LiCS

Literacy in Composition Studies

LiCS MISSION STATEMENT

Literacy in Composition Studies is a refereed open access online journal that sponsors scholarly activity at the nexus of Literacy and Composition Studies. We foreground *literacy* and *composition* as our keywords because they do particular kinds of work. We want to retain Composition's complicated history as well as FYC's institutional location and articulation to secondary education. Through literacy, we denote practices that are both deeply context-bound and always ideological. Literacy and Composition are therefore contested terms that often mark where the struggles to define literate subjects and confer literacy's value are enacted. We are committed to publishing scholarship that explores literacy at its intersection with Composition's history, pedagogies, and interdisciplinary methods of inquiry.

Literacy is a fluid and contextual term. It can name a range of activities from fundamental knowledge about how to decode text to interpretive and communicative acts. Literacies are linked to know-how, to insider knowledge, and literacy is often a metaphor for the ability to navigate systems, cultures, and situations. At its heart, literacy is linked to interpretation—to reading the social environment and engaging and remaking that environment through communication. Orienting a Composition Studies journal around literacy prompts us to investigate the ways that writing is interpretive as well as persuasive; to analyze the connections and disconnections between writing and reading; and to examine the ways in which literacy acts on or constitutes the writer even as the writer seeks to act on or with others.

LiCS seeks submissions that interpret literacy at a time of radical transformation in its contexts and circulation. We are open to a wide range of research that takes up these issues, and we are especially interested in work that:

- provides provisional frameworks for theorizing literacy activities
- analyzes how literacy practices construct student, community, and other identities
- investigates the ways in which social, political, economic, and technological transformations produce, eliminate, or mediate literacy opportunities
- analyzes the processes whereby literacies are valued or legitimated
- examines the literacies sponsored through college writing courses and curricula, including the range of literate activities, practices, and pedagogies that shape and inform, enable and constrain writing
- considers the implications of institutional, state, or national policies on literacy learning and teaching, including the articulation of high schools and higher education
- proposes or creates opportunities for new interactions between Literacy and Composition Studies, especially those drawing on transnational and cross-cultural literacy research

Composing a Further Life: Introduction to the Special Issue

> Part of the challenge . . . in growing older, is to discover the ways, arising from a lifetime of experience and in spite of reduced strength and stamina, in which it continues to be possible to contribute. The corresponding challenge to society is to recognize that contribution and to benefit from it instead of dismissing it.
>
> —Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Further Life* (18)

> Theorists have to expand their imaginations to encompass all the situations where the key axis of difference is the one never mentioned—being aged by culture.
>
> —Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (105)

Three years ago, it was estimated that 8.5% of the world's population was aged sixty-five and older; by 2030, that number is expected to increase to 12%; by 2050, 16.7%—all while the population of people age twenty and under remains relatively flat. Soon, the world is expected to reach a demographic milestone, as people who are sixty-five and older will, for the first time in history, outnumber children under age five (He, Goodkind, and Kowal 3). The United States, home to the post-World War II baby boom, is in the midst of its own major demographic shift, as the population of people age sixty-five and over will have more than doubled in the first third of the twenty-first century, constituting almost 21% of the US population by 2030 (Federal Interagency 2). With changes to fertility rates, poverty levels, and access to health care, global aging "is poised to become one of the most significant social transformations of the twenty-first century" (United Nations 1). But what *is* the significance of this social transformation? To world leaders and global organizations, the exigence of global aging is largely economic—and largely one of crisis. More often than not, public response to aging demographics is framed as a dangerous balancing act, wherein policymakers must choose between addressing the needs of different generations; as one assessment report phrases it, nations must prepare "to provide a decent standard of living for the old without imposing a crushing burden on the young" (Jackson, Peter, and Howe iii). However, as this special issue of *Literacy in Composition Studies* illustrates, there are many other ways—cultural, ideological, rhetorical, and pedagogical, among others—in which aging might matter now more than ever.

The story of growing old in this transitional moment is "ill told with statistics" (Bateson, *Composing a Further Life* 23). For Mary Catherine Bateson, human lives are composed: a blend of conscious arrangement and improvised creativity. As the lifespan of people in many parts of the world extends and as a four-generation society becomes increasingly commonplace, the meanings of life and its stages must also expand and be composed anew. In referencing Bateson's metaphor of composing in the title of this special issue, Suzy and I aimed to draw attention to the relationships among aging, literacy, and composition in two ways. The first and perhaps most obvious is that, in assembling this special issue, the intention was to gather and inspire studies of literacy and composition from the perspective of an entire lifespan, including old age. Second, but no less important, Bateson's use of *composing* signals a particular attention to old age and aging as something more than discrete demographic categories or predictable biological processes: old age is, itself, composed—by cultures, by social norms, by interpersonal relationships, by institutions,

and by representations of the self. In sharing the work included in this special issue, Suzy and I hope to exemplify the importance of including later life in the literacy and composition research agenda, and urge literacy and composition scholars to consider how literate activity shapes, and is shaped by, ideologies of aging.

In 1999, Gail Weinstein and Simone LaCoss observed that information about literacy and its functions, circumstances, and values among older people was "virtually nonexistent" (Weinstein and LaCoss 318). Now, nearly twenty years later, the vast majority of studies of composition and literacy continue to emphasize the literacy learning and practices of younger people. The few studies of literacy and older people, specifically, remain siloed in fields (e.g., educational gerontology) that have, as yet, little cross-talk with literacy and composition studies. This special issue marks an effort to focus and foster the nascent interest in aging within literacy and composition research.

Of course, composition and literacy research has not been totally silent about aging. Given that literate activity is complex, dispersed, and entangled with many interconnecting systems, literacy learning and practice remains relevant to human experience well past adolescence and early adulthood. It is no accident, then, that older people occasionally feature as central figures in research on writing, composition, and literacy. Although composition studies, as represented by research published in journals such as *College Composition and Communication*, *Composition Forum*, and *Composition Studies*, remains a field primarily attuned to the development of young adult writers in postsecondary settings, a few researchers have turned their attentions to the experiences and development of "adult students" (see, for example, Cleary, "Anxiety and the Newly Returned Adult Student"; Cleary, "Flowing and Freestyling"; Connors; Crow, "What's Age Got to Do with It?"). Although still sometimes known as "non-traditional students," adult college students older than twenty-four have, in fact, comprised approximately 40% of the US college student population since at least 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics). Studies of adult student writers present a rare but invaluable opportunity to consider an often-overlooked question for the field: *What difference does age make for writing and literacy?* Yet the broad definition of *adult student* as "older than twenty-four" presents an enormous age range in which to consider age as a meaningful identity category, and thereby collapses what may be important distinctions for writing development that are lost when age, itself, is left unexamined.

Meanwhile, within literacy studies, the inclusion of older adults is more commonplace. Widely influential literacy research has, for instance, documented the cross-generational ebbs and flows of literacy during periods of cultural, social, and economic change (e.g., Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives*; Brandt, *The Rise of Writing*; Selfe and Hawisher; Heath), in which older adults figure most often as literacy sponsors and mentors for younger generations, or else as points on a timeline, marking historical shifts in literacy. Such cross-generational comparison is essential to understanding the larger social, cultural, and economic contexts of literacy—a value to which I'll return later in this introduction. However, just like composition studies, in the vast majority of studies of literacy, including many of those examining older adults' learning and literacy practices, age remains an "absent presence." Just as Catherine Prendergast must "exert a little extra effort" to track the role of race in writing studies research, in which racial difference is present but too-rarely analyzed (36), here, in regard to aging, we might make a similar observation. Age and ageism are ubiquitous in our classrooms, our research sites, and our own bodies, while remaining

largely absent from overt analysis.

In introducing this special issue, I begin with a brief overview of scholarship in the interdisciplinary field of age studies in order to spark further scholarship on aging at the nexus of literacy and composition studies. As the remainder of this introduction and the contents of this entire issue demonstrate, the inclusion of age analysis in writing studies enacts the very mission of *LiCS*: to bridge scholarship in literacy and composition. For composition studies, attention to aging (particularly during old age) necessitates stepping further away from the "pedagogical imperative" of composition studies, toward a disciplinary commitment to the broader study of writers and writing (Dobrin). For literacy studies, it means examining an ideological dimension of literacy that has, thus far, been largely ignored. Unlike the bulk of geriatric medicine and much of gerontological research, age studies unites disciplines around the study of ideologies of aging. Through the project of age studies, researchers positioned at the intersection of composition and literacy studies may find a critical framework through which, as Bateson urges, to recognize the contribution older people might make to our own disciplinary knowledge, and to "benefit from it instead of dismissing it" (*Composing a Further Life* 18). The characterization of age studies I offer here aims to contextualize this special issue's central claim: that aging is a crucial dimension of analysis to which literacy and composition studies are well positioned to contribute.

Age Studies

Age studies emerged from feminist philosophy, as Simone de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse* (or "Old Age," a title euphemistically translated for anglophone readers as *Coming of Age*) is often reclaimed as the field's germinal text.[1] Originally published in 1970, Beauvoir's book presented what would years later become the unifying principle of the age studies project: that "old age can only be understood as a whole: it is not solely a biological, but also a cultural fact" (Beauvoir 13). The term *age studies* was first introduced in 1993 by Margaret Morganroth Gullette, a feminist cultural critic who used the term to capture "a large interdisciplinary zone" in which scholars were increasingly interested in the critical analysis of age-related issues ("Creativity" 45). Among age studies scholars and activists, age is more than a minor variable; it is a dynamic identity category alongside gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and ability. Age studies scholarship centrally involves critical investigations of "being aged-by-culture" (Gullette, "Age Studies and Gender"; Gullette, *Aged by Culture*)—work that is distributed across literature, history, media studies, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and other fields.

As a cultural fact, age is not neutral; rather, age has situated meanings. As a demonstration, consider the contrasting meanings associated with old age at various historical periods. In Western Europe during the seventeenth century, the cultural meanings of old age were heavily influenced by both Christianity and early medicine—often to contradictory effects. Scriptural commands to "honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God" (Lev. 19:32, qtd. in Botelho 122), as well as commandments to "honor thy father and mother," were shared across the deeply divided Catholic and Protestant communities, such that old age was seen as a spiritual ideal—even if, in reality, older people (especially women and the poor) were not always treated accordingly. At the same time, seventeenth-century medicine cast old age as a period in which individuals were "drying up and wasting away physically while at the same time manifesting a

melancholic and phlegmatic temperament" (Botelho 127). Thus, it became a goal of seventeenth-century medicine to prolong youth and *prevent* aging—a goal of Western medical practice that lingers still. Despite religious attachments to old age as symbolic of an exalted spiritual ideal, medical knowledge framed old age foremost as a problem.

By the mid-twentieth century, a new set of contradictory cultural meanings for old age had emerged in many European and North American cultures in response to industrialization and technological development. Medical advancements, including the rise of joint replacement and physical therapy, and the wider adoption of state pensions and retirement policies created a new era in which many people were living longer and healthier lives, but leaving the workforce earlier than ever before—often by mandate (Thane 277). In response, US political discourse of the late twentieth century saw the rise of the "greedy geezer" stereotype. In this enduring cultural catch-22, older adults are deemed unfit for the labor market and thus discouraged from earning wages, but as pension collectors and frequent users of health care systems, they become national burdens. The expression "greedy geezer" was first popularized through the cover art and feature article of a 1988 issue of *The New Republic*, in which Henry Fairlie characterized older Americans as "coddled" drains on national resources: "All the way from the Pacific to the Atlantic," Fairlie rages, "you can see the old lined up in banks, feeding into their accounts the checks from a range of federal agencies," as well as rising numbers of "pampered ones" who are "riding around in golf carts . . . instead of taking an invigorating walk" (21). Geriatrician and proto-age studies scholar Robert Butler—who is credited with coining the term *ageism*—challenged Fairlie's essay as a form of political scapegoating. In addition to falsely representing older people's share of social benefits from taxpayers, Butler contends, such accusations "foment an artificially manufactured intergenerational war" (1372). Greedy geezer indictments are not, however, unique to right-wing argument. In the present cultural climate, members of the Baby Boomer generation—US-born citizens currently between ages 52 and 70, according to Pew Research Center definitions—have been condemned *en masse* from the political left for bankrupting the financial, social, and environmental future of upcoming generations (see, for example, Gibney; Tankersley).[2]

In contrast to the "greedy geezer" sentiments in the US, the role of filial piety—respect for elders as a virtue in Confucian philosophy—has been central to understanding intergenerational relationships and attitudes toward aging in East Asia. However, while a cultural value of filial piety may be still be embedded within institutional structures—for example, in some East Asian languages, via the use of age-based honorifics—social changes may be gradually weakening filial piety. Studies suggest, for instance, that the shift from an agrarian to an urban economy in China has led many adult children to seek residence and employment in cities geographically distant from their parents; in such cases, filial piety, in the form of financial support, is reduced (Cheung and Kwan). As these various examples illustrate, different cultures embed different meanings and ideologies of old age within institutions (legislation, medical practice, language), thus creating a particular cultural habitus of aging. Yet no culture or historical period contains static or singular meanings of old age. Examining age for its cultural meaning renders age less fact than paradox, as "chronological age is both meaningful and meaningless," and as aging is "both within our control and beyond our control" (Cruikshank 207-208).

But if old age and aging are culturally determined categories, then old age is also *learned*. Much in the

same way that we become acculturated to gender roles, age studies scholars recognize that we learn how to talk to and about old people, how to see and not see them, and how *be* old through discourses circulating cultural scripts—through a "curriculum of aging" (Bowen, "Beyond Repair")—that circulate and replicate "the din of representations, unseen internalizations, unthinking practices, [and] economic structures of dominance and subordination" (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 27). Circulation of stereotypes—that older people are ugly, inflexible, incapable—and the use of dehumanizing terms that reduce older people to body parts (*blue-hairs*), to familial roles (*grandma*), or to clinical problems (*geriatrics*) are common ways we are acculturated to think about aging—and, specifically, to fear and be reviled by it. Another way is in how aging figures in grand narratives of culture. Age studies historian Thomas R. Cole noted that Medieval iconography suggests a vision of aging as a "womb to tomb" circle; this conceptualization was eventually displaced by the "rising and descending staircase" of the seventeenth century (4-5)—a shift that would, perhaps, mark the origins of what Gullette would later critique as the dominant *decline narrative* of aging (*Declining*; *Aged by Culture*). Silence and absence, too, contribute to repeating loops within the curriculum of aging, as the very absence of varied models of older people can leave us dependent on limiting grand narratives of aging as our only guides.

If aging is partly learned, age studies provides some hope for the possibility of un-learning: of changing cultural scripts that are "thwarting our development" as we age (Cruikshank 22). As individuals, we may develop critical awareness of how cultural values may be detrimental to self-esteem as we become middle-aged and older, and become conscious and critical of age ideologies. Margaret Gullette describes this critical lens—the sort developed through the work of age studies scholars and activists—as *age theory* (*Declining* 68). By being in possession of critical age theory, individuals can be aware of pervasive cultural values and myths that restrict their abilities to age with self-esteem and dignity—a necessary step to recognize, resist, and revise cultural scripts of aging. Age theory could do more, though, than provide individual fortitude against the onslaught of the "hostile age gaze" (Gullette, *Declining* 68) as it impacts self-esteem in old age. Put to its broadest use, age theory can provide incentives and frameworks for revising anti-aging cultural scripts—including those that discourage literacy learning and practice, as well as those that echo, mostly unnoticed, in the pages of our journals, in conference hallways, and in our own classrooms. For this reason, age studies scholars have advocated for a pedagogical approach to improving intergenerational relationships and age-awareness. "Teaching aging studies or age studies concepts," writes Leni Marshall, "makes a difference in students' self-perceptions and actions related to their own aging processes, in their understanding of and interactions with elders, in their comprehension of the social and economic cultural structures that constrain people's experiences of aging and old age, and in their workplace readiness" (56).

Writing studies and age studies, as I have elsewhere noted, "share an interest in recovering the previously ignored work of marginalized social groups in order to make sense of the rhetorical worlds in which they write or otherwise make meaning; both turn a critical eye on the ideologies that create and sustain systems of oppression through discourse; and both identify opportunities for the resistance to, appropriation of, or confirmation of dominant ideologies through literate acts" (Bowen, "Literacy Narrative"). Whether through pedagogical, theoretical, critical, or methodological connections, writing studies and age studies have much to learn from one another.

Older People in Literacy and Composition Studies

Despite its sparseness, the inclusion of older people has already enriched literacy and composition studies, drawing attention to aspects of composing and literate activity that are often less salient in the experiences of younger people. As a reminder of the work already circulating within our fields, beckoning for closer examination of age and its meanings, I offer several thematic clusters of work in literacy and composition studies that begin to reveal the value of studying the literacy learning and practices of older people—many of which suggest important ways that literacy and composition studies might contribute to the critical project of age studies.

Literacy Learning Across the Lifespan: The Role of Role

While many studies of younger people acknowledge that literate activity, even in the context of school, is always multi-motivational (Prior and Shipka 206), studies of older people yield rich information about literacy learning and practice that is usually distanced from the contexts and motives of schooling. In this regard, studies of literacy among older people have been essential to exploring the lasting impact of social roles on literate activity. As Deborah Brandt notes in a discussion of roles in workplace writing, "While often congruent with certain stages of life (i.e., youth, middle age, old age) the multiple and simultaneous roles most people play in families, communities, and workplaces condition developmental trajectories and possibilities even as they interact with one another" ("Writing Development" 251). Studies of later stages of life afford researchers a means of tracing the trajectories of development and motives for literacy learning and practice as individuals use literacies to shed, embrace, resist, or maintain both new and familiar social roles. In particular, as more people live longer and more active lives, literacy is particularly important for shaping what Mary Catherine Bateson calls "Adulthood II." Commonly occurring after child-rearing and career-building efforts have subsided but before the biological effects of aging place greater constraints on productivity or quality of life, Adulthood II begins "[w]hen you realize that you have done a lot of what you hoped to do in life but that it is not too late to do something more or different" ("In Search" 52).

As many studies have begun to show, literate activity is one significant resource for establishing and maintaining social roles through Adulthood II and into old age. For example, Harry, a sixty-six-year-old retired Royal Navy veteran featured in David Barton and Mary Hamilton's *Local Literacies*, engages in many routine literacy practices, despite having no formal education after leaving school at fourteen. By meeting with a friend every Wednesday to read and discuss local news and write letters to the newspaper, helping his grandchildren with their homework, reading countless "authentic [nonfiction] war books," and occasionally writing about his Navy experience during World War II, Harry continues to seek out and inhabit meaningful social roles in his community, in his family, and in his country (81 –83). Similarly, John Branscum's interpretation of the digital literacy narrative of sixty-five-year-old Frank Quickert reveals that Frank's affinity for immersive, exploration-centered video games affords him opportunities in his "semiretirement" to extend and explore familiar subject positions from his off-screen life:

> In the semiotic domains Frank has occupied in both his real and gaming lives, he has stressed a
> macro-social sense of self where he is both player and an avatar of larger social forces: as God's

shepherd in his role as priest, as the people's voice in his role as state representative, as an incarnation of the law in his role as director of law, and as part of a larger, transhistorical, economic leviathan in his role as investment advisor. (225)

In my own research, too, tracing the literate lives of older adults has lent itself to careful consideration of the "role of role." Beverly, at age eighty-one, used emergent and remediated print- and digital-based literacies—most of which were developed as part of her changing and gendered roles as secretary and later manager at a paper mill—in order to continue to assert agency and authority in her family-based social media literacy practices, despite her relatively novice status as a social media user ("Resisting"). As these cases only begin to illustrate, not only are literacy practices taken up in the context of particular social roles, those literacy practices can be called upon by individuals to sustain, reinvent, or reject social roles in later life—particularly at stages of life, such as Adulthood II and old age, when social roles aren't as clearly outlined as they are earlier stages.

Cross-Generational Perspectives of Literacy

At the time Deborah Brandt interviewed her for the research project that would become *Literacy in American Lives*, Martha Day was eighty-nine and "still stinging" from the preference her parents showed her brother, who was sent to college, while the equally talented Martha was not (32). Nonetheless, Day's agrarian upbringing in the rural Midwest became a resource—an example of what Brandt came to call "reservoir s of opportunity"—for literacy acquisition during a moment of economic change, which she leveraged into a career as a writer (*Literacy in American Lives* 34). As agrarian economies grew in the 1940s, so did the industry of farm magazines, which advertised farming equipment. When the local newspaper editor bought a small farm magazine, Day was primed to share press releases and bulletins, and occasionally to contribute to a women's interest column—a role that expanded once the small magazine was sold to a larger firm. After a full career as a writer, Day, at eighty-nine, "was still writing and finding her constituency," having published some recent work in "senior citizen magazines" (36). While remaining bound to the agrarian conservative culture was largely the result of gender discrimination, Day could leverage her agrarian values to secure work as a writer: a transition that "depended on being well connected to an older order on whose value she could continue to trade" (37). Brandt contrasts Day's success story with the story of Barbara Hunt, who—apart from being born in 1971, sixty-eight years after Day—shared a near-identical upbringing, as the daughter of a dairy-farming family in a small, conservative agrarian community. However, by the time Barbara was growing up, close-knit agrarian communities were no longer prevalent, and thus the values and knowledge she absorbed from her upbringing no longer enjoyed the same market value as Day had enjoyed before her retirement in 1968.

The contrasting retrospective accounts of two women, growing up in similar environments but at different historic moments, yields one of the most crucial findings of Brandt's work in *Literacy in American Lives*: that "literacy learning is conditioned by economic changes," which "devalue once-accepted standards of literacy achievement but, more seriously, destabilize the social and cultural trade routes over which families and communities once learned to preserve and pass on literate know-how" (42). This finding has direct implications on composition classrooms and curricula, within and against national rhetorics of literacy achievement:

> The school's responsibility should not be merely—and perhaps not mainly—to keep raising standards, revising curricula, and multiplying skills to satisfy restless pursuers of human capital . . . Economic changes create immediate needs for students to cope with gradual and sometimes dramatic alterations in systems of access and reward for literacy learning that operate beyond the classroom. (43-44)

To say that such important claims would have been impossible if Brandt had not included narratives of older people (the oldest participant was ninety-eight) among those of younger adults and children, would be an overstatement. Historiography, statistical research, and other methods are also effective in tracing literacy's ebbs and flows amid economic and social change. However, as Brandt's study exemplifies, these contrastive personal histories serve as crucial repositories of literacy's histories and ecologies: the historic, psychological, and social dimensions of literacy that arise, weave together, change, and vanish over time.

In addition to longitudinal, cross-generation studies represented in work by Brandt, Shirley Brice Heath, and Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher (among others), studies have also demonstrated how the oldest members of a population can be crucial to the formation and maintenance of group identity. Studies of communal efforts by elders to preserve cultures and to establish legacies have contributed to expanding theories of literacy. For example, the widely influential concept of literacy sponsorship has been expanded through studies of the efforts of older people to reproduce literate legacies in future generations. Although not exclusive to the literacy practices of older people, Alanna Frost's study of First Nations women in British Columbia includes Mary John, a Saï'ek elder—so named for her community leadership and seniority, but whose politically motivated literacy stewardship practices began in earnest after age sixty. Through analysis of Mary John's long-term efforts to use literate activity to "work toward rhetorical sovereignty" (57) and "practice and protect traditional literacies that are threatened" (70), Frost builds from the concept of literacy sponsorship and outlines "literacy stewardship," a concept more precise to the work of people like Mary John. Also expanding the concept of literacy sponsorship, Charlotte Hogg's *From the Garden Club: Rural Women Writing Community* documents the literacies of older women in Paxton, Nebraska, who use literate activity to create a coherent sense of local community. As they "grounded themselves in space and time through their writing against everything moving around them and past them" (32), they illustrate a particular form of sponsorship that involves "producing and sharing culture and history for future generations" (132).

Multi-generational studies within single families have proven useful to conceptualizing the role of family, home, and intergenerational relationships in literacy learning and rhetorical education. Suzanne Rumsey's study of her own family's multimodal, home-based literacy practices yielded the concept of *heritage literacy*, which captures "how people transfer literacy knowledge from generation to generation and how certain practices, tools, and concepts are adapted, adopted, or alienated from use" ("Heritage Literacy" 575). The three generations of women in Rumsey's autoethnographic study made agentive decisions about how multimodal literacies and technologies "are accumulated across generations" (576). Many of these cultivated, accumulating heritage literacies become treasured practices, or what Jamie White-Farnham calls *rhetorical heirlooms*: "literacy practices acquired not through formal education, but through family knowledge" (210). Through such attention to the intergenerational relationships among grandparents, parents, and children, researchers capture important aspects of literacy and learning that

are likely unavailable to studies that focus exclusively on a single (younger) generation of learners.

Technological Change and Digital Literacy Development

As collective attention to digital technologies in literacy learning reached new heights in the first decade of the new millennium, adults with decades of engrained and sometimes-well-rewarded experience with print-based, alphabetic literacies found themselves confronting a sudden tectonic shift that put new limits on their hard-won expertise. Debra Journet articulated her own sense of the moment of change, as a self-described senior faculty member:

> I have begun to recognize that what I and my students consider "writing" are very different phenomena. Young people today move more fluently among words, sound, and image; they report experiences with technologies I only dimly understand; and they write in genres I have never heard of. Confronting this sea change—trying to understand what might be called the new work of composing—I am striving to reconsider how I define my core responsibilities as a teacher. (107-108)

This technological "sea change" prompted Journet to explore and to experiment, despite her "novice status" with technology—the demand to learn made more pressing, in her view, "because senior colleagues represent powerful allies in efforts not just to use but also to *advocate* for technology" (108 , original emphasis). That Journet shares her story at all, despite "never [having] written anything for publication that depends so heavily on personal experience" (119) , marks a significant moment at which many older faculty members had begun to wonder, as Angela Crow overheard one fifty-something-year-old colleague ask, "Why do I feel like a basic writer?" (*Aging Literacies* 20).

In part responding to concerns that began growing among many "senior" writing faculty, Angela Crow's *Aging Literacies* focuses specifically on the challenges that emerging literacy technologies bring to many adults as they age. Crow's work suggests a need for digital literacy researchers to stay in tune with gerontological research on the physical and cognitive changes associated with aging, which come to bear on older learners' abilities to develop and engage in digital literacy practices. For instance—and germane to compositionists as well as to technical and professional communication scholars—Crow illustrates the particular conundrum of digital and new media composition for aging audiences and users. On the one hand, compositionists regularly call for digital design that is dynamic and rhetorically sophisticated; on the other hand, such designs do not automatically lend themselves to the kinds of accessibility needs shared by many older users—and users of all ages with disabilities. The seeming incommensurability of these two stances, Crow suggests, indicates a need to know more about how users, young and old, actually navigate digital texts, such that we are better able to strike a balance between overaccommodating (and thus insulting) older audiences, and underaccommodating (and thus excluding) them (91).

Extending Crow's attention to older users and producers of digital texts beyond academic contexts, Heidi McKee and Kristine Blair note that the age-based digital divide can be deeply problematic for many older people:

> The digital divide based upon age is potentially just as detrimental to individuals and society as the divide based on cultural and economic resources. As more news and information, governmental business, and personal communications are conducted online, older adults who

> do not use the Internet are at an increasing disadvantage in terms of developing social relations, participating in civic discussions, and gaining valuable knowledge on issues such as health care. (14)

While often a problem of material access, many older people are excluded from digital culture due to lack of digital literacy experience: unlike younger people who are exposed to digital technologies in school and at work, many retired older adults must rely instead on less formal support, such as community programs and centers, to fill in the knowledge gaps. McKee and Blair's essay offers, then, a call for literacy and composition scholars to identify and address the barriers many older digital literacy learners face.

Alongside consideration of the professional, physical, and social dimensions of digital literacies in the early twenty-first century, studies of older adults' technological literacy learning and practices have also prompted thinking about the ideological contexts of literacy practice and learning. Taking a critical age studies stance, my own work ("Beyond Repair") has considered the ways that literate activity is shaped by ideologies of aging. Dominant representations of technologies *for* older people are primarily framed in terms of health and bodily repair, with the assumption that tech appropriate for older users is inherently tech designed to compensate for physical and cognitive decline or health interventions. While many older adults do experience declining health and ability, the pervasiveness of such representations may, in fact, restrict both motivations for technological literacy learning, as well as a discourage any sense that experiences of aging could involve something *other* than coping with failing bodies and minds.

Just as beliefs about aging can impact literate activity, so too can literate activity be used to form and confirm beliefs about aging and age groups. Writing technologies become cultural icons of generational divides in literacy and language use, as evidenced in Brandt's *The Rise of Writing*. Many of Brandt's interviewees used writing habits amid technological changes as a basis for establishing intragenerational identity through intergenerational difference. Observes one interviewee, "From what I have seen my generation is the last one that still kind of reads books, still kind of wants to go for coffee and talk face to face. A shocking percentage of younger kids I see . . . it's all digital" (*The Rise of Writing* 146). Another suggests, "I'm not as good at online research as some of the younger lawyers. They just seem to be born knowing how to do it" (147). This kind of para-literacy talk suggests that, as technological changes continue to impact literacy practices and values on a global scale, the category of aging may be more important to literacy and composition studies than ever before.

Bodies and Agency

Having primarily worked with "traditionally-abled" college students, Heidi McKee and Kristine Blair describe a particular source of surprise in working with older adults learning to use digital technologies:

> The sheer physicality of computing surprised us and our bodies began experiencing computers in a new way, such as when we demonstrated and described how to sit properly at a keyboard so as to lessen bodily strain. Similarly, we held older adults' hands as they first used a mouse in order to show them how to hold and move it correctly (not in a death grip, which is exhausting, but also not too tentatively). Our failure to recognize the incredible physical dexterity (and stamina) needed to sit at and use a computer initially left us unprepared for working with older adults using computers for the first time. (23-24)

While studies of older people should always be cautious about overdetermining the physical, biological aspects of aging, studies of older adults place particular demands on our attention to the corporeal dimensions of literacy learning and practice, and thus offer vital opportunities to investigate the role of the body in literacy and composition.

Common physical changes in later life, including reduced visual acuity, hearing loss, arthritis, and fatigue, can play a major role in literacy learning and practice (Weinstein and LaCoss 320–21). Suzy Rumsey's study of the literacies of older people in assistive and healthcare environments illustrates that, in response to the many changes brought about by old age, including physical and cognitive change, older adults must make decisions about their literacy practices. Eighty-three-year-old Sarah, for instance, found that significant changes in her health necessitated changes to her familiar literacy practices; no longer possessing the manual strength to write long-form documents, Sarah "holds on" fiercely to the practice of signing her own name, while adapting her beloved practice of reading the Bible by listening to an audio version ("Holding On" 90-91). While Rumsey's study illuminates older adults' experiences with confronting and adapting to physical changes—changes largely experienced as a reduction or total loss of previous capabilities—it also acknowledges that a loss of physical ability does not necessitate a loss of agency, since even amid changes in health, "older adults employ the same agentive decision-making process that we all do in order to use literacy" ("Holding On" 82).

This attention to agency in the context of research on the physical factors of literate activity among older adults is particularly crucial, as physical changes in old age present complications for perceptions of agency. Age studies scholars Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs note that, as developed societies continue to age through increased affluence and longevity, the nursing home has begun to serve as an icon of an old age without agency. Gilleard and Higgs theorize that the social imaginary of the "third age," a modern period of post-working life that is defined by its lack of "agedness," depends on the imagined existence of a *fourth* age, which "represents not so much a particular cohort or stage of life but as a kind of terminal destination—a location stripped of the social and cultural capital that is most valued and which allows for the articulation of choice, autonomy, self-expression, and pleasure in later life" (123). Against prevalent social imaginaries that thus "treat physical and mental decline as definitive limits on agency" (Polivka and Longino 3), literacy and composition research is uniquely qualified to challenge such narrow definitions of agency.

As symbolized by the nursing home, medical contexts are especially important sites at which literacy and composition scholars might contribute to knowledge on aging, agency, and the body. Medical and healthcare contexts are fraught sites of power and agentive struggle: "[m]edicine—along with other forms of bodily knowledge—is reproduced through texts and norms," generating cultural scripts that can affect patient agency in medical contexts (Owens 18), even among younger patients. Adding old age to the complex of medical authority and the maze of health care systems can even further suppress the recognition of patient (and caregiver) agency. By pathologizing aging as a body problem, health-related materials written for elder patients often "perpetuate a narrow notion of what agency means for older adults and present limited agentive possibilities to them" (Swacha 70). Against the cultural scripts that might constrain the agency of older people on the basis of their bodily abilities and symptoms, literate activity can become an essential tool for maintaining some semblance of agentive control. For instance, as

Yvonne Teems finds, literacy practices such as online and library research can be an essential means for older people to play a more active role in their diagnosis and treatment during interactions with medical care providers ("Seniors' Uses").

Given the strength of connections between issues of literacy, agency, and the body afforded by studies of older populations, literacy and composition researchers familiar with disability studies are likely to find important connections. (For a discussion of the connections between aging and disability, see Teems, "'My Body Feels Old,'" and in this issue.)

Life-Writing and Aging

In an archival study of personal writing pedagogy at the University of New Hampshire, Thomas Newkirk acknowledges the difference age seems to make in the context of personal writing. Asking younger college students to engage with and emulate autobiographical essays written by middle-aged writers and intended for older readers requires "young adults to impersonate older ones, to breathe, to walk, to assume body postures of men and women two, three, even four times their age" (253). Newkirk's impression that a writer's age has significant impact on written self-expression is borne out by studies of late-life personal writing at the intersections of English studies and gerontology.

The work of compositionist/gerontologist Ruth E. Ray, for example, reveals that life-story writing does more for older adults than simply pass the time in reminiscence. In *Beyond Nostalgia*, Ray documents older people writing life stories within several writing groups, carefully considering how the literate activity of composing and sharing a life story in a group setting participates in the social construction of identity. In observing their work, Ray notes how "social scripts" for gender, race, class, and especially age placed "rhetorical demands" on the life stories they wrote (76), such that life story writing became a practice of inscribing intersectional age identity. Ray's work with Sally Chandler further illustrates that the "interpersonal dynamics" within groups of older writers can be transformative, as participants' questions and shared reminiscence can alter "fixed and . . . formulaic reminiscences," and instead "pose new meanings and create more dynamic stories that continually unfold" (46).

Literary gerontologist Kathleen Woodward's work with life-writing similarly theorizes that the life review performs important psychological and emotional memory-work: rendering the span of a lifetime as a narrative whole creates opportunities for "psychological integration" and reconciliation with conflicts of the past (2). Through an analysis of the life review writing of memory theorist Helene Deutsch, who wrote *Confrontations with Myself: An Epilogue* as an eighty-nine-year-old widow still grieving the loss of her husband, Woodward accounts for the purposes of writing the life review as a form of "emotional protection" amid a phase of life so marked by feelings of loss and social isolation: "the act of writing and the book itself becomes a kind of holding environment, a companion to [Deutsch]. . . . Her book is, we could say, itself an instance of creating companionship; it offers an important theory of the solace of emotional memory" (5).

The "tacit tradition" of personal writing may no longer be the hot topic in composition studies that it once was (Goldblatt). However, life-writing and literacy narratives continue to serve crucial functions as sources of self-knowledge and as popular methods for studying the individual *and* social dimensions of literate activity. As we explore the narratives that writers construct as research participants and as students in our classrooms, writing studies might take a cue from the interdisciplinary work of Ray and Woodward

and consider the role of age identity in life-writing.

Intra- and Intergenerational Collaboration

Composition studies has long held interest in collaboration and co-authorship, and in thinking of both literate activity and rhetorical agency as distributed rather than the work of an autonomous individual. In this regard, studies of older writers and learners have begun to emerge as important sites for investigations of writing and collaboration. Researchers and facilitators of midlife and older writers' collaborative work find that groups sometimes generate *zones of proximal development* (ZPD)—Lev Vygotsky's well-known concept that captures the developmental stage between what a learner knows and can do independently, and what they can accomplish with more-expert assistance—in order to "assist each others' social, emotional, and intellectual development" (Rumsey et al. 208). The middle-age and older women of Caroline Heller's writing group in San Francisco's Tenderloin district helped to fill in the developmental gaps left by underprivileged academic, economic, and social lives. Likewise, participants of W. Ross Winterowd's community writing groups served as audiences for one another, and thereby could discover new meanings for writing previously unavailable to them: writing became "a way to relive and preserve the past," to envision "a more hopeful future ," and to "express their hopes, their anger, their disillusionments" (503).

While ZPD is often used to conceptualize forward-and-upward developmental progress toward more complex and independent activity in the context of learning, studies of older learners' collaborations provide an important challenge to assuming eventual independence as the sole (or even preferred) goal of collaboration. Donora Hillard's work with William, a seventy-seven-year-old man with Alzheimer's, offers a poignant example. During an eighteen-month period, Hillard worked with William as he dictated memories of his service on the *USS Knapp* during the Korean War. Often confused and wholly unable to physically read and write, William could still speak, but with difficulty. As Hillard worked with William to focus on the task of reminiscing about his time in the navy, she recognized that his fragmented ways of thinking and speaking required an altogether different kind of collaboration; Hillard "moved into formulating a hybrid of *Knapp* 'stories' pieced together from William's brief lucid recollections and existing stories from his shipmates, along with organic snippets from our conversations" (219), which she then assembled into text, adding line breaks wherever William paused in speaking. The resulting textual product of Hillard and William's collaborative authorship took something like poetic form; Hillard presents a sample, from which I excerpt here:

> I'm going to go away
> There's no place for me
> I can't anymore
> But they know me
>
> Back from long years
> I don't have anything to do
> I have enough where I can look at that
> And understand it (219)

William, who had been an English major and an aspiring poet in his youth, is—through his unique

collaboration with Hillard—able to use language in a new and inventive way. While Hillard acknowledges that her framing of William's language "is always incomplete, an impossible thing," their work together signals an important shift in collaboratively composing his memories: away from narrative cohesion and fact, and toward "opening and validating the imagination" (220). As the writing work of their collaboration is reframed, so too is the language of Alzheimer's: not purely as a destructive force, but also as "a rich source of alternative creativity" (221).

Collaborations like Hillard and William's draw us outside of examining collaboration in the context of learning, and instead provide opportunities to investigate the nature of collaboration as interdependence. As frequent subjects of oral histories in literacy and composition studies and beyond, and as populations for whom language use can become quickly complicated by physical and cognitive changes, older people can, as Erin R. Anderson observed while composing her grandmother's life story, provide powerful opportunities to experience and examine the "co-constructed process of narrative composition." Through critical investigations of collaborative processes, composition and literacy studies is poised to contribute to an underexamined issue within age studies: "[t]he idea that 'dependence' may be a collaborative process" (Segal).

Coming of Age: An Invitation

The nine articles in this issue—and the subsequent "horizons of transformation" proposed by Louise Wetherbee Phelps' afterword—continue to build on and expand from these predecessors of age-aware literacy and composition research by illustrating how literate activity shapes and is shaped by experiences and ideologies of aging. Tracing the writing ecologies of two neighborhood activists in their seventies, Yvonne R. Teems consciously unites age studies and writing studies perspectives—to the benefit of both. Teems finds that "Discourses of aging" (138) and her participants' constructions of the aging experience inform and sometimes motivate their literate activity. Participants described aging as rife with risks: of becoming too sedentary, too isolated from social life, too uninformed, and too financially unstable. Against this construction of old age as a potentially dangerous time, library-based literacy practices served, for both participants, as a means to address and reduce the perceived risks—especially the risk of aging out of relevance and service to their own communities.

Both Lauren Rosenberg and Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk turn their attentions to the "long view" of literacy development, as sparked by recent interdisciplinary exchanges about writing development through the lifespan (Bazerman et al., "Taking the Long View"; Bazerman et al., *Lifespan Development*). Pointing out the need for lifespan research to attend to "unconventional" pathways toward literacy development over the lifespan, Lauren Rosenberg examines the conjoined literate lives of an older couple, in which one spouse is in the midst of developing basic literacies later in life, while his spousal partner has long experienced literacy as intricately woven into her sense of self and purpose. In their partnership, the couple demonstrate how "intertwined life trajectories" prove crucial to establishing and maintaining the "desire for literacy," particularly when pathways to literacy contain many barriers (19). Also taking the long view of literacy development over the lifespan, Mlynarczyk adopts a life history approach to document the literate histories of four women, whose lifelong ways with words, both "in school and (mostly) out

of school," (37) figured prominently in making later life vibrant and meaningful in their eighties and nineties. Literacy, for these women, continues to bring "life-enhancing" values (36).

Janet Bean, Ryan J. Dippre, and Annie Kelvie each conduct writing studies projects that challenge facets of contemporary ideologies of aging, all while offering important contributions to knowledge about literacy and composition. Exploring the seeming incongruence of faith and critical pedagogy in composition studies, Janet Bean offers a sensitive analysis of the literate activity of her mother, Janice, whom she describes as a "conservative, religious, eighty-one-year-old woman living in the rural south" (59). Rather than embodying the anti-critical stance so often assumed of older people, of faith-based communities, and of the rural south, Janice's Methodist faith leads her to engage with diverse texts that challenge her lifelong values. These critical literacy practices give rise to gradual transformations as well as entrenchments, and serve as a crucial reminder that critical literacy is "a process full of stops and starts, contradictions and dissonance" (61). Ryan J. Dippre contributes in equal measure to age studies and writing studies through the articulation of *expansive agency*; through sociohistoric analysis of acts of textual coordination by Frank, a retired engineer, Dippre traces the circulation of agency through Frank's textual practices and language choices from one situation to the next. In doing so, Dippre challenges assumptions that agency is inevitably reduced or lost in old age, and illustrates agency as a distributed, enacted process. While Dippre challenges limited perspectives of agency in old age, Annie Kelvie counters the "decline narrative" of aging in the US through her ethnographic study of a church reading group, whose members are predominantly older adults. Through collaborative interpretation of readings, and through the appropriation and adaptation of familiar church genres, the reading group demonstrates a form of progressive civic engagement rooted in literate activity.

