a static state of being—that once they can read and write they are and will remain literate—but as a tool for discovering who we can become over the course of our lifetime? How do we encourage students to use literacy as a tool to nurture affinities and affiliations over the course of their lives? What are we doing as scholars to maintain our literacy as we age and to develop our own literacy of aging?

Literacy and composition studies scholars have begun considering some of the issues raised by age studies. For example, Heidi McKee and Kristine Blair highlight the importance of recognizing the writing practices of older adults beyond reductive stereotypes. As they point out, "Knowing why learners have come to a program and what goals individuals have for their participation . . . is particularly important for working with older adults who seek to develop their technological literacies" (21). They find that understanding the different reasons for learning technological literacies requires acknowledging different individual, familial, and community interactions that might provide the physical, emotional, or financial support necessary to develop those new literacies. Assuming older adults are incapable of learning simply because of their age rather than because of their support systems ignores the rhetorical effect such ubiquitous depictions have on older people's confidence to continue learning. As Lauren Bowen notes, "the conflation of aging and bodily decline potentially limits the literate and rhetorical development of older adults" ("Beyond Repair," 437). "Wrapped up in such age-based rhetorics of literacy," she continues, "are assumptions about older adults' inability or unwillingness to take up newer literacies associated with younger people" (438).

As their work demonstrates, literacy scholars have begun taking up issues of age and have been raising new issues for scholars to consider. However, English studies programs, and liberal arts more broadly, have yet to sustain a critical dialogue about persisting conceptions of old age and of aging. As Kathleen Woodward states bluntly, "For it remains the case today that aging, in comparison with research on sexual and racial difference, has been virtually ignored in the humanities. Age is still the missing category in cultural studies" ("Rereading"). This gap provides opportunities for composition scholars to continue the work of others, like Bowen and McKee and Blair above, who examine how reading and writing change as a person ages. However, given our field's commitments to the teaching of writing, this gap also invites us to enact pedagogical approaches that challenge entrenched "curricula of aging" (Bowen, "Beyond Repair"). Such pedagogical approaches would work toward building a language for aging together, which must begin by acknowledging diverse models of living—and for that, scholars and students need a wide variety of stories.

In the following pages, we first suggest a specific contact point to integrate age studies and new literacy studies as a framework for a literacy of aging: new literacy studies complicates simple conceptions of literacy by situating literacy practices and materials within historical and ideological contexts (Graff, *Literacy Myth*; Street; Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives*), while age studies highlights individuals as dynamic and social beings, complicating simple conceptions of old age by situating current aversions to old age within historical and ideological contexts (Beauvoir; Woodward, "Performing Age"; Segal). In other words, definitions of "literacy" and "old age" vary across histories and cultures. We also highlight three particularly relevant lessons from age studies before we briefly discuss the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) as an appropriate site to begin theorizing a literacy of aging. With an eye toward literacy, we then apply lessons from age studies to analyze one narrative from the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (thedaln.org). Our analysis captures a sampling of the rhetorical moves and ideological underpinnings associated with prevailing, commonsensical perceptions of age. It is important to note that our intent is to enact part of our larger argument to develop more sophisticated conceptions of age that are sensitive to guiding tenets of literacy studies. The last section of our article encourages composition teacher-scholars, directors, and administrators to actively engage in recomposing the communities we build with our scholarship and our pedagogy. More specifically, we encourage scholars to rethink *who* helps students learn how to learn, not just what materials or texts students currently use to interact with one another. We argue for intentionally expanding opportunities to interact with people of different ages, especially older adults, since developing and nurturing constructive relationships is our primary reason to read and write. To that end, we leave readers with an assignment sequence they can adapt according to their scholarly and pedagogical interests.

How Ageism Limits Composition

As mentioned, age studies scholars have worked to complicate overly simplistic, sentimental, ahistorical conceptions of how people negotiate the aging process—but not simply to challenge the status quo. At stake for these scholars is a belief in what it means to be human and which pressures

and attitudes we acknowledge as valid in the aging process. The problem with ageism, as Sarah Lamb defines it, is that it "goes beyond prejudice against particular older individuals to entail a broader, pervasive aversion to and embarrassment about the condition of old age in general, in oneself and others, and in humankind" (xi). If this is true, then age studies scholars find themselves in matters of temporality and identity, critically reconsidering the intersection of both terms in the hopes of avoiding regressive, anachronistic, and sentimental characterizations of people and aging that essentially "strip us of our own future" (Andrews 303). In other words, unconsciously adhering to ageism restricts our view of what is possible for ourselves and the people we age with. This has significant implications for composition instructors who design curricula, develop relationships across campus and communities, and work alongside students. While a complete review of age studies is beyond the scope of a single article, we present the following three specific lessons because they highlight certain ideological beliefs that limit composition studies.