Laura McGrath and Dawn S. Opel examine literacy at sites with near-opposing age-associations: for McGrath, a social media platform most often associated with the literacy practices of younger people; for Opel, a health care system that is inclined to overdetermine the role of older patients as problems. McGrath investigates the construction of age identity through her study of the social media activity of middle-aged and older women. Through surveys and case studies, McGrath illustrates the varied means by which women use technological literacies to achieve visibility within youth-obsessed culture of style and fashion circles on social media platforms. Addressing one outcome of the "crisis rhetorics" of aging—that aging populations are a burden on national resources—Dawn S. Opel contests the use of *health literacy* as a means of effectively pinning the difficulties and failures in navigating a complex health care system on individual patients. Simultaneously recognizing health care and literacy as *distributed* activity, Opel posits a model of health care that recruits patients, caregivers, providers, and even compositionists in a community care coordination effort.

Finally, Douglas Hall and Michael Harker turn us toward the pedagogical connections between age studies and literacy studies, through which compositionists might contribute to the development of age theory. Noting the potential the value of the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives to the field, while further noting the need to examine the ways ideologies of aging inform and are revealed within the literacy narratives people tell, Hall and Harker argue for the importance of a "curriculum for aging." Toward this end, the co-authors describe an oral history project designed to help students develop understandings of literacy development that are attuned to the ideologies of aging.

As with studies of younger people, these nine essays present varied means of examining literacy as distributed, collaborative activity, moving within ecologies and bringing communities together—or breaking them apart. In their particular focus on the literacies of *older* people, the authors lead us through rich sites of literate activity beyond school: private homes, places of worship, libraries, health care systems, and social media. We see literacy development over a longer lifespan, as literacies developed at different stages of life accumulate, fragment, and fade. We see older adults using literate activity to adapt to aging, as well as the physical changes of aging that necessitate adaptations to literate activity. We encounter older adults making agentive and critical choices about literacy, even among stereotypes of aging that would otherwise cast them as helpless or resistant to change. We see, too, opportunities for literacy and composition scholars, teachers, and activists to intervene in anti-aging cultural scripts.

Suzy and I have asked the authors to use terms like *older adult* and *older people* to describe the subjects and participants of their work. As age studies scholars remind us, chronological age carries fluid meaning across contexts and across the lifespan. We chose the relative term *older* to remind readers of that very fact. (Terms like *senior citizen* or *retiree*, which collapse the varied experiences of older people into static, homogenous groups, are consciously absent.) Suzy and I were determined that this issue would focus on literacy in relation to *older* people, however authors might identify such an age category, as a small step toward rectifying the general omission of older adult experiences from the field. However, in electing to refer to *age studies* rather than its alternative name of *aging studies* (or *ageing studies* in British English contexts), Suzy and I want to signal the sense that age, as a category of analysis, is not only relevant in the second half of life. As Leni Marshall notes, because *aging* is often associated specifically with older people, it is a term used to signal a specific focus on older populations; its alternative term, *age studies*, "recognizes aging as a continual process" (56). In this subtle way, Suzy and I acknowledge that, while the project of this special issue is to call attention to the "absent presence" of older people, in particular, it is also our hope to motivate studies of age more broadly: across the lifespan.

I urge readers to see this assemblage of work as an invitation to come of age: to recognize the absent presence of age in literacy and composition studies. We invite readers, too, to consider what remains absent, still, from the pages of this issue, and to contribute to our ever-growing list of questions for further investigation:

- What new purposes and exigencies for writing emerge at different stages of life?
- How do technological, social, and cultural changes place new demands on the existing literacies of older adults?
- How does the development of literacies or the transfer of knowledge about writing continue over a lifetime?
- How might intersectional identities of age, alongside race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and others, constitute difference in literacy learning?
- What does it mean to age as a writer and/or as a writing teacher?
- How do we compose our late careers or post-retirement lives as compositionists?
- How well do interfaces of composing technologies account for the aging body?
- How might composition and literacy instruction participate in shaping perceptions of older people?

- How might community literacy pedagogies foster opportunities for cross-generational composition?
- How might different cultures of aging impact literacy learning and practices?

Whether it's because we are becoming more cognizant of aging as an identity category with each passing year; whether we are increasingly conscious of loved ones and neighbors and colleagues as they grow older; whether we notice and confront ageism and generation-based conflict in personal and public spheres; whether we see age as an under-examined component of intersectional identities; whether we simply value a vision of literacy from the full span of a lifetime; or even if it is all of these things, we have reason enough to consider old age and aging as a lens through which to understand literacy and composition.

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NOTES

[1] For more comprehensive introductions to the field, see Katz; Segal; Gullette, "Age Studies and Gender."

[2] Scapegoating is not, of course, solely applied to members of older generations. Millennials born between 1981 and 1996 have long been demonized in public discourses for ruining (or, rather, "killing") entire industries, products, social norms, and the American way of life.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

ARTICLES

The Writing Ecologies of Older American Activists

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KEYWORDS

aging; writing ecologies; New Materialism; disability studies

While studying older adults appears niche in its focus on a marginalized community, this community is unique in its ubiquity—we all have the potential to age. Similarly, writing studies research on aging contributes insights relevant not only to those interested in aging, but to the field at large. Writing studies researchers have examined older adults' identity construction and their relationships with technology and medicine. Ruth E. Ray has explored the ways people use life writing to construct identity with regard to age, gender and race. Scholars have examined the ways older adults acquire technological literacy (McKee and Blair), to what extent they are technologically literate (Teems, "Evidence"), and the cultural expectations of their technological literacy as represented in public texts (Bowen). Kathryn Yankura Swacha has found troublesome metaphors for aging in public health literature, and I have identified the ways older adults internalize these types of cultural tropes ("My Body") and use literacy tactics in medical encounters to leverage power ("Seniors' Uses").

This research is not only relevant to other researchers who study older adults' literacy practices or to those who teach older adults directly. Research on the literacy practices of older adults also is at the forefront of literacy and composition studies because it is able to further the field's understanding of writing ecologies (Dobrin; Rickert; Syverson; Taylor). Ecological theories of writing assume that the subject exists within a complex system that is composed of an unlimited number of influences, such as the author's culture, background, history, and education, as well as material resources, including the author's tools and the embodiment of the author herself. Ecologies include the interactions and conversations writers have had with others, contributing to the idea that no one writes alone (Taylor). These components interact in unpredictable ways to produce writing that conventionally would be attributed to the author-subject. Researchers may find it difficult to systematically examine authorial embodiment and materiality as components of writing ecologies. Yet because older adults' bodies are marked as aging, studying them allows us to bring to the surface the role of the body within their writing ecologies, and thus contributes to our understanding of how bodies function within complex systems of writing.

This study asks two linked questions through an interdisciplinary lens: First, what can we learn about writing ecologies by studying older adults' literacy practices? Second, what can we learn about older adults by examining their writing ecologies? In this article, I examine two activist men over age seventy-five to explicate the aspects of their writing ecologies that relate to aging, ability, and materiality. To do this, I use an interdisciplinary approach that first draws connections among the mostly discrete fields of writing studies, disability studies,

"Because older adults' bodies are marked as aging, studying them allows us to bring to the surface the role of the body within their writing ecologies, and thus contributes to our understanding of how bodies function within complex systems of writing."

and age studies.[1] I collect and analyze data through community-based and feminist methodologies, and I analyze the discourse of the interviews. Finally, I discuss what is useful about examining older adults' writing ecologies for older adults and for those who work with them.

Interdisciplinary Framework

By drawing connections among the epistemological grounding in disability, age studies, and writing studies, we may find a more productive interdisciplinary approach to the phenomenon under study. Each of these fields has experienced parallel moves toward new materialism. In *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things,* a 2015 edited collection that examines materiality in writing studies, S. Scott Graham identifies the move to new materialism in the humanities and social sciences broadly. He writes, "[N]ew materialisms (Coole and Frost's umbrella term) are marked by a strong interest in objects, ontologies, reality, and the concrete" (108), and in so doing they identify the shortcomings of the social turn, where human subjectivity constructs reality in lieu of material reality.

Disability studies has taken a new materialist approach to its work in recent decades. Prior to the social turn, disability studies used a medical model, where disability was a problem located in the individual's body. The social turn separated impairment from disability, defining impairment as bodily difference and disability as the socially constructed barriers that people with impairments face because of that difference. Disabled bodies only struggle in the world due to the way the world expects "normal" bodies to move and function (Shakespeare). In response to this turn toward constructivism that ignores the material body, disability studies scholars began to argue for a phenomenological interrogation of "lived experience" (Hughes and Paterson). Tobin Siebers suggested a "theory of complex embodiment" that "raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body, but it emphasizes as well that some factors affecting disability, such as chronic pain, secondary health effects, and aging, derive from the body" (25). In other words, while impairment often can be something to celebrate, disability studies must also acknowledge its negative effects. Siebers' new materialist focus on the body complicates the study of disability by acknowledging somatic experiences and not only disability's social construction.

Social gerontology took similar, if differently timed, turns as disability studies—one turn away

from the body with social constructivism, and one back toward the body with new materialism. The social turn positioned aging as a social construction, but Peter Öberg brought the body back into aging in a way similar to Siebers, focusing on the material realities of the aging body. Recently, scholars have sought to bring together aging and disability studies in a special issue of the *Review of Disability Studies: An International Journal* that focuses on disability and aging (Conway). The fear in both fields is that a return to the body could lead us to the medical model again, and so researchers call for an understanding of both material and discursive construction of aging (Öberg; Twigg) and disability (Siebers; Hughes and Paterson).

Like disability and aging studies, writing studies has followed a similar pattern, focusing on the writer and/or text exclusive of social context (Perl; Sommers). The social turn prompted us to examine the writer *in situ*, yet here we faced limitations, such as the "limits of the local" that preclude an understanding of how writing in local contexts is connected to global forces, an antidote to which, Deborah Brandt & Katie Clinton suggest, is examining the "text-as-object." Kate Vieira echoes this sentiment, noting that literacy has materiality: "literacy is not only a social product, but . . . it is also an object that actively constitutes the social" (27). To examine this phenomenon, she writes, "Brandt and Clinton encourage us to look *at* literacy instead of *through* it—precisely the work that compositionists' disciplinary training encourages" (27). In her study of immigrant families, Vieira observes literacy's inherent agency—such as in the form of a passport—to regulate the movement of bodies across borders, and to act as an opportunity but also an obstacle.

Writing Ecologies

In writing studies, one new materialist approach to explain how material objects and bodies are implicated in the writing situation is through the study of writing ecologies. Margaret Syverson argues that writing ecologies theory attempts to account for additional variables within the writing context outside of "writer, text, and audience" (23). Writing ecologies theorists attempt to decenter the subject and to account for the agency of things, human and non-human, that contribute to the emergence of a written product. The interactions of these networked items are explained by complex systems theory. Complex systems are sets of "independent agents . . . [that] act and interact in parallel with each other, simultaneously reacting to and co-constructing their own environment" (Syverson 3). Further, "because such a system is self-organizing, adaptive, and dynamic, it is not possible to predict its behavior simply by understanding its parts and their relationship to each other; a complex system defies any attempt at a strictly mechanistic explanation" (4). Syverson explains that "an ecology is a kind of meta-complex system composed of interrelated and interdependent complex systems and their environmental structures and processes" (5). As a system of complex systems, writing includes varied components that interact with one another, influencing each other and producing byproducts that are incapable of being predicted. Sidney Dobrin advances this writing ecologies theory, explaining that the complex system of writing is "fluctuating," and "one not moved toward stability" (144).

To examine the writing ecologies of the activist men in this study, I examine the Discourses[2]

(Gee) of aging and the ways they intersect with participants' descriptions of their literacy practices. Aging might be seen as a component of a networked writing ecology's "ambience" (Rickert) in which the network exists. More accurate than "environment," the concept "ambience," says Thomas Rickert, "seeks to put place, language, and body into co-adaptive, robust interaction" (904). In this study, I talk with aging activists about their literacy practices and then examine the ways an aging Discourse is threaded through the discussion. This lends insight into the ways participants' constructions of aging affect their literacy practices and the role of the body in this ecology.

> *"Aging might be seen as a component of a networked writing ecology's 'ambience' (Rickert) in which the network exists."*

The Neighborhood Action Coalition

This article examines two black men over age seventy-five who are members of a grassroots civic organization in a suburb of New York City. The civic organization, which I am calling the Neighborhood Action Coalition (NAC), serves a minority community composed of about 45% black, 40% Hispanic, 10% white, and 5% other races and ethnicities. The NAC is a community organizing group that aims to generate power in numbers of residents who have a stake in the direction of the neighborhood and to leverage that power to influence the decisions of local government, businesses, and universities. The group maintains strong relationships with some government officials and university partners but struggles to make its voice heard on all issues. Organizing leaders attribute this to a lack of representatives who listen to their concerns as well as to the neighborhood's "minority-majority" status, as they describe it.

A coalition of community groups, the NAC meets regularly to proactively address the needs of the community and react to local government and business decisions. At the time of the interviews, the community group was focused on three main issues: enhancing local economic opportunities by working with local government to establish a workforce development site; working with the school district to address the increasing need for infrastructure expansions; and responding to a developer's plans for a new residential complex. The group's leadership team meets weekly for two hours, and the group's broader membership meets monthly.

The neighborhood's majority-minority makeup is one of the elements that brings many of the activists to the table. Organizers often cite the neighborhood's demographic makeup as part of the reason lawmakers privilege other neighborhoods with a majority white population. The majority, but not all, of the members of the leadership team identify as part of a minority group. The context of the community is important to consider as background to the following analysis of participants' discourse on aging. This article's analysis is limited to the ways participants discursively construct age and disability, which leaves other components of participants' identities, including race, underexplored. Theorists have discussed the ways in which identity, including racial identity, intertwines with literacy practices and discourse (Cunningham; Cook-Gumperz; Gardner-Chloros; Gee; Gilyard). These components of the participants' identities undoubtedly shape the discursive

representations of their activist literacy practices and impact the ways they construct aging, yet a thorough analysis of those intersections is beyond the scope of this article.

Methodology and Methods

I engaged in participant observation of the weekly leadership team meetings for the fifteen months leading up to the interviews, and I audio recorded the latter nine months of meetings. I audio recorded one-on-one interviews with the two participants who are the focus of this study and who regularly attend the weekly meetings. The study received approval from my university's institutional review board, and all individuals who participated in the weekly meetings and interviews signed consent forms. Names of people, organizations, and places are changed and nonpertinent details of some community issues are left vague to protect the identity of the group and its members.

As feminist research, the study is transparent in its methods and reflective in practice (Fonow and Cook). The study uses an ethic of reciprocity (Powell and Takayoshi) that requires an open and evolving relationship between researcher and participants wherein the researcher takes up opportunities for giving back to participants as they become apparent. To those ends, I attended as many meetings as possible, listening mostly but offering advice in the few areas where I had expertise or connections to the university. I also served as the organization's "writer,"—an interesting title given the distributed nature of writing in writing ecologies theory—drafting letters to government officials and marketing materials as needed.

Feminist researchers seek to dismantle the power dynamic between researcher and researched in many ways. Some researchers suggest recruiting participants to engage as co-researchers; for this study, asking participants to do that work would have placed an unnecessary burden on them. To ensure participants maintained control over what gets published about them, I included the following clause in the consent forms: "The researcher will allow the organization's co-facilitators to review any presentation or publication of findings prior to the release of this information to ensure that the organization's mission is not compromised." Prior to publication, the participants had an opportunity to review this article and redact or change details that might reveal the organization's identity or strategy. I worked with participants to ensure that details were not altered to the point that findings or conclusions would be jeopardized.

In this study, I treat participants' talk about civic work as a discursive representation of their civic literacy practices.[3] Interviews were discussions of participants' civic work, which includes literacy practices such as going to the library, conducting research on topics important to the community, and reviewing government and school district documents in order to take a position on particular issues, as well as note taking and drafting position statements.

Norman

Norman is a seventy-six-year-old member of the NAC who worked for a nongovernmental agency during his professional life. He raised his family in Brooklyn, New York, where he became

involved in the local school district as an active citizen. Upon moving to the New York City suburbs, he continued his involvement in his local community, most recently contributing to the study of a new development in the community and its impact on traffic, which was his specialization as a former engineer. Retired now, Norman describes his daily visits to the library as the nexus where his literacy work and his management of aging meet. He explains that in recent years he lost his wife and his daughter to cancer, and staying active in the community is one way to maintain a positive outlook on life.

For Norman, the library becomes a place where he meets his needs as a retiree. He says,

> Norman: It was so well. It's critical to my mind. I think reading is the best thing they invented. I think because that's the grasp of information, I'll read it. Like I do, I literally go to the library just about every day. Read a book, buy a newspaper (   )[4] *Best in Business Daily, USA*. It keeps you current. And it's also the practicality; it's pragmatic because you learn something from it. I'm retired so you have to be aware of your surroundings, it's (   ). Things are constantly changing that you know. As a person said, "The only thing constant is change." And you just have to be aware. There's so many things; investments, should I go here now? Where is the place you're not to go. There's markets there, there's ATF's. No, seriously. You know if you're retired you don't want to run out of your money. You're [eating] cat food. No, seriously. That's the way I look at it. So, that scares you to keep learning. To keep learning. And then you find out too that as you age you've got to keep growing. Age is not simply a number because sometimes the joints let you know they're aging. You know you're outliving the joints. But, I think you have to keep active. You have to keep your mind, body, and soul. Continuing to ( ) and that's part of it; being part of organizations, been all over the place. Real deal, it's all over.
>
> Yvonne: Now, you mentioned going to the library. Why go to the library to read the papers instead of having them come to your house?
>
> Norman: Okay, that's a good question. First of all, too. I'm by myself; I need social interaction. Okay, which is good. So, you don't stop, you don't go live and isolate yourself completely. You get that social interaction. I go to the East Neighborhood Library, I go to the West Neighborhood Library, I go to the North Neighborhood Library, I go to the South Neighborhood Library, I go to the Central Neighborhood Library. A lot of people they kind of see me, and they know me. And it's some interaction: "Hi, how you doing?" And so forth. They have courses there. I just took chess at East Neighborhood Library.

The library, for Norman, is a place where he manages all of the challenges of retirement and aging. He brings up four distinct features of aging in this excerpt that will be discussed in turn: retirement as a time when you lose connection to information; retirement as a time when you risk poverty; aging as a time of inactivity; and aging as a time of social isolation. The library is a place where he combats all of these challenges.

First, Norman describes retirement as a stage in life where it would be easy to lose track of what

is happening in the world. He says, "I'm retired so you have to be aware of your surroundings. . . . Things are constantly changing." Retirement is a stage in life that is also often associated with aging because most adults retire when they reach a late numerical age. Norman reinforces this concept by sliding easily from a discussion about retirement into a discussion about aging in this same excerpt. He says, "And then you find out too that as you age you've got to keep growing."

The library helps him to stay aware of current events as it provides him with access to the latest of any periodical, such as *Best in Business Daily* and *USA Today*. Later in the interview, he says that he picks up whatever sparks his interest, including *Money Magazine*, *Kiplinger's*, and *Psychology Today*. When asked how the library is related to his civic engagement, he notes, "It show you how interrelated things are because I pick up an article talking about the same social issues." He notes that he picks up the local newspaper and sees an article about a development that is on the community organization's radar. He adds, "It keeps that awareness, that consciousness." Through reading these articles, he can contribute to strategizing at the NAC, which is researching the development's impact on the community and working together to come to a consensus about where to stand on the project. At a stage in life where he says it might be easy to become less informed about what is happening in the local and global communities, Norman notes that the library allows him to maintain awareness and also to use that literacy practice to be a contributing member of the community activist group.

Second, Norman connects retirement and, therefore, aging, with risking poverty, and positions the library as an antidote to that risk. He says, "If you're retired you don't want to run out of your money. . . . So, that scares you to keep learning." Norman brings to the forefront that one of the greatest material struggles of aging is adjusting to a new and often reduced level of income. He uses

"When Norman notes that 'age is not simply a number,' he argues that age is embodied; it is more than the number of years you have been alive. He feels his age in pain and stiffness that he experiences in his joints. Thus, age is not only a social construction but also a material, lived experience . . . "

the library as a space where he accesses the resources of financial literacy, reading about the stock market in magazines such as *Money* and *Kiplinger's*. He jokes that one might be reduced to eating "cat food" if one's resources were depleted, and how a thought like that "scares you to keep learning." This emphasizes that in retirement, people are limited to few options for obtaining material resources. They may have little family to rely upon, or they may be unable to work a full-time job any longer. One way to maintain control over one's material resources is to manage what you already have saved. To do this well, Norman turns to literacy practices that he engages in at the library.

Third, Norman describes the library as a place where he can combat inactivity in all of its forms— inactivity that comes with aging. He says, "And then you find out too that as you age you've got to keep growing. Age is not simply a number because sometimes the joints let you know they're aging. You know you're outliving the joints. But, I think you have to keep active. You have to keep your mind, body, and soul. Continuing to ( ) and that's part of it; being part of organizations." Age studies scholars have described different ways of measuring aging (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles), and

Norman identifies two of them here: aging can be measured numerically but also physically. When Norman notes that "age is not simply a number," he argues that age is embodied; it is more than the number of years you have been alive. He feels his age in pain and stiffness that he experiences in his joints. Thus, age is not only a social construction but also a material, lived experience, as scholars have argued (Öberg; Twigg). He goes on to say that "you're outliving the joints," which implies that your mental sharpness might stay intact longer than your body's capacity for movement and health. Age studies scholars remark upon this idea in their description of the mask of aging (Featherstone and Hepworth), where older adults look in the mirror and do not recognize the aging body because their sense of self seems much younger.

In order to combat the effects of aging, Norman says that "you have to keep active," and "active" in this statement seems to take on multiple definitions. He had just been talking about reading at the library to stay in touch with the goings-on of the community and the stock market, and now he is talking about the need to keep "growing" despite the limitations of the joints. The library seems to provide opportunities for both mental *and* physical "activity" and "growth." He underscores this idea when he says, "You have to keep your mind, body, and soul." He goes on to say that "being part of organizations" like the NAC is part of what it means to be active. This relates to the interconnectedness that he points out later in the interview. Aging contributes to mental and physical inactivity, Norman argues, and literacy practices such as going to the library and participating in community groups, some of the work of which involves library research, helps him to stay active.

Later in the interview, Norman connects physical activity to library literacy practices more explicitly. While on a library computer, he checks out different articles that catch his eye. He says, "It might be something on health because that's very important especially as you age. . . . It keeps you alert, it keeps you active. You getting to the age and think . . . you know exercise is critical. I try to exercise. I will sometimes exercise seven days a week." He directly connects the need to fight the physical effects of aging with physical activity, and he notes that he will read about health and exercise to inform this activity. The library seems to provide Norman with the physical activity of engaging with other humans, books, and computers; the opportunity to connect with and stay current on issues that he takes with him to community groups; and information on physical activity and health literacy.

Fourth and finally, Norman describes aging as a time when one can experience social isolation, and his literacy practices help him to stay socially connected. Like many older adults, Norman is a widower, and he lives alone. He describes how he goes to a different library every day and spends on average two hours at each one. The social interaction is essential to his quality of life: "A lot of people see me . . . and they know me. And it's some interaction: 'Hi, how you doing?' and so forth." Norman emphasizes the importance of social interaction and how the library provides that in informal and formal ways: "The library atmosphere too. I'm getting the social, I'm getting the universe. They've got courses I can sign up for." He joined a chess group through one of the libraries which not only provides him with social interaction but also forces him to engage in "deep thinking."

In this example, Norman describes the norm of aging as having multiple negative qualities: lack of awareness of global and local events, financial distress, inactivity, and social isolation. Norman uses

the library as a way to combat all of these negative consequences of aging, and the literacy practices that he engages in at the library contribute directly or indirectly to his work in the community. In highlighting aging in Norman's community activist literacy ecology, we have found that Norman even more robustly engages in literacy practices in response to his fears that aging will cause mental, financial, physical, and/or social depletion. This in turn allows him to be even more engaged in his community activist work by being more aware of ongoing community issues, networking with others in the community, and finding information that informs the activist group's decisions.

Gerard

Gerard is a seventy-eight-year-old member of the NAC and elected member of the local school board, a position he has held for almost twenty years. Of Caribbean origin, Gerard moved to New York City as a young man and worked on issues facing Caribbean immigrants in Harlem and Queens throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout his adult life, he held a government job, and he became involved in his local school district when he moved to the New York City suburbs and had children.

Gerard describes himself as an active contributor to community work but notes that he is in the process of passing responsibility to the next generation.

Excerpt 1:

Gerard: I've just been sitting there observing [laughter.] And at my stage of the game, that's what it has come down to.

Yvonne: When you say my stage of the game, what do you mean?

Gerard: Well, I've been at it a long time. Some people my age are retired, I mean from civic engagement and community. I'm still involved, so I'm leaving it to younger folks to do the heavy-lifting [laughs] and stuff like that. But, wherever I'm needed or I could assist, I pitch in. I'm more or less passing it towards ( )

Excerpt 2:

Yvonne: So, that's really interesting; you say that some people would retire from civic engagement and community. Why not you?

Gerard: That's a good question, [Laughter] and the answer is I'm not ready to do that. I still think there's things that I could assist with it and contribute towards, so I continue. And, it's a good thing; it helps me, keeps me abreast of what's going on, and it's healthy. [Laughter]

Yvonne: How so?

Gerard: Well, it keeps you active to some extent; inactivity, I don't believe, is very

good. So, I'm active and I think that's a helpful thing. And, it keeps me, my mind alert and active; I think that's helpful as well – healthful. I mean, I've been at it awhile. I've been involved in community activities since I was in my twenties.

Yvonne: Wow.

Gerard: I'm almost eighty.

Gerard's discussion of aging and practicing community activist literacy sheds light on his literacy ecology when his discourse is examined with insights from age studies.

First, Gerard's discourse in this example constructs an identity that is located between young and old. To do this he uses a "provisional continuity device" that has been discussed by age studies scholar Pirjo Nikander. She conducted interviews with Finnish men and women nearing age fifty and found that they consistently "construct *provisional continuity* that allows them simultaneously to acknowledge and distance themselves from factual notions of physical or psychological lifespan change" (865). Nikander found that this identity construction is not uncommon among those transitioning among age brackets. Specifically, her participants invoke a pattern in their discourse in which they deny impending change due to aging (A), then acknowledge that change is possible or inevitable, or perhaps has begun in some small way (B), but then reiterate that they have yet to experience significant change (A). Because this pattern is seen in the identity constructions of membership categories in other studies, Nikandar argues, it can support the argument that age is a membership category that is indexed discursively.

If not an exact copy of this pattern, Gerard's movement between youthful and aging categories constitutes a "provisional continuity device" (Nikander). His talk moves back and forth between a younger and older age identity category; if we were to apply the same variables, we might name it BABAB. Note how the excerpt from above weaves back and forth from an aging to a youthful membership category (clauses coded as aging are in bold; clauses coded as youthful are in italics):

> **Well, I've been at it a long time. Some people my age are retired, I mean from civic engagement and community [aging].** *I'm still involved [youthful],* **so I'm leaving it to the younger folks to do the heavy-lifting [laughs] and stuff like that [aging].** *But, wherever I'm needed or I could assist, I pitch in (youthful).* **I'm more or less passing it toward ( ) [aging]**

The ABA pattern is also evidenced in the second excerpt, where Gerard is asked why some retire from community work but he does not. He does a similar type of weaving between the identity categories in this response. He notes that there are still ways for him to help advance the causes that he has worked on even though he is "almost eighty." Just as with the first excerpt, he underscores a contradiction between what he is able to offer and his numerical age. Thus, the first observation is that Gerard's talk of his activist literacy activity locates him in a transitional, liminal space between young and old.

The second observation is that Gerard's discussion of aging as a community activist is framed by metaphors of physical labor, which lends insight into the embodiment of his literacy practices. He

notes that at his age, many people retire from community work, but he is still involved. Even though he is still involved, he leaves the "heavy lifting" to the "younger folks," which shows that he pulls back a little from his intense community engagement to allow others to take up the greater burdens. In this metaphor, the tenor or subject is the literacy work and the vehicle is physical labor. Because he says he leaves the literacy labor to younger folks, he implies that older people should not or cannot (or simply do not want to) do the heavy lifting. The metaphor underscores that there are limitations on older adults' literacy practices that are akin to their physical limitations. The use of this metaphor takes for granted that people experience physical limitations as they age, and then extends those physical limitations to the labor of literacy. By packaging physical limitations and the limitations of literacy work into one metaphor, Gerard implies a correlation between age-related limitations in the body and in literacy practice.

The metaphor also implies that, in literacy, there is physical labor. This "heavy lifting" includes attending meetings, conversing with community members, and writing emails, letters, and memos, all of which require physical energy. My observations of the NAC over the course of eighteen months allowed me to see members' bodily movements: climbing stairs (which appeared difficult for Gerard); physically gathering around a table, often late into the evening; carrying and distributing materials; taking one's place on a wooden bench in the county legislative building; standing, holding a sign, in unity with the community group at that meeting; and climbing a bus to travel to the sidewalk outside of the legislative building to stage a protest. All of these physical movements and positions, as well as selections of spatial locations, are part of participants' activist literacy practices. Gerard's metaphor reveals that the body's ability to do these activities determines one's level of literacy activity within this ecology.

In the second excerpt, body metaphors and literal body references are again bound up with Gerard's discussions of literate activity. Gerard says that his work in the community keeps him healthy: "Well, it keeps you active to some extent; inactivity, I don't believe, is very good. So, I'm active and I think that's a helpful thing. And, it keeps me, my mind alert and active; I think that's helpful as well; healthful." In this example, the line between physical and mental activity and health is blurred. He says that literacy "activity" "helps" as well as contributes to his "health." Activity in this example might be interpreted as mental but also physical, as his work in the community includes walking around high school and college campuses and attending meetings. Further, he describes his activity as "healthful," which might include both mental and physical health. This example shows that his community literacy work impacts health and body in positive ways.

Later in the interview, Gerard uses another body metaphor to describe community activist literacy work. In response to the question, "How old are you?", he says, "seventy-eight; going on seventy-nine [Laughter]. So, I've been doing this a long, long time starting with that and all the stuff like that. And, I'm from [the Caribbean]; I used to be, in my twenties, president of the State Public Affairs Council. Yeah, I've been doing this all my life, so it's in my blood." In this metaphor, the tenor is his commitment to community activism and the vehicle is his blood, and the rationale for making such a bold statement is, in fact, age. He rationalizes that community work is "in my blood" *because* of how long he has been doing it; he measures the length of time spent on it by comparing his age

when he started (in his twenties) to his age now (late seventies). Ecological theories of writing reveal the co-constitutive nature of components' interactions; in this example, Gerard's engagement in community activist literacy practices *produce* a body whose life force includes that practice. Gerard was not born with activism in his blood; instead, his notation of the years he has spent on it show that it exists because he produced activist work for so many years. Just as his decades-long literacy practice produced a body that houses activism, the body may affect the nature and longevity of that activism. Because it is in his blood, he may never give it up; it might only stop when life does.

The observations made about Gerard lend insight into his writing ecology. Gerard constructs a distinction between active/young/capable and inactive/old/incapable, and then limits his activist literacy work in a way that locates him within the liminal space between those poles. He still participates in the work, but he does not participate as fully as he used to. Gerard also reveals some insight into the body's role in literacy activity. He identifies the body's labor as essential to this activity and notes that age reduces bodily *and* literacy activity. Yet his age allows him to have spent decades on this work, which makes this work an inextricable part of himself. While age is why he continues to engage in activist literacy work, it is also why he cannot do it fully, which perhaps explains his location in the liminal space between young and old.

Conclusion

In both examples, participants describe engagement in their activist literacy practices as something that is antithetical to the traditional aging experience. These tropes that equate aging with bodily decline are common in our culture. Studying older adults in film, Sally Chivers argues that aging successfully means appearing as if you are not aging at all. This trope of "aging well" implies that older people have the agency to control their health and levels of ability (Rubinstein and de Medeiros), yet this attitude has been critiqued because it does not account for variables outside the individual's control. There are problems with the "aging well" construct in that it disparages the difference that may come with aging. But it does, as I have argued elsewhere (Teems, "My Body"), acknowledge that aging may bring pain and disability, which accommodates a "complex theory of embodiment" that acknowledges the "negative and positive valences of disability" and, one might add, of aging (Siebers 5).

In joining the NAC, participants have found one way to handle what they characterize as the struggles of aging. The ways participants describe the experience of aging often run counter to disability and aging scholars' and activists' arguments that bodily difference has affordances. Yet while scholars identify the positive affordances of bodily differences, they do not deny that aging and disability *can* come with impairments that cause pain and discomfort (Siebers) and that are not accommodated in a society that privileges the young and abled norm. Accommodations are not always available in all sectors of American society, but the activist organization to which these participants belong appear to have some: weekly participation, while encouraged, is not required, and contribution to discussions can be as minimal as providing a listening ear. As a space that allows for accommodations in ways that the market economy does not, grassroots activism may

offer opportunities for engagement that meets the needs of older adults where they feel that they are. Those who belong to activist organizations may find, like Gerard, that they are able to "still contribute," even if their contributions are more limited than when they were younger.

These older adults seem to find in activist organizations the "positive valences" of aging because it is age that allows them to add value to the organizations' missions. Older adults bring to activist organizations a wealth of historical community knowledge and a career's worth of working in a particular field (as Norman brought his engineering expertise) or with a particular community: both participants have volunteered in school districts for more than forty years. As retirees, they may have more time to devote to the time-consuming work of activism, where grassroots meetings happen weekly and monthly and government meetings often happen during the workday. Further, activist groups, unlike workplaces, are unlikely to discriminate based on age, as they are grateful for any unpaid volunteers[5] and their success is often directly related to the number of community members who get involved. Perhaps most importantly, this organization's mission is to enact change that will divert resources to their community, one that is commonly overlooked, and participants may feel valued and valuable in contributing to those goals.

By examining the aging Discourse within discussions of activist literacy practices, we gain insight into the participants' writing ecologies. First, participants in NAC's weekly meetings engage in distributed authorship (Syverson) as members gather, talk, and strategize a joint response. Second, complex systems generate products and byproducts

"This organization's mission is to enact change that will divert resources to their community, one that is commonly overlooked, and participants may feel valued and valuable in contributing to those goals."

that are unpredictable (Syverson): while the participants began their work in the community as young men, they have since found that participating provides physical and mental health benefits. This may be a byproduct that was unanticipated when they were younger, but now it has become a focal point of their engagement. Third, the participants' writing ecologies include multiple complex systems that relate to and interact with one another (Syverson). Norman says that he picks up magazines to educate himself on financial or other issues that are important to him as he ages, and in doing so, he learns more about a community issue that the NAC is addressing: "It show you how interrelated things are," he says. At this point of intersection that Norman describes, we might think about two writing ecologies intersecting, as he shifts focus from one goal (e.g., financial literacy) to another (e.g., activist community literacy) because of the topics presented in the magazine.

By looking at the ways aging is woven into the "ambiance" (Rickert) of these participants' writing ecologies, we highlight the important ways the body intersects with literacy practices, thus characterizing older adults' lived experiences as activists. Specifically, participants position bodily decline in correlation with a decline in literacy work, suggesting that they think that bodily ability and energy are essential components to the engagement of literacy practices. Participants also characterize activist literacy work as similar to exercise in that doing it maintains one's cognitive and physical health or it can be used to combat aging's effects on health. Finally, in Gerard's case,

age creates a body that is consubstantial with activist literacy activity. This suggests a dialectical relationship between activist literacy work and physical and mental health that includes the added characteristic of a centripetal force: the more one does, the more one is able to keep doing, and the more one's body is inseparable from this activity.

Older adults' lived experiences as activists necessitate an understanding of the body, both discursive and material. The body is affected by and affects the ecology but also becomes a much more integral component to the literacy work the longer the work goes on. Through an analysis of situated writing practices, we are able to systematically trace some of the connections within the complex networks that make up these writing ecologies, furthering our understanding especially of writing ecologies' material components.

NOTES

[1] While the three fields are mostly discrete, disability studies and writing studies, particularly rhetoric, have a joint history (see Brueggemann; Dolmage; Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson).

[2] I use Gee's capital-D "Discourses" to describe an umbrella term for aging Discourse(s) that capture "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and, often reading and writing" (3), and lower-case "discourses" to refer to participants' speech.

[3] Dobrin describes how some definitions of ecocomposition fail to include writing but opt instead to focus on discourse because of its ability to capture broader cultural trends. In this study, I follow Dobrin's advice to advance an ecology of writing, but to examine writing, I examine discourse *about* literacy practices that include and inform writing.

[4] Empty parentheses ( ) indicate that a portion of the audio recording was inaudible.

[5] Some age scholars have argued for the concept of "productive aging" wherein older adults contribute to society and the economy even after retirement. Critiques of these arguments have noted the unfairness in labor practices that this approach can bring (King). Because much activist work falls on low-income college students and older adults, this may be a labor issue that is worth exploring in future studies.

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"Still Learning": One Couple's Literacy Development in Older Adulthood

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KEYWORDS

For Chief, a seventy-seven-year-old African American man who became literate later in life, writing development has taken an unusual trajectory. As an adult basic learner motivated by a lifelong desire to become more literate, his investment in writing and reading is largely influenced by his wife's daily practices. During an interview with Chief and his wife Shirley (pseudonyms), I asked Chief about the significance of Shirley's literate activities. Although they were both present for the conversation, Chief answered this particular question, while Shirley interjected occasional expressions of agreement.

Lauren: I was just wondering how important it is to you that she loves to read and write—in your life together, in your marriage together? Does that matter a lot to you?

Chief: Oh, yes—

L: —That she loves it so much?

C: I love it. I love to see her doing things like that. Not only that, it helps me out. She helps me out a lot. . . . I uh, she helped me out a lot when I first started. But now, I don't go to her. I go to the dictionary, get my words out [In the background, Shirley confirms: "Yeah"], a lot of words out [S: "Yeah"], that I do now [S: "Yes, um"]. When I started, she was helping me out a lot. And it looked like, it was keeping her away from a lot of work that she wants to do in the house. But now, I don't think I went to her, for uh, sometime I might go to her actually, but usually I can do it myself. Go to the dictionary, or something I want to know, or uh, something I want to spell, or spell it right, I get the dictionary. And I learn it myself.

For Shirley, who is also African American and retired, writing development has taken a more traditional path. She was born in Austin, Texas, into a military family, spent her early years in Guam, then moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, when her father was stationed at the nearby Air Force base. She recalls that growing up in Guam there wasn't much to do. "As a youngster, we always, we learned to read. . . . When I got to first grade, I was already reading at a third-grade level." Shirley also

loved to write. "I learned to write backwards! . . . I used to get a kick out of that." She would amuse herself by writing right-to-left, then turning the paper over to admire her writing flipped to the correct direction. She adds that even though she is left-handed, "I taught myself how to write with my right hand . . . I'm even-handed . . . I can use the right hand just like I use the left hand."

"I wanted to find out how the literate interactions of this couple demonstrate their ongoing desire for literacy especially in their ordinary interactions; how the reading and writing practices of the more literate partner in a couple impact the less literate partner, and vice versa; and, what they can tell composition researchers about writing development across the lifespan, particularly for an older couple in which one partner has become more literate later in life."

In this essay, I consider Chief and Shirley's engagement with writing, and with one another, as part of their uniquely intertwined life trajectories. By looking at one couple's trajectories as writers during older adulthood, I bring together the exploratory interests of the emerging fields of lifespan development of writing and age studies as they pertain to literacy studies in composition. In both areas, scholars look across disciplinary perspectives for a deeper understanding of development. Lifespan studies centers on the longitudinal development of writers. Age studies, which also looks qualitatively across time, focuses on bodies and how they are socially constructed, leaning away from medical definitions of personhood toward more cultural perspectives on what it means to age, to change, throughout a lifetime (Katz). In this regard, the two fields merge and can inform our understanding of how people relate to self, one another, and cultural representations of body, health, and their own capabilities. Although researchers in Lifespan Studies assert that there are many paths toward writing, and that writing development is individual (Bazerman et al., "Taking the Long View"), research in this area so far (see Bazerman et al., *The Lifespan Development*) tends to assume conventional pathways, such as access to public schooling with its age- and grade-level markers of development. Because Chief's educational experiences are so far removed from—even opposed to—a typical trajectory toward literacy development, and because I was curious about the role of literacy in his marriage to the quite-literate Shirley, I was compelled by the following questions. I wanted to find out how the literate interactions of this couple demonstrate their ongoing desire for literacy especially in their ordinary interactions; how the reading and writing practices of the more literate partner in a couple impact the less literate partner, and vice versa; and what they can tell composition researchers about writing development across the lifespan, particularly for an older couple in which one partner has become more literate later in life.

In describing the social development of identity and agency, social psychologist Glenn H. Elder, Jr., argues that, "Indeed, we now see that the implications of early adult choices extend even into the later years of retirement and old age . . . from the adequacy of economic resources to adaptive skills and activities. The later years of aging cannot be understood in depth without knowledge of the prior life course" (5). Elder's research on life-course development (which influences Deborah Brandt's work on the shifting literacy practices of working adults), concentrates on the trajectories

that determine experience and thus enable or constrain one's choices. He asserts that, "Transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning" (5). In my ongoing studies of the literacy practices of adult learners, I am interested in the material, historical, and social experiences that shape relationships to literacy. Therefore, in this article, I adopt Elder's idea of trajectories to look at the interlocking pathway of a married couple. Their literate interactions are especially provocative because they have had such different individual experiences with formal and informal education. By partnering with Chief thirty-seven years ago, Shirley joined him in navigating a path that interweaves their individual histories with their current and ongoing relationship to reading and writing. It was this overlap that I sought to understand by meeting with them together.

Looking Back to Look Ahead

Chief, who was raised on a sharecropper's farm in rural South Carolina during the 1950's, had limited exposure to formal education, although he always craved opportunities to read and write. Despite his occasional access, and the segregated conditions of schooling when it was available, Chief was able to make a decent living because of his extensive early work experiences and the skills he developed as a laborer. During his long career, he worked as a welder and a forklift operator. He owned his first home at the age of seventeen and sent his children to college. Only after he retired following a motorcycle accident that injured his back, did he become able to study. At that time, Chief began to seek informal education at a number of adult learning centers in Springfield, the city where he has resided for most of his adult life. In the fifteen years since then, Chief has become an avid writer and reader. He was editor of the newsletter at one literacy center and involved in a family literacy program there. He has been committed to circulating his writing among known and unknown audiences so that more people can learn about the importance of learning from his example. And, he has been a successful singer-songwriter. (For more on Chief, see Rosenberg *The Desire for Literacy*.)

For more than a dozen years, I have been studying and writing about adult basic literacy learners in order to understand the ongoing purposes that people have for pursuing literacy, especially writing, when it is not motivated by dominant functions such as getting a better job, credential, or becoming a different kind of participant in society (see Rosenberg *Desire*, "Retelling Culture," "'You Have to Knock'"; Rosenberg and Branch "A Conversation"). This research began with a study of older adults who attended an informal learning center; it has progressed longitudinally because of my continuing relationships with the original participants.

In 2015, after publishing a monograph on this research, I contacted the participants so that I might meet with them and give them the book. Chief took this opportunity to reexamine his own writing and extend our former research project by offering new insights into his texts and reflections on his identity as a writer over the last few years. In other words, he disrupted our previous relationship of researcher and researched and steered it in a new direction that he chose.

During that visit to Chief's house, I was introduced to the vibrant Shirley, whom I had only heard described before by Chief. Relaxing on the sofa after an early morning stint volunteering at

the local food pantry, Shirley was effusive about her lifelong love of reading. Her passion for literate activity includes the personal and the practical. For example, as a home care nurse's aide for most of her career, Shirley engaged in the daily practices she needed to provide care for her clients, which included managing their household and bank accounts, paying bills, driving the car, and even having power of attorney. She explained that the agency she worked for was unregulated, which was why she carried responsibilities outside her training. Once Shirley realized that the company was swindling their customers, she reported them, and they were sued for bilking the elderly. The agency closed down, and eventually it was Shirley who inherited her clients' property. She sold the property, which "gave me a chance to move into the neighborhood I wanted to live in," and she bought her house with Chief.

While I listened to her describe her literacy habits that day in their living room, I wondered whether it was Shirley's practical intelligence combined with her enthusiasm for writing and reading that made literacy education so desirable to Chief. I recalled a discussion I had had with him during our earlier interviews, in which we discussed a pattern I'd heard talk of at the literacy center where we had met: that it is common in traditional marriages for women to be more literate than their male partners and that a change in one partner's writing development can cause a significant disruption. When I reminded Chief of this conversation, Shirley exclaimed that this was not the case for them. Conditions in their lives improved as Chief acquired more literacy. Afterwards, I could not stop thinking about Chief and Shirley together, the way she reclined on the sofa telling her story while I spoke with Chief about the book. Chief and Shirley's interaction that day sparked the current study on what the roles of literacy have been, and continue to be, as they age together.

On the surface, Chief and Shirley present as a heteronormative, retired African American couple in their late seventies and late sixties. But by looking into their literate interactions—specifically at the ways that Chief identifies himself as someone "still learning" at the same time that Shirley maintains her "hands and [my] brain" through daily writing and reading—we can more fully understand the range of possibilities for what writing means and does. My goal in reviewing Chief's early educational experiences is to emphasize that, because of racial and economic oppression, it was impossible for him to become literate through expected channels. His material and social experiences oppose mainstream conceptions of how writing should develop. Yet Shirley, who has identified as literate throughout her lifetime, turns Chief's pathway in a unique direction. Together, they can help literacy researchers in Lifespan and Age Studies understand the unconventional paths that writing development can take in older age, not just for an individual but for a couple, and see the value in looking at writing development as always emergent.

Adult Learners, Lifespan Studies, and Literacies of Older Age

Chief's experience is not so unusual. Recent data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies reveals that approximately 3.5 million (1 in 6) US adults is considered "low literacy"; of that group, "almost one-third of black adults age 65 and younger have low literacy" (Block and Peñaloza). These numbers are a reminder of why it is important to confront

inequities in our education system and support the efforts of quality adult basic education programs that concentrate on learners' needs and interests rather than on General Education Development (GED) test and workforce preparation.

Becoming a writer has allowed Chief to counter his personal oppression as well as the historic oppression of his community of African Americans. Rhea Lathan, in *Freedom Writing,* addresses the experiences of African Americans whose spoken and written voices have been historically ignored or hidden, implying that literacy researchers must address the writing development of those on the margins as well as within the mainstream in order to counter a dominant narrative that writing instruction begins in school and then continues, enhanced by personal, professional, and civic demands. Medicine, health, and age studies scholar Aimi Hamraie adds that accountability toward race is essential to scholarship on aging and disability, and that we must look into these critical intersections because of the "overwhelming whiteness of mainstream disability (and aging) scholarship." Chief exemplifies how some individuals who have been prevented from having a voice can keep studying and developing their literacy as a means of undoing that oppression. Shirley has important supporting and contributing roles in this endeavor. As a more competent, confident writer, she models her capabilities for both of them, thus countering Chief's oppression and the oppression of her people.

In reflecting on my interactions with Chief and Shirley, I turn to a lifespan development of writing approach to exploring writing in older adulthood. This nascent field seeks to get an integrated picture of people and their writing across their lives, in relation to the experiences that determine their pathways, such as schooling (or its absence in Chief's case), family relationships, material effects such as war and poverty, and work (Bazerman et al., *The Lifespan Development*; Bazerman et al., "Toward an Understanding"). The authors of "Taking the Long View" point out that longitudinal lifespan studies can help us to understand how, "Trajectories of writing development are intertwined with trajectories of intellectual, professional, and personal development, such that writing development contributes to personal uniqueness" (353), something I have suggested in framing Shirley and Chief's common trajectory. While my focus in this project is on Chief and Shirley as a couple who maintain and support one another's literacy practices, it is important to contextualize their activities among the overall interactions of daily life that involve maintaining the self, care for family and community, as well as nurturing intelligence.

While the lifespan group generally refers to age/grade levels of school, there is little research so far in this field that looks at older people continuing their development as productive writers, the assumption being that people who have had these abilities all their lives can simply go on until they cannot (see Rumsey). Although I have worked with populations of adult learners for some time, the reality of participants' aging minds and bodies, combined with their position as subjects that are no longer viewed as relevant in the workplace, presents a specific situation. Within age studies, Suzanne Kesler Rumsey, Ruth E. Ray, Lauren Marshall Bowen, and Donora Hillard state in a chapter on service-learning projects with older writers, that composition scholars and teachers should, "re-think their meanings of 'community' and 'collaboration' and re-consider writing as an act of collaborative risk-taking, experimentation, and imagination. Teaching and learning across the

divides of age and ability remind us that writing is, above all, a living social act" (205). They refer to the value of writing and agency of the writer even as the writer may be declining physically and/or cognitively.

A few other studies look into the writing produced by writers at the end of life, such as Catherine Schryer, Allan McDougall, Glendon R. Tait, and Lorelei Lingard's project on "dignity interviews." Joining together rhetorical genre studies with palliative care research, the authors consider how a person's life-story transcript can have therapeutic and agentive benefits. The individual is no longer developing as a writer, but writing is generated in the form of transcripts of their recorded interviews. The value of this work lies in its attention to the agency of the writer, something that Rumsey, and Rumsey et al., emphasize as well. That age studies takes a reflexive approach, often looking back and reflecting on the writer's agency, as it considers growth of the person across the life course, strikes me as one of the strengths of this field (see also, Ruth Ray's *Beyond Nostalgia*). Stephen Katz explains that this stance defines the field of age studies, noting that the critical reflexivity of gerontology work is important for studies in the humanities that take up its approach: ". . . one looks forward and backward, outward and inward at the same time."

> *"While Shirley and Chief compose individually, usually for different purposes, they are not disengaged from one another. Writing, like many life practices they share, indicates commitment, personal and practical, and suggests their collaboration as a couple."*

Brandt extends the lifespan approach by contributing perspectives from "life course" research, explaining that this area of social psychology and sociology emphasizes that "development comes to people through the roles they play or are expected to play at different times of life. . . . [D]evelopment is defined in terms of changes that occur in relationships between people and their life worlds over time, changes that gather lasting consequence for the workings of those relationships going forward" (245). She notes that while life course scholarship concentrates on distinguishable life stages, it is a valuable perspective to bring to writing studies because of its attention to multiple, simultaneous roles that people play, and how, by inhabiting complex roles they build their trajectories (251).

When I speak of Chief and Shirley's entwined trajectory, I am thinking of their individual writing development as well as their daily interactions with literacy that intersect and overlap, in ordinary ways. Practical purposes can include emails to grandchildren (usually sent by Shirley to confirm that they arrived home from school), short notes and lists left for one another, though Shirley and Chief comment that now that they carry cell phones with them they tend to call one another from the car or store rather than communicate through writing. Less frequent purposes for writing might include Shirley or Chief composing personal letters to relatives, Chief completing homework for his Monday morning tutoring session, or Shirley working on a document for her church. These individual activities come together in what Steve Graham calls "writing communities," noting that a community can be constituted by as few as two members, even spouses, and that people participate in multiple writing communities that are determined by the purposes for writing. According to Graham's model,

the community in which writing takes place and the cognitive capabilities and resources of those who create writing simultaneously shape and constrain the creation of written text. [W]riting cannot be fully understood without considering how the communities in which it takes place and those involved in creating it evolve, including how community and individuals reciprocally influence each other. (272-73)

While Shirley and Chief compose individually, usually for different purposes, they are not disengaged from one another. Writing, like many life practices they share, indicates commitment, personal and practical, and suggests their collaboration as a couple. For example, while Chief struggles with the physical and cognitive acts of writing, Shirley's competence encourages him. They both refer fondly to the amusing stories he wrote while he was a student at Read/Write/Now, stories that have entertained them and their relatives and friends.

Disrupting the Balance of the More Literate/Less Literate Partner

I met with Chief and Shirley for a single interview, keeping my knowledge of Chief from our years of research together at the front of my mind as I considered his current literacy practices in relation to those of his wife and vice versa. I observed Chief and Shirley at home where they assumed the interview would take place. Using narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin) and deep interview analysis (Seidman), I reflected upon our conversation as illustrative of a collaboration in which we interact as composers and collaborators (Graham). After a long writing partnership with Chief in which we have *mutually contemplated* his texts, I was interested to see how Shirley would join us. When I speak of mutual contemplation, I refer to a co-interpretive act of reflection on situations and texts that can involve lingering together without an immediate response (see Rosenberg *Desire*; Rosenberg and Howes 82). In addition to Chief and Shirley's entwined trajectory with one another, they also have a trajectory with me as a researcher who has been involved with them across time.

During this visit, Shirley does most of the talking. She and I sit side-by-side on the couch while Chief is a few feet away in his recliner. The television is on, but no one is watching. We talk casually for close to an hour before recording. I expect that Shirley and Chief will exhibit the kind of "rapport" talk that Deborah Tannen attributes to intimates who overlap and interrupt as they contribute to a conversation together, but they mainly take turns. Once we focus closely on Shirley's texts, Chief withdraws from the discussion, dozing briefly. In addition to recording the interview, I have collected Shirley's letters and the holiday cards that she has sent as supplemental writing samples, and I have planned to discuss some of the content during the interview; however, Shirley introduces another text of her choice into the conversation (I explain below), and this document becomes our focus.

Chief continually brings up the shaking in his hands, a tremor that I don't perceive, but which he says is getting worse. He asks Shirley to sign the consent forms for him. Although he is mostly alert throughout the conversation, he indicates ways that he has slowed. He no longer works part-time as a small van driver, and he has stopped singing with his men's gospel choir. Chief claims to have breathing problems now, to be "short wind." His breathing difficulty is symptomatic of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), which he probably developed working as a welder. Despite

indications that he is aging and doing less, he diligently goes once a week to a neighborhood social service center called Gray House for one-on-one literacy tutoring. In earlier conversations, he has insisted that studying is what he wants to do with the rest of his life, and he remains true to that promise.

The majority of my interactions with Chief occurred while he attended the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center, which I have always thought of as an innovative site; yet now I hear Chief speak critically of the library-based, city- and state-funded program.

"She helped me out a lot when I first started. But now, I don't go to her. I go to the dictionary, get my words out, a lot of words out, that I—. When I started, she was helping me out a lot. And it looked like, there was a lot of work that she was doing. But now ... usually I can do it myself."

At Read/Write/Now, Chief recalls, "if you're doing the lessons, like math or something. You get the basics of it, but you don't get, it seems like, something that you got to stay there a little longer so it get to sink in . . . ." After reviewing a concept in math, for example, "They push you on to something else. But, *hey!* I learned a lot. But I had to rush." Studying at home when he was a student at Read/Write/Now required that he turn to Shirley as mentor, a pattern they followed until Chief became able to alter it. He recalls, "She helped me out a lot when I first started. But now, I don't go to her. I go to the dictionary, get my words out, a lot of words out, that I—. When I started, she was helping me out a lot. And it looked like, there was a lot of work that she was doing. But now . . . usually I can do it myself."

Shirley's enthusiasm for reading is apparent in their physical space. Within the living room, for example, there are religious books on side tables and holiday cards displayed along the door frame (it is just after New Year's when we meet). Shirley remarks that the cards she likes best are the ones with a bit of scripture or a personal note inside. She gestures toward one of the back bedrooms where Chief studies, his "computer room," where he comments, "I can do my writing."

The model Shirley has provided for Chief, and the support she has given him as he disrupts the balance of the more literate/less literate partner, is expressed in our discussion about paying bills and using the mail. Chief claims that the greatest benefit he gained from studying at Read/Write/Now was learning the math skills he needed to pay bills:

> C: I really learned. I learned so much. . . . the best thing happened to me when I learned how to write my own bills—make my own bills. Cause she [referring to Shirley], she got tired. She pushing too. She got tired of it. Writing all my checks, paying bills. She got tired. So, . . . I learned to do it. It was a blessing to me too.
>
> L: That's great. [Turning to Shirley:] What was that like for you?
>
> Shirley: Well, I, I said, "Now, you're going to school now, now you're going to learn how to do some things for yourself. Now you doing—that's going to help me too." So, we got the checkbook out, and he learned how to, showed him how to use the register, how to record

the number of the check, and write the check, and balance his checkbook, and things like that. And, he understood it very well. And, from that day forward, he was able to do it. So, it was a good teaching; it was a good learning. And, it was a good help to me.

L: Before that, did you have to do all the financial stuff?

S: I did. I did all the financial things. And, kept up an accurate account of everything that was going in, everything that was coming out. But then that was a lot of pressure on me, because any time there was any question about anything, then it was, "See my wife. See my wife." You know. That was on me. You know? So, I'm going to teach you how to do some of this so, you don't have to come to me. You know, you learn how to go to the file cabinet. We got a file cabinet in there; everything was filed, and uh, be able to retrieve all this information, instead of going, "Hey, Shirley, where's this? Where's that? Where's this?" You know. It was a good thing for both of us.

Both Chief and Shirley's remarks indicate that Shirley carried too much responsibility as the partner capable of managing all their literate activities. Their comments show that Chief's developing literacy has been beneficial to their marriage. I asked Chief if it felt good to him to pick up some of the financial responsibilities. His response:

C: It make you feel better that you know how to do something that means something to you. To write checks and to pay your bills. That's the first time that I had to ever start paying my own bills. I went and paid it by cash.

S: Mm hmm. And, I also taught him how to use the mail. How you don't have to run to all these places. To the cable company, or, . . . to the electric company. To here, to here. How to address an envelope, put a stamp on it, let it go [she claps her hands together in a gesture of finality]. Whereas, before he would go out and go to all these places to pay his bills.

L: [to Chief:] You would go with cash to the places?

C: Mm hmm.

L: So, that was a big change.

S: That was a big change. It would take a whole day to run around to all these places, which was unnecessary.

For Chief, becoming more literate means the ability to change his social habits as he wishes. He no longer has to devote a day to driving around the city to pay his debts in cash in person. While readers who are accustomed to online or automatic bill paying may find Shirley's method of recording checks, filing papers in a file cabinet, and sending off snail mail quaint, the contrast between Chief's ways and hers is significant. Adjusting his ways of being and relating with his wife and the public are part of Chief's literacy development and an illustration of their intertwined practices. Further,

Shirley's remark that, "it was a good teaching; it was a good learning. And, it was a good help to me," demonstrates how changes in learning practices impact the couple as well as the individual. As Chief becomes more literate, Shirley is relieved of certain pressures. His changes shape her changes and the pathway of their entwined writing development.

And yet, Chief is losing memory and cognitive ability. He is troubled by back problems and by COPD. He frequently refers to the stroke he had about ten years ago, which left him with a tremor in his hands. When I ask him a question about writing development across his lifetime, he responds by remarking on the physical act of composing in the present moment:

> L: How has writing changed for you over your life? . . . you didn't write for a long time, and then you did.

> C: My shaking. I write now, and I can't even understand it myself. I don't believe that nobody else will understand it. But, I miss being able to write. Thinking about, when you writing, when you doing writing, you learn more new levels, and different words and everything.

> L: Can you say that again? When you write, you learn more about writing?

> C: Yeah, you learn more about, uh, you getting the right pronunciation and the right words, and spelling and all that.

> L: So, when you're writing, you're thinking about writing?

> C: Yeah.

> L: And looking things up?

> C: Yeah. I always keep a dictionary beside me. I had one here a while ago.

An interesting shift occurs as Chief and I communicate in this passage, each of us steering the conversation differently. Though I ask about writing development across time, Chief's response shows that his attention is on writing as a physical and cognitive act. His commitment to becoming more literate remains strong; however, his remarks suggest that the cognitive act of writing, which has always been challenging, is becoming even more difficult as it is complicated by disability. Suzanne Kesler Rumsey refers to this tendency to "hold onto literacy" as an important means of retaining "dignity, independence, and agency"; however, she is quick to add that holding onto literacy also means acceptance of loss, including the "loss of literacy" (99). Chief is frustrated by his own deterioration, particularly by the sense that his limitations interrupt his writing development ("when you doing writing, you learn more new levels, and different words and everything"). His words suggest that Chief views writing as a pathway toward more writing, greater learning, and knowledge. As a result of his stroke and continuing decline, he can no longer maintain a smooth pathway. When he talks about knowing how to spell, or looking up and pronouncing the "right" words, he is literally

talking about the complexity of creating written words, the effort involved, something he is losing the ability to achieve, but which already required a lot of effort. In Chief's case, unlike Shirley's, writing, even spelling the words, requires cognitive and physical effort; yet, while Chief ages, he simultaneously develops as a learner, reminding us why it is important not to evaluate literacy development based on signs of progress; rather, we can look at shifts within the writer for a more comprehensive picture of writing and reading behaviors as continuing to emerge—as well as to decline—during the course of a person's life.

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Writing as the Craft of a Precise Hand and an Agile Mind

Reading and writing have always been activities that Shirley embraces. In a letter that she sent to me when I was first getting to know her, Shirley presented herself as a writer: "I love to write. I am the secretary at my church and all my business papers are handwritten. I'm not so into the new technology. I like to use my hands and my brain. I am 67 years old myself so I have to use my brain and stay active." Shirley is emphatic about maintaining physical and mental health through challenging activity—most significantly, through writing. She associates technology with inactivity, assuming that machines replace the work of the hands and the mind. When she speaks of writing by hand, she conflates the physical act of handwriting with the action of producing text. To Shirley, writing is crafted by hand to display the work of an agile mind.

Age and disability studies scholar Erin Gentry-Lamb points to a cultural "disavowal of disability" that privileges a narrative of the healthy, still physically active older person who is not hampered by disability or disease. This narrative is reinforced by texts like Mary Catherine Bateson's *Composing a Further Life*, which celebrate "Adulthood II" as a time of opportunity when people may be unencumbered from responsibilities such as work or parenting, yet without emphasis on the deterioration that accompanies aging. In Chief's case, it is clear that, while he continues to develop as a writer and reader, his current trajectory is nonlinear because of cognitive and physical decline. But Shirley is able to control her body and mind, and by maintaining herself, she cares for them both.

For Shirley, like Chief, writing sometimes means the physical act of handwriting on the page; however, Shirley defines writing in multiple ways. She may refer to cognitive ability at moments; in other instances, she discusses writing as an interpretive act. Shirley shuttles back and forth between these definitions and functions of writing as she gives an extended example of her competence as a writer:
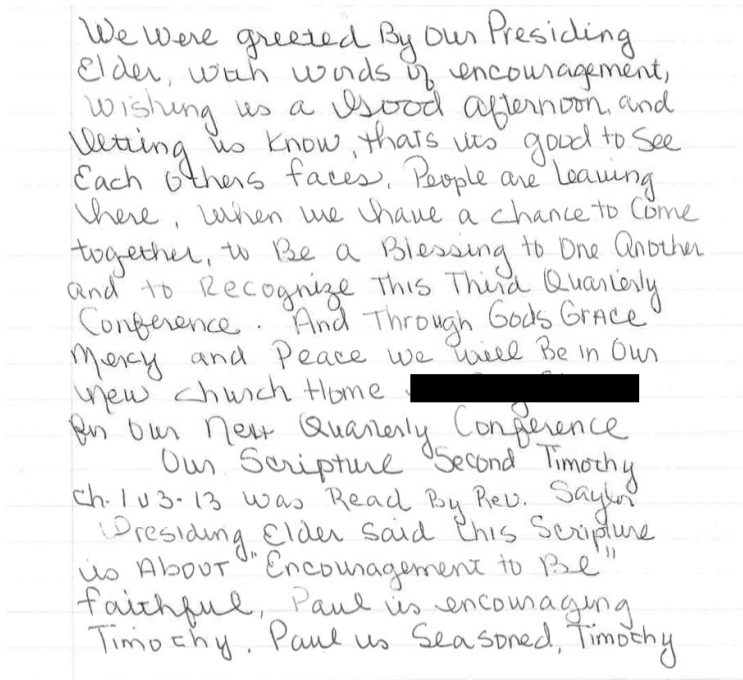
S: I am the secretary of the part in our church, which is very important. This is when we have our big business meetings. And usually, all this information requires me to be on a computer, and typing and things like that, and *I have chose to continue to use my hands. So, everything that I do, and all the little things that are done, is, are always printed.*

L: You mean, printed in handwriting?

S: Handwritten. Handwritten. . . . A lot of people would, "Oh, no. I'm not accepting this. I want it typed." But [our presiding elder] could just not believe how I print those minutes. And sometimes I, if it was typed, it probably would be done in two or three pages. And sometimes my minutes are seven and eight pages. And the time that I put in to do it. There is not one mistake in them. And [our presiding elder] really has—it really makes me feel good when he gets up before the congregation and says, "I wish you guys would see. Pass these minutes around. I want everyone to take a look at 'em." You know. And even down to the pastor—

L: He passes your minutes?

S: I'm going to show you.

Fig. 1. Excerpt from Shirley's introduction to the minutes of the quarterly meeting. (Identifying information redacted.)

Shirley highlights the precision of her own work, the attention to detail that allows her to produce a lengthy error-free text, and the quality of her writing (Fig. 1). Her minutes are so well written, that the presiding elder circulates them around the congregation. Shirley's writing thus serves as a model for others of serious engagement with the church. For a moment she excuses herself, then she returns to the room with a copy of the quarterly meeting minutes and reads aloud her narrative of introduction:

> We were greeted by our Presiding Elder with words of encouragement, wishing us a good afternoon and letting us know that its good to see each others faces. People are leaving here. When we have a chance to come together, to be a blessing to one another and to recognize this third quarterly conference. And through God's Grace Mercy and Peace we will be in our new church home for our next Quarterly Conference.
>
> Our scripture Second Timothy ch. 1 v. 3-13 was read by Rev. Warner. Presiding Elder said this scripture is about 'Encouragement to Be" faithful. Paul is encouraging Timothy. Paul is seasoned. Timothy was from good stock, he was letting Timothy know at times you have to stir up that gift that God has given you, you have to fan into flame, for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and self discipline.
>
> So we know our gift we have to fan it back to flame and help each other. Go "Guard your Gift." "Hold fast to it." "Cherish your gift."
>
> We as a church are going to be considered in a way we weren't before. When you step now really step. "Do justice to the blessing".

The minutes blend the transcription that Shirley creates without a recording, information that she documents in her notes, and a carefully composed narrative. Not only does she reproduce portions of the presiding elder's words to those church members present at the meeting, she selects the passages to include and combines them into a narrative that introduces the event in her own words. The minutes are Shirley's interpretation of the meeting rather than a straightforward account. She explains:

> S: This is all my own rewording. … I put it in my own words. I go over my minutes, and then I put it in my own wording.
>
> L: [referring to the text] So, this is something that the pastor may have talked about at the meeting? … But, you wrote this introduction—
>
> S: Then I do the introduction. Now, right here is when all the business comes to order: "The third quarterly conference is now called to order by our presiding elder at 4:30 p.m." And then it goes on to the next order of business: "This is the reading of the minutes, from the second quarterly conference held on December third, twenty-sixteen, by our conference secretary, Sister Shirley Dawson, for the twenty-sixteen, twenty-seventeen conference year. Presiding elder asks for a motion on the reading of the minutes from the Quarterly Conference held on December third, twenty-sixteen. …"

Shirley continues to read from the minutes and to describe the process of giving and accepting

reports, all of which is documented in her text. She interrupts her review to make a point about her role as recording secretary:

> S: I have been the quarterly conference secretary (I think) this might about be my twelfth or my thirteenth year, and they *all know* that when I am taking these minutes that I'm serious. The first thing they have to do is tell me who's speaking. Cause I'm writing. I don't have time to look up and see who it is. But there have been incidents where there were some little commotions going on in the church, and people weren't happy about this and that and the other; and, I let them know before it started: I am going to be recording everything that's said, so if you *don't* want it to be read, don't say it. . . . Oh, they were talking about this person and talking about the pastor and doing all this, that, and the other. But you know what I did? When it came that time for that next meeting, and it was time for me to read those minutes—Lauren, I was so ashamed to read those minutes, but these people were so headstrong and so bad. "Well, if you wrote it—" I said, "You know what? I'm going to tell you something." I said, "I'm really ashamed to read these minutes." . . . I started reading those minutes, and I looked around that table, and everybody had their heads down. Well, you know what? You had the opportunity to keep your mouth shut, and so. It's kind of funny because they know that I'm going to record everything that's said, so, everybody's kind of on one accord now. A lot of your thoughts you keep to yourself. Because these minutes don't go to me; these minutes go all the way to the bishop. You know, so he sees all these things. So, people have learned to be a little more serious when it comes down to it.

I ask Shirley whether she perceives the work she is doing as simply recording, or if she believes she is crafting a narrative when she creates the minutes. We go back and forth between looking at documents and discussing her process, until she explains that part of the act of composing is producing a piece of writing that members of the congregation will read and understand. Various themes emerge in Shirley's account. As secretary, she is spectator, recorder, interpreter, and author. She alone creates a permanent narrative of the quarterly meeting. There is a moral component to Shirley's narrative as well. She holds church members accountable for their words and actions. As recording secretary, she is an arbiter of truth. She can decide to expose the inappropriate talk of others to teach a cautionary lesson about badmouthing fellow churchgoers: "If you *don't* want it to be read, don't say it." Shirley concludes this section by agreeing that she is not "just being a recording secretary." Accuracy is surely important to her, but her remarks about what people said in church reveal something else. She is documenting the behaviors of people in the congregation as well as documenting the words of the pastor. The responsibility she takes on as recording secretary is to create a text that encapsulates the truth of church members and their leaders. She warns her peers that she is observing. She has put herself into James Britton's spectator role, as Britton describes it when he distinguishes between the major positions writers take as participants in and spectators of their experiences: "as participants we APPLY our value systems, but as spectators we GENERATE AND REFINE the system itself" (157, emphasis in original). By choosing the position of spectator, Shirley permits herself—even assigns herself the obligation—of recollecting events as they occurred, of representing the truth as she perceives it, as she documents it through her own trustworthy

hand. When she composes the narrative of the report, it becomes her unconstrained account, her "rewording" of events as she experiences them, and her words go all the way up to the bishop.

Shirley's rendition of her work as church secretary perfectly illustrates a point Brandt makes about the "role of role": "Indeed when we look closely enough we can see that what people write and how they write it will embody an interpretation of role—what it calls for and what it makes possible or not at the time of composition—contributing to individual variation in writing" (255). In her detailed recounting of her experiences, recording, recalling, writing, and delivering that writing, Shirley demonstrates the elaborate way in which she inhabits the role of secretary. Being acknowledged by the elder pastor for her writing in that role helps to shape the role for her. She *is* the writer of minutes—a role she also determines, one that calls upon members of the church to pay attention to her words as well as to their own behaviors. For this role, she is rewarded with the respect of the church elders and admiration of her peers. Shirley can also admire her own accomplishments as a writer.

Why Literacy Continues to Matter

In the final chapter of *Composing a Further Life*, Bateson defines wisdom as, "the fruit of continuing reflection on encounters over time, a skill at drawing connections and finding similarities, looking for underlying patterns" (234). This definition resonates with Shirley and Chief's accounts of their ongoing relationship to literacy. They are active learners who express a commitment to nourishing themselves through older adulthood, and they regularly revise their patterns while making new connections. In Chief's case, he has established a structure for continued informal schooling: every Monday he drives across the city for his one-on-one lesson with his teacher. He does this at the same time he is restricted by physical limitations and cognitive decline.

When I asked Chief whether it was important to him that Shirley loves to read and write, his immediate, "oh, *yes*" reinforced the significance of understanding their literate relationship. Shirley clearly inhabits the role of expert for this writing couple. She determines many of the tasks that matter, such as managing finances and recording appointments on the calendar. She encourages Chief to write emails and even to help her with some computer skills. Shirley is the one who mostly uses writing for personal correspondence, such as letter writing and composing holiday cards, yet Chief reflects on the written correspondence he used to keep up with his family members. Both of them express pleasure in maintaining relationships through letter writing.

While Chief's loss of memory and cognitive function is undeniable, his signs of decline are balanced by a stubborn desire to be "still learning," the impulse that has fueled his literacy learning throughout older adulthood. Shirley's confidence and skill clearly inspire Chief. For example, in comparison with his own increasing inability to physically write, he praises Shirley's precise hand: "That's the way I would like to write." Shirley's literate activities reflect lifelong practices of turning to reading and writing to participate in the world. Reading and writing are activities she associates with communicating with others and sustaining herself individually and in communities. Because she has been practicing avidly all her life, Shirley approaches new tasks with curiosity and pleasure. She

brings her enthusiasm for writing into her relationship with Chief when she tells of her experiences. Shirley enjoys new literate challenges, one of which is supporting her husband's desire to get an education during retirement. By continually placing Shirley in the role of expert, Chief reminds her of the value of her literacy to both of them. She is his primary role model; yet, it is the two of them together who create an intertwined trajectory. When he is in the position of admiring Shirley's daily practices, Chief is also learning from her example, contributing to their common writing pathway.

Chief and Shirley provide a good example of how ongoing development of the individual writer depends on nurturing their relationships. Their commitment to writing is bolstered by awareness of their life partner as both writer and collaborator. It is important to remember that Chief's path to reading and writing has always been unconventional, and that it has been up to him to define the meaning and value of literacy. No educational institution or employer has provided him with a trajectory toward literacy; thus, he never takes reading and writing for granted. Shirley has a major role in helping Chief negotiate why literacy matters. This includes a commitment to keep demonstrating the significance of literacy so that it remains a vital pursuit for them both. Shirley's work as church secretary demonstrates her particular relationship to writing as a way of being in her community and of valuing herself.

Together, this couple can offer age studies of literacy in composition and lifespan development of writing an important model for why literacy matters as a continuing life practice among partners. Researchers in these fields can learn from Chief and Shirley to recognize the ways people co-inhabit writing practices throughout their lives. Chief shows how diverse writing development can be from childhood through older adulthood, that there is no prescribed pathway toward understanding how writing functions. Similarly, Shirley demonstrates that trajectories reflect the many interactions that compose relationships, and that these pathways reflect the whole of their combined experiences.

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Making Meaning in (and of) Old Age:
The Value of Lifelong Literacy

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KEYWORDS

aging; aging well; literacy; lifespan; life course; life history; meaning

"What people are able to do with their writing or reading in any time and place—as well as what others do to them with their writing and reading—contribute to their sense of identity, normality, possibility." (Brandt, *Literacy* 11)

I n this article I report the findings of a small-scale, ethnographic study of positive aging in women. A major theme[1] that emerged from interviews with my four participants, women in their eighties and nineties, is that a lifelong engagement with reading and writing was an important key to aging well, a vital part of who they were and what they could hope to achieve at all stages of life. Reading and writing were of particular significance in the elder years as a way of making meaning of one's life. For these women—and many others—literacy is important not only for the value these "skills" can earn in the marketplace but for the life-enhancing benefits that come to individuals who maintain an active engagement with literacy throughout their lives.

Existing scholarship on literate development usually focuses on a short time span. Even studies described as longitudinal often deal with only a few years of the students' college careers (Beaufort; Carroll; Herrington and Curtis; Sternglass). However, the literacy described in such studies began long before these students entered college and continued for many years after graduation. What happened in the earliest years to make these students the readers and writers they became? And what meaning did the literacy they worked so hard to achieve during the college years have in their later lives? Specifically, what role did literacy, initially acquired in childhood, play toward the end of life?

By looking closely at the literate lives of individuals from childhood through old age, much can be learned. From this perspective, the four women in my study of aging have a great deal to teach us about the role of literacy over a lifetime. My study espouses an ecological view of literate development (Syverson), a model that "understands an individual's writing abilities as developing across an expansive network that links together a broad range of literate experiences over lengthy periods of time" (Wardle and Roozen 108). Such an approach addresses Paul Prior's critique of the 2017 multi-authored forum article in *Research in the Teaching of English*, "Taking the Long View on Writing Development" (Bazerman et al.). Prior argues that the view articulated in this article mistakenly assumes that most writing development takes place as a result of school activities (216-17) and can be studied separately from other aspects of literacy development (213-16). Instead,

in Prior's view, "research on the lifespan development of writing needs to begin with embodied, mediated, dialogic semiotic practice as its unit of analysis and to trace what people do, learn, and become across all the deeply entangled domains of their lives" (211). By attending to the participants' literacy experiences from early childhood through old age, in school and (mostly) out of school, my study examines how these experiences are deeply entwined with who they were and who they have become.

One purpose of this project is archival, describing literacy experiences that occurred over the better part of a century. Using "thick description" (Geertz), I hope to show the ways in which the literacy that the women began to develop in childhood has played out as part of a lifelong narrative. In the pages that follow, I will focus on the importance of early literacy development, the self-sponsored nature of memorable literacy experiences (Gere; Roozen), and the differing ways in which the women used reading and writing in their adult years. Not surprisingly, certain generational trends were apparent. For example, all four spoke of their discomfort with computers and modern communication technology, a new literacy they chose not to embrace. Despite this limitation, however, literate activities remained central to their lives into old age, helping them to cope with the challenges of aging in positive, life-affirming ways. The women's facility with reading and writing provided a way to make meaning of their lives, a key developmental task in old age

"Nurtured in childhood, developed during adulthood, [literacy] can and often does become a source of meaning and connection at a time of life that is challenging, even for the most fortunate. For the women in my study their active, lifelong literacy was a key factor in their continued vitality and involvement in the elder years."

(Cohen; Edmondson; Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick).[2] Taking the long view of literacy as acquired and practiced over a lifetime is extremely important in assessing the uses of literacy in old age. Nurtured in childhood, developed during adulthood, it can and often does become a source of meaning and connection at a time of life that is challenging, even for the most fortunate. For the women in my study, their active, lifelong literacy was a key factor in their continued vitality and involvement in the elder years.

Overview of the Study

In the mid-2000s, contemplating the world's rapidly aging population, I asked myself: What is society doing to prepare for this huge and rapid demographic shift? And what can we as individuals do to make the elder years more meaningful and enjoyable for ourselves? Having used qualitative, interview-based methods for my doctoral dissertation and subsequent book (Mlynarczyk, *Conversations*), I was convinced that much could be learned from small-scale studies of a few individuals. Using purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al.), I selected four women from Plainfield, a small town in the hills of western Massachusetts where I have been spending summers and weekends since 1973. Despite their advanced ages, these women were still vitally involved in living. For me,

they were—and still are—positive models of what it could mean to grow old.

When I began this study, I often described it as focusing on "successful aging." At the time I was not aware of the controversy surrounding this term. In their book *Successful Aging*, based on a ten-year study by the MacArthur Foundation, John Rowe and Robert Kahn attempt to counter the widely held notion that old age is characterized primarily by decline and disease. As many scholars have subsequently pointed out, however, this account vastly oversimplifies the complex phenomenon of aging (see, for example, Cruikshank; Katz and Calasanti). Rowe and Kahn promote the view that individuals can improve the odds for "successful aging" through diet and exercise, educational attainment and cognitive stimulation, and social interaction. Critics of the "successful aging" model equate this view with a white, male, neoliberal perspective, one that emphasizes "productivity" and individual effort while ignoring the crucial roles that race, class, gender, and broad socio-political factors play in one's ability to age successfully according to this definition. They point out as well that focusing on "successful agers" necessarily implies the widespread existence of many who, through factors beyond their control, are "unsuccessful agers."

In April 2018, I arranged to talk with the two surviving participants, Anna and Blanche, and we discussed the controversy over the term "successful aging." Blanche had strong feelings about this issue: "It irks me a little when you see a commercial on TV asking, 'Are you ready for retirement?' And it shows young-looking people playing tennis or traveling to Europe. Well, that's just not possible for many people." She went on to say, "You can't put a pattern on successful aging or successful retirement. A lot of it is just being satisfied with where you are."

I have come to share these concerns about the implications of "successful aging" and no longer use the term to describe the women in my study. Instead, I refer to "vital involvement in old age," "aging well," or "positive aging." Whatever term is used to describe them, it is important to acknowledge that these women, like everyone who lives long enough to become one of "the oldest old" (age eighty-five or older), will not remain forever free of disability, disease, or cognitive decline. Rather, their "success" lies in the ways they respond to the challenges that inevitably come with aging as a woman in twenty-first-century America.

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When I began this study in 2007, I explained the project to the women and submitted IRB (Institutional Review Board) forms. They chose to have their real names used rather than pseudonyms. Allow me to introduce them.

The oldest participant, Mary Kathryn (Kay) Dilger Metcalfe, was born in 1912 in Clarksburg, West Virginia. After graduating from high school, she attended the College of Wooster in Ohio and later graduated from the Parsons School of Design in New York City. In 1934, as part of a Parsons-sponsored study abroad program, she traveled to Paris to continue her art studies, an experience

that changed her life, not only by furthering her artistic development but also by sparking a lifelong fascination with history. After graduation, she worked for a few years as a designer before her marriage in 1938. The mother of two children, she re-entered the workforce after her children left for college, designing visual displays for the local public library. When I interviewed Kay in 2007, she was ninety-four years old. Since that time, Kay continued to live at home with help from her daughter, who lived with her. In old age, Kay experienced severe hearing loss, and after her hundredth birthday, she rarely left the house, spending her last years mostly in bed but still welcoming visits from friends and family. She passed away peacefully on February 21, 2018, at the age of 105.

Irene Jordan Caplan was born in 1919 in Birmingham, Alabama. The child of musical parents, Irene earned a bachelor's degree in voice performance at Judson College in Alabama and then moved to New York City in 1940 to pursue a career in opera. In 1946 she was offered a three-year contract at the Metropolitan Opera and performed major roles with the company as a mezzo-soprano from 1946 to 1948. In 1947 she married a violinist in the opera company's orchestra, and the couple had four children. After retraining as a soprano, she resumed her career in 1951 and continued to sing and teach professionally for many years. Irene was eighty-eight years old when I interviewed her in 2007. Shortly after these interviews, because of physical and cognitive problems, she moved to an assisted living facility and then to a nearby nursing home. Although she suffered from serious dementia in her final years, Irene kept her warm smile and outgoing personality. She died in 2016 at age ninety-seven.

Blanche Svoboda Cizek was born in 1919 in New York City, the child of Czech immigrant parents. She studied piano for many years, beginning at age eight, and often accompanied school performances. She attended Julia Richman High School, an all-girls school in Manhattan. After graduating, she worked for two years as a payroll accountant. She married in 1940 and had two children. Although Blanche did not work outside the home after her sons were born, she assumed a leadership role in a number of civic and religious organizations. She was eighty-eight years old at the time of our interviews. In spring 2016, Blanche underwent major surgery and spent several months in the hospital. Later that year, she returned to her home in Plainfield, where she lives alone with occasional help from friends and relatives. Blanche celebrated her ninety-ninth birthday on March 10, 2018.