Limit One: The Ideology of Autonomous Aging

Age studies scholars challenge the assumption that we as individuals possess complete control over our own lives, including our health and social circumstances; that if we exercise, eat well, and make wise decisions, we will inevitably enjoy a long, fulfilling life with an appropriate and just conclusion (Lamb; Calasanti and King; Beauvoir). Instead, age studies scholars illustrate that the commitments, obligations, and goals we set for ourselves will inevitably change, whether we wanted them to or not, during a long life (Bateson). In other words, because we are individuals who live socially, the individual changes we experience as we age also have social consequences. By contextualizing personal experiences and changes as socially situated, age studies scholars highlight how simplistic conceptions of society, self-identity, and old age undergird an ideology of autonomous aging.

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Unraveling the persistent beliefs that make an autonomous ideology of aging possible also raises critical questions of concern for composition studies scholars—in particular, how assumptions about age impact how composition studies scholars conceive of literacy learning temporally. Simple conceptions of age presume that once we become adults our goals, obligations, and relationships will not change until we reach a very old age marked by a rapid decline of our body and mind. A belief that adults completely control their goals and relationships oversimplifies the complexity of life experiences, which limits their access to the necessary resources to develop new literacy practices. A failure to conceptualize old age beyond simplistic, flat assumptions is a failure to acknowledge the complex challenges and conditions we all experience. More specifically for composition scholars, a failure to conceptualize age is a failure to conceptualize the reasons we read, write, and communicate with one another.

It also fails to recognize the social history of the kinds of relationships we build, maintain, repair, leave, and discard over the course of a life. As Ingrid Arnet Connidis describes in "Intimate

Relationships,"

> As we age, we experience change in our own lives and in the social worlds we inhabit; the longer we live, the more we experience change as a constant feature of our lives. Anticipating living longer also means that when we begin our relationships with others, the reality of a lifetime commitment is a much longer reality. Finally, spending a longer time in a stage of life that is not dominated by paid work can redefine gender relations. (129)

Her comments provide a stark reminder that as we live longer lives, we must consider how relationships will need to change as well. Falling into the autonomous age trap obscures how we can use reading and writing to construct relationships and support systems.

Limit Two: Our Culture's Obsession with Youth Rhetoric

Youth (as a concept of development) is frequently described in terms of vitality, health, and opportunity. The rhetoric of youth relies on a logic that Simone de Beauvoir explains well: "since the child is a potential active member, society ensures its own future by investing in him, whereas in its eyes the aged person is no more than a corpse under suspended sentence" (Beauvoir 217). In this sense, an obsession with youth rhetoric has the self-defeating consequence of propagating a message and ideology that relies on the belief that as long as we are not old, we still have a future—we still matter to society. In "Resisting Age Bias in Digital Literacy Research," Lauren Bowen suggests that persistent ageist stereotypes are supported by numerous age-based assumptions. Most important is the fact that she connects youth-centered ideologies and youth-centered rhetorics of literacy to our current technological and cultural moment. "By paying closer attention to the work of older adults," Bowen writes, "we begin to make transparent the ageist ideologies that infuse our professional and public discourses on literacy, learning, and technology, and to move beyond such youth-centered understandings" (Bowen 602-03).

A youth-centric bias, as Beauvoir and Bowen encapsulate it, suggests that society makes resources available to young people but not to old people. As Bowen and McKee and Blair make clear, having access to the appropriate resources and being supported and encouraged by those around us are vital to develop new literacy practices. As such, a youth-centric bias limits whom composition studies effectively reaches, who can find composition instruction valuable, and with whom our students interact through reading and writing and speaking. It also reinforces how that society continues to distribute resources to younger people.

Limit Three: Prevailing Views of Successful Living

Age studies scholars complicate pervasive, binaristic depictions of old age that represent people as having aged either successfully or unsuccessfully. As Lynne Segal notes, such binaries do not acknowledge "how we always struggle throughout our lives to become, and remain, the person we feel 'we are,' striving to retain some sense of selfhood and agency" ("The Coming of Age Studies"). Other scholars, like Mary Catherine Bateson, challenge narratives found in traditional biographies of extremely "successful" people because they describe a person's life experiences in a linear trajectory: one that implies that "successful people" decide early in life to achieve a particular goal (one they have

already achieved *before* they tell their story). Further, such narratives imply the successful person required little or no assistance from others, including any social or economic privileges provided by race, class, or gender. Such narratives, scholars argue, evaluate older individuals in terms of a characterization of success that is based on preconceived notions about particular lifestyles.

Bateson and others teach us that how we conceptualize aging and "being aged" is intimately connected to how we characterize our achievements—the threshold moments in our lives that we sometimes retroactively (and inaccurately) attribute to individual decisions. Reconsidering what counts as evidence of achievement and success in the context of a whole life means reconsidering the persistent stereotypes and ideologies that inform prevailing views of being "successfully aged," especially those associated with success during a time of economic dislocation and social change. "When the choices and rhythms of lives change," Bateson notes "as they have in our time, the study of lives becomes an increasing preoccupation" (4). Her call seems especially relevant now.