Anna Rice Hathaway was born in Plainfield in 1929, the only participant who was born in town (the others are "transplants," who first spent summers and weekends in town and later retired there). She attended the local one-room elementary school and graduated from high school in a neighboring town. She married a local man in 1948, and they had four children. Over the years Anna has held a number of official positions in the town. Now, in 2018, she is eighty-nine years old and lives alone at her home in Plainfield.

Like myself, all these women are white and middle-class. All are members of the Plainfield Congregational Church, which is where I initially came to know them. I decided to limit this study to women's experiences of aging for several reasons. The majority of people in the age group known as "the oldest old" are women. In the 2010 US census, 67% of people eighty-five or older were women, a gender gap that steadily increases with age. Women were also more likely to be dealing

with the challenges of aging on their own. In 2010 only 18% of women over eighty-five were married, compared with 58% of men. Among this group, 73% of women were widowed compared with 35% of men ("Population: Number of Older Americans"). All the women in my study were widowed. Finally, women's experiences, especially among this age group, are not usually part of the public historical record. My project was designed to honor the life experiences of these women and preserve their stories of positive aging.

Goals and Methods

The design and implementation of this study were based on the phenomenological human science described by Max van Manen in *Researching Lived Experience*:

> From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to *know* the world is profoundly to *be* in the world in a certain way, the act of researching—questioning—theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it . . . . (5)

In van Manen's view, this type of research is a caring act: "we want to know that which is most essential to being" (5).

My goals and methods were very different from those of the study of successful aging described by Rowe and Kahn. In critiquing this study, Margaret Cruikshank observes, "research in a positivist spirit" will not be able to account for many factors that play into one's experience of aging, "factors that may be elusive, changing, or knowable only by intuition" (2-3). The need to attend to such "subjective" factors was confirmed in 2011, when *The Gerontologist*, a major journal in the field of gerontology, expanded its scope by welcoming contributions from the arts and humanities. Introducing this new policy, editors Helen Kivnick and Rachel Pruchno encouraged scholars to submit articles based on research, often qualitative in nature, that focus on "meaning and interconnection, not on prediction or explanation as does empirical research" (142). Such studies are valuable "in the exploration of aging as it is portrayed, understood, and/or experienced" (142).

This meaning-based approach to age studies has gained traction in recent years and provides the basis for the interdisciplinary work of Ricca Edmondson, a scholar interested in creating a "wisdom-related discourse" (1) focusing on small-scale behaviors of ordinary people: "Openness . . . of this kind could concentrate attentiveness to what older people do and say, emphasising that the meanings they have to offer are potentially illuminating not for them alone, but for everyone" (2). Yet, surprisingly, in scholarship that focuses on the importance of meaning in aging, very little attention has been paid to literacy, particularly reading and writing, as a way of creating meaning throughout the lifespan (see, for example, Edmondson; Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick). In this article, I take a small step toward correcting this neglect.[3]

The goal of my study was to learn what had enabled these women to remain so vital and involved in living in their elder years. To address this broad research question, I conducted a series of open-ended, qualitative interviews (Seidman) with each woman focused on three life periods: childhood,

adulthood up until the deaths of their husbands,[4] and old age. During these interviews, I practiced the feminist rhetorical practice of "deep listening" as described by Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Jones Royster (649). Like van Manen and Cruikshank, Kirsch and Royster value reflection, intuition, care, and listening as essential to understanding social phenomena.

I personally transcribed the interviews, listening and relistening to the women's voices and their words, and coding the transcripts for major themes that recurred. I also collected writings done by two of the participants (Kay and Irene) over many years of their lives. As the study progressed, I asked the women to read and comment on my written reports, and we met several times as a group to talk about the findings. I have given several public presentations about this research, and reports on the project are available on the website of the Plainfield Historical Society (Mlynarczyk, "Coming of Age"). In April 2018, I scheduled a conversation with the two surviving participants to discuss my emerging findings about literacy across the lifespan and check for accuracy, a qualitative research practice known as member checking (Creswell and Miller).

There are certain limitations to this research, which need to be acknowledged. First is the small sample size. Of course, it is not possible to make sweeping generalizations about the lifelong value of reading and writing based on the experiences of only four participants. What we can gain from small-scale, qualitative studies such as this are portraits of the value of literacy for these particular women, case studies that can serve as the basis for comparison and contrast as more information emerges. Elliot Eisner describes the kind of knowledge generated by such studies:

> Research studies, even in related areas in the same field, create their own interpretive universe. Connections have to be built by readers, who must also make generalizations by analogy and extrapolation, not by a water-tight logic applied to a common language. Problems in the social sciences are more complex than putting the pieces of a puzzle together to create a single, unified picture. (210)

Another limitation is that the original study (and the interviews conducted in 2007) were focused on aging well, not on literacy development. Thus, I didn't probe as deeply about matters of reading and writing as I would have if that had been my primary focus. What is noteworthy, however, is that each woman, as she looked back on her life, described literacy experiences as having been extremely important. Beginning in early childhood and continuing through old age, literacy was a way of exercising agency, a way of taking control of situations that might otherwise be outside their control. This type of control becomes increasingly important in the elder years.

The Importance of Early Literacy

In planning for the interviews, I decided to start by focusing on the women's childhoods. I felt it would not be wise to try to understand who these women had become in their later years without first finding out who they had been as little girls.

All the women had been born into families that encouraged their literate development. Anna's mother (born in 1894) had been an elementary teacher before her forced "retirement." Married women were not allowed to teach in those days. She continued to teach unofficially, however, reading

to her own children and transmitting her love of stories and appreciation for the humor one could find in literature. Anna spoke warmly of listening to her mother reading aloud from the Pooh books by A. A. Milne and the "Just So Stories" of Kipling, books that Anna read to her own children years later. The original copies still exist and are regarded as valuable family heirlooms.

Blanche, too, was raised in a family that valued literacy. Her parents immigrated to the United States in 1904 from what is now the Czech Republic. They were busy earning a living in the new country, but literacy was an important part of their lives. Although Blanche and her brother had been born in New York City, their father insisted that they speak Czech at home. The arts were important in this household. Her mother performed in a Czech theater group, and both parents sang in a choir that performed in venues around the city. One of Blanche's early memories is watching her mother moving around the apartment, dusting the furniture with one hand while holding the text of a play in the other hand, practicing her lines.

Reading and writing were also important for Kay and Irene as they were growing up. Both mentioned that, from an early age, they had been fascinated by language. Thinking back on her childhood, Kay explained: "I was terribly interested in words. And even from junior high school I had a little booklet, one of those black and white books. I would write things that I liked, copy things that I liked there. I've done that ever since then."

Irene was eager to describe her own early literacy development. She vividly recalled memories of teaching herself to read at the age of three with the help of a Chautauqua desk, an early twentieth-century educational "toy" based on the principles of Maria Montessori and readily available by mail order: "It was the joy of my life when I was a *very* [spoken with emphasis] young child." After describing the desk in great detail, she continued:

> One night the family was sitting around in front of the fireplace. . . . And Mother and Daddy said, "What is she saying?" I was sitting on the floor, and there was a piece of newspaper open on the floor, and I was saying, "5 C puh ging ham." And they kept saying, "What *is* she saying?" And they looked down and saw that it was "5 cents per yard. Gingham."

This young girl was fortunate to live in a family where literacy was celebrated. Irene and her older sister soon began to promote literacy themselves among other children who lived nearby: "We felt like it was our mission to teach the neighborhood. We had a little school in our yard. We had an alarm clock and would set that for the ringing of the bell [between periods]." The results of this little school were sometimes dramatic. Irene recalled: "One of the mothers came and thanked us because her son had been double promoted when he got back to school in the fall."

When it was time for Irene to start school herself at age six, the school authorities decided she should skip two grades, beginning in grade three. Looking back, Irene felt this was a mistake for her social development (her classmates and teachers often referred to her as "the baby"). However, she had no trouble keeping up academically, and her facility with language continued to flourish. When she graduated from high school in 1935 at age sixteen, her peers elected her "class poet." The following excerpt from her graduation poem, entitled "To the Maker of Music," aptly described what was so distinctive about her own singing much later in her life.[5]

> Draw forth notes that are clear & joyous

Till they bubble over in glee,
Make the ever-changing rhythm
One of ecstasy.

When it reaches a peak of tempo and time,
Gradually let it fall
To a low, rich phrase which will draw a tear
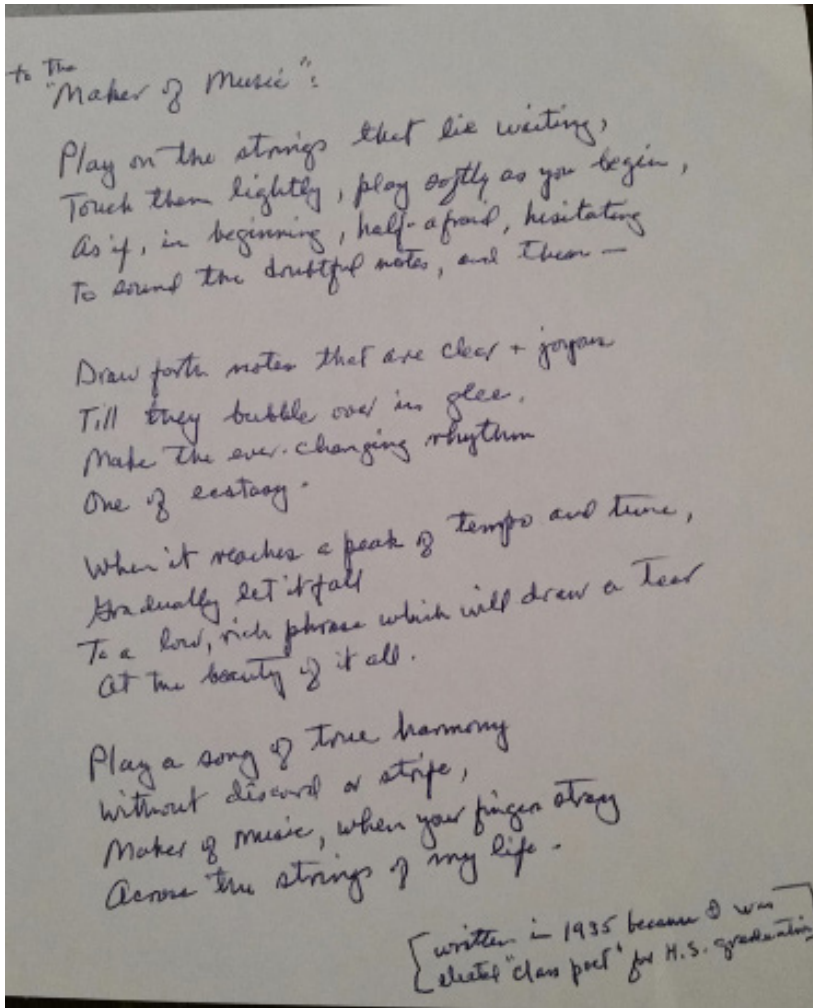At the beauty of it all.

Fig. 1: Irene's "To the 'Maker of Music'" poem, originally written in 1935.

The early literacy described by the women in my study had many benefits, some of which did

not become apparent until years later. For one thing, their childhood involvement with reading and writing may be helping them to delay cognitive decline in old age. There is accumulating evidence of the cognitive benefits of literacy, not only during the school years but stretching into old age. The so-called Nun Study, which was designed by David A. Snowdon, an epidemiologist and professor of neurology, to learn more about the factors involved in Alzheimer's disease, has shown a link between early literacy and improved mental functioning many years later. The cognitive condition of the 678 nuns in the study has been assessed regularly, beginning in 1986, and findings from the study have been reported in numerous medical journals (see, for example, Snowdon; Riley et al.; Snowdon et al.).

In addition to the medical data available to researchers, there is verbal data as well: the autobiographical essays the young women wrote before taking their vows. Ninety-three of these autobiographies (written at an average age of twenty-two) were selected for analysis. Susan Kemper, a psycholinguist experienced in studying the effect of aging on language skills, developed a system to analyze the autobiographies for "idea density" and "grammatical complexity" (Snowdon 109). Kemper and her team were not told anything about the participants' current cognitive condition. After the early writing was coded for idea density and grammatical complexity, both factors proved to be statistically significant predictors of current positive cognitive status, with idea density showing a stronger relationship. This connection did not seem to be influenced by the nuns' educational level or occupation. Commenting on this finding, Snowdon expressed surprise: "Somehow a one-page writing sample could, fifty-eight years after pen was put to paper, strongly predict who would have cognitive problems" (112-13).

As I have read and analyzed the interview transcripts of the women in my study, I have been impressed by the sophistication of their vocabularies and the complexity of their ideas. The little girls who were fascinated with the power of language have matured into women for whom language matters a great deal. Perhaps their verbal facility has also helped to delay cognitive decline.

Literacy as a Lifelong Narrative

Literacy does not occur in a vacuum. As young girls, Kay, Irene, Blanche, and Anna internalized the beliefs of those in their immediate social and familial worlds. The message was clear: reading and writing were an important part of being a successful person. Far from being only a set of skills, literacy represented values that were passed down in—and mostly out of—school. As Anna put it, "Everybody read." For these women, the literacies that were encouraged in their early years aligned closely with the literacies practiced and rewarded in school. Kay, who, as a young girl, began to keep a notebook of memorable quotations . Irene, who along with her older sister, started a school for the neighborhood children. Blanche, who watched her mother with a book in one hand as she dusted the furniture with the other. And Anna, whose mother created a kind of home school for her own children after she was forced to give up her teaching career. Clearly, too, all four had certain inborn cognitive qualities that equipped them to benefit from the literacy opportunities available to them. None of them had learning disabilities that would have made learning to read or write unduly

difficult. And fortunately for them, these were ways of being in the world that lasted into old age. At the time of our interviews, all of the women were still able to engage actively with reading and writing.

"[F]or these women literacy is part of a lifelong narrative. As they grew older, they used reading and writing as resources to enrich their lives in ways that directly related to the habits and values established in childhood and practiced over a lifetime."

In February 2011, three of the women gathered in my kitchen to talk about literacy; Irene was not able to join us. These links to video clips from the session give a sense of the women's personalities and the different ways in which literacy was important in their lives. Kay, age 98 at this time, talked about her lifelong fascination with words. Blanche, age 91, talked about the mysteries of brain functioning and about how her own literacy might have been fostered by her study of the piano and her bilingualism. And Anna, who is known for her good memory and wry sense of humor, recited several limericks as examples of literacy.

> https://youtu.be/m045ZBsGMRE
> Kay, age 98

> https://youtu.be/Z6cKxWtGCsk
> Blanche, age 91

> https://youtu.be/MZU4hVHkK0I
> Anna, age 81

Looking back, we see that, for these women, literacy is part of a lifelong narrative. As they grew older, they used reading and writing as resources to enrich their lives in ways that directly related to the habits and values established in childhood and practiced over a lifetime. In this section, I will look again at each of the women and identify literacy themes that have run throughout their lives and that help to explain how reading and writing have been powerful influences on their ability to age well.

Literacy Within Community: Anna and Blanche

For Anna, a theme that runs throughout her literacy narrative is the key role of literacy sponsors. Defined by Deborah Brandt as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" ("Sponsors" 166), literacy sponsors have been especially important influences in Anna's life. As the only one of the women who was born and raised in Plainfield, Anna had limited

opportunities for advancement in this rural community. Female literacy sponsors were instrumental in her selection for various positions, both paid and unpaid, within the town.

The earliest and most influential of these literacy sponsors was her mother. Forced to retire from teaching because of her marriage, Anna's mother eagerly embraced the role of literacy sponsor for her children. Another significant literacy sponsor was her Sunday school teacher from the age of three onward, a woman who also served as the town librarian for many years. Anna worked under this woman's tutelage as assistant librarian, and when she died at the library desk at the age of ninety-seven, she had made it clear to the authorities in Boston that Anna should be her successor. A few years later, when the town postmaster decided to retire, she too had designated her assistant, Anna, to be her replacement.

As Brandt's research on literacy sponsors has demonstrated, literacy helped many people in the twentieth century to improve their economic and social status, and this has definitely been true for Anna. However, her life has also been enriched in other, intangible ways by her love of reading and writing. Now, in retirement, Anna has become an important literacy sponsor herself. As treasurer and official distributor of the *Plainfield Post*, she assures that this biweekly newsletter, an essential source of town news (even in this digital age), is never late to arrive in residents' mailboxes. As a retired librarian, she is always on the lookout for books and articles that might be of interest to others and has an almost uncanny knack for knowing who would be interested in reading what. She is often seen at town events with a book or magazine in her hands, ready to pass it on to the right person. As if to demonstrate her continuing role as literacy sponsor, Anna brought several items of interest to our meeting in April 2018—a letter from her friend in North Carolina, a recent newspaper article about the ongoing influence of mothers, and the first issue of *Hilltown Life*, a glossy magazine focused on "the beauty and vitality" as well as "the challenges and opportunities" of life in the hilltowns of Western Massachusetts (Perkins 4). Having gained so much from literacy sponsors earlier in her life, Anna now takes satisfaction in serving as literacy sponsor for her friends and neighbors.

For Blanche, strong religious faith and the love of music are intertwining themes that run throughout her literacy narrative. In our April 2018 meeting, both Blanche and Anna mentioned that they practice daily Bible devotions. Blanche owns a number of versions of the Bible and likes to compare the nuances of the different translations, to which she is especially sensitive because of her bilingual background. Religious faith and regular Bible reading (or listening on CDs) were important for several of the participants in Suzanne Kesler Rumsey's study of literacy in older adults. As Rumsey observes, "By 'practicing' or engaging their spirits through literate acts, they are able to hold on to what is most important in their lives" ("Holding" 89). Rumsey's study as well as my own reveal that, for many elders, literacy is a way of supporting and strengthening their spiritual lives.

Throughout her life, Blanche's involvement with religion and music have often taken place within community, an important source of connection and self-worth since she did not work in a compensated job during most of her adult life. Blanche was active in church organizations, which involved many literacy activities such as planning programs, writing reports, and giving speeches. While living in Long Island, she belonged to her church's women's fellowship and taught Sunday school. She was also very active in a national Christian organization, serving as music chairman

and prayer chairman for a number of years. After moving to Plainfield full time, she continued this type of involvement, serving as president of Plainfield's non-denominational Ladies Benevolent Society (LBS) for seven years. Finally she stepped down from this leadership role, explaining that she decided to "let it go to the younger generation. . . . You know, enough is enough."

Aging well is partially dependent on knowing when to let go, and Blanche had a good sense of when to move on. But moving on doesn't mean abandoning the sources of literacy that had sustained her in the past. Even now, as a woman in her hundredth year (as she is fond of pointing out), Blanche remains active in community and religious organizations, attending church almost every week as well as monthly meetings of the LBS and weekly sessions of the church-sponsored reading and discussion group. She also regularly joins younger friends who take her to live broadcasts of Metropolitan Opera performances. Blanche's involvement with music and religion have provided a strong sense of self-worth and identity throughout her life and continue to sustain her in old age.

Rejection of Computer Technology

The one area where all four women felt excluded from literacy was technology—computers and new media. Their refusal to use computers wasn't just a passive reluctance but rather a clear decision not to engage with this new form of literacy. It was significant that each woman readily identified computers as the most important change in recent years. For example, in 2007, when I asked Kay to talk about important changes she had seen in her lifetime, she answered without hesitation: "Oh, I think the biggest change is this dotcom stuff. . . . And it's getting bigger [said with emphasis]. I just read something about a young kid who's twenty-three who's developed something that's called Facebook. You know, to me, it has no virtue of any kind. Does it?" I went on to talk about the power of the new technology, and how there are good and bad sides to it. Kay continued, "They said it's going to change the world. . . . I wonder how it will change the social life of people. How is it going to change their culture?"

Like Kay, Blanche expressed reservations about the new technology:

> I feel that I'm out of the mainstream. . . . It's a little bit frustrating. Not being able to understand. On the other hand, I don't know that I want to. It would be wonderful to send an email. Somebody will write me a note or a Christmas card and say, "Send me your email so we can correspond." Well, I don't have email. So it's a little frustrating. . . . Things are happening at such a rapid pace that it's almost impossible to keep things in sequence. We're bombarded from the radio, we're bombarded from the TV. All of these terrible tragedies. Things come to your mind that are pretty stressful. And the rapidity of all of this.

She went on to talk about "this new Apple thing"—the iPad.

It's revealing of the continued active involvement of Kay and Blanche that even though they themselves didn't use computers, they were aware of recent technology breakthroughs shortly after they came into existence: For Kay, Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook and, for Blanche, the Apple iPad.

Anna, ten years younger than Blanche, is also resistant to computer technology. She explained that she managed to retire from her jobs as postmaster and librarian just as these occupations were becoming more computerized. When we spoke in 2011, she mentioned that her daughter and son-

in-law were buying a new computer and wanted to give her their old one, but she had rejected the offer. "I have fat thumbs," she said. "I can't deal with all those little keys."

In her ongoing work on literacy and technology in later life, Lauren Marshall Bowen highlights the tendency in writing studies research to stereotype older people as uncomfortable and inexperienced with digital technologies ("Beyond Repair"; "Resisting"). She has worked to draw attention to elders who are successfully using technology for their own purposes, a trend that will become increasingly important as the century advances. For the women in my study, however, despite their impressive literacies in other areas, the digital world evoked their fears and suspicions, and they chose not to engage with this new type of literacy. In effect, they decided to "alienate themselves from the changes" in literacy tools, one of the options Rumsey describes in "Heritage Literacy" (575-76). These women, so flexible and up to date in other areas, opted not to update their skills with regard to computer technology.

Instead, they developed other ways of coping. For example, Anna devised a low-tech workaround for not being able to enjoy the instant communication of email. As the former town postmaster, she had relied on the US mail as a key link with the outside world all her life. In the cold and snowy winter of 2018, when she was eighty-nine years old, she made it a point to venture out to the mailbox in front of her house each morning with a letter or bill, raise the red flag for mail pickup, and, when the flag was lowered, go back to check for new mail. Clearly not as convenient as sending a quick email, these trips to the mailbox had several advantages. They encouraged her to write something every day, enabled her to communicate regularly with older friends who didn't use computers, and provided daily doses of fresh air and exercise.

Blanche's solution was to make the most of the telephone—a breakthrough technology in her youth. Having given up driving in her early nineties, Blanche relied on the phone to maintain close contact with her friends and relatives. Speaking personally, I can confirm that receiving a phone call or voice mail from Blanche is like having a face-to-face visit. The warmth and caring in her voice come right through the phone line in a way that no text or email can ever equal.

Although none of the women in my study are computer literate, this has been a conscious choice on their part. They prefer to rely on the communication technologies that served them well in the past.

Differing Views of Themselves as Readers and Writers

Although most of the literacy experiences the women recalled as meaningful occurred outside of school, the educational opportunities available to them as young women have shaped their uses of literacy in later life. All four women were intellectually inclined and would clearly have benefitted from a college education. But primarily because of family economic circumstances aggravated by the Depression of the 1930s, only two, Irene and Kay, were able to achieve that goal. Both of Irene's parents were college graduates, and they were determined that their children would get a college education. Kay's family was the most prosperous of the four. Her college-educated father was working in a management position with an income that enabled him to send both daughters to college despite the hard economic times. Blanche and Anna were not so fortunate. As a child of immigrants, Blanche

took the commercial course in high school and had to find a job after graduating. Anna's parents were making ends meet with their small farm, but college for their children was a luxury beyond their means.

This educational history may help to explain the different ways the women have used writing in their later lives. Anna and Blanche saw writing as a useful skill for accomplishing certain tasks of daily life, but they did not regard themselves as "writers." In contrast, Kay and Irene, the two college-educated women, went beyond these everyday uses of writing in an effort to explore ideas and communicate in the wider world outside their immediate social circle.

The women's different uses of writing reflect a trend in twentieth-century literacy. In "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading," published in 1994, Brandt makes the point that for most of her interviewees' reading seemed to have a higher and more universal status than writing as they looked back on their earlier lives:

> On the whole it must be said that the status of writing in everyday literacy practices is decidedly more ambiguous and conflicted in comparison to reading. . . . [W]riting seems to be experienced more as an embedded means than a demarcated end in itself. Writing does not seem to be as broadly sponsored and endorsed by parents; nor does the identity "writer" seem as unproblematically available as the identity "reader." (470)[6]

This generalization held true for Blanche and Anna. While they were eager to talk about themselves as readers, they did not regard themselves as writers in a creative or aesthetic sense. It's important to point out, however, that reading, like writing, is a form of meaning-making and, as such, can be of great value for older adults. In her landmark book, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, Louise M. Rosenblatt called attention to the ways in which readers actively create what she called "the poem" as they read poetry, a novel, or even a piece of informative nonfiction. Readers construct the meaning of what they read, and these meanings differ at different times of life. Thus, an active reading life remains a significant way of making meaning in the elder years as it was for the women in this study, one of the keys to their continued involvement and vitality.

When I asked about the role of writing, Blanche and Anna initially thought I was talking about penmanship, a skill that was stressed in their early educations. Both did go on to talk about letter writing as an important life skill. For example, in the past few years Anna has been exchanging long, informative, and carefully composed letters with a dear friend and neighbor who moved out of town to live near one of her children. These letters not only serve as a way of staying in touch but also provide a means for Anna to think reflectively on subjects of her own choosing. She often encloses a clipping she thinks would be of interest to her friend with a note written in the margin, "What do you think of this?"

Letters also play an important role in Blanche's life. She mentioned listening to a radio program focused on "the lost art of writing letters." Speaking with great emotion, she said, "It's so *sad* because once the emails are erased the record is gone. You have no record of these beautiful letters like Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote back and forth, these beautiful things that are on paper." Like the famous poets, Blanche and her fiancé (who later became her husband) exchanged letters: "I still have

his old letters upstairs." They are among her most treasured possessions.

Like many of the people Brandt interviewed ("Remembering"; *Literacy*), Anna and Blanche were fully literate and used writing as needed in their daily lives. But they did not view themselves as writers. Irene and Kay, on the other hand, used writing not only for instrumental purposes but also for aesthetic reasons and as a way of asserting their agency in the world.

Writing for a Wider Audience: Irene and Kay

Throughout their adult lives, Irene and Kay had used writing as a way of reaching out to a world beyond the local community. As they grew older, writing became even more important as a way of formulating and expressing their views. At a time of life when activities such as participating in a political demonstration or attending a lecture had become difficult, writing provided a way to stay actively involved in the wider world.

A theme that runs throughout Irene's literacy experiences from the school years through old age is writing as a public act. Chosen as class poet at age sixteen, Irene continued to have a way with words throughout her life. In fact, her facility with writing helped to pay for her college education. As Brandt points out, in the twentieth century media sources such as magazines or television programs promoted literacy by sponsoring contests ("Sponsors" 166-67). It was through one such competition, an essay contest sponsored by the *Birmingham News*, that Irene won a full scholarship for the first and last years of college.[7] During her career as an opera singer, Irene continued to use her writing in the public sphere, writing program notes and professional bios for her singing engagements. Much later in her life, Irene engaged in another form of public writing, composing letters to elected officials. As she told me in an interview, about a year after the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, she wrote a letter of concern to then President George W. Bush, criticizing his war policies. She had hoped to receive a reply from the President but instead got only form letters requesting donations. After Irene's death in May 2016, her sons found a copy of this letter among her papers and decided to read it at her memorial service. To them, it exemplified an important character trait: their mother's belief that, as a citizen in a democracy, she had a right and a responsibility to express her opinion to the highest public official. And she saw writing as a way of doing this.

For Kay, a fascination with history, which was sparked during her season in Paris as a young woman, provided a theme for writing in later life. When she and her husband retired in 1977, she devised a project that would combine three of her lifelong interests: writing, visual design, and history. After a three-week road trip tracing the travels of her paternal grandfather, who had been a bugler in the Civil War, she produced a book that included copies of his writings (his diary and sixteen letters) along with her narrative of his travels during the war. Kay had the complete document photocopied and bound—an important piece of family (and national) history.

Another type of writing that is often especially meaningful in old age is the life review. In 1999, when a "writing group for seniors" was offered in neighboring Cummington, Massachusetts, both Irene and Kay decided to participate. In *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing*, Ruth Ray, a gerontologist and writing studies scholar, theorizes the value of this kind of writing in later life, drawing upon her own experiences as a participant-observer in eight different senior writing groups

over a three-year period. In the book's introduction, she explains her rationale for taking a narrative approach to this subject:

> From my position as a feminist, life stories are rich examples of gender negotiations; they are language acts that make visible the different ways men and women "write the self" in old age. They also illustrate the different paths of development available to men and women across the life course. (27)

Looking back on one's life, using words to make meaning of the past, is an important task at any time of life, but is especially significant in old age (see also Jerome Bruner, 110-36, for a discussion of the construction of the self in autobiography).

But if people do not see themselves as writers, as seemed to be the case for Blanche and Anna, they may feel intimidated by the thought of joining a writing group. Even Kay, never one to shy away from new or challenging situations, had some hesitation before eventually signing up. She expressed these reservations in a handwritten metacognitive reflection, which she later attached to her copy of the group's photocopied publication:

> Somehow, somewhere it was suggested to me, there would be a creative writing course to attend in Cummington. I felt that I am not a candidate for writing and thus dismissed the idea. However, the word creative kept recurring in the recesses of my mind. When the offer to take advantage of this Tuesday morning event was again mentioned, I thought, "Why not?" It's been a general habit of mine to venture into new or different experiences.

According to Ray (22-26), the communal aspect of writing workshops for elders is of key importance as the "self" is constructed in dialogue with others (either real or imagined). The facilitator of the Cummington group, Wynne Busby, emphasized this in introducing the group's publication: "I am grateful for the richness of the stories we have told each other, . . . and for the warmth of our little community during these ten weeks. There was commonality, laughter, a few tears as someone touched a nerve now and then" (n.p.). Kay and Irene each had three pieces in the group's publication.[8] In these personal reflections, the women explored memories of their childhood and analyzed turning points in their lives as adults. Like many other elders, Kay and Irene benefited from this opportunity to reflect on people and experiences from the past, using words to make meaning in old age within a supportive community.

Perhaps the confidence Kay gained through sharing her writing with others in this workshop was a factor in her decision, at age ninety, to begin a series of reflective writings in which she worked to express what aging had meant in her life. This decision was typical for Kay, who throughout her long life felt the need to work things out for herself and not just rely on accepted wisdom. In one of our interviews, Kay explained:

> I don't know why, but I had the feeling that . . . for some reason I wasn't born to know all of this stuff the other kids seemed to know. And then I thought, "Oh, well. So what? I'll make it out on my own." And I think that idea has stuck with me the rest of my whole life, that I'm responsible.

Many years later, Kay applied this same attitude to understanding the meaning of aging. Written over a period of nearly ten years and shared with many friends in the community, these writings

constitute a valuable archive of aging—reflections on what it means to grow old from someone in the midst of the process. In this way, Kay was working actively to make meaning in—*and of*—old age.

In the first of these pieces, Kay uses a metaphor she would invoke many times as she describes ending up "somehow on the other side of the 'Looking Glass' where I had never been before. From there, there would be no return." In "Ode to Aging," written in 2006, when she was ninety-three, she expresses the sense of "drifting" or "floundering" into a new time of life (see Figure 2). She finds this "last phase" to be one of "a grand awareness." The next year, still grappling with her own mortality, she writes: "How I wish the knowledge in one's brain, especially of great importance would survive after death. How can it pass into oblivion?" These reflections, written at the end of her life, were one way Kay hoped to pass along the knowledge she had gained. The deepest, most philosophical of these writings is a poem entitled "Motion Is not Stationary," composed in 2007 and influenced by her reading of Walter Isaacson's biography of Einstein. In this poem she shares understandings that had evolved over the course of her life.
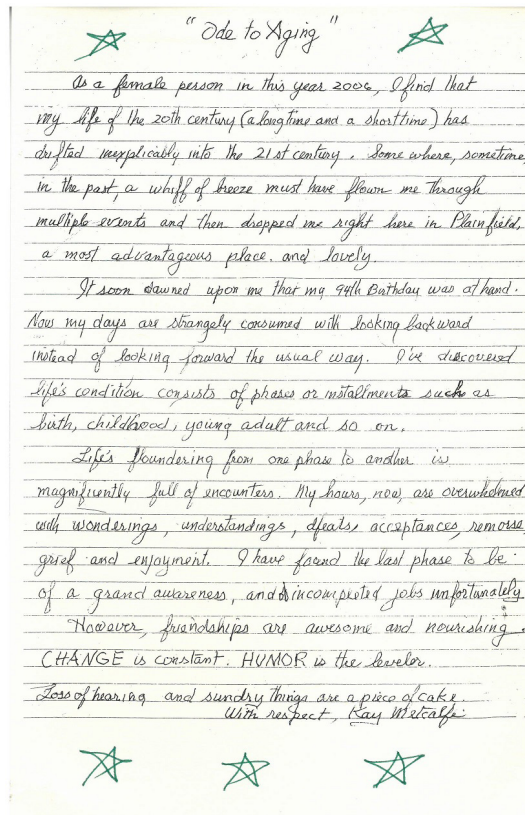

Fig. 2: Kay's "Ode to Aging "

The last of Kay's writings on aging, composed in 2011, when she was ninety-eight, reflects her basic optimism tempered by the realization that "Old Age is busy now, showing off its inordinate

skills." This reflection was originally written as a prose piece, but a friend, herself a poet, encouraged Kay to reformat it as a poem and publish it in the local newspaper, the *Plainfield Post*.[9]

While others in her age group may feel silenced by society's negative view of old people, Kay Metcalfe, as she became one of the "oldest old," decided to share her perspective on aging with others in this series of writings. At a time when she was struggling with hearing loss, which greatly interfered with oral communication, Kay used writing to transmit to others the essence of what she had learned from living. This was a task she took extremely seriously, revising many times as she struggled to express her thoughts on this most profound of subjects. As Kay grappled with old age, her literacy, honed since childhood, enabled her to broaden what she could accomplish at a time of life when many others retreat into silence.

As the proportion of elders in the world population grows dramatically,[10] it is important to recognize the role that literacy can play in aging well (Beal). The type of reflective writing that Kay did during her nineties has great potential as a way of coping with the challenges of aging. Composing a narrative is a way of organizing complex, often disturbing, occurrences into a coherent whole, a way of bringing structure and meaning to life experiences (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1250). Experimental studies conducted over many years and with many different subject populations have found a direct correlation between writing about (and analyzing) traumatic events and improved physical and psychological health (see, for example, Pennebaker, *Opening Up*, "Writing About," *Writing to Heal*; Pennebaker and Seagal).

For Kay, using writing to reflect on what it means to grow old was a way of doing the kind of mental processing that geriatric psychiatrist Gene Cohen feels is an important task in the years after seventy. At this time of life, people "feel more urgently the desire to find larger meaning in the story of their lives through a process of review, summarizing, and giving back. . . . [W]e begin to experience ourselves as 'keepers of the culture' and often want to contribute to others more of whatever wisdom and wealth we may have accumulated" (75-76).

Partly as a result of her writings about aging, Kay was seen by many in Plainfield as a positive role model. In 2012 she received the "Gold-Headed Cane," awarded to the town's oldest resident. After her death in 2018, the selectmen (the town's governing board) decided to dedicate the town's annual report to her memory. They asked me to write the dedication, and I used this opportunity to quote from her reflective writings on aging.

Making Meaning Across the Lifespan

In her book *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom: Meaning and Practice across the Lifecourse*, Ricca Edmondson stresses the importance of meaning making within the context of a person's entire life: "To neglect this aspect of lives, bitterly misrepresents them: making

"Considering how older people use reading and writing to construct meaning is one important way of focusing on growth and development rather than decline."

meaning is a socially and existentially significant activity" (15). She emphasizes the need for society to focus more on the ways that people make meaning in old age and less on how they are (or are not) contributing to the economy (197-205). Recognizing the strengths and resources of our elders counteracts the common tendency within gerontology and society at large to focus on the frailties and illnesses of old age. Considering how older people use reading and writing to construct meaning is one important way of focusing on growth and development rather than decline.

Now, more than ten years after beginning my study, I have learned a great deal about the role of literacy in aging well by looking closely at the lives and experiences of four remarkable women. As I reflect on what I have learned, I think about Irene writing a letter critiquing the foreign policy of President George W. Bush. I think about Anna walking out to her mailbox, hoping for a letter from her friend. I think about Blanche, who, at age ninety-nine, still reads from the Bible every day and regularly attends a church-sponsored reading and discussion group. And I think about Kay, who, over a ten-year period, used her own reflective writing to explore what it means to enter the land of the oldest old. For these women, reading and writing are part of a continuing narrative, providing a way of relating to the world and making meaning at a time of life when other activities may no longer be possible.

As I conclude this discussion of literacy across the lifespan, I keep remembering something Irene said in our 2007 interview:

> I love words. I think words are fascinating. . . . You know, I love that chapter in the book of John: "In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And the word *was* God." You know, it says He spoke the worlds into being. He said, "Let there be light. And there was light." Words have *a power* beyond almost anything that we know of.

With her belief in the power of words, Irene could have been speaking for all four of the women. A lifelong fascination with words has been an important factor in their ability to age with grace and resourcefulness. For these women, active engagement with reading and writing has taken on a particular power in the elder years as they use words to make meaning of their lives.

Acknowledgments

NOTES

[1]Other themes that emerged as significant to successful aging were independence and agency, engagement in the creative arts, connections with the natural world, a sense of humor, openness to change, and strong social connections.

[2]For this article, I have limited my discussion of literacy to reading and writing though there are, of course, many other forms of literacy. For these participants, literacies in the creative arts (music and the visual arts) were especially important, another reason for the women's continued vitality.

[3] By focusing on reading and writing as ways to construct meaning, I do not mean to imply that meaning is always expressed verbally. Edmondson is careful to point out that people often cannot or will not express their deepest values and meanings in words (11).

[4]I decided to end the second interviews with the death of the husband because, for these women, becoming a widow marked the beginning of a new phase in their lives. Blanche could have been speaking for all four when she said, "Well, your whole life, when something like that happens, is a series of adjustments. *Nothing* [said with emphasis] seems to be the same. There are things you have to [do], the house, the bookkeeping, even balancing the checking account, which I didn't even do."

[5]Irene did not mention this poem in our interviews. I learned of its existence nine years later when her son displayed it at her memorial service in June 2016. A complete copy of the poem can be found at http://plainfieldmahistory.org/irene-jordan-caplan-wordsmith/.

[6] Brandt's more recent research (*The Rise of Writing*) indicates that the relationship between reading and writing has shifted in the twenty-first century as a result of the Internet, with writing having attained primacy over reading.

[7] Irene's mother had also earned the right to attend college by winning a contest. She was the only girl to enter an oratorical contest with contestants from several states including Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. She won the competition and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in oratory.

[8] Irene's stories from this collection can be read at http://plainfieldmahistory.org/irene-jordan-caplan-wordsmith/. Kay's stories are available at http://plainfieldmahistory.org/kay-dilger-metcalfe-written-reflections-on-aging/ .

[9] Kay's reflective writings about aging are available at http://plainfieldmahistory.org/kay-dilger-metcalfe-written-reflections-on-aging/.

[10] A study entitled "An Aging World 2015," produced by the US Census Bureau, predicts that between 2015 and 2050 the world population of "the oldest old," defined as people aged 80 and older, will more than triple—from 126.5 million to 446.6 million (He, Goodkind, and Kowal).

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Critical Literacy for Older Adults: Engaging (and Resisting) Transformative Education as a United Methodist Woman

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KEYWORDS

critical literacy; faith; older adults; religion; transformative education

Over the past several years, I've noticed a curious intersection of books on the shelves in my office and in my mother's house. As a member of my university's first-year common reading program, I reviewed potential selections like *Long Way Home: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah, *Just Mercy: A Story of Redemption and Justice* by Bryan Stevenson, and *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario. Meanwhile, as a volunteer librarian, my mother was reviewing the annual lists of the United Methodist Women (UMW) Reading Program to select titles for her church library. An avid book collector, she often buys personal copies from the UMW list, which explains how the above books—along with others on topics like global water resources and microloans in developing countries—have come to be on her shelves. How does a liberal English professor at a state university in a rustbelt city end up reading the same kinds of books as a conservative, religious, eighty-one-year-old woman living in the rural south?

The answer lies, I believe, in certain shared values and goals of our institutions. While the United Methodist Women pursue transformative education for religious ends and my university operates in a secular context, both institutions have established programs of critical literacy for their members. The university's general education program promotes social responsibility, ethical and critical reasoning, and understanding of diversity. Students apply interdisciplinary perspectives to issues like climate change, health disparities, and poverty with the goal of understanding what it means to be a responsible citizen in an interconnected world. A liberal education such as this, argues the American Association of Colleges and Universities, promotes values and skills central to a democracy: the ability to understand the perspectives of others, respect for human dignity, and a commitment to active citizenship (Schneider).

The national organization of United Methodist Women embraces similar values. The UMW identifies transformative education as a central part of its mission, with emphasis on personal change that leads to social action. This educational mission extends to women of all ages, as the church operates on "the principle that ongoing faith development of midlife and older adults is critical for the transformation of the world" (United Methodist Church, "Discipleship"). Every four years, the UMW selects priority issues for service and advocacy such as economic inequality, human trafficking, global migration, and racial justice. The goals of their 2018 Reading Program are strikingly similar to the cultural diversity learning outcomes of my university's general education program: "[To]

inform, educate and raise the consciousness of women to our social, economic and political realities, including the inter-connectedness of race, class and gender in women's lives" (United Methodist Women, "2018 Reading List"). Given the similarities in the liberal education goals of my university and the transformative education goals of the United Methodist Women, the intersection of my mother's reading and my own makes sense. Both institutions seek to develop critical, reflective reading practices that lead to understanding of diversity, power, and inequities in the world.

To understand the connection between religious and secular critical education, we need look no further than the work of Paulo Freire, which has roots in both Marxism and radical Catholicism. Shari Stenberg argues that Freire's liberation theology shares common elements with critical pedagogy discourse as espoused by Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Ira Shor: "Each tradition is concerned with making visible and challenging arenas where human suffering is ignored as well as fostering in individuals a sense of agency and commitment to change" (275). Both traditions promote critique of social structures, understanding of diverse perspectives, and empowerment for marginalized people. Yet, as Stenberg points out, critical pedagogy has largely followed the modernist tradition of US higher education, which brackets off faith from educational practices (275-6). This approach obscures the interplay of religious and pedagogical theory: one might study Freire in the academy, for example, without ever examining how radical Catholicism influenced his work. Although scholars like Patricia Bizzell, Lizabeth Rand, Michael-John DePalma, and Elizabeth Vander Lei and Bonnie Kyburz have called for greater attention to the role faith plays in academic literacies, bracketing remains the norm for post-secondary teaching and scholarship.

Composition research on religious students has largely associated faith with resistance to critical pedagogy. When students engage their religious identities in first-year writing classes, there can be conflict. Some evangelical students have difficulty in negotiating the expectations of their composition classes, particularly in regard to pluralism (Ringer). Perhaps because of this difficulty, a significant percentage of instructors believe Christian students violate academic norms of critical thinking and tolerance (Thomson-Bunn). Shannon Carter states the case bluntly: "the evangelical Christianity with which a number of my students most identify functions—rhetorically, ideologically, practically—in ways that appear completely and irreconcilably at odds with my pedagogical and scholarly goals" (572). As a critical pedagogue, she hopes to foster critical consciousness and the ability to engage different perspectives; many of her evangelical students, however, resist these goals and view the academy as hostile to their Christian worldview. This perception is supported by the public discourse of conservative leaders, who view academics "as promoting agendas of 'secular humanism' and 'cultural relativism'" (575). Like Carter, Heather Thomson-Bunn sees "the competing discourses of Christianity and composition" as a source of conflict between instructors and students (278). In *Toward a Civic Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, Sharon Crowley frames this conflict more broadly as she analyzes the impasse between academic liberalism and Christian fundamentalism and underscores the lack of common ground between these two powerful discourses.

The story of religion and critical literacy, then, is commonly told as a conflict narrative in academic and popular venues. Philip Marzluf argues that this narrative operates on multiple levels:

Composition research, teacher lore, and politically conservative commentary about U.S

higher education use the conflict narrative in order to express assumptions about pedagogy, literacy, and the values of colleges and universities, constructing "stock figures" (Helmers, 1994) of secular, liberal teachers and their narrative counterparts, fundamentalist Christian and conservative students. (2-3)

In the conservative version of this narrative, college instructors seek to destroy the faith of students; in the liberal version, intolerant students reject essential values of higher education. One thing remains constant in both versions: the conflict narrative depends on a view of religion and critical education as incompatible. Dominant cultural narratives such as this one provide ready-made structures through which experiences are organized and meaning is created. The more powerful the cultural narrative, the more difficult it becomes to express alternative perspectives and even to imagine counternarratives.

And yet there are my mother's bookshelves, where faith and critical literacy sit side by side. The more she and I talked about these books, the more I saw her experience with the UMW Reading Program as a challenge to prevailing views of critical literacy, religion, and aging. What might we learn from an older adult's literacy practices in a nonacademic setting where bracketing is *not* the norm, where faith and critical education are intertwined? As a critical reader, my mother appears to be doubly

> *"As a critical reader, my mother appears to be doubly deficit: the conflict narrative defines her faith as an obstacle to critical consciousness, and popular culture views her age as an indicator of conservatism and increasing intolerance."*

deficit: the conflict narrative defines her faith as an obstacle to critical consciousness, and her status as an older adult is commonly associated with increasing conservatism and intolerance (Chamorro-Premuzic). Yet she does engage in critical literacy—in a process full of stops and starts, contradictions and dissonance. She negotiates perspectives that challenge a set of strongly held beliefs she has developed over eight decades, drawing on church-sponsored literacy practices to guide her. Her story complicates the conflict narrative that places religion at odds with critical literacy and offers insight into the complex nature of belief, value, and change in older adults.

My research included an extended face-to-face interview and multiple follow-up conversations with my mother, whom I'll refer to as Janice in the body of this essay. Using an informal and collaborative interview style, I hoped to create an environment that would elicit "small stories" that allow the expression of "important thoughts, reactions, and other experiences of aging that are outside of the grand master narratives of age" (de Medeiros 79). My stance as a researcher was inevitably affected by my position as a daughter, particularly because my mother and I talked about issues on which she and I have long disagreed. I tried (not always successfully) to practice what Krista Ratcliffe calls rhetorical listening, "a conscious choice to assume an open stance" to foster "identifications across commonalities and differences" (26). In other words, I tried to stop arguing with my mother and start listening to her. After our interview, I shared the transcript with her as well as early drafts of this essay, which led to many discussions that clarified details and shaped interpretations. My analysis has been influenced by my commitment to critical literacy and my work

as a university professor, as well as the deep respect I have for my mother's desire to live a life of spiritual growth.

Church and School: Cultural Foundations of Literacy

Janice's house is full of books: a set of encyclopedias from the 1970s, a dozen leather-bound editions from the *Franklin Library* series, old college textbooks, children's books, and—most of all—spiritual books. She lives in the same farmhouse where she was born, although much has changed since her childhood. The Bible was the only book in the house when she was growing up. "We were too poor to have books," she says. Electricity was slow to come to the rural south, and her house wasn't connected to the grid until 1948, when she was twelve. The library of her rural school provided access to books, and she particularly enjoyed reading historical accounts and biographies. About her literacy, she says, "Church and public education—these were the foundation for me."

Especially since her retirement, Janice has made spiritual reading part of her daily life. She favors devotionals, which are annual publications that provide a short reading for each day of the year. Each entry begins with a Biblical verse or quote, followed by reflection, explanation, and illustrative examples. Some devotionals provide historical context, while others take a more contemporary, story-oriented approach. Janice purchases multiple books each year to get various perspectives. She says, "I look forward every morning to reading. I don't just read one person's devotional. I'll read one week's devotionals in one day, and I'll comment on it in my mind. And sometimes I have to share it with people." Her reading process is consciously dialectical, through either inner dialogue as she makes comments to herself or discussion with friends or family. For Janice, a central benefit of devotional reading is interpersonal, in that the insight she gains helps her negotiate her relationships with others. She says devotionals help her understand

> . . . how I can be happier in life. And I'm happier when I love everybody and I feel I'm being loved. I'm not happy if I feel somebody's got an angst against me. I worry and think, what did I do wrong, and why do they feel that way. That's when you have to read and get on the positive side. It's negative or positive. You've got to read—*I've* got to read—things that are going to be uplifting, and those things are Biblically based.

The daily practice of reading and reflecting helps her "get on the positive side" of challenges and conflicts. At several points in the interview, she stresses that reading materials should be positive and uplifting. The criterion of positivity is central to how she evaluates reading materials, and, as we will see later, is at the root of why she resists some books in the UMW Reading Program.

Janice seeks out what is "good and true" in her reading and has a particular affinity for narratives that demonstrate "grit"—the ability for individuals to overcome adversity and contribute to their communities. She was raised to believe literacy plays a key role in an individual's success and credits her mother for shaping her taste in reading:

> Number one, when I was growing up, my mother didn't like for me to read junk. We could not read junk. So I started reading biographies. I just loved reading about how other people did something good, where they contributed to life. When I was left with four children

> I prayed to God that I could get them educated so they would not be dependent on the government to take care of them. When you're exposed to reading things that have some grit to it, you have more quality in your life.

Janice's mother taught her to view literacy in strongly moral terms, with "good" reading practices connected to progress and merit-based success. Romance novels and magazines like *True Confessions* were considered "junk" that led girls and young women to waste time and embrace frivolous values. In contrast, reading stories of exemplary individuals who contributed to society had an edifying effect. Reading the right kind of texts leads to "more quality in your life," just as getting an education leads to a life of respectability and independence from government assistance.

Janice tells her own life story as a story of grit, particularly in regard to literacy acquisition. As a young mother, she remembers reading the dictionary and memorizing definitions so her "brain wouldn't turn to mush." She sold encyclopedias long enough to get a free set for the family. Divorced at a time when marriage was the social norm, she struggled financially to raise her four children, working low-wage, pink-collar jobs as a clerk on the nearby military base and as an uncertified librarian in a public elementary school. Disillusioned by the limitations of this work, she began taking college classes and graduated with a degree in library science at the age of forty-nine. She returned to work in the public schools as a certified librarian and retired at the age of sixty-two. Literacy provided her with powerful financial and personal benefits in her youth and adulthood, and it continues to enrich her life as an older adult.

She sees continuing learning as essential to her wellbeing, and the church plays an important role in providing access to educational opportunities. Educational gerontologists have identified four learning needs for older adults: coping needs, expressive needs, contributive needs, and influence needs. Religious institutions offer older adults opportunities for learning across all these categories, perhaps most importantly in the dimension of being "active social agents" (Findsen 74). Janice's expressive needs are met through her participation in small group studies, women's circle meetings, and worship services. She contributes through her work as volunteer librarian and seeks to influence her community by promoting the UMW Reading Program. She believes reading is particularly good for older people:

> It will cause your mind to be more sharp. I think that if you sit in front of the TV and you don't participate, you'll become a rotten potato [laughter]. You don't stay with what's in the world. Reading good stuff—you know what that is, I've talked about it before. I think reading has enlightened my life and has enhanced my life.

She sees reading as an active, participatory process that keeps people mentally sharp and helps them "stay with what's in the world." Reading itself is good for you, but the UMW Reading Program requires more from its participants—transformation of the self and the world.

The Methodist Self: Inner Reflection and Outward Action

Methodism has a long history of sponsoring literacy, from founder John Wesley's promotion of working class literacy to current programs like the UMW Reading Program. One of the most

important aspects of Methodist literacy, especially in context with this project, is the relationship between reading and the inner self. Daily reading and journal writing have historically been encouraged as a method of spiritual growth. Vicki Tolar Burton argues that John Wesley's "empathic attunement to the inner experience of ordinary people . . . served to enhance a sense of self as a person with potential for development" (103). Janice's daily devotional reading, with its strong emphasis on self-reflection and dialogic engagement with the text, fits squarely with the Methodist tradition. Through reading, she seeks continual personal development—as do many of her fellow church members. Surveys show 39% of United Methodists read the scripture at least once a week and 25% participate in prayer groups, study groups, and/or religious education at least once a week (Pew 181, 184). The church offers its older members a powerful narrative of personal growth through literacy: everyone, at every stage of life, should actively engage in a journey of faith.

Given the Methodist Church's historical view of the self as mutable and literacy as a means of change, it is not surprising that the UMW Reading Program defines its mission in terms of personal growth. Just as Paulo Freire calls for praxis, though, the UMW warns its members against viewing reading as separate from service and advocacy: "For almost 150 years, United Methodist Women have been involved in mission that includes prayer, study, and action. The Reading Program is a study opportunity, but it should also lead to action" (United Methodist Women, "Reading Program"). Any UMW member can nominate a book for consideration, and each year the national office creates a reading list for each of these categories: education for mission, leadership development, nurturing for community, social action, and spiritual development. The social action category addresses issues that can be politically controversial, particularly in Janice's community. As volunteer librarian, she reviews the list and decides which books should be purchased for her church. She looks for books that will be most relevant to the needs of her fellow church members, reading reviews on the internet and selecting ones with the "best value." Her goal is to build a strong collection for the church library, and she takes pride in the range and quality of her selections. When confronting perspectives that challenge her worldview, Janice turns to church-sponsored methods of reading.

The UMW presents its mission issues within a framework of textual justification that draws from the Bible and the Social Principles in *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. Quotations serve to connect social action to the sacred texts and foundational church principles. When a UMW member reads about an issue on the website or in print materials, she will see how this issue connects with the key texts of the community. For example, the UMW webpage on Economic Inequality prominently situates this advocacy issue within church discourses:

Scriptural Inspiration

"Protect the rights of the poor and needy." (Proverbs 31:9)

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." (Luke 6:20a)

<u>From the United Methodist Book of Discipline</u>

As a church, we are called to support the poor and challenge the rich . . . Poverty most often has systemic causes, and therefore we do not hold poor people morally responsible for their economic state. (Social Principles, ¶ 163 E)

(United Methodist Women, "Economic Inequality")

The United Method Church explicitly emphasizes systemic causes of poverty, offering an alternative to dominant cultural narratives of personal responsibility and meritocracy that advocate "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps." Janice's own prized narrative of self is challenged by the church's counternarrative, which shifts responsibility from individuals to social, political, and economic systems. The Methodist view of systemic poverty complicates her respect for "grit" and her fear of government dependence. By situating disruptive concepts within the context of Biblical and church texts, the UMW establishes common ground—a place for its members to stand as they encounter challenging perspectives.

When Janice explains the UMW's mission priority issues to me, she follows the same pattern of textual justification, linking contemporary social issues to Biblical references:

It's very strong . . . to welcome the immigrant. Because they said, in early Biblical times, the Hebrew nation—they were immigrants. They did not own property; they were foreigners in a new land. So this is the religious aspect of that. And not only that, but just loving your neighbor.

Viewing immigration through the lens of scripture encourages church members to draw parallels, for example, between the wandering of the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt and the plight of Syrian refugees today. This method of reading supports a narrative about immigration that runs counter to other narratives that Janice encounters on Facebook, in the news, and in conversation with friends and family. The scriptural lens seems to provide a way for Janice to engage alternative perspectives, even when she holds different political and social views. In our interview, she acknowledges the controversial nature of some mission issues:

Climate change is a big issue. Of course, it's a controversial one also outside of religion. But people say, [there is] a firm belief that God created this earth. We're stewards of it, and we have to take care of it. I mean, that's a mandate to take care of this earth. And that has its grounds in Biblical issues.

In these passages, Janice embraces the ways of thinking and patterns of Methodist literacy, reading the world through the lens of sacred texts. As her daughter, I know that she is skeptical about climate change and supports restrictions on immigration. She doesn't comment on this dissonance, perhaps because the church provides a Bible-based method of reading that allows her to inhabit the liberal discourse of social justice—at least in this moment.

I must admit that as a daughter I have sometimes found my mother's ability to move between viewpoints difficult to accept. My academic training has taught me to argue with consistency and avoid contradictions, to see dissonance as a problem that needs to be resolved. As a researcher, however, I have to ask myself: how does my desire for a "coherent" narrative shape the way I

listening to my subject's story? What role does dissonance play in my mother's critical literacy? Am I distorting my mother's story by looking for a linear narrative of change? Debra Journet cautions researchers in writing studies to interrogate the tropes and themes we employ as we interpret data. Stories of belief and attitude change occur again and again in our scholarship: "In particular, composition narratives are often marked by transformational arcs" (19). Critical pedagogy narratives are particularly dependent on this arc, as they recount how learners move from unawareness to critical consciousness. My search for consistency in Janice's story stems from a desire to see an arc of transformation: I am looking for a discipline-sanctioned narrative with a beginning, middle and end. But like all dominant narratives, this limits what I see.

My interview with Janice is not linear or tidy: sometimes her story suggests transformed views; at other times her positions seem less fixed as she moves between engagement and resistance. Paying attention to moments of dissonance in her story helps me focus on critical literacy as a *process*. Cognitive dissonance is a powerful psychological state, one that is essential to learning. When a person experiences contradictions or discrepancies within their perceptions or thought processes, the result is psychological discomfort. It is human nature to want to resolve dissonance, and people often do it quickly by rejecting the conflicting element or minimizing the discrepancy. Justin Walton argues that critical educators should make use of cognitive dissonance by helping students embrace it rather than rushing to resolve it. Dwelling in the perspective of another, even provisionally, is a necessary step in critical consciousness. Because the ability to tolerate cognitive dissonance allows time for critical self-reflection and reconceptualization, educators should create environments that help students "sustain dissonance" and "infuse paradox, conflict, and ambiguity into the curriculum" (775-76, 780). While Walton's work focuses on postsecondary students, we might also consider the role dissonance plays for older learners in nonacademic settings. Janice's willingness to engage perspectives that conflict with her beliefs complicates the idea that viewpoints become rigid with age and suggests there may be similarities in the way older and younger people respond to the challenges of critical literacy.

Janice seems to find it easiest to engage issues that are at a distance from her life, perhaps because the unfamiliar elements create less dissonance. When asked about a book that challenged her views or opened her eyes to a new way of seeing things, she said:

> I won't ever forget when I went to one of the [UMW] conferences, and they had some pamphlets laid out there that said "human trafficking." I thought, what are they talking about? Human trafficking—that was back in the slave days, that's not today. But the more I've read the more I know. I can't give you figures but I have books in there that can give you figures of the women and girls, men and boys trafficked for agriculture. They're trafficked for sex, they're trafficked for slave labor in homes. These things blew my mind. I never knew it was going on today.

Since then, she has read several books on human trafficking and is particularly interested in learning about the issues women and girls face in Muslim countries. She favors books provide a positive message of hope, particularly stories of individuals who tackle problems and make a difference in their communities.

Many of the UMW books follow this pattern, particularly those dealing with women's leadership

"Reading can be painful, particularly when a book offers a worldview that collides with a cherished belief about how the world works."

in the world. Janice has read *I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (Yousafzai and Lamb) and *This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President* by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. She also enjoyed reading about Kenyan ecologist Waangari Maathai, who calls for healing of the earth. She finds books like these uplifting because they show the power of individuals to create social change; reading these books inspire her and bring her joy. But her participation in the UMW Reading Program has inspired other emotions as well: she has felt challenged, irritated, hurt, and angry while reading church-recommended books.

Contending Narratives: When Beliefs Collide

Reading can be painful, particularly when a book offers a worldview that collides with a cherished belief about how the world works. "Let there be no mistake," Jim Corder writes, "a contending narrative, that is, an argument of genuine consequence because it confronts one life with another, is a threat" (19). Such a narrative disrupts one's sense of self and the reality of one's worldview: "What happens, then, if the narrative of another crushes up against our own—disruptive, shocking, incomprehensible, threatening, suddenly showing us into a narrative that is not our own?" (18-19). Corder lays out the possibilities: we turn away, lose our conviction, we go to war—or, sometimes, we change our selves (19). The UMW Reading Program poses this kind of deep personal challenge for Janice, particularly when selected books interrogate the structural and systemic causes of social issues. Critical literacy requires readers to open themselves to "contending narratives" and risk change to themselves.

At several points in the interview, Janice's emotions welled up in ways that surprised me. Seemingly straightforward questions led to deeply felt answers that took her back to childhood ways of understanding the world. When asked what reading means to her as a Christian, she said:

> It inspires me. It really makes me want to go out and do something for the Lord. It makes me want to [pause, tearfully] really do something good. And I just wish I could have. I was about fourteen, fifteen years old when I saw a film at a camp meeting about the African people. They were living such primitive lives, and I wanted to go and help them. That's the problem, now that I know what I know—they don't really need you to go over there and change them, to be like we are. Really and truly. That's why in *Why Africa Matters*, [the author] is saying, white man came and they're trying to change the culture of these people that don't want it changed. It's like, oh, I know something that will make it so much better for you. . . . I'll use the word culture because that's the bottom line. From what I've read, I've learned that you don't have to change the culture.

This answer reveals the emotional complexity of inhabiting new worldviews. Reading *Why Africa*

Matters by Cedric Mayson disrupted a deeply held perspective about the cultural superiority of the West. As a young girl she hoped that she, as a Christian in the developed world, might help the "primitive" people of Africa. Mayson presents a view of pre-colonial Africa as a society that is whole, not broken, and in doing so, challenges narratives and belief central to Janice's worldview. In the lingo of critical pedagogy, she is experiencing "desocialization," the process of "critically examining learned behavior, received values, familiar language, habitual perceptions, existing knowledge and power relations . . ." (Shor 114). Through desocialization, a person becomes aware of oppression and works toward critical consciousness. But resulting cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable—as Janice's emotional response makes clear. Inhabiting Mayson's worldview caused irreparable harm to her own. She can no longer see Africa through the eyes of her fourteen-year-old self, the idealistic girl who wants to "really do something good" for a downtrodden people. It is no longer clear what "doing good" means.

The conflict she experiences as a participant in the UMW Reading Program must be felt by many of her peers. The Pew Research Center 2017 Religious Landscape Survey shows that 45% United Methodist Church members call themselves politically conservative, while 38% call themselves moderate and only 15% call themselves liberal (193). A significant number of church members hold conservative social views:

- 32% believe homosexuality should be discouraged (202).
- 43% oppose same-sex marriage (205).
- 42% believe "stricter environmental protection laws cost too many jobs and harm the economy" (211).
- 54% believe "government aid to the poor does more harm than good by making them dependent on the government" (214).

Conservative church members like Janice will most certainly experience conflict when the UMW advocates climate justice, health care as a human right, and greater income equalization—issues commonly associated with liberal political views.

The question of how to deal with the conflicting beliefs of its members has been central to the Methodist Church since its founding. John Wesley feared schism and established a concept to accommodate conflict by identifying elements that were vital to faith and allowing divergent perspectives otherwise. The United Methodist Church codifies this approach in its *Book of Discipline*:

> John Wesley's familiar dictum was, "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think." . . . Beyond the essentials of vital religion, United Methodists respect the diversity of opinions held by conscientious persons of faith. Wesley followed a time-tested approach: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." (56-57)

We might think of Wesley's approach as a rhetorical strategy for maintaining community in the face of contention. First, the community identifies common ground: the broad, essential beliefs that every member holds in *unity*. Next, the community agrees to treat "non-essential" beliefs with *liberty*. Finally, and foremost, members must embrace the principle of *charity* in all interactions with each other and the world. In his sermon "On Charity," Wesley argues that charity is often misunderstood

as outward action; it should instead be understood as love marked by humility, a reluctance to be provoked, gentleness to all (especially those who oppose us), and a willingness to suffer "affronts, injuries, and reproaches." Charity, then, requires one to take a receptive, nonaggressive stance when faced with challenging viewpoints. In terms of educational psychology, charity opens a space for cognitive dissonance.

Wesley's approach to conflict can help us understand what motivates an eighty-one-year-old woman with conservative political and social views to read a progressive text like *Why Africa Matters*. Diverse opinions "held by conscientious persons of faith" are less threatening when the essentials of faith are shared. Janice shares core values with Cedric Mayson, who served as a Methodist minister and approaches global issues from the perspective of faith. From this common ground, she can encounter challenging ideas with charity. "For some reason, within myself," she says, "I just want to find out why people are different." She says she doesn't always enjoy reading perspectives that differ from hers, but she does try to gain something from the experience: "it opens my eyes to how other people are the way they are. I don't have to agree with them, but if I get just a little bit of knowledge from them or a little bit of good from them, then—yeah." By suspending judgment and focusing on understanding, Janice opens herself to engage diverse perspectives with a simple goal of understanding

> *"The stakes are low: she can, in the words of John Wesley, "think and let think" and encounter conflicting views with charity, secure in the knowledge of shared essential values."*

"why people are different." The stakes are low: she can, in the words of John Wesley, "think and let think" and encounter conflicting views with charity, secure in the knowledge of shared essential values. This method of charitable reading, which echoes Peter Elbow's believing game or Krista Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening, allows Janice to set aside questions of disagreement or agreement and focus on what she finds valuable in the text: "a little bit of knowledge" or "a little bit of good."

Still, Janice finds it difficult to read some books from a charitable stance, particularly those that don't "keep to the positive side." She is deeply troubled by *The Massacre at Sand Creek: How Methodists were Involved in an American Tragedy* (Roberts), which tells the story of Colonel John Milton Chivington, a Methodist minister who ordered the massacre of more than two hundred Cheyenne and Arapaho in 1864. "With all the positive stories you could tell," said Janice, "why do we have to focus on the negative?"

Given her conservative views on homosexuality and same-sex marriage, one might expect her to struggle with books on the UMW reading list that deal with these issues. Yet she has purchased numerous books on sexuality for the church library and thought extensively about these issues. We can see her attempting to engage the "contending narratives" of the LGBTQ community even as she resists them:

> The United Methodist Church does not condemn homosexuality. They do not condemn same-sex marriage. It's not talked about. They do not condemn it. I know we have one book about a minister . . . who had a transsexual change. It's one of the books on our [church

library] shelves right now. I have not read it—I hope to read it someday—but it's not my main focus. Lately, all I want to do is read about how Martin Luther thought, and how John Wesley thought.

In this passage, Janice echoes the United Methodist position on sexuality and signals her openness to understanding the perspective of a transgender minister. Her preference is to avoid the issue altogether, though, as she turns her attention to historical readings. The church has taken a similar approach to this issue of same-sex marriage: the United Methodist General Conference voted in 2016 to postpone a decision on same-sex marriage but is headed for a contentious General Conference meeting in 2019 that may split the church (Funk). Janice's conflicted views on progressive social issues mirror the deep divisions within the United Methodist Church.

One strategy she uses to cope with the conflict within her community is to locate herself within a narrative of change, one that acknowledges her beliefs as situated in the time of her upbringing:

> You have to understand that at eighty-one years old it's real hard for me to accept some things that are acceptable today, whether that means same-sex marriage or whether it means interracial dating. Because I wasn't raised with this. Today, we have it all around us. I'm not condemning of it; it's just different. I admire people who are good. I admire people who do something to make this world better—this community, their neighbor. I don't care who it is, if they're good to you.

This narrative creates a context for her beliefs by acknowledging their constructed nature: she recognizes that social views change and the era one grows up in shapes one's beliefs. By viewing her beliefs from a perspective of social change, she can retain her conservative beliefs and at the same time not condemn those who disagree with her. In the words of John Wesley, she has agreed to "think and let think" on matters that aren't essential. She then moves on to a higher criterion for judgment: she admires good people who make a difference in the world.

At multiple points in our interview and in later conversations, Janice returns to homosexuality as an issue that troubles her. She holds a strong moral position against same-sex relationships:

> For me personally, I feel that we human beings were made to praise God. We were created to procreate, to have children and raise them to have children. And unless you get technical input there . . . two men are not going to get pregnant. Two women are not going to get pregnant. You're going to have to have something outside of nature. That is not how we were created to be.

Yet earlier she had talked with enthusiasm about Adam Hamilton's *How Christians Get It Wrong*, which presents a pastor's perspective on his work with the LGBTQ community. "These people are suffering," she said, "and he's saying it's because of how the church is treating them." When I asked her why she purchased this book for the church library, given her own position on homosexuality, she framed her answer in the discourse of reader rights and institutional authority: "I feel like, just because I don't feel this way, why should I deny somebody something that's been approved by, or recommended by, the UMW board for this reading program. You can read all about it online." She then moves to a different line of reasoning based on empathy. This book, she tells me, shows the need to love gay people who are suffering because of the church's position on homosexuality. She imagines

how a mother of a lesbian might feel:

> Who am I to deny someone who has a daughter who has a tendency to fall in love with another woman [the right to read this book]. I have to put myself in that parent's shoes. You have to make up your mind, am I going to let something separate me from my daughter? I think of the scripture, and the Lord says nothing—*nothing*—can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Period.

Janice sees the book's value in terms of the comfort it might bring, a judgment she makes by putting herself in the position of a parent who has a gay child. The book may help a mother to love her child unconditionally, as the scripture tells us God loves us. In referencing a Bible verse, she applies the same method of justification as the church does for its social justice issues. The "essentials of vital religion"—unconditional love—are far more important than her personal opinion about homosexuality.

Janice encounters challenging viewpoints on continuing basis, with each year bringing a new book list for the UMW Reading Program. She recently selected a book for the library on a mission priority issue, Criminalization of Communities of Color and Mass Incarceration, that surprised and troubled her.

> I have a social issue right now that I personally have a problem with. [The book] has to do with there being more Black people than white people in prison, or more Hispanics. And there's something wrong with the system that's doing this. It tells how to organize for a protest, and this protest to "ban the box." They want it to be put into law that an employer can't ask if you've ever had a felony. And of course, this is something I don't agree with.

She feels strongly that employers have rights, and she doesn't feel this is an appropriate issue for the UMW to support. Likewise, she was not happy when she saw a photo in her local newspaper depicting protestors from the UMW Wilmington District holding signs that said, "United Methodist Women against HB 2." North Carolina House Bill 2 would have required people to use the facilities of their biological gender and was widely viewed as discriminatory toward the LBGTQ community. She objected to the use of the name of the United Methodist Women in the protest: "If they want to, that's their business," she said, "But don't make me part of it."

Clearly, Janice feels an uncomfortable dissonance when engaging some of the social justice and advocacy issues of the UMW. When I asked if she would ever consider leaving the church because of its liberal views, she replied: "I know what my niece said, and it hit me right in the heart. She says, I love my church and my church family too much to let a doctrine make me leave my church. She's saying, I will not leave my church family." This answer shifts the question of church membership from divisive issues to "the essentials of vital religion." The essentials of love and community bind her to her church family, and no doctrine will separate her. Yet her story shows that remaining in communion is not simply a decision one makes; it is a process that requires on-going emotional and intellectual work. For Janice, that work involves critical literacy in the Methodist tradition: the on-going engagement of difference through charitable reading.

Conclusion: Reading Methodically, Aging with Agency

One of my main points here has been to offer a counternarrative to the transformation plot we usually associate with critical literacy. Having argued against a linear narrative, how do I write a conclusion to Janice's story? Her engagement with the issues I've discussed in this essay is ongoing. She has continued to update me on her reading, some of which was undertaken in direct response the draft I shared with her. She decided to not only read *The Massacre at Sand Creek: How Methodists were Involved in an American Tragedy*, but to do additional research on John Milton Chivington. While she still struggles with the idea of "dragging up negative stories from the past," she now supports the United Methodist Church's apology to Native Americans at its 2016 General Conference. "It was a horrible thing," she says; "the church should have apologized." She has also engaged other UMW mission issues that she initially resisted. On the recommendation of her great-niece, she has begun reading about issues of racism in the criminal justice system. She recently finished Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy: A Story of Redemption and Justice* and told me, "Everyone should read this book." She felt inspired by Stevenson's perseverance and success at helping those who had been treated unfairly by the justice system. "It's not right to incarcerate a child for a lifetime" she says, especially if the child has mental health issues.

To understand Janice's willingness to engage texts with which she (at least initially) disagrees, we must understand the *method* of her reading. She reads to improve herself, to understand others, and to stay "in the world"—even when the world challenges her beliefs. Her church provides a rhetorical strategy for encountering difference: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." The importance of method, according to John Wesley, is that it provides a structure that allows one to become a better Christian. Its purpose is not to achieve an end point but rather to engage in an active process. Janice's literacy poses a challenge to the conflict narrative that places religious faith in opposition to critical consciousness; her faith supports an approach to reading that promotes openness and postpones judgment. Reading with charity allows her to "think and let think" as she dwells in the worldviews of others. For my mother, the clash of worldviews is not an abstract concept; it is a family matter. She is keenly aware that her views are quite different from "the generation I birthed," and her motives for critical reading include a desire to understand "how younger people think." She reads difficult texts not only to improve herself but to build connections with her children—including me.

Janice's narrative does not have an ending; her literacy practices reveal evolving views and opinions, engagement and resistance, and critical insight that occurs in moments. At the age of eighty-one, she reads with agency—intentionally, methodically, and purposefully. Just as she reads challenging texts with charity, we might read her experiences with charity, expanding our notions of where critical literacy occurs and what it might look like in practice. Her story offers a counternarrative to dominant cultural and disciplinary narratives and challenges us to develop more expansive views of literacy. To do so, we must reframe critical literacy as a process rather than a plot. Instead of focusing on end products of transformation, we need to consider the conditions that support the process of transforming.

Acknowledgements

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Faith, Squirrels, and Artwork:
The Expansive Agency of Textual Coordination in the Literate Action of Older Writers

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KEYWORDS

L iteracy, variously defined, has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on the social, cognitive, and physical functioning of older adults. The social nature of literacy—the fact that our literate actions pull us into conversations with others, drawing us into social worlds that we would not otherwise be part of—not only brings literate actors into social organizations, but into configurations of cognitive, spatial, chronological, and material action that echo across multiple dimensions of human activity (Bazerman). In studies of older subjects, literacy is positively associated with reducing sedentary behavior (Gibbs et al.), supporting working memory (Rhodes and Katz; Manly et al.), and decreasing mortality (Sudore et al.).

While the benefits of literacy are clearly demonstrated in research on gerontology, psychology, cognitive science, and physical health, the ways in which literacy is taken up by older members of society—how, why, where, when, with what social and historical antecedents and consequences—are not well understood, although research by Lauren Marshall Bowen, Heidi McKee and Kristine Blair has begun to outline this work. In particular, the relationship between literate action and the agency of older writers—that is, their capacity to make choices that shape the construction of a social situation—remains unclear. Understanding the relationship between literate action and agency in older writers can provide significant insight into age studies.

In this text, I present a case study of Frank, a retired engineer who has, in the decades since his retirement, repurposed his literate practices to participate in a wide array of social activity involving friends, family, the local community, and far-flung networks of actors from across the country. The particularities of Frank's affordances in retirement offers what Harold Garfinkel refers to as a "perspicuous setting" for the study of how literate action impacts the lives of older writers (*Ethnomethodology's Program* 181). That is, Frank's work as a writer during retirement brings into stark relief key aspects of the social construction of writing in later life for examination by researchers. Because Frank relies on such an interconnected set of literate practices to build his network of lifeworlds in his post-career life, a close study of those practices can indicate how literate action promotes, reinforces, and perpetuates agency in older writers.

I trace Frank's literate practices across his life, the lifeworlds he participates in, and the audiences that he writes for in order to answer the following research question: How does Frank's negotiation of his lifeworlds through literate action promote agency in his life after retirement? Drawing on a

sociohistorically and sociologically situated theoretical framework and methodology, I identify the ways in which Frank uses literate action to construct situations post-career that are informed by a lifetime of practice and inform the ongoing development of post-retirement lifeworlds.

Agency and Age Studies

At the heart of understanding Frank's negotiation of lifeworlds is the concept of agency. Agency is a central concern of age studies. In the introduction to his edited collection, *Old Age and Agency*, Emmanuelle Tulle notes that "what we know about later life is influenced by powerful discourses, such as medicine, welfare and neoliberal ideology and that it is at the meeting point of these discourses that we 'imagine' and produce later life" (ix). Our understanding of agency in old age is caught up within these discourses—agency is often seen as belonging to the cognitively and physically able, something seen culturally as slipping away from those in later life. As Tulle puts it, "older people appear to be in a Catch-22—whatever they do, they either postpone decline or have been caught up by it" (ix).

The work in and after Tulle's collection has attempted to subvert these commonplace considerations of agency and aging in contemporary discourse. Explorations of the embodied nature of selfhood (Kontos), the role of identification with aging (Hockey and James), anxiety and memory (Herrera et al.), and dispositions (Francescato et al.) have worked to reframe such views, encouraging a multifaceted view of age and age studies that locates an individual not only along an age range but also within states of dispositions, individuated frames of reference, personal perceptions of opportunities for social action, and bodily movement within material systems of circulation. This multifaceted view challenges the commonplace notions that contemporary social discourse brings to discussion on agency and aging.

Such a multifaceted view of agency and aging must be kept in mind if we are to best understand how Frank's literate action produces and extends agency in his life. In order to read Frank's literate action without problematic commonplaces in mind, I draw on a posthumanist (Accardi) definition of agency, which sees agency as circulated, as established situationally through the interactional work of actors, human and nonhuman alike. Viewing agency in this way returns my attention to the material work of Frank—both his literate practices and the products of those literate practices. This view on agency both aids in avoiding a return to commonplace understandings of agency and enables an uncovering of the "radical withness" (Micciche, *Acknowledging*; "Writing") within which agency is constructed, both by people and by objects.

Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner, drawing on a Translingual perspective, suggest that, since "difference is an inevitable product of all language acts," any use of language—which, by extension, constructs a social situation—is agentive in nature (585). "All writing," they argue, "always involves rewriting and translation, inevitably engaging the labor of recontextualizing (and renewing) language, language practices, users, conventions, and contexts" (586). The use of language through writing and the marshalling of resources to make such writing possible is fraught with individuated decision-making. As Garfinkel suggests, we engage in any given social situation—whether it be arriving at

the office for the twentieth year in a row, or being introduced to someone we've never met—we are always doing it "for another first time" (*Studies* 9). There is a newness, as well as a familiarity, to each language use, to each social construction. Our identification and response to this mix of the familiar and the new is where agency comes into play: we deploy our agentive powers as we (co)construct a social situation with other actors and tools, including writing.

Just as the people who (co)construct social situations have agency, the materials that are brought to bear on the (co)construction of those situations have an agency of their own as well. In order to make sense of Frank's agency, I draw on the concept of *symmetry*, from the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, among others, in their advancement of actor-network theory. Clay Spinuzzi defines symmetry as "the principle that human and nonhuman actants are treated alike when considering how controversies are settled" (23), and argues that this principle is, at heart, a methodological move. Drawing on a hypothetical example of bringing "undernourished hipsters" (24) and sound equipment together in an elevator with a specific weight limit at a SXSW festival, Spinuzzi demonstrates that, for very particular purposes (such as making sure an elevator does not get loaded past its capacity), it can make sense to treat humans and nonhumans as actors. Symmetry becomes "a methodological stance meant to get at some things and not at others" (27). By treating nonhuman actors as having agency, multiple facets of the (co)construction of a social situation are thrown into relief. Attention can be paid to the work that nonhuman actors do, if we imagine them to have the potential for agency to begin with.

In this particular study, symmetry highlights the role that writing plays in Frank's life. Frank's writing—and, in particular, his notebook practices—and my discussions about his writing reveal what appear to be widely-separated lifeworlds: artwork, religion, family, health concerns, and many other issues crop up that are not clearly interrelated. Symmetry, however, allows for me to follow not only people and language but also tools and objects. As I trace Frank's literate practices across various aspects of his life, identifying the ongoing work of both humans and nonhumans to establish and perpetuate agency serves as an important sense-making research mechanism: it highlights the ongoing work that Frank needs to do to keep the spinning plates of his lifeworlds working together, and to keep himself operating on each of those spinning plates. In other words, a posthumanist approach to agency throws into relief the social and personal consequences of literate action by Frank.

Framing Agency: Chronotopes and Textual Coordination

Envisioning agency as circulating in the social construction of situations allows for researchers to follow the work of literate actors to construct and perpetuate agency through a range of means, with a range of tools, in incredibly different social settings. Looking for not just Frank's writing but also how Frank's writing contributes to the agency he perceives himself as having in any given situation sheds important light on Frank's situational sense-making activity. But attending to the material, moment-to-moment work of literate action—as well as the ways in which it constructs and perpetuates agency—necessitates a close look at the nature of interpersonal relations: understanding

the principles that drive ongoing, interpersonal work across a lifetime is the only way to establish useful concepts for envisioning agency and its relationship with literate action.

> *"…human identity is, at a fundamental level, interactionally constructed."*

Various studies and scholars in sociology (Goffman; Garfinkel), interpersonal psychiatry (Sullivan) and sociocultural psychology (Vygotsky; Wertsch; Cole) have insisted for nearly a century that human identity is, at a fundamental level, interactionally constructed. Harry Stack Sullivan traces social action into the pre-language stages of human development, when the infant must coordinate with what Sullivan refers to as the mothering one (an anachronistic reference to one who feeds, changes, and otherwise takes care of the infant) in order to eat, remain clean, stay warm, etc. These pre-linguistic social actions carry within them the seeds of what will become the self-system of avoiding anxiety (Sullivan), the groundwork for the conscious socialization of gesture (Vygotsky), and many other important aspects of individual development into a social and cultural participant.

The socialized development of persons-in-action does not create cultural/ sociological/ judgmental dopes; rather, the series of unique interactions each individual encounters constructs rambling paths of social development that leads people to individuated understandings of society and social action that are also, to greater or lesser degrees, in tune with those around them. Many theorists from a variety of fields have gestured at the individuated understandings that emerge from this socialization process while tending to focus more on the social than the individual. Adam Smith, Alfred Schutz, and many others have mentioned the idiosyncratic differences among individuals, although for their particular fields of study, those differences were of little importance. Interpersonal psychiatry and sociocultural psychology are much the same way: Sullivan himself noted that "in psychiatry as a study of interpersonal relations, all these individual differences are much less important than are the lack of differences . . . the parallels in the manifestation of human life wherever it is found" (21). In the study of writing, however—and particularly in the study of writing in periods of intense transition, such as retirement—the idiosyncratic differences that are posited (though not attended to) in interpersonal understandings of human development become important. These aspects of writing are untypifiable—that is, they "fall away" (Bazerman 71) from our conscious attention while engaged in the intersubjective work of writing. While of minimal importance to psychiatry, sociology, and economics, however, these aspects are significant for understanding how individuals make sense of writing tasks, particularly across their lifespans.

In the study of individuals in limited times and places (a school setting, for instance), difficult-to-see idiosyncratic differences in understanding may mean little, depending on the particular research questions. But individuated understandings add up over a lifetime and can help researchers make sense of the particularities of the accumulated resources of older writers. When Frank reveals a passion for drawing and artwork, for instance, we can see the artistic aspects of his engineering career in a new light: the actor-oriented perspective of Frank's literate life can be glimpsed, and the connection between his engineering career and his pursuit of new artistic techniques can be seen.

Understanding agency as socially constructed but individually enacted demands a set of theoretical constructs that enables both the social and the idiosyncratic to emerge in the pursuit of

data. This study relies on two concepts to perform this feat: chronotopes (Prior; Prior and Shipka) and textual coordination (Slattery; Pigg). These concepts, when paired together in my later analysis, highlight both the lifeworlds Frank is involved in and his orchestration of those lifeworlds—the ways in which he worked with, through, and among them in his writing.