Opportunities for Composition Studies

Adopting an age studies approach provides an opportunity for composition studies to extend its scope of research, to develop theories of composition based on life experiences as socially and historically contextualized, to be proactive in developing new courses of study that reach across disciplines, and to develop composition pedagogies that account for changes people experience over the course of a whole life. It also provides exigency to critically approach and contribute narratives of lived experiences. For that, scholars need a site to collect and contribute life stories, a place where critical engagement with narratives offers opportunities to transform limits into lessons.

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Critical Context for the DALN

The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) is a particularly appropriate site for identifying and examining the aforementioned limits of ageism. An online, publicly available, searchable database of autobiographical narratives about literacy acquisition and development, the DALN (thedaln.org) aspires to "provide a historical record of the literacy practices and values of contributors, as those practices and values change" (DALN). Since its inception in 2007, the DALN has expanded to contain over 7,100 literacy narratives, including stories from contributors in over forty countries around the world. As the archive has grown, it has gained attention from teacher-researchers in English and writing studies as well as the humanities more generally, functioning

as a site for both research and pedagogy. To date, the most comprehensive examination of how educators and researchers employ the DALN comes from a report in a 2015 edition of *Computers and Composition*. In this piece, Kathryn Comer and Michael Harker review the most cited scholarly publications referencing the DALN, listing both Krista Bryson's *Computers and Composition* article, "The Literacy Myth in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives" and the introduction to Sally Chandler and John Scenters-Zapico's edited special issue of *Computers and Composition* on literacy narratives. But ranking most prominently among scholarship dealing with the archive, according to Comer and Harker, is H. Lewis Ulman, Scott DeWett, and Cynthia L. Selfe's edited collection, *Stories that Speak to Us: Exhibits from the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives*.

Ulman et al.'s digital collection examines DALN narratives from multiple perspectives. Aimed toward scholars and teachers as well as community literacy workers and librarians, the curated exhibits comprising the collection "examine themes such as 'betweenity,' scaffolding, digital divides, ethnolinguistic vitality, ludic literacies, black women's literacy narratives, the convergence of local and global discourses about literacy, feminism and digital literacy, and transnational 'thirdspaces' of literacy" (Ulman et al.). Although the collection is not meant to be representative of the DALN as a whole, it does contain over fourteen exhibits that emphasize how individual citizens and groups of people use literacy to "make sense of their world" and "construct the realities in which they live" (Ulman et al.). Without a doubt, the collection makes a significant scholarly contribution to ongoing and developing conversations that parallel the rise of what J. Blake Scott termed composition's "literacy narrative industry" (Scott 108). In terms of scope, the work is impressively diverse, identifying Deaf & Hard-of-Hearing, Feminism, Gaming, Identify Formation, Race, Rhetorical Relationships, Teaching & Learning, Technology & Digital Composition, Transnationalism & Multilingualism as organizing themes for the project. Despite its significance in the field and diverse thematic commitments, the collection misses multiple opportunities to engage with theories, concepts, and definitions connected to age studies. Notably absent as an organizing touchstone for the project is aging itself. To be fair, nowhere do the editors or the contributors of *Stories that Speak to Us* explicitly identify issues of aging as a focus of the collection, but opportunities for engaging with issues and questions related to aging and ageism(s), in particular, are ever-present.

In addition to reviewing the most cited and prominent scholarly works referencing the DALN, Comer and Harker also conducted a national survey aimed toward identifying pedagogical trends related to the archive. Findings indicate four predominant trends for pedagogical applications of the DALN. Instructors use the DALN as a (1) database for student research, (2) site for student publication, (3) resource for administrators, and (4) resource for critical contextualizing (67). Again, although pedagogical applications of the DALN reinforce tenets of literacy studies, disability studies, identity construction, narrative theory, and other subfields of English studies, Comer and Harker's report indicates that educators are not employing the DALN to engage with lessons or concerns endemic to age studies, specifically. It is also important to note that the DALN Blog (thedaln.wordpress.com) contains an updated bibliography of publications, presentations, and general mentions of the DALN in scholarship. While the bibliography of DALN entries continues to grow, notably absent are uses of the DALN that connect explicitly with aging.

In the following section, we turn our attention to the DALN as a site for composition scholars to mine attitudes and conceptions of aging and literacy. We offer an age analysis of a literacy narrative by a black man in his late-sixties to demonstrate how more nuanced conceptions of age can deepen our understanding about why, how, where, and when people change literacy practices during their lives. In this way, our age analysis of a DALN narrative is an attempt to highlight "a model of lifelong learning and adaptation" (Bateson 14) that might impact the pedagogy of composition teacher-researchers.