Paul Prior, Catherine Schryer, and Jody Shipka draw on Bakhtin's use of chronotopes to understand the ways in which individuals organize their worlds for participation in literate activity. For Bakhtin, a chronotope is created within a novel. For Prior, Schryer, and Prior and Shipka, a chronotope is a place created by a writer and for a writer. The organization of activity, the flow of time, and the structure of a given space becomes structured for the production of, among other things, writing. As Prior and Shipka indicate in their study, chronotopes serve to orchestrate multiple streams of activity, allowing the creator of the chronotope to accomplish goals as necessary to continue to be an effective member of larger systems of literate activity. Chronotopes *order*, in other words, the world for the performance of writing and other associated tasks. But the connection between cognitive activity and social-material order is, as Edwin Hutchins and Bruno Latour indicate, two-way. Chronotopes order activity and material, but the activity and material that are chronotopically ordered also serve to tune and shape conscious attention.

Crucial for seeing the impact of chronotope construction on agency are instances of what Shaun Slattery refers to as "textual coordination" ("Understanding"). For Slattery, textual coordination "refers . . . to the selection of texts from a larger information environment and staging and manipulating them toward the production of a new text" ("Undistributing" 318). It is through acts of textual coordination that writing is "undistributed" into new texts, some of which rush out into the world. If chronotopes enable us to conceptualize the situations within which literate action is performed, textual coordination provides an object (that is, the chunks of distributed text) from that action which can carry into other social situations.

Chronotopes and textual coordination provide the framing concepts for envisioning agency as circulated in the ongoing production of social order. While work by Prior, Slattery, Stacey Pigg, and others has usefully demonstrated the effectiveness of these concepts at studying writing at all stages of the lifespan, they may be particularly useful when examining the work of those writing in later life. The literate lives of writers after their careers conclude are rife with possibility. Much of Frank's writing life after retirement was shaped by a chance retirement gift from his sister, for instance, and identifying the impact of such a chance encounter requires attention to the material work of literate action that Frank engages in. The concepts of chronotope and textual coordination enable the tracing of literate action through whatever possibilities are realized by writers in later life. Such tracing also reveals the interconnected work of literate practices across a range of lifeworlds.

Methodology

I met Frank, a retired engineer in his eighties, through a mutual acquaintance who ran a community writing class for older writers. Frank originally met with me as part of a larger study involving the literate lives of retired professionals who write on a regular basis. Frank's literate

practices proved so complex, however, that I asked him to meet with me further to discuss his literate practices and his published and unpublished writings. In total, I met with Frank for three interviews, each lasting between 75 and 120 minutes. During those interviews, Frank shared a number of texts with me, which I copied and analyzed as part of my emerging understanding of his literate life. In order to understand the relationship between Frank's agency and his literate action, I examined first Frank's literate life, then the construction of his chronotopes for writing, and finally the textual coordination that he engaged in.

My first interview with Frank was a literacy history interview, which I organized using Deborah Brandt's interview framework (*Literacy*). Understanding Frank's history as a writer allowed me to understand how the more specific information I would gather in later interviews was located in his overall experience with writing. This also provided a broad framework through which I could identify the broader themes developing throughout Frank's life, such as his ongoing interest in artwork and faith, or his embrace of particular kinds of technology for writing. My second interview with Frank followed the picture-drawing interview protocol devised by Prior and Shipka. These interviews uncovered how Frank organized himself for writing, both in space and time. In his drawings and his articulations about those drawings, Frank demonstrated how he made use of his office space, the times of his day, and the ebb and flow of his lifeworlds to produce a wide range of publications, both personal and public, over a rather short period of time. My third interview with Frank focused on some of his recent publications—in particular, his publication of books on his Quaker faith and a collection of his artwork. We also discussed his journal writing, which is the grounds upon which much textual coordination occurs. I also used this interview as an opportunity to expand upon and clarify both Frank's literacy history and his chronotope-constructing practices. The textual coordination served as a link between Frank's broad literate life and the particularities of his chronotope construction.

The three interviews and their attendant documents provided me with a range of records from which I constructed units of data. Drawing on Brandt's sociologically oriented approach to studying writing, I focused on *mentions* of writing that occurred in Frank's interviews ("Studying"). That is, each mention of writing by Frank in his interviews was treated as a unit for further analysis. I organized these mentions of writing in the order that they occurred in the interviews (Roozen and Erickson), and drew from those mentions to construct a literacy history for Frank. I then isolated the mentions of writing that referred to the chronotopes for writing that Frank creates. With these isolated mentions to guide my study of Frank's drawings, I developed an account of Frank's chronotope construction. Through memo-writing, I then identified connections between Frank's chronotope construction and the longer arc of his history as a literate participant in the world around him. These connections were used to identify potential instances of patterns in Frank's literate action over a longer period of time, as well as connections to the lifeworlds that he inhabits. Using this interpretation of Frank's interviews as a starting point, I re-read Frank's texts, locating them in his literacy history and the development of his chronotopes for writing. Contextualizing his writing in this way indicates the larger lifeworlds that Frank's writing contributes to. Connecting Frank's writing to the larger lifeworlds he inhabited highlighted the ways in which Frank orchestrates his

lifeworlds through his writing.

Frank's use of textual coordination became a key element in understanding how Frank established and perpetuated his own agency through literate action: Frank's literate action constructed textual objects that gained an agency of their own (Spinuzzi) as they became entangled with Frank's various lifeworlds. The moments of textual coordination that Frank engages in highlight not only how agency is established in a given performance of literate action, but how those agentive moments build on one another, creating sustained lines of agentive action that stretch across Frank's lifeworlds.

Findings

Frank's Literacy History

In recounting his history as a literate participant, Frank identified a wide range of sponsors in his life. Friends, family, primary and secondary school, religious institutions, college, the military, graduate school, private enterprise, and the federal government shaped Frank's engagement with literacy in one way or another across his life. In order to best understand the chronotope that Frank establishes in his writing during retirement—as well as the ways in which he repurposes his past practices for that writing—Frank's literacy history can best be read by attending to two themes: his ongoing communication with his family and his developing expertise as a technical writer.

Although his schooling, military service, and later career took him to many different places around the world, Frank has been regularly in contact with many members of his family throughout his life. Perhaps the most significant interaction for Frank has been his communication

> *"Frank's literacy history can best be read by attending to two themes: his ongoing communication with his family, and his developing expertise as a technical writer."*

with his mother. Frank's mother is his hero. The two began exchanging letters when Frank left home to attend college. Frank and his mother would end up exchanging letters for the next forty-five years. After his retirement, Frank used the letters his mother sent him to construct a biography of her, which he self-published. Frank communicated with more family members than just his mother: he kept in contact with most of his siblings, and those contacts turned into opportunities for writing later in life as well. Frank also organized a collection of essays about their father (who passed away suddenly in 1957) and edited a book written by his sister-in-law. This collaborative book work later led Frank further into his local community, as he became more deeply involved with his religious community. In short, Frank's family history, as amplified by his communication with his family throughout his life, became a recurring site of literate action that engendered other kinds of literate action.

The ongoing literate engagement that Frank's family provided was deeply intertwined with his highly diversified and extremely successful career as an engineer. Frank received his BA in a highly competitive, five-year professional program in engineering at Ohio State University. Of the two-hundred-plus students who enrolled in the program with Frank in his first year, nineteen graduated.

His success in this program led him to graduate school, the military, the private sector and, eventually, several teaching positions in the northeastern United States.

Frank saw himself as lucky in his career: "A lot of professors … will write ten or fifteen papers on the same subject, you know. Especially in the technical fields, maybe they'll spend many years doing the same thing … and I was blessed with being able to get into lots of different problems, problem areas. So it was never boring." Frank's wide-ranging experiences, both in his time as a professor and while working for federally-funded laboratories, provided him with a wealth of experiences in doing various kinds of writing with various technologies, such as the Linux operating system and LaTeX typesetting. Frank's experience with Linux and LaTeX, as well as his other publishing experiences, would prove an important tool for him as he developed his writing and publishing experience after retirement.

The Chronotope of the Commonplace Journal

The two themes of Frank's literacy history that I outline above—his communication with family members and his developing expertise as a technical writer—were drawn on by Frank as he developed a journal writing practice after retirement. Frank's sister gifted him with a copy of *The Artist's Way*, by Julia Cameron, as a retirement gift in 1998 (Frank would end up pushing back his retirement to 2000). Frank was initially put off by the gift, but eventually began reading it and working from it:

> In '98 I looked at it—Why am I interested in this?—and I put it away. But I didn't throw it away, because it was a gift from my sister. And so ten years later, in 2008, January, I looked at that and said well, I don't know what I was thinking, but well I'll take a look at it, you know? And so I went through the twelve weeks exercise with that book….You signed a contract with yourself that you would do it in good faith. And you had to write three pages every morning before breakfast, before you did anything in the day. And sometime during the week you had to take your artist's self out for a date, to do something different than you've ever done before. And write about it in your book.
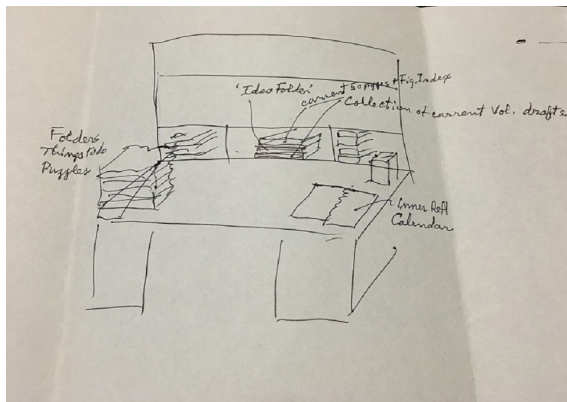

Fig. 1: Frank's Drawing of His Home Office Writing Desk

Frank's interest in morning pages lasted well beyond the twelve weeks of the book. Drawing on this gift from a family member, Frank transformed the morning pages into an elaborate system of writing, revising, editing, and publishing volume after volume of writing on a daily basis.

Frank's writing begins each morning when he wakes up. At a table depicted by Frank in Figure 1, Frank goes about writing his three daily pages. These pages offer a wide range of topics from many different facets of Frank's life. Frank aims to write 133 days out of every five months. This translates to 399 handwritten pages every five months, which Frank then sends to a typist. The typist sends Frank a typed copy of his morning pages, which Frank then copyedits. Over the twenty years of his work on this process (Frank is currently on the twenty-second volume), Frank has developed a system that always has one volume being typed, one being copyedited, and one being written.

As seen by Figure 1, Frank has organized his writing space to facilitate three handwritten pages on a variety of topics every day—in other words, to enable a flow to his writing:

> You know how you wake up in the morning sometimes and you're coming out of a dream, and right at that moment it's kind of vivid, but about two minutes later you can't remember hardly anything about it? Well I can write these things, three pages in the morning before breakfast, from bed right down to the desk, I write it, and then when editing it after she's typed it, I don't remember writing that. So it's certainly not conscious in some way, it's called getting in the flow, and the thoughts just come. So it's sort of dreamlike in a way, a lot of the time.

In this dreamlike state, Frank can move back and forth across a range of topics, from working on his novel (which follows the journey of a squirrel, Rodney), to issues of faith, to musings on health, family, and friends. Frank's organization of his chronotope has allowed him to generate copious amounts of text on a daily basis in ways that interact with multiple lifeworlds—even if he does not remember much of the writing. In other words, although Frank might not be able to write so productively, Frank *and the room* can (Spinuzzi).
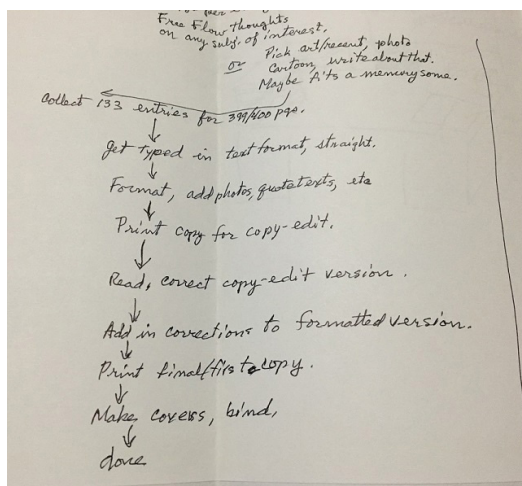

Fig. 2: Frank's Production of Morning Pages

Frank's morning pages regulate his communication with multiple lifeworlds in a number of ways. Most directly, they regulate his communication with his typist and the representatives of the publishing companies that he works with (Fig. 2). But the writing that Frank does in his morning pages regulates far more than Figure 2 identifies alone. In his morning pages, Frank makes lists of tasks for the day, works through decisions about how to deal with others in his life (notably, doctors), and reflects upon his feelings about particular life events—both current and long past. Just as Prior and Shipka found, Frank's chronotope for writing his morning pages is deeply laminated: his production of the circumstances for what he calls writing flow is orchestrated via multiple streams of activity, as can be indicated by his shift from topic to topic across his pages.

Identifying and Tracing Expansive Agency: Three Instances of Textual Coordination

The immense work that Frank has done to establish a chronotope for writing, what Charles Bazerman refers to as courting the muse, has had enormous productive value in Frank's life: he has produced a wide number of self-published books that reflect on his life, the lives of his family members, the institutions he belongs to, and the many projects (art, chess, music) that he has found himself interested in.

Through his literacy history and his chronotope construction, we can easily see how Frank's literate action allows him to negotiate his lifeworlds. In my reading of Frank's journals, however, I see evidence not only of the negotiation of those lifeworlds, but of the production and circulation of agency within those lifeworlds. When Frank engages with his journal writing, he is co-creating—with his journal, as well as his available artifacts in his chronotope—a social situation in which the power of language decisions flows through him. Frank's chronotopic work creates a place apart from the social networks he is part of, and in that place, Frank can make language choices of his own accord and at times that suit him.

But Frank's chronotopic work does more than simply give him the opportunity to write what he wishes. I suggest, based on my reading of Frank's texts, that Frank uses the agency created in his journal writing to construct future social situations in other lifeworlds that will also allow agency to circulate through Frank. For instance, Frank might write out his thoughts on a given medical issue that he is struggling with, and this writing may clarify, for him, what he wants to say when he meets with his doctor.

Frank is not alone in this agentive work—by relying on the concept of symmetry, I can trace the ways in which Frank creates texts that also move (via textual coordination) from his journal writing into other social situations in the form of books. These objects work with Frank to circulate agency back to him in those future situations. I refer to this work of carrying agency beyond Frank's journal-writing chronotope as *expansive agency*. Frank's work to circulate agency through himself and his language choices in one situation creates understandings and objects that carry forward into future situations, allowing agency to continue to circulate back to Frank. Expansive agency is particularly clear in Frank's work during moments of textual coordination. In order to demonstrate expansive agency at work, I present three moments of textual coordination: his faith, his emerging novel, and his artwork.

Frank's interest in religion stretches back to his youth, but finally found a home in the Quaker faith later in life. A central feature of the Quaker faith is journaling, and so Frank's morning pages fit in well with the faith that he has committed to. Frank regularly wrote about religion, mysticism, God, and faith in his morning pages, and eventually decided to pull that writing together into a text:

> So last year, I went through all my things and I came up with this book. By going through and finding out discussions about my exploring the field of Quakerism and finding out if that's a place for me and getting involved with Quakerism, so this is a prologue giving background, so now I'm searching in this phase, then I got involved, and then I arrived by becoming a member. And this is an epilogue to sort of make it final that it was a good decision to do. And I got all that text, almost all of this text out of the typed files by just word searching for Quaker [using his Linux program]. So I built a book from out of that.

Frank pulled directly from his morning pages to create a book that would serve as a useful instrument for those interested in exploring their faith. Frank believes the book is meant to be read a bit at a time, so that the reader has time to mull over each daily entry. This book is now available on Frank's website, as well as the local library, and has been taken up by his local Quaker community to discuss their faith.
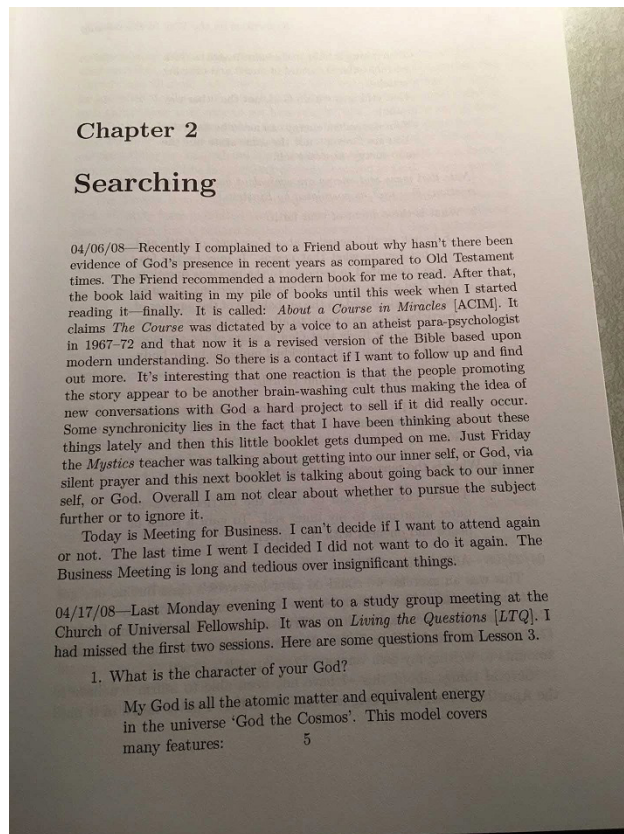

Fig. 3: An Instance of Textual Coordination in Frank's Book on Faith

As can be seen from Figure 3, Frank's topics range widely within each entry. The revisions that Frank undertook after bringing his text over from the morning pages has not changed that completely. What Frank has done in this instance, however, is continue a line of thought that began during a conversation with another Quaker ("Friend"). Frank's concern about the lack of "evidence of God's presence in recent years as compared to Old Testament times" has carried over into his morning pages, then into his book on faith, and from there into the sites that his book carries—Meetings with other Friends, conversations with those outside the Quaker faith who share an interest in the subject of religion, etc. Frank's publication and distribution of his book, in other words, has provided him with the tools necessary to contribute to and shape conversations about faith within his Quaker community.

Frank uses textual coordination to similar ends via his emerging work on his novel, focused on a squirrel named Rodney. Since our first interview, Frank has expressed an interest in writing a novel. Writing about Rodney's adventures has been Frank's most recent attempt to complete a novel-length work. Frank lamented early on, to this author and others, about his struggles to make a novel come to fruition:

> I really want to write a novel. And I haven't figured out how to do that. I've written many premises for novels, they sound really interesting, to me, and I sit down to start to try to write it and I can't seem to make myself do it, make up stuff, to make an interesting story that somebody would want to read.

Frank's friends, former colleagues, and Friends have given him periodic advice on the matter. One friend was particularly blunt about the matter to Frank:

> He said, hey, shit, Frank, it's just work, you just go there and you write an hour every day… I sit down, I can't make myself write anything. But I can write this stuff, you know, every day. That's got him perplexed, that I can do this. I'm a writer, I think. I think it says I'm a writer. Or I want to write. And I write this, but I haven't written a novel.

Frank's identity, particularly early on in his post-retirement writing work, was not that of a writer. Through his morning pages, however—and, particularly, through the textually coordinated work that emerges from that writing—Frank has been able to slowly piece together a publication about Rodney and his adventures in and around the Penobscot River.

Frank's textual coordination, in this case, has produced a situation wherein Frank can come to see himself—after however long a period of time, however haltingly, however uncertainly—as a writer. Just as Frank's writings on faith enabled him to create the social situations that were co-constructed by his thoughts on the topics he had written about, Frank's textual coordination here creates a social fact—his finished work on Rodney the squirrel—that allows him to more fully identify himself (and, by extension, be identified by others) as a writer. When friends and acquaintances encounter his books in the public library, on his website, in the university library, and around town, they then come to Frank with an understanding of his identity that he has struggled successfully create, and they support that identity in their co-construction of their interactions with Frank. In other words, Frank's construction of an identity as a writer through his journal writing creates objects that circulate that identity in situations not directly involving Frank, which enable him to co-construct (for another

first time) his writerly identity in future social situations with others.

The final moment of textual coordination that I aim to show is based on Frank's post-retirement life as an artist. Frank's interest in drawing runs throughout his life, although this interest was repurposed into the field of engineering during his college years. After retirement, however, Frank took up drawing nearly as extensively as he took up writing, taking a wide range of art classes at a local university, as well as teaching himself other art forms when he wished. Frank wrote about his art regularly both on his website and in his morning pages. In 2017, he self-published a book chronicling his development as a writer from 2008 through 2017.

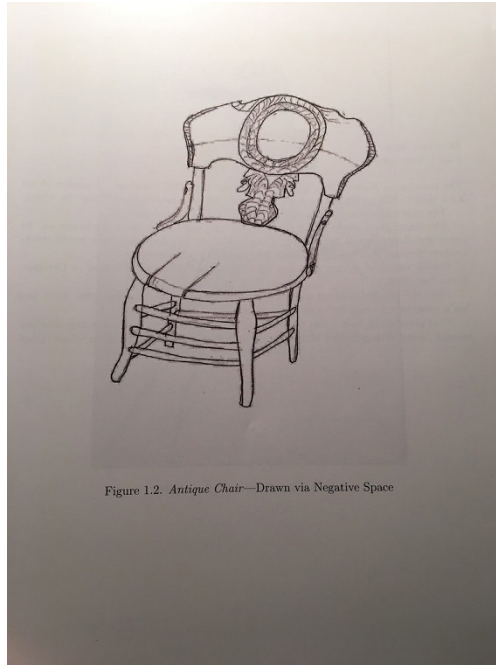Figure 1.2. *Antique Chair*—Drawn via Negative Space

Fig. 4: An Antique Chair Drawing from Frank's Artwork Text

Like his book on faith and his novel about Rodney, Frank's book of art creates the conditions for him to further his agency in future social situations. Frank not only demonstrates a range of artistic experience, but also chronicles the development of that range. Figure 4, for instance, showcases his emerging work with negative space in mid-2008. In these drawings and the captions that accompany them, Frank locates the drawings in his own history (Fig. 5) and his wider understanding of art.

Frank's writings in this book build on the discussions of art in his morning pages, as well as the discussions on his website. The book draws across these artistic experiences (as well as the descriptions of those experiences) to continue to shape his understandings of and discussions about artwork and, in particular, his own artwork.

Frank's artwork book (much like his publication on faith) has been made available via a local

library and the university library, in addition to the copies that Frank has made for his friends and family. In much the same way that Frank's other two books work, this text serves as an object that shapes the construction of social situations oriented toward art. Frank's agency in shaping the discussion works in collaboration with the book, much as his book on Quaker faith supports and extends his agency in discussions with Friends.
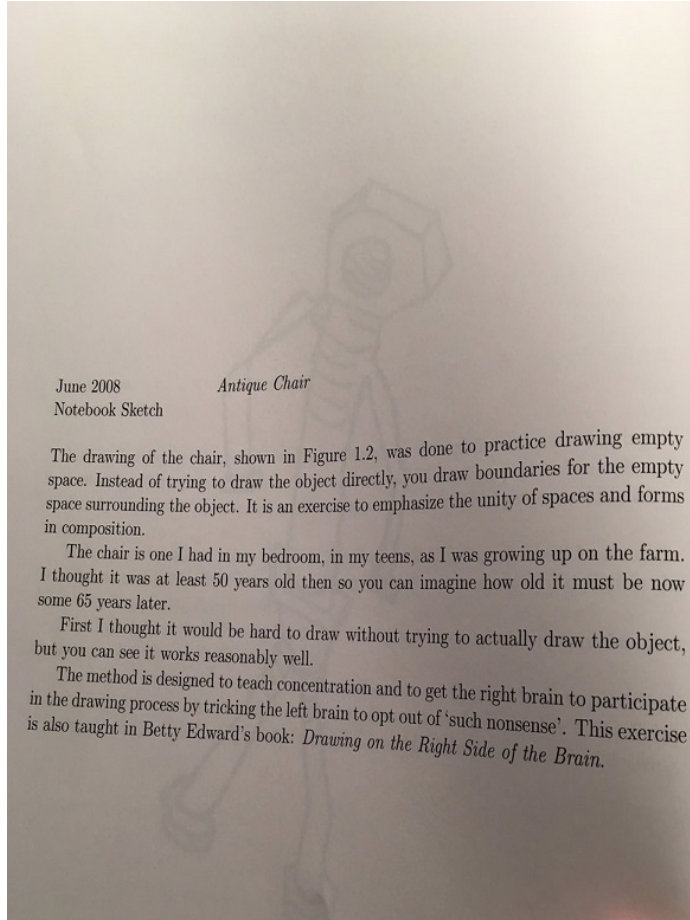
Fig. 5: Frank's Caption for "Antique Chair" Drawing

The three moments of textual coordination presented here do more than simply carry writing from one setting to another; in doing so, they also carry on particular conversations, particular social scenes, that enable Frank to continue to be an active participant in those scenes. Frank's sociohistoric engagement with the talk, tools, and texts around him allow him to build social situations that continually circulate agency, in one shape or form, through him.

Discussion

I have attempted, in the moments of textual coordination above, to demonstrate the expansive agency that Frank's literate action has generated in his post-retirement life. By extending the social situations within which agency circulated through him, and producing objects that support the re-circulation of agency to Frank in future situations, Frank was able to expand his agentive power across time, space, and lifeworlds. Frank's displays of expansive agency offer multiple insights for research on the literate action of writers in later life.

One of the key issues of understanding aging in contemporary society is understanding the role that agency plays in it: how do older members of society gain, lose, and revise their agentive powers? Frank has demonstrated, through his acts of textual coordination, that agency can be taken up in moments of engaging with language for another first time, and that such take-ups of agency can be compounded, built upon, and used to transform future social situations across multiple lifeworlds in order to create expanding agency over time. Understanding agency as circulated in social situations, and as being a capability of human and nonhuman actors alike has uncovered an important aspect of agency in old age. As people age, their agency is part of the chains of social situations that they participate in. Framing Frank's agency as something possessed entirely by him obscures the complex, situational work that he does to establish, maintain, and further agency over time. But if we see Frank as being in situations where agency circulates through him, and if we see Frank taking these moments of positive agency circulation to develop future situations where this agency will persist (and, indeed, expand), then a number of options for preserving the agency of older members of society arises.

Frank's morning pages enable him to be an active member in a wide number of lifeworlds. Within his morning pages, these lifeworlds become laminated: Frank moves among them at will, in the "flow" of his writing. This juxtaposing of lifeworlds with one another, this ability to toggle back and forth among

> *"By creating a space for Frank's lifeworlds to come together, the morning pages both continue the social situations that allowed Frank to establish agency and give Frank the opportunity to reach new insights along the way."*

various ideas, thoughts, concerns, and attentions, allows Frank to develop new perspectives on those lifeworlds—and, along with that, the space to develop those new perspectives, continuing the chain of earlier social situations that can lead Frank to different forms of social action. By creating a space for Frank's lifeworlds to come together, the morning pages both continue the social situations that allowed Frank to establish agency and give Frank the opportunity to reach new insights along the way.

Not all older adult writers will have some of the opportunities that Frank has: they might not have the technological prowess to create "camera-ready copy" of their writing; they might not have the time and resources to devote to the wide range of lifeworlds that Frank participates in; and they might not have the flexibility in their schedules to construct daily morning pages as steadily as Frank

has for the past two decades. But the specifics of Frank's morning pages are less important than the general claims that emerge from them. Considering how literate action can be used to circulate agency back to oneself in future social situations, and how that circulation can be sustained over extended periods of time (i.e., across multiple situations), can dramatically transform the ways in which we encourage and support agency in the older members of our population.

Suggestions for Further Research

At the heart of the peculiarities of Frank's situation is the issue of time: Frank had considerably more control over his schedule than other older writers might. Some older writers need to pick up other jobs, or shoulder considerable family responsibilities, or have to work with and around significant health concerns. The impact of these variables on older writers' ability to expand their agency across situations is an open question, and a close examination of expansive agency (or the lack thereof) across multiple cases may yield important information about the complex social actions that enable the circulation, perpetuation, and expansion of agency. Further research on the literate lives of older writers, then, may begin by attending to time—amount available, control over it, opportunities to write in given segments of it—in order to capture the wide-ranging literate lives that older writers are living in contemporary society.

Expansive agency as a concept may also be useful for the study of other populations. While tracing the agency-supporting work of writing is particularly important for older adults, the work that literacy does for Frank in this case study suggests that exploring the agentive work of literate action at other points in the lifespan may be useful for understanding the individuated, richly literate lives of writers. Though Frank does offer a perspicuous setting for the study of agency through literate action, and has a wide range of resources for constructing, supporting, and perpetuating his own agency thanks to a lifetime of experience, the work that he does to construct his agency is rooted in the everyday interactional work that human beings perform throughout their lives. Further research could explore the work of writers to construct, support, and perpetuate agency at other ages and in other circumstances. These future settings might be less perspicuous than Frank's, and may require the development of new methods to successfully trace agency-supporting work, which could, in turn, be used to develop a more complex understanding of the agentive work that literate action performs for older writers as well.

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Achieving Visibility: Midlife and Older Women's Literate Practices

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KEYWORDS

In literacy and composition studies, much of what we know about the literate practices of social media users comes from research on youth and young adults (e.g., Amicucci; boyd; Buck; Ito, et al.; Pigg; Shepherd, "FB in FYC" and "Men, Women and Web 2.0 Writing"; Tomlinson; Warner). Despite evidence of social media use across the life course (Smith and Anderson), the literate activities of midlife and older adults on social media remain under-researched, leaving us with an incomplete perspective on digital literacy practices. In order to help address this gap and contribute new knowledge on digital literacy across the life course, I present the results of observational and survey research on the literate activities of an active community of Instagrammers (users who contribute content to the social media platform Instagram) who range in age from approximately fifty-three to over eighty.

Over the course of nine months, I studied multimodal content produced by ninety midlife and older women for their Instagram feeds, focusing particular attention on twenty-five of those women. Many of the women also maintain blogs, and in those cases, I studied the blog content as well. As part of my research process, I collected data on hashtag usage, recorded observations about practices and interactions, and identified common themes that emerged in posts and comments. In addition, I surveyed the women about their uses of Instagram and blogs and obtained completed questionnaires from twenty-one of the ninety women.

The Instagrammers I observed draw on a variety of semiotic resources as they construct identities and perform age on social media. Instagram and blog posts are "*ensembles of modes*, brought together to realise particular meanings" (Kress 115). These multimodal ensembles reveal "individual and group identities that are constructed through repeated performances of self and in anticipation of the expectations, social codes and discourses available within a given context" (Lewis 231). Digital literacies—knowledge, practices, and skills the women have developed through self-study and/or sponsorship (Brandt)—enable the multimodal performances I analyze in this article. Through their performances, the women render themselves visible "as part of the cultural mainstream" (Givskov and Deuze 401). Some use this visibility to push back against ageist stereotypes. Others pursue a range of other personal and professional goals. In all cases, the women's performances are situated within broader discourses on age and gender. Due to the epistemological complexity inherent in social media research and the opportunity this special issue provides to read age through multiple lenses, my work has been informed by a broad range of concepts from literacy, composition, media, gender, and age studies. I will examine some of these concepts prior to describing the methods and

results of my research.

Talking about Age

Determining how to talk about age in this article posed an unexpected challenge. My research includes Instagrammers who are in their fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties and focuses primarily on women who self-identify as over fifty (#over50). After considering all possible options as well as associated critiques from age studies scholars (Cruikshank, 2013; Gullette, 2004), I chose to use *over fifty* as well as *midlife and older adults*. *Older adults* is the term recommended by the editors of this special issue and one adopted by many of the researchers whose works I consulted, but at what point do adults become older adults? Answers appear to vary from study to study, so *older adults* may refer to adults over age fifty or adults over sixty-five or even seventy-five. Similarly, *midlife* is used variously to refer to adults over age forty, adults in their fifties, and adults ages forty-five to sixty-five. I believe that my terminology—*over fifty* and *midlife and older adults*—is suitably flexible and inclusive.

Age and Technology Use

Even though popular media and advertisements "maintain the discourse that older adults are technology inept and digitally illiterate" (Schreurs, Quan-Haase, and Martin 361), research does not support this stereotype. In their study of older adults' digital skills and technology use, Eszter Hargittai and Kerry Dobransky remind us that many "older adults below 65 years of age . . . are still using the internet in their work life" and that "those 65–79, though many are retired, . . . have experienced the diffusion of the online world into their daily work and home lives . . ." (207). In light of the role technology plays in the work and home lives of so many older adults, it is not surprising that a 2017 Pew Research Center report on technology adoption trends finds older adults "moving towards more digitally connected lives" with 42% of American adults sixty-five and older "owning smartphones, up from just 18% in 2013" (Anderson and Perrin 2). As I observed in my own research, growth in technology adoption is driven by "younger, relatively affluent and/or highly educated seniors" (Anderson and Perrin 3).

Regarding social media in particular, C. J. Hutto and colleagues report that
> among older adults, social media users tend to be younger seniors, female, educated with higher income, have higher confidence in technology and more positive attitudes of ICT, mostly access social media technology from their home computers, and typically desire to stay connected with family as their primary goal. (85)

Other motivations for social media use include "enjoyment, engaging in social contact, and to provide and receive social support" (Leist 381). According to the Pew Research Center, 64% of Americans ages fifty to sixty-four and 37% of Americans sixty-five and older use social media (Smith and Anderson 4). Although fewer adults ages sixty-five and above are on social media, researchers found that those who do use the platforms "tend to be highly active and engaged" (Anderson and

Perrin 12).

Instagram, the platform featured in my study, is a social networking service that allows users to share photos and videos, follow other users, and comment on content. Instagram is less widely adopted by midlife and older adults than Facebook and YouTube, but statistics provide evidence of Instagram use across the life course. As of 2018, 21% of American adults ages fifty to sixty-four and 10% of those over sixty-five use Instagram (Pew Research Center). Worldwide, as of January 2018, there were 33 million female users in the forty-five to fifty-four range; 13 million in the fifty-five to sixty-four range, and 8 million sixty-five and older (We Are Social/Hootsuite). Unfortunately, the reports I consulted do not distinguish between passive consumption (e.g., lurking, watching videos) and active participation (e.g., creating and publishing content, commenting on posts) when referring to "use." The fact that older adults are *visiting* these platforms does not contribute to our understanding of what they are doing there, and I find it problematic that midlife and older adults are not more visible as *content contributors* in research on social media use.

Information that focuses on generational characteristics or age cohort statistics provides valuable evidence of use but an ultimately incomplete perspective on *how* midlife and older adults use social media. As Cecilie Givskov and Mark Deuze argue, "diversity in lived experience of older people in the new media environment constitutes a blind spot in current research" (400). Because literature on age and technology use tends to collapse rather than highlight differences among individuals, one of my research goals was to maintain a focus on the literate practices of *individual* midlife and older women. For this reason, I employed a case study methodology in addition to conducting an anonymous survey and compiling disaggregated data on hashtag use and other trends.

Age and Gender

Age-related stereotypes came to my attention once again as I explored age studies literature and scholarship on visual representations of age and gender. I devote space here to perspectives on ageism and gender because they influenced my interpretative work and challenged me to assess my own assumptions and beliefs. This material also illuminates the ways in which cultural values exert pressure on individuals to conform to norms and standards. Margaret Syverson's ecological approach to literacy reminds us that we must take into account "the complex interrelationships in which . . . writing [or, in the case of my research, multimodal content] is embedded" (6), and cultural values are very much a part of the that web of interrelationships.

In *Learning to Be Old*, Margaret Cruikshank writes, "People over forty are targets for an astonishing range of insults, including birthday card jibes" (139). In addition to being ridiculed in greeting cards, cartoons, advertisements, and jokes (see Gendron et al. and Gullette on ageism and micro-aggressions), older adults are often labeled "forgetful, frail, deaf, and helpless" or "irritable, boring, grumpy, weak, mournful, debilitated, and . . . cognitively impaired" (Fawsitt and Setti 357; Coudin and Alexopoulous 516). Older adult women are subjected to additional derogatory labels like *hag*, *biddy*, or *old bag*, and as Cruikshank notes, they are often "reviled as grumpy, frumpy, sexless, and uninteresting" (141).

Mutton dressed as lamb or other critiques are at the ready when midlife and older women defy expectations by, for example, dressing "young." At the same time, *successful*, *active*, or *positive aging* discourses—"new, more positive version[s] of later life" (Moody 68)—define *success* "as reaching one's potential, being productive, achieving individual accomplishment, and, for the elderly, exhibiting behaviors that resemble those of young people" (Pecchioni, Ota, and Sparks 172). Jenny Hockey and Allison James describe how successful aging emphasizes the "moral duty of the individual to adopt regimes of diet and exercise which will bring older people's appearance and lifestyles closer into line with younger ones, so differentiating themselves from 'the elderly' who are past saving" (71). Often, midlife and older adults who appear to have met this moral imperative are the most visible and celebrated. In the introduction to *Aging Femininities*, Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell refer to this as the "new visibility" of "'graceful agers'" (xi).

> *"Mutton dressed as lamb or other critiques are at the ready when midlife and older women defy expectations by, for example, dressing 'young.'"*

The visibility or invisibility of midlife and older women is an important topic within the context of my research, one that the Instagrammers I studied confront either explicitly or implicitly through their literate practices. A number of scholarly sources devote attention to visible representations and performances of aging and/or to some combination of age, gender, and in/visibility (Barrett, Raphael, and Gunderson; Fairhurst and Baines; Featherstone and Hepworth; Featherstone and Wernick; Hepworth; Hockey and James; Meagher; Woodward). Michelle Meagher's "Against the Invisibility of Old Age" provides a particularly helpful overview of feminist scholarship on the cultural invisibility of older women. In the conclusion of her article, Meagher, referring to the theories of Kathleen Woodward, writes, "in order to learn to look at old women in new ways, they need to be wrenched from . . . cultural invisibility. Old women must become a part of our visual culture—present in popular visual culture and in art" (142). My research examines one of the ways in which midlife and older women are making themselves part of popular visual culture.

Digital Literacies and Online Self-Representation

Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton define *literate practices* as "the socially regulated, recurrent, and patterned things that people do with literacy as well as the cultural significance they ascribe to those doings" (342). As Brandt and Clinton acknowledge, these practices typically develop in response to technological changes (352). Social media platforms like Instagram and associated genres (e.g., post, story) have emerged in response to technological developments that make new ways of communicating possible. As a social media researcher situated within literacy and composition studies, I am particularly interested in how individuals employ digital literacies to craft online personas and to connect and communicate with others. Media studies scholar Nancy Baym explains, "Our ability to construct an online self-representation—whether authentic, fanciful, or manipulative—is limited and enabled by the communicative tools, or affordances, a platform makes

available and our skill at strategically managing them" (123-124). Similarly, Elizabeth Tomlinson notes, "the possibilities for self-representation and performative identities have multiplied, and the need for new digital literacies used to perform these identities continues proliferating" (163). In other words, online self-representation is predicated on digital literacies.

The term *digital literacies* refers to situated practices that occur in online contexts. Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher, who use *digital literacy* and *technological literacy* interchangeably, offer this definition: "the practices involved in reading, writing, and exchanging information in online environments, as well as the values associated with such practices—cultural, social, political, and educational" (Selfe and Hawisher, *Literate Lives* 2). In addition to Selfe and Hawisher's helpful definition, I appreciate this succinct variation from *Understanding Digital Literacies*: "the practices of communicating, relating, thinking and 'being' associated with digital media" (Jones and Hafner 13). The practices I studied are indeed associated with ways of not only reading, writing, and communicating but also of connecting and being.

Within literacy and composition studies, limited research exists on the digital literacies of midlife and older women. Notable exceptions include Debra Journet's "Inventing Myself in Multimodality: Encouraging Senior Faculty to Use Digital Media," Linda Stewart's "Come on in! Stepping into DMAC to Become a Digital Media Dweller," Angela Crow's *Aging Literacies*, and Heidi McKee and Kristine Blair's "Older Adults and Community-Based Technological Literacy Programs," in which the authors reflect on learning to use multimodal technologies in writing faculty development and community settings. Other relevant scholarship includes Selfe and Hawisher's *Literate Lives in the Information Age* and Hawisher and Selfe's "Women and the Global Ecology of Digital Literacies." These sources address age as one element of "a complex set of related factors that shape, and are shaped by, people's use of computers as tools and environments for reading and composing" (Hawisher and Selfe, "Women" 208).

In addition to examining literature on women's digital literacies, I consulted sources on identity and social networks (Baym; Chau and Lee; Georgalou; Harris; Marwick; Schmidt), which provided insight into how individuals use the semiotic resources available on various platforms to construct identities and signal affiliation. From my perspective, research on digital literacies and online self-representation intersects in productive ways with Margaret Gullette's work on age identities in *Aged by Culture*: "Age identity is a special subset of autobiography—which I understand broadly, as a narrative that anyone can tell about one's self, to self and others, whether informally in conversation or written for archival purposes" (124). Drawing on these and other sources, my research examines Instagram and blog content for evidence of how midlife and older women use digital literacies to exercise control over their online self-representations and to tell multimodal age identity stories. In keeping with this focus, my interpretive work is also informed by Gullette's claim that "where age is concerned, we both *have* a body and . . . *perform* our body" (162), by Woodward's work on performing age, and by literacy and writing studies scholarship on performance and identity (Fishman et al.; Ivanič; Lillis; Love), which prompted me to consider how Instagrammers discursively construct their identities as they engage with the "the performativity of everyday life" (Love 13).

Methods

My research focuses on a subpopulation of Instagram users: female lifestyle Instagrammers and bloggers who self-identify as being over fifty. Marketing agency Mediakix offers a helpful explanation of the *lifestyle* category: "A lifestyle blogger creates content inspired and curated from their personal interests and daily activities. As such, lifestyle blogs are oftentimes highly personalized to the author's location, life stage and experience." I identified this subpopulation while using Instagram's search feature to detect age-related hashtag trends. Many of the women within the subpopulation I studied use hashtags such as *over 50 style* (#over50style) or *advanced style* (#advancedstyle) to indicate affiliation with the *over 50* (#over50) lifestyle Instagrammer and blogger community. It is common for the women to include #over50 or similar hashtags even if they are in their sixties or above. In keeping with this common practice within the subpopulation, I decided to use over fifty as the starting point for inclusion in the study. Although some of the women have a presence on multiple social media platforms, I chose to focus on the most content rich and widely used: Instagram and blogs. All of the blogs and feeds I studied are public rather than private.

Small data qualitative analysis approaches best support efforts to "understand specific phenomena as they exist among narrow subpopulations of Instagram users" (Laestadius 581). Therefore, I relied on a combination of qualitative approaches:

- unobtrusive observation of literate activities on Instagram and blogs (actions and interactions including posting, captioning, commenting, replying, hashtagging, and username tagging)
- analysis of extant data (multimodal content on Instagram and blogs; published interviews or other materials featuring the women)
- interpretation of elicited data (survey results)

Social media research poses well-documented ethical and methodological challenges. When planning my study, I consulted with my university's institutional review board (IRB) and carefully considered literature on the ethics of online and social media research (Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder; McKee and DeVoss; McKee and Porter; Salmons; Townsend and Wallace). Although the blogs and Instagram feeds I observed are public and of a non-sensitive nature, I decided to obtain consent from the women who are named and quoted in this article. As required by the IRB, I prefaced the anonymous online survey with an informed consent document, and my other observations rely on disaggregated data.

I identified ninety potential participants through their use of age-related hashtags as well as through Ari Seth Cohen's *Advanced Style* blog, which is devoted to showcasing "the sartorial savvy of the senior set" (Cohen). Although health and fitness are occasional topics on the feeds and blogs I studied, I did not recruit participants from what I perceive to be a separate subpopulation: *fit over 50* (#fitover50) Instagrammers whose content focuses almost exclusively on workouts and nutrition. In addition, I was not able to include exclusively foreign-language Instagrammers, even though some of them do use the *over 50* (#over50) hashtag.

Desiring to obtain as many women's perspectives as possible and with participants' convenience in mind, I employed an anonymous online survey as the most logistically feasible method of gathering

information from a busy and geographically distributed group. I invited all ninety to participate in the survey, and twenty-one completed the questionnaire. As I gained a better sense of who among the ninety posted most actively and in order to balance breadth with depth, I began to focus on twenty-five women in particular who were representative of the heterogeneity I noticed among the broader subpopulation. Specifically, I observed English-speaking women from across the globe who range in age from their fifties to their eighties and who use Instagram and blogs for a variety of purposes. I invited ten of these women to be featured in case studies, and seven agreed. Due to space limitations, I include only four in this article. Each case represents an individual's unique personality, style, and motivations, while also illustrating key strategies I observed multiple women using to construct and communicate multimodal age identity narratives on social media.

Discussion of Findings

Survey Results

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on survey results that intersect with discourses on age and gender. The survey instrument I designed, however, was meant to solicit a broad range of information about how participants' literate practices on Instagram and blogs are shaped by literacy sponsors, learning opportunities, personal and cultural values, motivations and goals, platform affordances and limitations, and genre conventions. The questionnaire included the following four questions and invited participants to share additional information about their social media use as well:

1. Why do you use Instagram?
2. How did you learn to use Instagram?
3. Do other people influence how you use Instagram?
4. If you also maintain a blog, how did you get started and what are your goals for the blog?

Although the survey invitation and consent document included information about the subject of my research, I intentionally refrained from posing age-related questions, leaving it up to the women to decide whether age was a topic they wanted to discuss in relation to their social media use.

> *"Instagram can provide women with a space for playful, experimental identity work. The catalyst for this experimentation, however, may be a sense of anxiety or uncertainty about how to be 'appropriate' as a woman over fifty."*

Many respondents did choose to talk about age and aging, and they did so candidly. For example, one respondent wrote,

> Part of me was wondering how am I to be now that I'm in my fifties. You know, how am I to look, what do I wear, is this appropriate for this age. . . . I don't know why but [it] became a thing. Using Instagram allowed me to play with that idea of expression dressing and being comfortable with who I am. I started posting my results of playing in my closet and got great responses and comments. I also love giving encouragements and continuing conversations

in the DMs [direct messaging]. I've make great connections because of it.

As this quote suggests, Instagram can provide women with a space for playful, experimental identity work. The catalyst for this experimentation, however, may be a sense of anxiety or uncertainty about how to be "appropriate" as a woman over fifty. This uncertainty is unsurprising, surrounded as we are throughout our lifetimes by age stereotypes, cultural norms and taboos about aging bodies, and media discourses that, on the one hand, extoll the virtues of pursuing an "ageless," youthful appearance and, on the other, admonish women over fifty who are perceived as failing to act or dress their age. As Julia Twigg notes in *Fashion and Age*, "the traditional cultural trope of 'mutton dressed as lamb' [is] still widely recognized and used as a term of control, policing women's appearance and disciplining their bodies . . ." (16). Although I observed some of this policing on Instagram and blogs in the form of, for example, advice about what does or does not flatter an older woman's body or negative reactions to bared aging skin, it appears to be tempered by the influence of a "you do you" philosophy and a tendency to respond positively to unique styles when presented confidently.

If they reach an audience, women's age identity performances on Instagram are sanctioned (or, apparently more rarely, censured) by followers through Instagram's feedback mechanisms: likes, comments, and direct messaging. Survey respondents reported only positive experiences. For women who receive encouraging feedback and establish meaningful, supportive connections with followers, Instagram can feel empowering. Multiple women who participated in the survey use terms like "inspirational," "empowering," and "encouraging" to describe what they have experienced on the platform, and one respondent calls Instagram "a very positive and empowering community." As I will discuss in my case study analyses, the women whose practices I observed receive numerous, sometimes hundreds, of affirming comments on each post. Instagram's automatic comment moderation feature likely also contributes to the positive climate these women experience. As Instagram explains, "Comments that may be inappropriate, offensive or bullying are automatically filtered out from your posts and live videos."

Another respondent offers this perspective on how Instagram empowers midlife and older women: "Because Instagram is visual, many in the 50 and older are reluctant to start posting. But when they get connected with other[s] in the 50 and older genre they are learning a better perception of aging and this creates a new empowerment." While the mention of reluctance hints, once again, at the anxiety some women feel about aging and how "to be" over fifty, achieving visibility on Instagram and connecting with other visible midlife and older women enables "a better perception of aging."

Some of the women who participated in the survey actively aim "to encourage women of all ages" or "to inspire women over 50 and show that they are relevant." Another woman relates,

> I started when I went gray and I realized that I was not represented anywhere in mainstream media—yet I am in the industry! So I decided to simply be a gray haired 'presence' and if nothing else would allow other silver haired women to see themselves represented. I keep learning and growing as I age and I aim to keep sharing that experience so the others feel less alone and marginalized.

This quotation makes the problem explicit: some midlife and older women feel "alone and marginalized." As survey responses suggest, women over fifty may not see themselves adequately

"represented" in "mainstream media," and they may feel irrelevant or unsure of their place in youth-dominated popular visual culture, including, at least initially the visual culture of Instagram. As survey participants suggest, however, making themselves present and visible on Instagram enables midlife and older women to ensure representation, establish connections with members of a supportive community, inspire women of all ages, and promote positive perceptions of age and aging.

In addition to providing insight into their motivations and goals, survey respondents shared some of the values and beliefs that guide their practices on social media. These were particularly evident in responses to the question about influences. In their answers, numerous participants chose to emphasize the importance of remaining "independent" and "individual" and of being "authentic" and one's "own woman." These values align with well-known cultural values, such as the emphasis on independence and individuality in the United States, and they are often associated with the "baby boomer" generation in the popular imagination. Authenticity, realness, and originality are also valued on social media specifically, where it pays to stand out and where followers may be turned off by, for example, paid content that does not seem true to the poster's established persona. In my case study analyses, I examine authenticity and individuality as values evident in the Instagrammers' discursively constructed identity performances.

Case Studies

I present as case studies four women who demonstrate various ways midlife and older women use Instagram to achieve visibility.[1] The motivations revealed by the survey are evident here, as the women use digital literacies and the affordances of Instagram to connect, inspire, promote, have fun, and express themselves. Amber Buck has demonstrated that "[s]elf-presentation on social network sites happens . . . through the construction of profiles, and through interactions with other social network site users" (15). I include attention to profiles and interactions while also examining self-representation strategies evident within the visual and textual content of feeds and posts. My analysis is guided by Nancy Baym's identity cue categories: "personal identity cues" and "social identity cues" (108-19). An individual's literate actions online provide personal identity cues: writing a user profile, posting a profile picture, commenting on other users' posts, replying to comments, selecting hashtags, and so forth. Social identity cues include "public displays of connection" (Donath and boyd 71), such as followers, likes, comments left by followers, and hashtags that signal group affiliation.

Case Study 1: Jeanie Marsh, *Jeamada*, *The Invisibility Myth*, and *Goldie Magazine*

I first came across Jeanie Marsh-Dawson, the subject of my first case study, in Instagram photos tagged *not dead yet* (#notdeadyet) and *the invisibility myth* (#theinvisibilitymyth), which is also the name of her blog. In her Instagram profile, Marsh-Dawson describes herself as an "Insatiably curious 61yr old adventurer of the heart & mind, with an attitude of No Limits" (Fig. 1).

Her approach to the lifestyle genre emphasizes "personal interests and daily activities" (Mediakix) rather than focusing primarily on fashion and beauty. Her feed features photographs from her travels and everyday life, including various images of objects, places, and people. Image captions are sometimes straightforward and sometimes characterized by humor, sarcasm, or anti-

ageism sentiments. In a March 2018 Instagram post, Marsh-Dawson wears a tiara and a bright pink blouse, hands crossed over her chest to reveal a tattoo and ornate bangle. The caption adds meaning and provides a context for the image, taking to task an actress who "says that at 52 she has started to
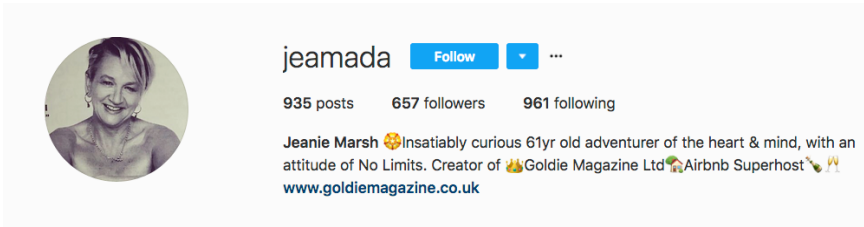

Fig. 1. Instagram profile for *Jeamada* (@jeamada), Jeanie Marsh-Dawson, 2018.

feel 'invisible and irrelevant' now a new generation is commanding the spotlight.' Well boo flipping hoo - get over yourself. . . . Put on your tiara & deal with it woman. #keepitreal #ageless #notinvisible #notdeadyet #getoverit #1stworldproblems #makesmemad #behappy #smile #theinvisibilitymyth." A conversation emerges as comments from followers support and elaborate on Marsh-Dawson's statement and as she replies to those comments. As is the case with the other women I observed, Marsh-Dawson draws on a combination of semiotic resources to make meaning and engage an audience on Instagram, and her feed is filled with personal and social identity cues.

Fig. 2. Instagram profile for *Goldie Magazine (@goldiemagazineuk)*, Jeanie Marsh-Dawson, et al., 2018.

Marsh-Dawson's July 31, 2017, post on her *The Invisibility Myth* blog presents an argument that connects social media, community, in/visibility, and positive aging. She writes,

> This world needs hashtags like: livefastdieold, advantageofage, notdeadyet, ageingcanbefun, the invisibilitymyth. With the challenges that we face as we grow older, we need this diverse, inclusive global community network of our own, with [its] shared ethos of supporting each other whilst endeavouring to live our individual lives to the fullest. . . . This highly visible, glorious movement is not just colourful, entertaining fun, it's also about connectivity, community and support, so I say it again: Fuck Invisibility!

Marsh-Dawson's manifesto rejects the idea that to age is to become invisible within society (the invisibility myth), offering an alternative vision and a strategy for how social media can provide "connectivity, community and support." Her other project, *Goldie Magazine* (Fig. 2) began as an

Instagram feed (@goldiemagazineuk) prior to the launch of the print version in April 2018. The *Goldie Magazine* feed enacted the strategic vision voiced in Marsh-Dawson's blog post through a "3 words on ageing" campaign that can be read as a form of anti-ageism activism designed to make midlife and older adults more visible on Instagram while promoting age-positive messages. *Goldie Magazine* invited followers to DM (direct message) their "3 words" to be featured, along with their photographs, on *Goldie*'s feed. The result is a diverse collection of images and perspectives on age and aging.

Case Study 2: Silvana Stefonovic-Riley, *Embellish or Perish*

Survey respondents emphasized inspiration, personal expression and enjoyment, and making connections as reasons for using Instagram, and my second case study provides an example of the influence of these goals and motivations. In her Instagram profile, Silvana Stefonovic-Riley (@embellish_or_perish) describes herself as "Australian. Embellished. Visible. Self discoverer. Traveller. Photo snapper. Story teller. Friends gather. Muse. Model. Making my life art" (Fig. 3). Stefonovic-Riley's feed features original content as well as other material, such as reposted content from other creators that she tags *inspiration* (#inspiration). Her original content includes digital art created with Photo Lab, photographs taken by and sometimes with others, brief videos, and photographs she has taken of herself (selfies) showcasing her "embellished" signature style.

Fig. 3. Instagram profile for *Embellish or Perish* (@embellish_or_perish), Silvana Stefonovic-Riley, 2018.

Stefonovic-Riley, who tags herself *the queen of selfies* (#thequeenofselfies), uses the genre as a playful but powerful tool for self-representation and achieving visibility. Martin Hand recognizes selfies as "visual self-expression for *consumption by others*" (224), and in "From Narrating the Self to Posting Self(ies)," Alexandra Georgakopoulou treats "selfies as small stories," a perspective that "recognizes narrative stancetaking as an important aspect of posting selfies in context and for specific viewers/users. Storying in selfies is thus viewed as a dynamic, contextually emergent process co-constructed by selfie-posters and users that engage with them . . ." (302-303). Building on some of the themes uncovered in the survey, selfies not only serve as a form of self-expression but also reflect other motivations, including the desire to connect and inspire. Followers engage with the selfies, as well as other forms of content, by liking and commenting on them. Comments generally draw attention to specific features of the image and/or offer greetings or compliments. They often also include emojis, icons that range from decorative to emotive.

Stefonovic-Riley draws on multiple semiotic resources to make meaning in her posts:

- Visual content: images, photographs, videos, and emojis like 👡👡 or 🖤🖤🖤
- Descriptive image captions (the main textual element associated with Instagram posts), which range from something as simple as "Get up from last week" to a 385-word caption about a family gathering
- Hashtags, as exemplified by this list from an April 17, 2018, post, which includes a mix of personal identity cues (e.g., #makinglifeart, #selfiequeen) and social identity cues (e.g., #aussiestyletribe, #advancedstyle):

> #embellish_or_perish #advancedstylegoddess #makinglifeart #1withmyart #advancedstyle #advancedstyledownunder #aussiestyle #aussiestyletribe #fabover50 #styleover50 #styleoverfifty #50plusstyle #mystyle #fiftyplusstyle #fiftyplusandfabulous #50plusandfabulous #selfie #selfiequeen #theselfiequeen #queenofselfies #pinkhair #thequeenofselfies #silvana #silvana_stefanovic_riley

- Responses to followers' comments

As her profile highlights, Stefonovic-Riley prioritizes visibility and friend gathering, goals which are shared by many of the women in the Instagram subpopulation I studied. The *Embellish or Perish* feed demonstrates mechanisms for pursuing these goals. For example, visibility can be achieved by posting frequently, sharing images of oneself, using descriptive tags to signal affiliation and ensure that one's content will appear in keyword searches, and by being a "friend gatherer" who actively and enthusiastically responds to commenters.

Additionally, the gaze in a photograph can be a "significant semiotic resource" (Veum and Undrum 95). Even when wearing sunglasses, Stefonovic-Riley often angles her face so she is looking directly at the camera. According to Aslaug Veum and Linda Undrum, "The gaze . . . indicates whether the viewer is encouraged to engage with the represented person or not. When the represented person gazes directly at the viewer, an imaginary contact is established" (95). Thus, "the act of making and publishing selfies is not only an act of self-presentation, but also an invitation to interact. Through the direct gaze, the selfie maker suggests that she is eliciting some kind of response from the viewer" (95). Thus, Stefonovic-Riley demonstrates openness and approachability through images as well as words, further contributing to her goal of friend gathering.

Stefonovic-Riley engages to some extent with age-related issues and assumptions. The keyword *visible* in Stefonovic-Riley's profile description suggests that her use of Instagram intersects with broader conversations about gender, age, and representation, and she references age occasionally, mentioning, for example, acquiring a senior travel card and turning "the fabulous 61." She also engages with discourses on aging when, for example, she pokes fun at a newspaper article categorizing people as middle-aged based on their top ten worries and their favorite music, movies, and television shows: "Well it's official, I am middle aged and all because I like Queen. That is surprising, as in the absence of any other signs of middle age, I would not have known" (May 28, 2018). In contrast to Marsh-Dawson's more overt anti-ageism stance, Stefonovic-Riley tends to dismiss age stereotyping with humor.

Embellish or Perish emphasizes experimentation and creativity while encouraging viewers to see

life as an ongoing journey of self-discovery. In keeping with standard approaches to self-branding on social media, Stefonovic-Riley maintains stylistic and thematic consistency on her feed. On the other hand, her content emphasizes the extent to which she embraces change. For example, in a series of posts from March 2018, she shares photographs of what she wore in her "civilian work days before [she] started to wear whatever [she likes]." "All I know," Stefonovic-Riley writes, "is I am no longer her." Rather than experiencing this shift as destabilizing, she appears to have found it liberating. Having recently dyed her silver hair pink, Stefonovic-Riley writes, "change is as good as a holiday" (July 8, 2018).

The *Embellish or Perish* feed promotes a positive version of later life without glossing over the fact that grief, doubt, and "tribulations" are also part of the journey. Stefonovic-Riley appears to delight in beauty and possibility, and her Instagram age identity story celebrates change, creativity, individuality, friendship, and family. Employing digital literacies in pursuit of the goals and interests described in her profile and using available semiotic resources to suit her own purposes and style, Stefonovic-Riley demonstrates one approach to being present in popular visual culture.
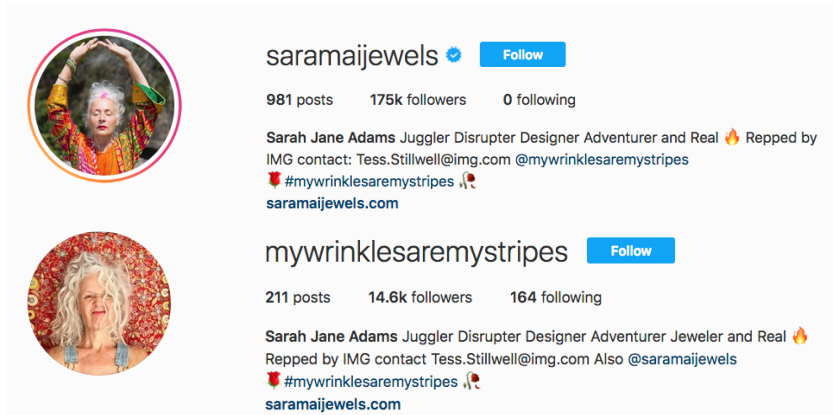

Fig. 4. Instagram profiles for *Saramai Jewels* (@saramaijewels) and *My Wrinkles Are My Stripes* (@ mywrinklesaremystripes), Sarah Jane Adams, 2018.

My third case study focuses on Sarah Jane Adams, a self-described "Juggler Disrupter Designer Adventurer Jeweler" who, through somewhat serendipitous circumstances but largely because her style and attitude resonate with such a broad range of people, has achieved a remarkable level of visibility on Instagram as well as in the media. Adams maintains two public Instagram accounts. Although there is some overlap between the two, she tends to offer glimpses into her daily life on *mywrinklesaremystripes* (e.g., family photos, photos and videos she captures of everyday objects and scenes) and uses *saramaijewels* to feature her professional work and brand collaborations (e.g., Priceline Pharmacy, 7 for All Mankind, Mercedes).

With over 175,000 followers on her *saramaijewels* account, Adams's age identity performances reach a broad audience. Like Stefonovic-Riley, Adams has been featured in Ari Seth Cohen's *Advanced Style* projects, and on the *Advanced Style* blog she explains that she created the *My Wrinkles Are My*

Stripes hashtag (#mywrinklesaremystripes) after a saleswoman offered a sample of a wrinkle removing cream: "My wrinkles do not scare me; they show me and therefore my experience. Hopefully there is a little wisdom which comes with these stripes. I see them as a badge of honour and a mark of roads travelled and experiences had. Why would I not be proud and happy to show them?" Adams ends her story with words of encouragement for other women: "Accept your true self, love your true self, smile and laugh often, gather those laughter lines and creases which come when you share a joke. They are you. The world needs to see more of YOU." The theme of acceptance carries over to Adams's Instagram feeds, particularly when she engages in self-reflection about aging:

- "I accept my wrinkles; my face is my story and is unique" (July 6, 2017).
- "This body was birthed 62 years ago today. I accept that I have had longer time within this vessel than I have remaining, and I give thanks for each day" (April 15, 2017).
- ". . . with gratitude, grace and acceptance, I intend to look after [my body], challenge it, stretch it, explore with it, to [its] maximum potential" (March 2, 2017).

An acceptance-oriented attitude toward aging counters what Adams recognizes as the "toxic" anti-aging messaging so prevalent in marketing targeted at women. Critics may argue that her case is an example of the "new visibility" of "'graceful agers'" (Dolan and Tincknell xi) and that it is easy for the fit and active Adams—widely perceived as attractive by followers—to practice and preach acceptance. From my perspective, however, Adams uses her visibility on Instagram to actively challenge assumptions and question reactions. As she suggests in a March 10, 2017 post that references self-acceptance in a hashtag (#selfacceptance), "An unfilled, unpulled, uninjected, unpeeled, unaltered, 61 year old female face appearing on your screen is a small act of rebellion."

Adams engages discourses on age and gender in a variety of ways, including reappropriation of terminology. For example, on *mywrinklesaremystripes* she captions a photograph of herself walking next to bird mural: "This old bird is migrating to warmer climes . . ." (@*mywrinklesaremystripes*, July 10, 2018). On her *saramaijewels* feed, she captions a photograph of herself standing next to a woven tote "Two Old Bags" and labels the image with hashtags including #oldbag, #mywrinklesaremystripes, and #keepingitreal (May 4, 2017). Adams often uses hashtags to layer meaning onto an image rather than to signal affiliation. The "keeping it real" (#keepingitreal) hashtag reflects Adams's commitment to openness and authenticity and plays a particularly significant role in the way she uses her feeds for cultural critique.

Two additional examples of "keeping it real" illustrate Adams's approaches to multimodal age identity storytelling and cultural critique. A May 17, 2016, post on *saramaijewels* shows Adams topless with a hat across her chest. On July 29, a less closely cropped version of the image reveals her midriff, which she describes using the hashtags baby belly (#babybelly), twin belly (#twinbelly), stretchmarks (#stretchmarks), and 61 (#61). In the caption, she explains, "Keeping it real means showing the out takes."

Adams employed a similar strategy in a series of December 2016 posts on *saramaijewels*. On December 22, she posted a photograph of herself in a red bathing suit. Viewers commented, "sexy," "hawt," "stunning," "true beauty, "fine," "beautiful." Four days later Adams posted a photo of her midriff captioned, "This is what's underneath the red swimsuit. So, you tell me. What do you really

think now?" (December 26, 2016). As in the previous example, hashtags label the image and guide interpretation: twin belly (#twinbelly), baby belly (#babybelly), keep it real (#keepitreal), stretchmarks (#stretchmarks), throwing down the gauntlet (#throwingdownthegauntlet). As of June 28, 2018, Adams's question had prompted 224 responses. While one or two commenters express revulsion, the vast majority share reactions ranging from admiration to gratitude. Some women voice a sense of relief upon seeing they are not alone in their perceived imperfections.

"What [Adams] accomplishes on a platform characterized to some extent by the fetishization of women's bodies and the idolization of beauty, youth, and celebrity, makes her visibility on Instagram more than a 'small act of rebellion.'"

Adams's multimodal age identity storytelling suggests that age is "irrelevant" (April 24, 2017), at least when it comes to a woman's core self and personal style. Through this storytelling, she also demonstrates an approach to aging based on self-acceptance, rejection of taboos, and "keeping it real." As a self-described "disrupter," Adams's Instagram practices call to mind performance art. She offers representations of herself for public consumption, using her own body to elicit reactions and then prompt critical examination of those reactions. What she accomplishes on a platform characterized to some extent by the fetishization of women's bodies and the idolization of beauty, youth, and celebrity, makes her visibility on Instagram more than a "small act of rebellion."

Case Study 3: Beth Djalali, *Style at a Certain Age*

My final case study represents a key trend revealed in survey results: midlife and older women are not only using Instagram to express themselves and connect with others; some of them have made content creation into a career. Beth Djalali, a professional lifestyle blogger, maintains a blog, Instagram feed, and YouTube channel, as well as Facebook and Pinterest pages, all united under the brand name *Style at a Certain Age*. Her Instagram profile features her brand logo rather than a photograph and lists her motto: "trends come and go but true style is ageless." Over half the women who responded to my survey report using Instagram for promotion and marketing, and a number, like Djalali, have turned social media content creation into a career.
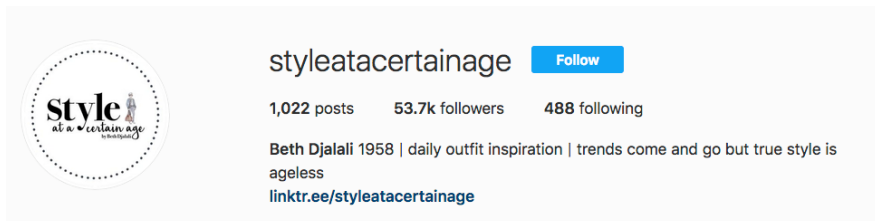

Fig. 5. Instagram profile for *Style at a Certain Age* (@styleatacertainage), Beth Djalali, 2018.

The "bio" page of Djalai's *Style at a Certain Age* blog features a portrait of her at age thirty-two, which she explains along with the purpose of blog in this way:

Needless to say, if you've stopped by my blog, you know I have an interest in fashion. This photo was taken of me at age 32, and while some things have changed since then I'm still just a girl at heart navigating through her personal style. My hope with this blog is to encourage other women to embrace their own personal style as well. Because one thing I've learned is that when you look great, you feel great and you step out the door armed with confidence!

While age studies scholars may take issue with Djalai's use of the terms "ageless" and "a girl at heart," she, like all of the women I studied, tells her age identity story in the manner she chooses and achieves visibility on her own terms. Djalai has used her approach to gain over 50,000 followers on Instagram, so her content clearly resonates with her target audience, which likely includes other lifestyle Instagrammers as well as women like the one in my survey who are questioning how to be and look over fifty.

The *Style at a Certain Age* blog includes style, beauty, lifestyle, fitness content categories and a link that allows followers to shop her looks (purchase items featured in her outfit of the day posts).

"Although reports on social media tend to focus on youth, research on age and technology use, as well as common sense, tells us that midlife and older women are present and active on social media for a variety of personal and professional reasons."

Photos on the blog and Instagram feed showcase Djalali's classic style and feature her posing in a variety of mainly outdoor settings. Unlike candid personal shots and selfies, the photographer's gaze plays a mediating role. Djalali's photographer is her husband: "Since his retirement, my husband has followed his love of photography and opened a small shop named Makbeth Studio. Now, when it is photo time for me, my husband is the one behind the lens" (Djalali, "Who"). The photographs are the result of a creative partnership, and Djalali exercises control over her self-presentation as she maintains personal style and brand consistency. Consistency is also maintained by using a signature writing style characterized by lack of capitalization and a peppy, conversational tone created by simple syntax, multiple exclamatory sentences, and a playful diction: "take a look at this straw handbag i've had for ages. it's a complementary shade of orange that gives this ootd a nice zing. when the temps heat up, i'm the first one to grab a wicker or straw handbag. don't they just scream summer?!" (Djalali, "Garanimal").

Figure 6 shows a popular *Style at a Certain Age* Instagram post that participates in a cross-platform social media trend: Throwback Thursday. While some users post decades-old photographs of themselves, Djalali uses Throwback Thursday as an opportunity to feature some of her past outfits, usually connecting them thematically or by color. Djalali encourages engagement by inviting followers to vote for their favorite photo and share what they "like best about Style at a Certain Age." She not only invites but consistently responds to follower comments. Personal and social identity cues are visible in the list of hashtags associated with the Throwback Thursday post (Fig. 6), which show Djalali promoting as well as connecting.

Although reports on social media tend to focus on youth, research on age and technology use, as well as common sense, tells us that midlife and older women are present and active on social media for a variety of personal and professional reasons. As my survey results reveal, women who

post lifestyle-related content to Instagram and blogs often employ digital literacies in the service of promoting themselves as professionals. In other instances, as Djalali's case demonstrates, they have launched new careers as professional lifestyle bloggers and social media content creators.
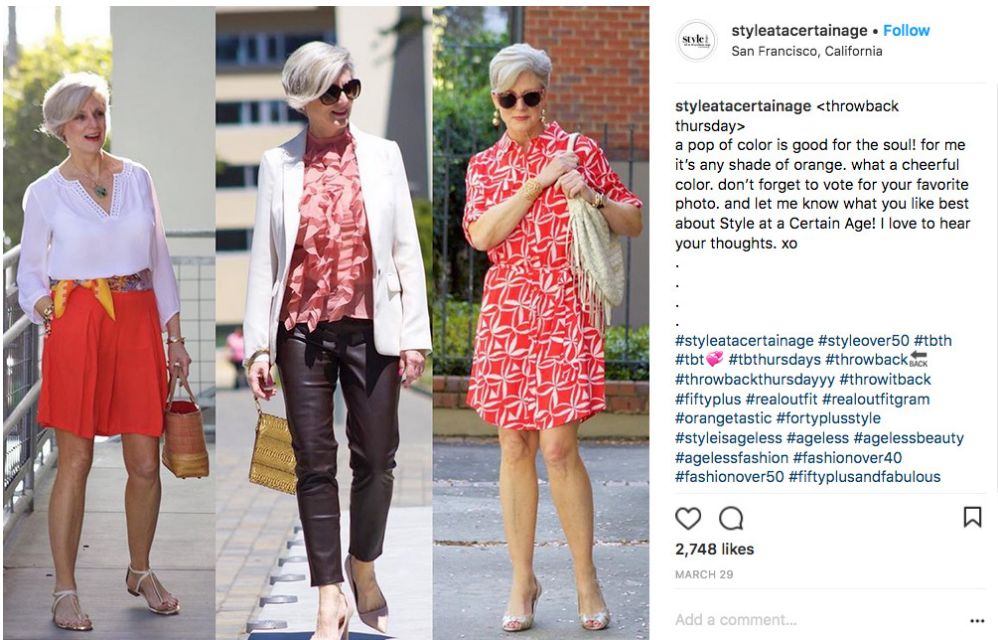

stylatacertainage • Follow
San Francisco, California

stylatacertainage <throwback thursday>
a pop of color is good for the soul! for me it's any shade of orange. what a cheerful color. don't forget to vote for your favorite photo. and let me know what you like best about Style at a Certain Age! I love to hear your thoughts. xo
.
.
.
.
#stylatacertainage #styleover50 #tbth #tbt💕 #tbthursdays #throwback🔙 #throwbackthursdayyy #throwitback #fiftyplus #realoutfit #realoutfitgram #orangetastic #fortyplusstyle #styleisageless #ageless #agelessbeauty #agelessfashion #fashionover40 #fashionover50 #fiftyplusandfabulous

2,748 likes
MARCH 29

Add a comment…

Fig. 6. "Throwback Thursday" Instagram post. *Source*: ©Beth Djalali, *Style at a Certain Age,* 2018. Used with permission.

Conclusion

This study contributes valuable new knowledge about the motivations, goals, and literate practices of midlife and older adults on social media, revealing some of the strategies #over50 women use to "story" or "discursively construct themselves" (Georgalou 24) on Instagram and blogs. Whereas most existing scholarship on visual depictions of age focuses on images that are controlled by other people (e.g., advertisers, community groups), I show how #over50 lifestyle Instagrammers and bloggers control their self-representations. As with all literate practices, these women's self-representations—their multimodal performances of identity—*mean* and *do* something within a complex web of social practices, discourses on age and gender, offline experiences and relationships, professional goals, personal needs and aspirations, cultural values and assumptions, mediating technologies, and so forth. All of these influences are at work as midlife and older women engage digital literacies in the service of self-expression, inspiration, connection, and promotion.

The multimodal performances of self I studied are complex, playful, experimental, and sometimes provocative. While not glossing over topics like menopause, grief, and health concerns, they challenge negative age stereotypes and encourage viewers to "learn to look at [older] women in

new ways" (Meagher 142). As I observed, these performances attract the attention of other women over fifty who are seeking inspiration, representation, and connection as they engage in their own age-related identity work. Younger Instagram users provide another audience for the performances, glimpsing in them possible future selves. Brands, marketers, magazines, and news outlets are also paying attention, which in turn increases the presence of midlife and older women in popular visual culture beyond Instagram.

NOTES

[1]I did not receive permission from all of the women I wanted to feature as case studies. Consequently, the stories of midlife and older women of color are unfortunately absent from this article, even though they are present on social media and were included in the survey. Those seeking insight into the social media practices of women of color may find Keisha Edwards Tassie and Sonja M. Brown's edited collection *Women of Color and Social Media Multitasking: Blogs, Timelines, Feeds, and Community* helpful, particularly Kandace Harris' "'Follow Me on Instagram': 'Best Self' Identity Construction and Gaze through Hashtag Activism and Selfie Self-Love."

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More Than Preaching to the Choir:
Religious Literate Activity and Civic Engagement in Older Adults

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KEYWORDS

religious literacies; civic engagement; older adult literacies; progressive Christianity; community literacy; race

"During one of our Pub Theology sessions as we were talking about this service, one of us, probably me said, 'But I feel like I'm preaching to the choir!' And then someone else in the group shared some brilliant insight saying, 'But we're the choir too. We thought we knew this stuff, but we didn't.'"

--Tom, church member and IT professional

"The question is one of both strategy and principle: Do you win by chasing those who don't share your views, or by serving and respecting those already with you? Is the purpose of the choir to sing to the infidels or inspire the faithful? What happens if the faithful stop showing up, donating, doing the work?"

--Rebecca Solnit, essayist, "Preaching to the Choir"

Pub Theology is admittedly a strange moniker for a church book group that neither meets in a pub nor discusses theology books very often. Nevertheless, this group of committed older adult readers has been meeting weekly in their church's common room on Monday evenings for about six years: catching up on each other's lives, voting on new book selections, giving each person who comes a chance to speak, and munching on plenty of popcorn during the discussion. The meetings are often a highlight of members' weekly routines, a friendly way of enjoying books and socialization.[1] However, an unfamiliar sense of urgency visited the group in fall 2015 when they started reading Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and continued into the following year when they read Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption.* Both books highlight the severe disparities in how criminal justice is meted out to communities of color in America, arguing for systemic change to right these long-term wrongs. For the first time in the group's history of reading and learning together, they were unsettled enough to feel like they had to act on what they were reading. Part of that action, as a group, included writing and presenting an entire church service about the subject matter of the books: the relationship between racism and the American criminal justice system.

Tom, quoted in the opening epigraph, aptly illustrates the dilemma the book group faced

when deciding to present this information from the pulpit: the group belongs to what he calls a "pretty liberal" church. The group did wonder if their efforts "preaching to the choir" would be better spent educating those who more vehemently disagree with them. As Rebecca Solnit points out in her November 2017 essay, "Preaching to the Choir," the phrase has become shorthand for useless pronouncements of in-group virtue, to staying put within one's own ideological bubble and not venturing outside of it. Stereotypes of older people as being rigid in their thinking and unwilling or unable to learn the use of new technologies and new ideas seem to dovetail with our worst impressions of preaching to the choir: repeating the same timeworn clichés to those who already agree, not bothering to changing anyone's mind. It would seem that preaching to the choir, especially when done by older people, could easily be dismissed within a larger cultural ideology of decline and irrelevance, an activity that older people putter around with while the "real work" of social change is accomplished by the young.

However, as both Solnit in her essay and Tom in his sermon point out, preaching to the choir is a completely necessary activity for both solidarity-building and more in-depth learning. In this particular case, a group of mostly white, middle-class older adults realized that their own beliefs and assumptions about race could stand to be challenged and improved despite thinking of themselves as part of the choir of liberal or progressive people. In order to be able to do something as apparently simple and repetitive as "preaching to the choir," these older adults built upon religious, personal, and professional literacies in order to create shifts in their own values and actions, and hopefully persuade others to shift their own values and actions. In this article, I argue that the members of the Pub Theology book group push back against the isolation and individualism that decline ideology foists upon older people, and instead create a robust model of civic engagement rooted in literate activity among older adults. These older adults draw on familiar genres and literate practices— consuming daily local news, participating in church services, and writing in the workplace—to change their perspective on race in the criminal justice system and encourage others to do the same.

Literature Review: Civic Engagement as a Common Thread

There has not been much scholarship that examines the interplay between religious literacies and age studies. However, within both of these subfields, civic engagement is a topic of great interest. This section briefly overviews the scholarly conversations about civic engagement within religious literacy scholarship and conversations about civic engagement within age studies with an eye toward the goal of bringing these two conversations together as they play out in the lives of my participants. To begin, though, I must acknowledge that the definitions of *civic engagement* as a term are manifold, depending on who is deploying the term and to what end, as Richard P. Adler and Judy Goggin point out in their aptly-titled piece, "What Do We Mean by Civic Engagement?" With that in mind, I use communications scholar Michael Delli Carpini's capacious definition of civic engagement: "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern" (qtd. in Adler and Goggin 239). This more open conception of civic engagement stands in contrast to how the term is popularly deployed in discussions of older people, as will be shown later in this section.

Scholarship about the relationship between religious rhetoric and civic engagement was reinvigorated with the publication of Sharon Crowley's *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* in 2006. Crowley shows how right-wing apocalypticist Christian rhetoric functions within a densely articulated ideologic that starkly mismatches liberal democratic values and attitudes, leading to a breakdown in conditions that allow democratic deliberation to effectively work. Some have critiqued Crowley's book for her portrayal of the religious rhetor as a uniquely static type of person who is completely unwilling and unable to change (DePalma et al.). This discourse of mismatch between the religious rhetor and the secular liberal rhetor carries over into the field's pedagogical scholarship as well, the mismatch usually framed as occurring between an evangelical Christian student and a secular liberal professor in a first-year composition classroom (e.g., Downs; Worth). In response to these mismatch arguments, Jeff Ringer has shown the complex and nuanced rhetorical practices utilized by evangelical students as they make arguments about civic topics ("Consequences" and "Working"), and Michael DePalma has argued that professors should consider religious commitment as a rhetorical resource for fostering civic engagement, giving examples from and analyses of syllabi in the field that do this work ("Reimagining" and "Re-envisioning"). Most of these works address the rise of conservative Christian civic engagement in the US since the 1980s, but an important exception has been in studies involving literacies taught in predominantly African-American churches, which have long served as a staging ground for progressive causes and community empowerment (e.g., Brandt; Moss).

Beth Daniell writes in her 2015 piece "More in Heaven and Earth: Complicating the Map and Constituting Identities" that because the field has been so focused on the apocalypticist Christian Right, its map of religious literate engagement is problematically small. She writes, "This map leaves no room for those who may hold liberal political views while practicing their faith or for those who, while socially conservative, experience a Christian community focused on compassion and forgiveness" (243). Following Daniell's call to complicate the map of Christian rhetorics within the field, the data for this article come from a larger study that focuses on religious literate activity inside churches that specifically label themselves as progressive. Many of the main questions driving my larger study of these progressive church field sites dealt with civic engagement: In what ways does religious literate activity inform the civic engagement of its members? How do rhetorical and literate practices performed at a progressive church influence the social and political causes with which they involve themselves? What types of arguments persuade these believers when it comes to social and political issues?

As I did fieldwork within this church, it became clear that the Pub Theologians were quite absorbed in connecting their faith to civic engagement due to their readings. Then, after finding myself on the receiving end of a few (gentle) jokes from the Pub Theologians about being the youngest person in the room by quite a bit, I started to notice and consider more fully the older age of all of the group's members. There were jottings in my field notes of one group member's reflection on her recent seventieth birthday, another of a lively discussion of who was planning to retire when and their feelings about it. It is worth noting that that the vast majority of older people in the US identify as being religious and part of a particular religious tradition, whether that tradition is conservative

or liberal. In a Public Religion Research Institute survey conducted in 2014, only 11% of Americans aged sixty-five and older and only 16% aged fifty to sixty-four said they were religiously unaffiliated (rpt. in Jones 48). It follows then, that understanding the literate lives of older Americans should involve a significant dive into their religious literate activity in all its complexity. I found with this group that age, religion, and race are not strands that can easily be separated from one another when analyzing how these group members interacted with their chosen texts and created texts of their own.