"[My Struggles with Technology](#)"

On the surface, E'Rich Harrington's literacy narrative seems conventional for the archive, especially with respect to thematic commitments, production quality, and interview style. It features a single interview subject discussing his difficulties with learning new forms of technology and the importance of education in skills-based computer training. A closer reading of this contribution, however, reveals a pervading uneasiness that exists in discussions about technology and unemployment, which is best understood through lessons from literacy studies and age studies. Further, we show how unraveling some of the entangled conceptions of technology, labor, literacy, and aging that undergird this interview raise important questions for composition studies.

In "My Struggles with Technology," Harrington explains he has struggled finding a job. Submitted in October of 2010, the interview would have occurred on the tail end of the recession and at a time of bleak employment prospects and persistent economic uncertainty. Harrington seems to have returned to school for some type of technology-based instruction. While at first the 4½-minute interview seems calm, Harrington and the interviewer repeat the expressions "struggle," "frustration," and "overwhelmed" throughout the interview, which indicate an underlying anxiety and general sense of uneasiness that is at first associated with "modern technology" broadly.

When asked, "What was your biggest struggle?" He responds, "I'm just learning all over again how to go to school, function in the classroom, with the computer and modern technology, period." He places much of the blame for his difficulties with technology on himself, specifically his "struggles of learning the computer, of learning the functions and the new technology with computers." However, when asked specifically about how his struggles with technology impact his search for employment, Harrington describes the impersonal, digitized job application process. He notes, "Yes, filling out applications now is everything's online, computerized and to me not personal anymore. I mean you used to just go in, fill out an application, hand it to the boss. The boss asked you questions, sees what kind of skills you have, and you either get the job or you don't."

When Harrington elaborates on the specific struggles he encountered while learning how to use computers more proficiently, he briefly mentions that typing slowed his progress the most. However, he quickly pivots, blaming this particular struggle on the fact that he is a "more hands-on, maintenance-type guy." It is in this moment that Harrington confidently lists characteristics and traits that comprise his identity. It is here that he looks directly into the camera and articulates what he knows to be true. And although we still find him searching for certain words—which is true of

most interview participants on the DALN—this moment marks a key point in this case because it is when the interviewer interjects to offer some supportive words. In response to Harrington's characterizations of himself as a more hands-on type of person, the interviewer responds, "Well, everybody doesn't have to be, I mean there's a place in this world for everybody. Everybody's got a skill to bring." Harrington responds with a knowing nod. In a sense, Harrington's reaction marks a clear tension about ambiguous conceptions of the aging process and, specifically, Harrington's struggle to maintain his personal identity (Segal).

Contributing to his frustration with the impersonal applications is the fact that he identifies as a "hands-on, personal type person that engages with interacting with a human being." He values face-to-face interaction, a mode of communication he characterizes as more direct and personal than the distant exchanges mediated by texting, voicemail, or resume banks. He further laments the fact that if an employer doesn't "like what they read" on a job application, he loses the opportunity to demonstrate his qualifications in person. His narrative also reveals a persistent binary conception between manual labor and cognitive work, or as Harrington suggests, between workers and "nerds." Despite the proliferation of digital composing technologies and the popularity and demand for new types of literacies, stark divisions remain in the types of work that are acknowledged and valued in the United States (Rose, *Mind at Work* 176). Directly related to this thinking is the way Harrington's narrative demonstrates how intertwined skills-based conceptions of literacy (Barton 11) become with autonomous views of literacy (Street 13), especially in the context of learning how to use computers as *the* means for participating in the workforce. David Barton teaches us that skills-based conceptions of literacy are based on metaphors, and that they are no less figurative than characterizations of literacy based on metaphors of disease (Barton 12). Although skills-based views of literacy are pervasive and influential, they are not without risk, especially since, as Harvey Graff notes in *The Labyrinths of Literacy,* skills-based conceptions often present literacy "as neutral or invariably good" (Graff 327). When literacy is understood exclusively as a neutral skill, it is easy to presume that literacy is autonomous from the social contexts that make it available or restrict access to it. In such instances, it is not uncommon to presume that literacy "can be reduced to one definition, or to one effect on people and societies" (327). Literacy becomes something you either possess or do not possess, a binaristic view that overlooks degrees of literacy acquisition and development, leading to an emphasis on what people (or students) lack (Harker 122).

Harrington and the interviewer mention other contrasts throughout his narrative, specifically: hands-on/nerdy; literate/illiterate; employed/unemployed. The conversation encourages Harrington to remain focused more on what he lacks (creating an effective, digital resume) rather than on the degrees of knowledge he possesses—the sophisticated, complex, and valuable expertise a person accumulates over decades of working in maintenance, plumbing, electrical work, and HVAC repair. Further, the interviewer continues to ask, and by extension reinforces, the frustration Harrington describes rather than asking about his positive experiences or his accumulated knowledge. His comments about literacy and the questions he is asked suggest both participants have enrolled in a youth-centric rhetoric that values new, digital skills, devalues "old" skills as "stuff," and depicts older age only in terms of decline, or in Harrington's case, as no longer employed. When considered

through the lenses of age studies and literacy studies, this narrative captures important aspects of the ways technological innovations are thought to inform socio-economic dislocations we associate with life in the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives* 75).

What is also remarkable about this case is how it allows us to follow these lines of thinking about literacy to a particular moment: an interaction between interview participant and interviewer that illustrates how preconceptions of literacy and labor impact our understanding of the relationship of literacy to aging. When making our way through narratives on the DALN, we are consistently impressed by the generosity, empathy, and enthusiasm of volunteers who interview participants and collect literacy narratives for the project. Given this enthusiasm it should come as no surprise that interviewers' predispositions sometimes impact the trajectory and general development of the literacy narratives they collect. In this case, Harrington's interactions with the interviewer's line of questions are particularly revealing. We get the sense he has heard these reassuring sentiments before, as evidenced by the fact that he anticipates and partially subvocalizes the interviewer's words as they are coming out of her mouth. His expression also seems to convey that while he appreciates the idea behind "everyone has a place in this world," *his* place is increasingly uncertain, despite his best efforts. We know this because Harrington's concluding remarks, which come in the form of recommendations for others struggling with technology, are timely and profound: "Work with it a little bit every day to try to keep up with it because it's changing so fast."

Given the various topics discussed in Harrington's account, the vague referent "it" in Harrington's closing quote is especially generative. "It" ambiguously refers to numerous associations: competencies necessary to use a computer effectively; the shifting nature of language surrounding emerging technologies and literacies; the ways new technologies impact employment prospects; the rapid pace at which new literacies both accumulate (Brandt, "Accumulating Literacy") and seem to lose relevance. Harrington's language of labor, literacy, and rapid change certainly calls to mind Daniel Keller's points about how the culture we live in "thrives on speed and efficiency" as well as Deborah Brandt's claims about the role of speed in the "piling up" and "spreading out" of new and old literacies (Brandt qtd. in Keller 69). But more important is Keller's discussion of the underlying tensions upon which our day-to-day experiences with literacy accelerate. "To continue Brandt's visual model for accumulation," Keller writes, "imagine literacies jostling into each other as they rise up and circulate. The literacies chosen and used by individuals, groups, and institutions signal to themselves and to others what they (appear to) value. When those values conflict, so do literacies" (34). When we consider Keller's points in the context of Harrington's account we come away with a different lesson than, "everyone has a place in this world." The clash of Harrington's "hands-on" literacies with his struggle to learn new technologies is as much a narrative about conflicting values as it is a story about competing skill sets. In a culture "that demands getting rid of the old to make room for the new" (Keller 69), employment does not hold a stable position in relation to expectations associated with particular types of literacy (Graff, *Literacy Myth*). His account complicates what it means to study the mobility of literacy (Vieira). For Harrington, the worlds of employment and literacy are moving targets in time and space—something he must "keep up" with. Yet, overcoming

the uncertainty, frustration, and overwhelming feelings required to keep up demands the flexibility that comes with an identity comprised of shifting behaviors, habits, literacies, and values. Harrington could not be clearer about what he values: hands-on work, personal interactions, candid feedback, opportunity, persistence, work ethic—all traits we associate with success in this country.

Prevailing characterizations of literacy informed by ageist and youth-obsessed rhetorics (Bowen, "Resisting Age Bias") may view Harrington's narrative simply as symbolic of the challenges facing an aging workforce. But such views, like the regressive ideologies that make them possible, confuse causation with correlation, oversimplifying the context and challenges facing learners in our current moment. Deborah Brandt reminds us that the nature of economic dislocations to literacy is a fundamentally complex one:

> In fact, these accounts suggest that what is unprecedented about literacy learning in the current climate is not so much a demand for literacy that seems always to exceed supply but rather the challenges faced by all literacy learners in a society whose rapid changes are themselves tied up so centrally with literacy and its enterprises. (*Literacy in American Lives* 75)

In this passage, Brandt underscores limits of commonsensical views of literacy that presume a stable, one-way relationship between literacy supply and demand: that society continues to demand more people who are literate. Instead of reinforcing stable conceptions of literacy within a changing (or *unstable*, as it were) society, she calls attention to the idea that the social changes are entangled with literacy—that literacy practices themselves are unstable. Further, she suggests that the scale and plurality of experiences and consequences of learners with literacy deserve more attention. Indeed, what draws us to Harrington's story is the fact that his varied experiences, anxieties, and struggles with literacy resonate with all learners to a great extent. In this way, Harrington's story stands out among other narratives on the DALN as a type of autobiographical literacy narrative, an act of "self-translation" (Soliday 511) that reflects what it means to acquire new literacies at a certain time, in a particular place, and at a distinct moment in the national economy.

When considered through the lenses of age studies and literacy studies, Harrington's narrative provides a powerful counter to the simplistic ideological terms that limit interpretations of older adults: rather than understanding Harrington as symbolic of older people as dislocated because they are unable or unwilling to engage new literacy materials or practices, his narrative hints at experiences over a whole life that involve working with people and a wide variety of technologies and mechanical systems. While in some ways Harrington's narrative does signify an ever-present dislocation that every person inevitably experiences in an ever-changing society, his digital contribution to the DALN is evidence of his continual effort to work with people to learn new literacy practices he believes will be useful as the recession recedes and jobs become available again.

A potential value of the approach demonstrated here is that it allows us to learn about the complexities of literacy entangled with conceptions of older age. Adopting an age studies approach provides composition administrators, directors, and teacher-scholars with an opportunity to expand our courses, programs, and scholarly research. In the remaining section, we present an oral history assignment teacher-scholars can adapt according to their institutional resources.

A Curriculum for Aging

In "Beyond Repair," Lauren Bowen argues that for the past sixty years AARP has been "craft[ing] a curriculum of aging—one based on Christian, middle-class values and aimed to 'promote independence, dignity, and purpose' in later life" (441). She suggests that "AARP frequently reinforces rhetorics of gerontechnology by presenting limited ideas about what technologies can mean for the lives of older adults" (448). The "curriculum of aging" she criticizes reduces old age to a process of decline which "potentially limits the literate and rhetorical development of older adults" (437). Bowen's use of the term *curriculum*, however, reminds us that ageist ideologies are not inherent, but are learned and reinforced. Developing an age studies pedagogy is important to resist the current "curriculum of aging" that limits how we can conceive of our future.

In the remaining space, we propose an oral history collection event that employs the DALN as a space where students can work alongside instructors to actively develop, model, and promote sophisticated, nuanced conceptions of age. Our proposed pedagogical approach is supported by recent research on emerging uses of the DALN in English studies and composition courses, and we foreground our proposed use of the DALN in the fourth category identified by Comer and Harker: "expanding and complicating students' and teachers' understanding of literacy practices" (76). This research-oriented approach characterizes uses of the DALN by teacher-researchers who work at the intersections of literacy studies and various subfields of the humanities: disability studies, sonic rhetoric, service-learning, gerontology, and many others.

> *"[W]e propose an oral history collection event that employs the DALN as a space where students can work alongside instructors to actively develop, model, and promote sophisticated, nuanced conceptions of age."*

Scholars repeatedly remind us of the importance of inviting students to work alongside us as we participate in ongoing discussions and debates related to literacy. For instance, in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, Linda Flower issues a particularly relevant challenge to the field: "How can teachers and students learn not only to speak *up* and *against* but also learn to speak *with* others . . . ?" (81). In *Literacy as Involvement*, Deborah Brandt beckons scholars to "see literacy as a growing metacommunicative ability—an increasing awareness and control over the social means by which people sustain discourse, knowledge, and reality" (32). For her, "social involvement becomes the key model for literacy and literacy growth" (32). And as Daniel Keller argues in *Chasing Literacy*, "Our participation means we can give some shape to the conditions of literacy" (169). For these scholars, literacy provides a contact point to engage with communities, and taken together, they offer scholarly exigencies to collect oral histories.

It is by situating the DALN as a resource for critically contextualizing theories, methodologies, themes, and ongoing debates in aging studies that we promote progressive development of the DALN as well as students' and instructors' attitudes about older adults. We believe this assignment sequence

seems particularly well-suited for supporting a pedagogy working at the intersections of literacy and aging studies. While we offer this assignment as a way to promote the kind of robust contributions we imagine for the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives, we would consider the following section a success if our recommendations spark ideas we have not considered yet.

Oral History Collection Event

First Step: Defamiliarizing Students' Conceptions of Age

Drawing from Brandt's definition of literacy as a "metacommunicative ability" (*Literacy as Involvement 3*2), we suggest that the first step toward an oral history collection event should encourage students to develop a literacy of age. More specifically, students should grapple with age studies scholarship and other critical texts that illustrate different cultures' views and treatment of older people. We offer the following texts as a potential starting point for scholars new to age studies.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* provides scholars with an essential entry point to defamiliarize common conceptions about age. She describes how various societies have conceived of old age and older people. Her text offers scholars a wide historical and cultural view of aging as entangled with attitudes, beliefs, and geography. She argues that we do not have complete autonomy over our bodies or our own ending, but that the values of each society impact how people define, experience, and treat old age. She offers compelling reasons for why "old age can only be understood as a whole" (13).

While age studies scholarship often focuses on old age, we believe asking students to consider the social and historical contexts of youth can be constructive as well. In *Conflicting Paths: Growing up in America*, Harvey Graff examines contradictions and continuities of growing up across three centuries (eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth) in America. He finds that the early twentieth century marks "the appearance and substantial impact of large-scale changes" (302) that are "still in progress" (305). He argues that changes in family structure, education, and laws restricting work performed by children undergird current "institutional age segregation" (303). We believe his historical context could provide the basis for meaningful class discussions about classroom dynamics as well as thinking about how conceptions of youth are entangled with the organization and distribution of resources our society provides (or does not provide) to people in different age categories. Grappling with historical perspectives, depictions, and conceptions of youth can help identify how to alter or build different institutions and communities.

One particular limitation of Graff's text, however, is his choice to separate women's experiences from men's. He acknowledges this limitation and states:

> A strategy of placing women on a path of their own rather than alongside their brothers, thus emphasizing commonalities, might be construed as assigning them a minority status by reification of a separate sphere. The dangers of marginalization are greater, however, when young women are included within paths of growing up that are defined primarily by male experience. Women also fall prey to male numerical domination of available first-person sources. (29)

Mary Catherine Bateson's *Composing a Life*, however, provides a compelling counter-balance by focusing solely on the experiences of five older women, making their experiences primary rather than marginal. Her intention is to provide models of living for other women who are also building their lives by improvising with the new social and cultural opportunities (Graff would call them *paths*) that were unavailable to them before the mid-twentieth century, which is decades after Graff defines the "large-scale changes" (Graff 302). When read next to Graff, Bateson provides an opportunity to think about and discuss historical moments as entangled with whose life experiences we acknowledge and value.

Taken together, these three texts defamiliarize our notions of age by providing social and historical context. They also provide a language for students to discuss age and aging in their own lives. Because we believe a substantial portion of our proposed oral history assignment should involve developing a socially and historically contextualized conception of age, we also suggest other constructive, but shorter, readings.

Kathleen Woodward's "Performing Age/Performing Gender," for example, uses an age studies approach for her feminist critique of simplistic depictions of old age in popular movies. Her article mentions six different concepts of age (biological, chronological, social, cultural, psychological, and statically aged) to argue against characterizing old age as one-dimensional—specifically, as a state of only mental and bodily decline. Further, Woodward presents an argument that men and women experience aging differently. In "Intimate Relationships," Ingrid Arnet Connidis also uses an integrated age studies-feminist approach to investigate the historical and social impetus for the kinds of personal relationships we construct. Her article highlights the importance of thinking about age when we consider the types of commitments and obligations we want to create for ourselves, especially as we live longer lives. Ricca Edmondson applies a humanist lens to age studies to consider direct questions about how older people are regarded. She asks: "Are older people on the whole to be regarded negatively, as occasionally amiable burdens to their friends and society, or can there be a real point to having them around" (201)? Drawing on the humanist idea of wisdom specifically, she provides an ethnographic account of the life of Edward and his community of Inis Oirr to show how a community perceives older people impacts the roles older people can take on. She finds that because Inis Oirr values older people, Edward was able to take on and, in turn, inspire the concept of wisdom. She argues, "The way people think about older people and ageing . . . has an undeniable influence on policy and behaviour" (202).

Texts that deal with age-related topics are not limited to scholarly texts, of course; composition instructors can find a variety of relevant news articles, literary texts, music, films, radio programs, and television programs. A quick search reveals a range of news articles that purport to relay critical, in-depth investigations about old age. For example, in "The New Reality of Old Age in America," Jordan Mary and Kevin Sullivan offer the experiences of two white, healthy, married couples just below the cusp of financial security (and the complete autonomy that presumes to come with it) as *the* reality of life experiences during retirement. *The New Yorker*, however, provides a thorough discussion of stereotypes that limit how people conceive of old age. Ceridwen Dovey's article, "What Old Age is Really Like," also provides a long reading list of poems, novels, and scholarship relevant

for critical depictions and discussions of old age. Other articles from the BBC, CBC, and *New York Post* present younger adults and older adults building partnerships to navigate the rising housing costs in cities. In addition to economic value, the new intergenerational housemates also express social, personal, and professional benefits. Asking students to read and search for recent articles is an important step to develop more sophisticated conceptions of age.

Second Step: Investigate the DALN and Apply Lessons of Literacy and Aging

This step emphasizes both playing with the archive and analyzing narratives. It is meant to offer instructors and students a meaningful way to compare and interpret contributions to the DALN that both implicitly and explicitly deal with aging. In "The Pedagogy of the DALN," Comer and Harker report that the most common use of the DALN in classrooms is archival. "As a research site," they write, "the DALN offers students the same potential it offers all academic stakeholders: the opportunity to access, investigate, and compare first-person accounts of literacy (and, often, related artifacts) that would be nearly impossible to gather individually" (70). As such, the DALN regularly functions as a resource of "assigned and suggested readings," as a database for students' individual research projects (69). A typical pedagogical sequence, according to the authors, involves self-guided exploration of the archive, followed by textual analysis of a selection of narratives, and a final step of synthesizing observations in the form of an academic research paper (70). Along these lines we envision instructors employing a version of the following prompt, which we have adapted from existing teaching resources on the [DALN blog (https://thedaln.wordpress.com/daln-resources/)](https://thedaln.wordpress.com/daln-resources/):

> For this part of the assignment, we will work as a class to investigate the relationship of aging and literacy by exploring the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives. Your first task is to revisit themes/topics/theories related to aging and literacy we have discussed to date. With the goal of identifying 3-5 narratives, search the archive for keywords/tags related to our ongoing discussions about aging. Read/listen to/watch the narratives you find, recording observations and insights. As you watch these narratives, consider the following questions:
> - How are these narratives similar?
> - How are they different?
> - What role do attitudes about aging play in these narratives about literacy?
> - In what ways, do your individual experiences with literacy and aging impact your interpretation of these stories?
>
> Finally, in a 5-7 page paper—and incorporating at least 2 secondary sources from our class—analyze the 3 DALN entries you have identified. In your paper, be sure to compare and contrast your narratives, noting meaningful trends and connections to reading and themes from our class."

At base, this approach asks students to play with and investigate the archive in a manner that emphasizes suspending judgment and comparative analysis. Employing the DALN for comparative analysis "may help students develop a critical perspective on their personal histories within larger community and cultural contexts and position their resulting insights within scholarly discourses on literacy" (Comer and Harker 69). In more ways than one, both aging and literacy studies seek

to impart critical frameworks and an awareness about how and why we develop particular attitudes about aging, reading, and writing.

Third Step: Conducting an Oral History Collection Event

A primary goal of an age studies approach to pedagogy is not to stand back and interpret narratives, however, but to use literacy practices to engage with communities and community building. And conducting oral histories is an effective method. As Stephen Caunce explains in *Oral History and the Local Historian*, collecting life stories that focus on a particular part of life or that cover a large portion provides scholars with a method "to examine life at a level of detail that would be quite impossible to achieve for whole populations, but which is essential for understanding the complex web of forces that make up all societies" (28). Conducting interviews also provides insight into experiences of marginalized groups such as inmates, people of color, women, LGBTQ+, and older people. He also argues that collecting and listening to stories from those we rarely hear must be a priority (84), otherwise we risk perpetuating stereotypes and learning only about individuals from "normalized" groups or from those with social and economic leverage. Asking students to read about oral history as a research method will help them understand their work as important and subversive.

> *"A primary goal of an age studies approach to pedagogy is not to stand back and interpret narratives, however, but to use literacy practices to engage with communities and community building."*

To begin collecting the narratives, students and instructors should consider the location of the event because the location can impact the story. As Mark Riley and David Harvey point out in their work recording interviews with farmers in the actual fields, having the chance to see or interact with objects can provoke more detailed memories and contribute more meaningful descriptions. Of course, not all students or narrators can reasonably conduct site-specific interviews; however, conducting an event on-campus provides an opportunity to promote or combine university resources (e.g., writing center, library, or makerspace) or university events (e.g., art exhibits, guest speakers). In addition to physical interview sites, instructors and students can consider digital technologies to interview people in communities previously unreachable during a semester.

We also recommend students conduct practice interviews during class, where they can ask specific questions and consider when to interject (or not) during an interview. Introducing students to active listening tactics would be particularly beneficial as would allowing students to practice in small groups in order to notice biased questions, answers, or responses. Instructors and students can also consult the DALN blog for more resources and support; especially relevant is the "everybody has a literacy story" event.

Conclusion

A guiding tenet of new literacy studies is that literacy is not autonomous—that learning how to read and write, by *themselves*, do not create more intelligent students, more moral citizens, or

more meaningful lives. Instead, what matters are opportunities for people to create and maintain meaningful relationships during the course of their life. A guiding tenet of age studies is that age is not autonomous—that growing older, by *itself*, does not create more intelligent co-workers, more moral neighbors, or more meaningful relationships. Instead, what matters are the opportunities to create social, cultural, and personal structures to support meaningful experiences during the course of our lives.

How do we design courses that leave learning open-ended? How should we model for students our own incompleteness—and that our literacy is not a state of being, but is a tool for discovering who we can and want to become? An answer might lie in Mike Rose's 2012 CCCC Exemplar Award Acceptance Speech when he instructs scholars to "Develop what jazz musicians call 'big ears,' that is, an inclination to listen to lots of kinds of music—in our case, to read and experience widely" (543). He goes on to suggest that "[t]aking our work out into the world forces us beyond our academic silos" and makes us more relevant and relatable to others in our local communities. What we hear him saying, especially as we consider the narratives examined in this article, is not only to stay attuned to the changes that accompany aging, but also to learn different instruments. Learn how to keep playing. Learn how to listen to lots of people. And in the words of E'Rich Harrington's DALN narrative, "work with it a little bit every day to try to keep up with it because it's changing so fast."

We believe English studies, and especially composition programs, are in an excellent position to bridge the diverse disciplines required to seriously consider what it means to live a meaningful life. We believe an interdisciplinary curriculum, undergirded by age studies and new literacy studies, would present important opportunities for rhetoric/composition teacher-scholars and administrators to develop learning outcomes and subsequent methods of assessment around composition pedagogies that work at the intersections of literacy and age studies.

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