Scholars in age studies have drawn attention to the dichotomy between "decline ideology" and "productive aging" in models of aging, and that dichotomy directly affects cultural conceptions of how older people civically engage and why. Decline ideology is most thoroughly described by Margaret Morganroth Gullette in her book *Aged by Culture*, which she then expands upon in her later works. She presents decline ideology as a way of thinking about the life course that idealizes a rather short period of time in young adulthood where a person is considered at his or her "peak" or "prime," intellectually and physically. Then, a long decline with its attendant loss of physical prowess, intellectual sharpness, and professional success, settles in as early as one's thirties or forties, leaving one with many decades to look back nostalgically on that very short young adulthood "peak." (*Aged* 130-2). To be clear, Gullette does not actually believe that decline is a universal phenomenon, but she instead points out the countless venues where decline ideology is naturalized and reified to the point that it functions as an objective truth in American society. She writes:

> Decline is a metaphor as hard to contain as dye. Once it has tinged our expectations of the future (sensations, rewards, status, power, voice) with peril, it tends to stain our experiences, our views of others, our explanatory systems, and then our retrospective judgments. . . . One of decline's saddest egocentripetal effects is to obscure anything suffered by those adjacent to us, in the polity and across the globe. The only history that matters is that of our times. Decline then squeezes the life span further, into an inflexible, biological, individual arc. (*Aged* 11)

In other words, even though decline functions more as a metaphor than as a universally true phenomenon, the negative effects of our belief in the truth of the metaphor do real damage, especially insofar as that belief isolates older people and makes their world smaller. One of the major negative effects of decline ideology, Gullette contends, is the simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of older people, depending on the context in which the figure of the older person is encountered (*Ending* xxi).

An illustration of this dichotomy between the hypervisibility and invisibility of older people plays out in how the political involvement or civic engagement of older people is described and reported. Older citizens are often referred to as being selfish, egocentripetal, as in the famous "greedy geezer" stereotype that was popularized in the 1980s, a stereotype that pops up regularly in thinkpieces and articles to this day. In this narrative, older people are hypervisible as they purportedly hoard scarce resources and care only for themselves at the expense of the young (Martinson and Halpern 428). Decline ideology also positions older people as enemies of change, even though scholars looking at the relationship between age and social movements, like Olivier Fillieule, have noted that "serious

doubts have been cast on the notion that with old age comes political disengagement or growing conservatism on political issues" (2).

In what is perhaps a well-meaning attempt to de-center decline ideology and greedy geezer stereotyping, the case has been made for "productive aging," which usually involves wellness regimens (Spindler) and encouragement for older Americans to be more civically engaged after retirement, usually through structured and regularly scheduled volunteer work (Adler and Goggin). In this model of aging, older people become invisible—compliant and eager to "earn their keep" by working for free. While advocates for the civic engagement of older citizens usually cite the endless benefits of volunteerism, critical gerontologists Marty Martinson and Meredith Minkler are among a growing handful of scholars who argue that conflating the terms "civic engagement" and "volunteerism" for older adults is harmful for a number of reasons, most of all because it devalues those older people who are either unable or unwilling to provide free labor once they have stopped working at their careers. They also point out that "[w]hen civic engagement is reduced to the act of formal volunteering, other activities associated with civic life, including voting, engaging in community activism, staying informed about current events, caregiving, and having informal connections, are notably ignored" (319). In other words, the productive aging model can be just as constraining as decline ideology, albeit in a different way.

Between the isolating nature of decline ideology and the questionable ethics of pushing all older people towards free labor, it becomes clear that there is a need for accounts of how older citizens can and do participate meaningfully in civic life. My findings suggest that through their literate activity, the Pub Theologians civically engage in a space between the rigidity of a decline narrative and the mandates of productive aging. To use Gullette's language, they avoid the "egocentripetal effects" inherent in a decline model of aging, becoming emotionally engaged in what those adjacent to them are suffering. Instead of being obsolete and useless, their familiar literate practices are crucial to connecting what they learned from their chosen texts to more expansive experiences of civic engagement as older members of their community.

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Methods

My findings come from a larger IRB-approved study conducted at an active congregation of the United Church of Christ in a medium-sized Midwestern city. The United Church of Christ is a theologically liberal, mainline denomination with about one million members nationwide. The church as a whole had about 100 in attendance on a given Sunday during the time the bulk of data

for the study was collected; and church members are a mix of ages, and at the time of fieldwork the congregation was mostly white. While the Pub Theology group does not have a formal membership roll, the number of people attending remained fairly consistent throughout my fieldwork. Figure 1 lists the regularly attending group members and their roles in the culminating Sunday service.

Participant Name[2]	Profession	Involvement with Sunday Service
Tom	IT specialist	Wrote and presented sermon portion "What We Learned"
Jeanne	Elementary teacher	Wrote "Further Ways to Get Involved" handout
Michael	Partially retired, therapist	Wrote and presented Prayer of Confession, Call to Worship, and Benediction prayers
Mary	Unknown	Attended
John	Unknown	Attended, handed out communion
Sue	Partially retired, Doula	Attended, handed out communion
Lou	Retired, therapist	Wrote and presented introduction to Bible reading, "StoneCatchers"
Becky	Retired, unknown	Attended
Jan	Retired, unknown	Attended
Teresa	Retired, academic professional	Attended, handed out communion
Pat	Nurse and nurse educator	Wrote and presented sermon portion "How We Changed"
Harvey	Public defender and criminal defense attorney	Wrote and presented sermon portion "What We Can Do"
Anita	Businesswoman	Attended, handed out communion

Table 1. Pub Theology Regular Participants.

Of the thirteen regular members, twelve were white and one was African-American. At the service planning meetings, five of the thirteen regular members volunteered to write original material that would be presented to the entire congregation. However, all members of the group participated in the group's lively conversations, some of which directly appeared in the service. Group members also provided feedback on drafts of the writers' texts as well as behind-the-scenes organization and support for the event.

The methodology for this study foregrounds literate activity, as described by Paul Prior, who writes, "Literate activity, in this sense, is not located *in* acts of reading and writing, but *as* cultural forms of life saturated with textuality, that is strongly motivated and mediated by texts" (138). Because a literate activity framework positions writing as situated, mediated, and dispersed, it is essential to use research methods that capture more than just a final textual product. The materials I analyzed

for this article included ethnographic observation field notes, transcripts of meetings, drafts of texts written for and based on the church service, and text-based interviews. Three out of the five primary service writers agreed to be interviewed three months after the service was conducted to give them time to reflect on how their ideas settled internally for each writer personally, as well as how the ideas settled in the congregation. The interviews I conducted with the writers were semi-structured as well as text-based (Odell, Goswami, and Herrington). In text-based interviews, the interviewer brings a copy of the writer's work to specifically guide the questions to the manuscript, allowing the writer to discuss the significance of particular choices he or she made during the writing process.

Rather than beginning analysis with a pre-determined set of codes, I used open coding as my initial method when working with this wide range of participant manuscripts, meeting and interview transcripts, and field notes (Strauss). I also drew on tenets of Kathy Charmaz's grounded theory approach to qualitative research, namely its commitment to centering practices that participants find important and an emphasis on collecting and analyzing data simultaneously in a recursive process (2-3). This approach proved fruitful when I noticed that group members did not spend as much time discussing the assigned texts as I thought they would, instead frequently connecting the concepts from the texts to what was happening in their own community. Since this was a practice that seemed important to the group, I then began to code for patterns related to intertextuality in their discussions, writings, and interviews. As Charles Bazerman writes, "intertextuality often seeks to create a shared understanding of what people have said before and what the current situation is. That is, intertextual reference can attempt to establish the social facts upon which the writer is attempting to make a new statement" (313). Since the Pub Theologians underwent a process of re-negotiating their own social facts about race and criminal justice (i.e., moving from believing the system is inherently fair and works well for everyone to acknowledging and working against racial disparities in that system), instances of intertextuality became relevant to understanding how and where they had changed their ways of thinking about this issue of civic importance. I also coded for the genres, or typified oral and written communication patterns (Bazerman 316-8), that the Pub Theologians used most frequently and for how they interpreted those generic conventions and eventually chose to deploy them in their Sunday service.

"I Bet None of Us Reads the Paper the Same Way": Daily Literate Activity and Civic Engagement

One of the more insidious effects of the decline narrative as it pertains to the literacies of older people is that it assumes that older people's literacies and literate practices only stagnate and decline. Much of the work about older people within literacy and composition studies has shown how older people have a much more complex and nuanced relationship with their literacies than decline ideology would allow, whether it is learning the use of new literate technologies (Bowen) or using the literacies they already cherish to shape a meaningful path through the end of their lives (Rumsey). Building on that work, I show in this section how the Pub Theologians use habitual literate practices as a vehicle for significant change. Reading and discussion of local news stories as they connected

to their book selections drew individual members closer together as a group. Their religious literate practices also drew them into caring about issues that did not directly affect them personally, in contrast to the greedy geezer stereotype , which presumes that older people only care about their own benefits and bank accounts. At most meetings, someone would bring up an article from that week's newspaper, and the discussion would center more around making intertextual connections between the newspaper and the books rather than just close reading the assigned chapters. All participants were familiar with The *Daily Tribune*, and the following interaction about content found in this shared text was typical. The group begins to discuss a story about a young African-American male getting pulled over for failing to use a turn signal that ended in his arrest on a drug charge.

> Michael: I bet none of us reads the paper the same way we did six months ago.
>
> Anita: Oh my gosh.
>
> Tom: (louder) You know, that is [so true!][3] I find myself=
>
> Teresa: [Absolutely]
>
> Anita: Did you see the paper today?
>
> Tom: I find myself=
>
> Anita: =There was something in the paper today that was right on point with this book.
>
> Tom: I find myself when I look at the police blotter or the stories about so and so, I, you are so right Michael, I am now reading that wondering as you were, when we were going around about okay, what's the backstory here that isn't being reported?
>
> Anita: In the paper today there was this article that I thought, oh my gosh. It was just a small, I don't know if you saw it, about the guy that didn't use his turn signal.
>
> Michael: Right.

As noted by the overlapping turns and volume of delivery, the Pub Theologians were often quite animated and threw themselves in the discussion wholeheartedly when talking about situations from the newspaper that went along with the situations that were described by the authors of their books. As a repeated type of talk at meetings, discussions of local current events served to solidify social bonds between group members, as these discussions were often the ones that got the whole large group involved in the conversation at once.

Anita then went on to explain her thought process as she read the article to the whole group, quoted below.

> But what he <u>stopped</u> him for was failure to use a turn signal and my first thought was, okay, was he turning left which was a major problem? Was he just changing lanes and you know how sometimes you just pull over and don't use, you know? What was the story here… So you're right, when you say you read the paper now, you don't read it the same, that's exactly what, when I saw that article, 'Failure to Use Turn Signal Stop' and it turned into this big drug bust, I thought, that is our book, right there in the *Daily Tribune*.

In this turn of the conversation, Anita summarizes the connections she made not only between the book and the newspaper article, but also between her own experience of driving and how it differs from the young black man in the article. Anita's comment about how she had switched lanes without using a turn signal without the same consequences is also representative of how many of the group members changed throughout their time discussing these articles and books: putting themselves in the described situations and noticing that their outcomes had been quite different. Most of the Pub Theologians said at various points over these months that they had not previously thought about, much less empathized with, people labeled as criminals or felons. But, as they read the books and then connected those stories to what was happening in their local community, their beliefs shifted. The Pub Theologians had always been avid newspaper readers, but their rather dramatic shift in focus and concern when reading was a big change, illustrating how interactions with very familiar texts can be shifted over the long course of a life. Instead of being a stagnant literate practice, the ordinary repetition of daily newspaper reading ended up serving as a regular point of connection to and reinforcement of the new ideas that the group members first encountered in *The New Jim Crow* and *Just Mercy*.

"We Must Educate, Congregate, and Agitate": Emotion and Persuasion within the Familiar Genre(s) of the Sunday Service

One of the recurring concerns of the Pub Theologians as they discussed these particular books was that of processing difficult emotions. As a result, during their planning and writing meetings as they composed their service, they often discussed how they wanted the congregation to feel as a result of their performance: moved to action, but not judged or attacked. In this section, I will show how the Pub Theologians used their long-standing knowledge of the genre conventions as practiced at this church in order to compose a service that both comforts and challenges their fellow churchgoers to feel and think differently about racism and the criminal justice system. Their efforts with this church service are especially relevant to extending arguments like Martinson and Minkler's, that civic engagement as practiced by older people should not be limited simply to providing free volunteer labor wherever someone else decides it is needed. Instead, the church gives the group members the space and the visibility necessary to deploy their civic-minded literacies in a self-directed manner. The Pub Theologians are able to remediate the content of their books into the shared genres of how God is worshipped in this community, and in so doing, find a way to engage

their fellow churchgoers with a topic they previously may have ignored.

One of the main genres present in Sunday services at the church besides the sermon is group prayer, or the direct address of God by the congregation as they read from their weekly bulletins in unison. The exact text of these prayers varies from church to church, but it usually contains a statement of the collective sins that churchgoers have committed throughout the week for which they seek forgiveness from God ("Book of Common Prayer"). While many Christian churches use the Prayer of Confession on a weekly basis, this church chooses not to use it as frequently, alternating it with other types of prayers so as not to focus only on sin. Because the group chose to include a confession of sin that was related to their reading, they needed to write one themselves. Michael, a regular and enthusiastic participant in weekly Pub Theology meetings who nonetheless took care to describe himself as "not very religious," was the first to volunteer to write the prayer of confession for the Sunday service. He stuck to the genre's conventions as typically practiced in this church setting, basing his prayer on the way that the church's longtime former minister, Rev. Jack Good, would write and deliver his prayers of confession. In an interview, Michael explained, "When [Rev. Good] would do the prayer of confession each week specifically, it was thirty years ago, twenty-five or thirty years ago. Sunday after Sunday, I would just be mesmerized. Often teary… Something about the way he did that, framed that, just got that. And so I knew I wanted write the Call to Confession." For Michael, the repetition of the genre, "Sunday after Sunday," served as a point of significance rather than stagnation. Since the genre had been so emotionally resonant for him, he was especially concerned that the prayer he wrote would likewise evoke an emotional response in his audience.

The following is an excerpt from the final version of the prayer that Michael wrote and then led from the podium at the front of the church and the congregation at their Sunday service.

> Michael: Let's join together in our confession. God who steadfastly seeks wholeness, even as we try to break things how can this be?

> Congregation: How can this be? How can we have done this? How can we have overlooked this?

> Michael: We're ashamed of our silence. In Your name we agreed to notice hatred and we didn't. And so we are here in this quiet place to cry out, who can treat another person like they're invisible? Who can hold someone down until they cannot breathe? Who can imprison another spirit in poverty or in discrimination?

> Congregation: We can. We did. If only by our silence, we do.

In keeping with the traditional form of a Prayer of Confession, the congregants take responsibility for their wrong actions, sin, and also the things they have left undone that potentially could have made the world a better place. Remediating this long-established tradition of accounting for silence and inaction as being sinful and wrong, Michael is then able to name staying silent and inactive about

racism as also being sinful and wrong. As scholars like Deborah Mutnick have noted in the pages of this journal, contemporary colorblind ideologies that present American racism as an anomaly from the past make it difficult for people to discuss the topic at all, whether in the college classroom or at church (73). Present-day American cultural notions of being racist usually involve saying something overtly racist, and Mutnick and other scholars (e.g., Trainor, "Critical," "My Ancestors," "Rethinking Racism"; Winans) have described how white people who do not participate in such overt behaviors are often very resistant to thinking about themselves as being racist. By drawing intertextual connections between the ideas in their books and the patterns of confessional prayer as practiced in this church community, Michael draws on years of shared language to persuade fellow white church members to take up what may be an unfamiliar or troubling idea.

When discussing the writing process of the prayer in an interview following the service, he discussed the significance of the choice he made when writing the first series of questions asked by the congregation. He explained, "To say 'How can that happen?' is too empty. It's more like, 'How could we let that happen, we as the people of compassion, as some would say, the people of God?' How could we have just turned aside and not known this?" Over the course of their time spent on these books, the Pub Theologians became closer not only to the suffering of their fellow citizens but also to the ways that they themselves had helped prolong that suffering, if only through their ignorance. In moving from the impersonal "How could this happen?" to "How could *we* let that happen?" Michael pushes the largely white congregation to make the same shift towards recognizing their own role in that suffering that Pub Theology members did. He invites them to admit out loud that racism and mass incarceration are something they are involved in, which is no small feat in an American culture steeped in colorblind ideologies.

> *"He invites them to admit out loud that racism and mass incarceration are something they are involved in, which is no small feat in an American culture steeped in colorblind ideologies."*

Although Michael stayed largely within the familiar genre conventions of a typical Prayer of Confession, the group decided to completely forego another recurring genre within the Sunday service, that of the "special offering," again in hopes of having a specific emotional effect on their audience. This church usually holds a few themed services each year about social issues like hunger or refugees. After learning about a given issue during the service, the money taken up that week is given to a related charity. The charity is usually written about in the bulletin and spoken about from the pulpit, and this action is a way for the people sitting in the pews to participate immediately in helping those affected by that week's issue. Even though this group had not put on a themed service of their own before, they were familiar enough with the genre to know that it is a common practice and would probably be expected by their audience. The following interaction occurred during a planning meeting, right after Lou simply asked where the special offering money would go, as she assumed they would take up this genre convention:

Michael: One thing quoting Michelle Alexander now, or thinking about her, what we don't want to do is end, after the service, is get people off the hook.

Tom: Oh for sure.

Pat: Oh God, yes.

Michael: So I put money in a special offering, <u>done.</u>

Tom: Right.

Anita: Oh no.

Pat: That's a good point.

Tom: That's a good point. No, what we want to do is inspire them to [do more.]

Michael: [They need] to think and suffer like we did.

Pat: And suffer (laughter) like we did.

Michael: I'm <u>serious.</u>

Tom: Because [we <u>did]</u>

Mary: [And struggle] with it

Tom: There were times we did.

This excerpt again shows their attunement to the emotional experience of the congregation being one of the most important aspects of the service. After a little more conversation, the group decided to eliminate the familiar and comforting action of the special offering. Instead, Jeanne put together (with the help and input of most group members in an email chain) a detailed insert in the bulletin that included a bibliography of books and documentaries, local racial and prison justice organizations to volunteer time with, and upcoming community events to attend. The handout Jeanne compiled also gestures to a richer conception of civic engagement than either just giving money or signing up for regular volunteer hours. While the organizations listed were happy to receive donations or regular volunteers, the group signaled that becoming educated in informal venues and attending community events were just as important in terms of engagement with these issues. It also suggests that the Pub Theologians consider themselves part of a longer-term effort in terms of

continuing their own education about these issues rather than considering it finished after making a donation or completing the presentation of their church service.

The group split the sermon writing responsibilities into three parts, both to give a wider range of representation of voices and to take the pressure off of one person having to be the only preacher. Tom summarized the facts, figures, and arguments of the books, Pat related the specific actions taken by the group as a result of their reading, and Harvey took up the finale of the sermon with a portion titled "What Can We Do." Harvey occupied a unique position in the group as its only African-American member and its only member employed in the legal profession, as a public defender and criminal defense attorney. His life experiences, both personal and professional, led him to be completely unsurprised by the information in the books the rest of the group was finding quite shocking. Harvey and his wife Anita told many stories to the Pub Theologians about getting pulled over for "driving while black and white" over the course of their long marriage. Harvey also provided local legal context for many of the issues the group read about, and group members often asked him follow-up questions that applied his legal expertise to what they were reading in the books.

"I'm Not Even an Advanced User": When Preaching to the Choir Leaves the Church Building

The presumption that preaching to the choir is largely an insular activity does not take into account the unexpected ways that said preaching can leave the pulpit and the pews and take on different forms for different audiences. In this section I will show how two Pub Theology members, Tom and Michael, brought their religious literate activity outside the walls of the church, broadening the scope of their civic engagement in the process. Tom and Michael both reported completing a significant piece of writing in their workplaces that grew out of what they learned over the course of their year reading these texts. While acknowledging Gullette's point that plenty of older people get pushed out of their workplaces prematurely due to ageism and decline ideology, Tom and Michael use their positions of relative privilege within their fields to bring pieces of what they learned to a completely different audience from their fellow churchgoers. Both men were able to draw upon their years of previous work experience and familiarity with the expected genres in those settings in order to make their co-workers and others in their field aware of some of the concepts and ideas that their religious literate activity provided them.

Tom, a writer of one of the sermon parts and the de facto organizer of the Pub Theology group, wrote a speech about white privilege that he delivered to a large group of his co-workers at an annual conference that brought together employees from various satellite offices of his workplace. He said that as an "old-timer" in his position, he had attended many of these conferences over the years. This year's conference, though, was the first year that an upper-level administrator had asked him to lead a trust walk, which was intended to get the employees to reflect on implicit bias and white privilege. He said that, "To do that amongst my co-workers, to be the one putting myself out there, was a pretty significant stretch for me."

As part of his work leading the trust walk, Tom's boss asked him to write up an introduction to

the activity to deliver orally to all of the employees present at the retreat before the activity began. He writes,

> I have held the job title of Computer Training Specialist for almost 25 years now. Amazing. But during all that time, I have always maintained that I am not a computer expert, but just an advanced user trying to stay one step ahead of those I am training. Sometimes I have successfully stayed one step ahead. Other times not even close. I stand before you today feeling much the same talking about White Privilege. I am not an expert on this topic, I am not even an advanced user. I am sure many of you in this room have more knowledge on this topic than I. I have done some reading in the past two years that have [sic] caused me to look more openly at situations and people around me that live differently than me. As a white, straight, Christian male, at the top of the food chain I am beginning to better understand the privileges that have been bestowed upon me just because. I have a lot of work to do.

While the full length of Tom's remarks is about four times what is excerpted here, this introductory paragraph illustrates how he puts the commitments he made at church into discourse appropriate to his workplace. In drawing an analogy between being an "advanced user" in his position as a Computer Training Specialist but not an advanced user when it comes to white privilege, he opens up what might be a foreign or uncomfortable topic by using common professional language that most of the group would be familiar with and understand. While he briefly brings up that he is Christian, he does not directly reference the fact that this reading has been, for him, part of his religious commitment. While this sensitivity to the demands of a professional audience might seem an obvious move, the rhetor with religious commitments is often depicted by the field as being extremely heavy-handed and unable to rearticulate those commitments in different ways depending on the setting (e.g., Crowley). While this might hold true for some religious rhetors, it is worth considering the ways that others utilize different strategies in different settings to achieve similar ends. In Tom's case, his desired end of his literate activity, educating and persuading people to examine white privilege and its harmful effects, is the same in both the pulpit and at work.

While Tom is quite able to change up the content of his speeches to make them appropriate to each context, he reiterated that "again, after [supervisor] asked me to do that, I knew, I knew that I had to. I just knew I had to. You know, having come out of these book readings and the church service, if I was going to be true to myself and true to what I said, statements I made in church, I knew I had to do this." Tom makes clear that reading these books and sharing them first with a church audience had made his engagement with the topic both serious and heartfelt, and it also provided him with a sense of urgency for taking action on the topic in other areas of his life. Tom's experience illustrates that it is not simple to cordon off certain types of literate activity as religious and others as professional and still others as public or civic. In the tangle of practice that is Tom's life, he learned at church about a public or civic issue that then led to him writing a text that shares those commitments in a professional context. It can be difficult to measure and categorize something like Tom's speech at a work retreat as civic engagement, but this literate action clearly grows out of a desire to identify and address this issue of public concern.

Michael similarly devoted a significant amount of time and energy to a professional activity based upon what he learned from participating in the Pub Theology reading group. Michael is semi-retired, having transitioned out of working full time at his private therapy practice, but still gives consultations, participates in conferences, and creates short films dealing with the mental health issues of young children. He describes the film that he was inspired to make after reading these books, a film about the effects of having incarcerated parents on the mental health of young children: "This is the sixth in this particular series where I write what I think little kids think and what they would say if they were old enough to talk. I'm representing kids who don't talk yet or who talk in incoherent ways… I mean the whole *idea* came out of the Jim Crow book for me." As with his previous short films, he wrote the entire script himself and then collaborated with others for the voice acting and video editing. Though the idea came out of what he had learned about and committed to in the context of the church group, the final film script also does not highlight religious concerns and is usable by a variety of audiences. Michael has shared film in a community room in the local public library and at far-flung conferences and has been offering it for free on his website. He said that "This is the first one I've ever made that I'm offering for free, I feel that strongly about it."

> *"While preaching to the choir can and does rally the faithful, it also has the potential to spill out into the world in surprising, ongoing ways. Tom and Michael's experiences suggest that when older people are allowed to shape the ways they civically engage according to their interests and proclivities, it will affect more spheres than either decline ideology or productive aging ideology allow."*

What emerges from Michael and Tom's professional experiences after their Pub Theology Sunday service is civic engagement that is both richer and more complex than a one-size-fits-all ethos of volunteerism that has been foisted on older people. While each of their involvements looks quite different, they both utilize their past professional literate activities to bring their newfound (or at least newly reinvigorated) sense of civic engagement into conversations with their colleagues and others in their fields. Tom opens himself up in a new way to his coworkers, allowing them to see him in a different, more vulnerable, light, as an older person who is still actively learning and changing his mind about social justice issues. Michael reported that his film also brought him to a conference that put him in contact with people he would not have met otherwise, perhaps leading to future projects and collaborations. While preaching to the choir can and does rally the faithful, it also has the potential to spill out into the world in surprising, ongoing ways. Tom and Michael's experiences suggest that when older people are allowed to shape the ways they civically engage according to their interests and proclivities, more spheres are affected than either decline ideology or productive aging ideology allow.

Conclusion

Although the Pub Theologians initially fretted that their work with *The New Jim Crow* and *Just*

Mercy would be a mere act of "preaching to the choir," their sustained engagement with these texts and the experiences that grew out of that sustained engagement shows just how complex preaching to the choir can be. Through drawing new connections while reading the local news, emotionally engaging and educating their congregation within the familiar genres of the Sunday service, and (for some) bringing the contents of Pub Theology to workplace genres, the Pub Theologians civically engaged with a social issue most of them had been largely unaware of when starting this journey. As a group of older adults, their work together pushes against a decline ideology that assumes older citizens to be disengaged from political involvement and current events, except as it involves themselves and their own benefits. Their work together also creates an alternative to the productive aging movement's one-size-fits-all volunteerism, illustrating how literate activity can itself be a form of civic engagement for older people.

As a group of progressive Christians, they demonstrate a way of expanding the map of how religious commitments can inform civic engagement that might eventually lead to more just outcomes for all. Neither I nor the Pub Theologians would argue that their prayers and sermons solve the problem of racism in the criminal justice system, or that everyone seeking to be involved in this or any social justice issue needs to come at it from a faith-based perspective. Their shared faith, however, did provide them a community to discuss these issues, a structure for sharing what they learned, and affective motivation to continue to engage in conversations that white people have found it all too easy to avoid. Though the presentation of their Sunday service on October 2, 2016, may have formally concluded the Pub Theologians' study of these two books, shortly thereafter, the group's numbers swelled. In response to their service and the contentious 2016 election, many more church members of a variety of ages began attending meetings, some evenings filling up all the furniture in their common room meeting area. They continue to choose books dealing with civic engagement and social justice. While the Pub Theologians do not think about the success of their group solely in terms of numbers, they were heartened to see the choir respond to their preaching by wanting to join the group and become engaged with these types of issues themselves. Literate activity is by no means salvation, but it's a start.

NOTES

[2] Participants were given the choice to use their real name or a pseudonym on the IRB form in order to have the option to take credit for their written texts. Some Pub Theology members chose to use a pseudonym and others their given name.

[3] The transcription conventions used are as follows and are discussed at more length in Dressler and Kreuz:

- = indicates latched talk, a lack of a temporal gap between statements. = signs indicate people talking quickly in succession
- [ ] indicate overlapping speech, or people speaking at the same time over one another
- <u>underlining</u> indicates a word or phrase that the speaker stressed or emphasized

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Challenging the Rhetorical Conception of Health Literacy: Aging, Interdependence, and Networked Caregiving

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KEYWORDS

health literacy; literate practice; caregiver; older adults; interdependence; care networks

Over the past two years, as I have collaborated on a clinical study of communication between clinicians and human services professionals who support the health and wellness of older adults in mid-Michigan, I have spent a good deal of time before meetings waiting in clinic and office reception areas, casually chatting with older adult patients/clients and their caregivers (or others who receive care by the patients/clients themselves). I have met many informal caregivers such as parents, children, grandchildren, and life partners, as well as formal (paid) caregivers, such as home health aides (HHAs), personal care assistants (PCAs), certified nursing assistants (CNAs), and transportation assistance providers. In all of my time in these waiting rooms, it is rare to meet someone who is alone.

Caregiving is a critical and yet understudied area related to aging, health, and wellness. In 2000, the U.S. Census documented 2.4 million grandparents raising 4.5 million grandchildren under age eighteen, a 30% increase from 1990 (Simmons and Dye). In 2015, about 34.2 million Americans provided unpaid care to an adult age fifty or older in the last twelve months, and of these, 66% report that they have significant decision-making authority regarding the care recipient's condition and adjusting care. Fifty percent of family caregivers act as an advocate for the care recipient with care providers, community services, or government agencies (National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP). Age studies scholar Svein Olav Daatland argues that more intergenerational studies of aging involving caregiving are crucial to an understanding of norms and ideals about aging and their societal implications (124).

Yet, despite the importance of caregiving in the lives of older adults (either as a caregiver or receiving care), assumptions about aging "actively" or "successfully" suggest that aging is independent, not interdependent. As Suzanne Kesler Rumsey discusses, a version of the controversial "successful aging" paradigm is focused on activities or tasks performed by an older adult that can be objectively measured (86-87, citing Boudiny). Further, popular television and print media targeted at older adults, such as *AARP Magazine*, circulates problematic discourses of older adults in a "curriculum of aging" that promotes self-management of bodily decline (Bowen). These narratives lie in sharp contrast to work in humanistic approaches to aging, which emphasize interdependence, solidarity, and increase in life satisfaction across the lifespan (Glass and Vander Plaats).

The healthcare industry reiterates problematic assumptions about aging when invoking notions of skills-based health literacy. The skyrocketing costs of health care, connected to the exponential

increase of older adults managing chronic conditions as a proportion of American healthcare consumers, has created a health care "crisis" in America, an ageist crisis that, as age studies scholar Stephen Katz writes, "project[s] [older adults] as a monstrous entity set upon destroying welfare states and generational futures" (18). The healthcare industry articulates remedies to this financial crisis through discourses of health literacy and patient engagement, particularly focusing on preventative care and self-management of chronic conditions. In order for a perceived aging American population to self-manage their chronic conditions and be more engaged in their own health care, the medical community urges more health literacy education. For example, in a study of 3,260 older adults with Medicare-managed healthcare plans, the participants took the Short Test of Functional Health Literacy and then were assessed in terms of their medical costs. The study found that those participants with low health literacy incur more medical costs and "use an inefficient mix of services" (Howard et al. 371). However, health literacy, narrowly defined as "the ability to understand and act on health information" (McCray 152), is a problematic lens—much like "successful aging"— for viewing aging and care in the twenty-first century, as it locates the problem with the individual, alone.

This essay is an analysis of and response to the rhetorics of literacy as used in health care. Using John Duffy's theoretical framework for literacy development as well as scholarship in age studies and community literacy studies, this essay analyzes the rhetorics of literacy as used in health care; namely, how literacy becomes, as Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola argue, a "metaphor for everything else" (349). With a community literacy approach that incorporates public engagement and distributed literate activity rather than individualistic skill development, I then respond to this critique by considering how aging, interdependence, and networked caregiving expand the notion of what contributes to healthy living and well-being as we age. This supports a humanistic age studies approach rather than a deficit model of aging.

To illustrate this, I use examples from an action research project that creates online spaces for networks of professionals and caregivers to work across health care and community. Implementing a tool that enables communication across spheres of writing, this work illuminates the networked, distributed, and collaborative nature of composing a healthy life in the twenty-first century, as caregivers and patients—across the lifespan—work together with their healthcare professionals. The implications of this project are many for literacy, composition, and age studies scholars across fields of study and sites of practice, including a more expansive view of how we all might contribute to building dialogue and understanding across difference (Flower) in clinical, community, and home health settings. This work opens up space for us all to live interconnected to one another and more focused on improving the fabric of our communities.

Framework and Method: Rhetorical Conception of Literacy

In *Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community*, John M. Duffy presents a framework that he calls a "rhetorical conception of literacy" (17). Drawing from Kenneth Burke's

"wider context of motives," Duffy argues that

> all elements of literacy instruction, including the selection of reading materials, the choice of teaching methodologies, the assignment of essay topics, and even the teacher's conception of the learner are ultimately rhetorical and ideological, ultimately intended to promote a vision of the world and the place of learners within it. (17)

Duffy continues to say that "the terms 'rhetoric' and 'rhetorics of literacy' are meant to indicate these opposing possibilities—the ways in which reading and writing can be used to define, control, and circumscribe, but also the ways in which human beings can use written language to turn aside, re-create, and re-imagine" (18).

To critique the rhetorics of health literacy, I use Duffy's framework to analyze the Health Literate Care Model, an approach to healthcare practice endorsed by the U.S. Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) for adoption by healthcare organizations as a model to engage patients in prevention, self-management, and decision-making (Fig. 1). The Health Literate Care Model presents a set of strategies that reinforces the notion of health literacy as an independent and self-sufficient act, leaving little room for caregiving and socially constructed notions of health and wellness proposed by humanistic age studies research. From this analysis, I argue that the Health Literate Care Model presents an opportunity to reframe discourses of aging and health and wellness inside and outside of the healthcare system. The curriculum of aging that the model reinforces emphasizes independent, autonomous patients working alone on their own health, absolving the healthcare industry of any unequal power differentials that the closed system of health care may sustain.
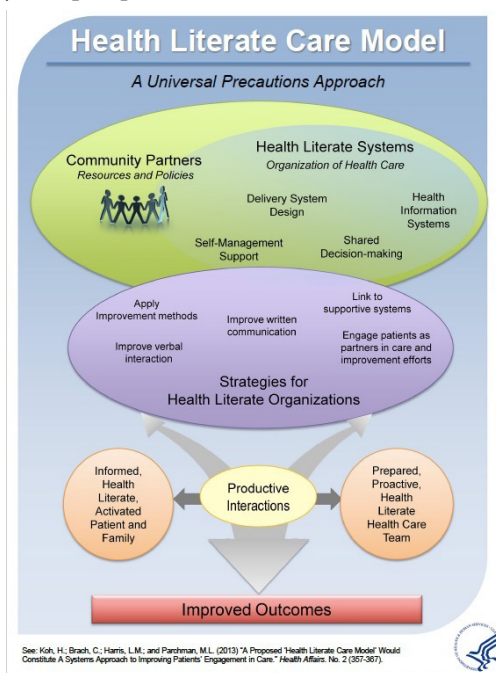

Fig. 1. "Health Literate Care Model: A Universal Precautions Approach." Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Interactive graphic available at https://health.gov/communication/interactiveHLCM/

To address this, I re-imagine and theorize one component of the Health Literate Care Model—community care coordination—that coordinates both health and social support services within a community (AHRQ). Community care coordination expands the focus of health and wellness beyond the clinical setting and into the communities in which patients live and work. To coordinate care across contexts, healthcare and social services professionals, caregivers, and others need spaces to write and interact. Using examples from a community-engaged, action research project (a community care collaboration project with team members including myself and professionals from a senior health clinic, a legal services clinic for older adults, and social services organizations), I then present strategies for networked writing to support interdependence and the building of interconnected care throughout the lifespan.

The Rhetorics of Health Literacy in the Health Literate Care Model

In 2013, the Assistant Secretary for Health and Human Services, Howard Koh, and a research team proposed a new healthcare delivery model for healthcare providers in the US called the Health Literate Care Model (Fig. 1; Koh et al. 357). This model grew out of the Chronic Care Model, widely adopted in the 2000s, and weaves into that older model health literacy strategies for "patients' full engagement in prevention, decision-making, and self-management activities" (Koh et al. 357). Coinciding with the enactment of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), this new model supports certain incentives under that legislation, such as the creation of patient-centered medical homes and accountable care organizations. These are team-based approaches to care that integrate medical practice across a team of providers and other sources of support for the patient (see Fig. 1).

While a team-based approach to care is laudable and a step forward from clinic-focused medical models, the model's adoption of the term "health literate" continues to pose ambiguity. The model refers to "health literate" systems, organizations, and teams, as well as patients and family (see Fig. 1). What does it mean for all of these entities to be health literate? The Health Literate Care Model's co-authors describe it this way:

> As noted in the Affordable Care Act . . . engaging patients in their own health care fundamentally relies on health literacy—that is, their ability to obtain, process, communicate, and understand basic health information and services. Unfortunately, relatively few people are proficient in understanding and acting on available health information to fully engage in their own care. . . . We then propose a new Health Literate Care Model based on "health literacy universal precautions"—that is, the need for health care providers to approach all patients with the assumption that they are at risk of not understanding information relevant to maintaining and improving their health. (Koh et al. 357-58)

Koh et al.'s description of health literacy is technically narrow (a set of skills) and yet expansively broad (skills across reading, writing, speaking, listening, cognition, decision-making, etc.). Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola describe this seemingly contradictory phenomenon of

defining literacy in their essay, "Blinded by the Letter: Why Are We Using Literacy as a Metaphor for Everything Else?", in which they write, "Too much is hidden by 'literacy,' we think, too much packed into those letters—too much that we are wrong to bring with us, implicitly or no" (349). They elaborate in arguing that "[w]hen we speak of 'technological literacy,' then, or of 'computer literacy' or of '[fill-in-the-blank] literacy,' we probably mean that we wish to give others some basic, neutral, context-less set of skills whose acquisition will bring the bearer economic and social goods and privileges" (352). Koh et al. posit that a set of enumerated skills bring health and wellness. Yet, Koh et al. are invoking a system that implicates many more stakeholders beyond the patient. In fact, in the Health Literate Care Model, as much or more of the burden lies on changing providers' skills. Health *literacy*, then, is the wrong term to use.

A more accurate term for the work the Health Literate Care Model seeks to do can be found upon returning to Duffy's rhetorical construction of literacy. He asks us to consider, "how is literacy implicated in our constructions of identity, perceptions of reality, and exertions of power over one another?" (5). It is important to remember that health care in the United States today is a three-trillion-dollar, for-profit industry, and that the "crisis" of the economic model—that older adults purportedly put more stress upon—does not have to be in crisis, and certainly is not in other countries (Rosenthal 244). This crisis is a construction framed in the public discourse of health care as an economic problem (Segal 119), and also framed as the increasingly aging and expensive U.S. population destroying health care. As Elisabeth Rosenthal, editor of *Kaiser Health News*, argues,

> Every other developed country in the world delivers healthcare for a fraction of what it costs here. They use a wide range of tools and strategies that line up with each country's values, political realities, and medical traditions. Some set rates for healthcare encounters. Some negotiate prices for drugs and devices on a national level. Some have the government administer payments. Some mandate transparency. (243-44)

Rosenthal's argument re-emphasizes how America has chosen to frame our healthcare debate in terms of financial crisis as a strategy for control of that debate. Unfortunately, one result of this framing is that aging (and the correlated management of increased chronic illness) is painted as contributing to that crisis to the detriment of younger Americans.

The low health literacy of older adults is implicated as a convenient explanation of this crisis. However, the invocation of poor health literacy of individuals is also designed to mask the increasingly bureaucratic imbroglio of American health care. There are very few people that do not have difficulty navigating the American healthcare system, so much so that an Institute of Medicine discussion paper redefined health literacy to be both related to an individual's competencies *and* to the complexity of the system (Brach et al.). As Ruth Parker argues, the "roots of health literacy problems have grown as health practitioners and health care system providers expect patients to assume more responsibility for self-care at a time when the health system is increasingly fragmented, complex, specialized and technologically sophisticated" (278). Rather than expanding an already problematic notion of literacy, I assert that the fragmentation and brokenness of the American medical-industrial complex should be the focus of the national health care discussion, and the use of the term *literacy* turns us away from doing precisely this. The deficit to be attended to is the system's,

not the individual patient's.

Literacy is currently used by healthcare researchers and professionals as a term for privilege, or lack thereof, across economic, political, social, and technological barriers to access to care. This is where health literacy meets health equity, which is defined as "the absence of systematic disparities in health (or in the major social determinants of health) between groups with different levels of underlying social advantage/disadvantage—that is, wealth, power, or prestige" (Braveman and Gruskin 254). The lenses of health equity and the social determinants of health help us to move beyond a biomedical focus on health literacy, or one that focuses on a patient's competency or deficiency in skillset or abilities. Instead, the focus is on improving health and wellness outcomes through addressing what may in fact be the primary roadblocks for many to become or stay healthy—lack of healthy food, transportation, housing, education, and other cultural and social (nonmedical) factors. The social determinants of health are largely socially situated and not individually determined, and much like those in New Literacy Studies, scholars who research health equity ask questions related to the "larger structural, systemic, and global forces that shape local contexts" (Duffy 10). These are questions of equity that the invocation of literacy obscures.

These lenses of health and equity and the social determinants of health also help us move beyond ageist notions of linearly-declining health and health literacy, and towards a postmodern, reflexive, and critical vantage point, aligning conversations in health with those in critical gerontology and age studies (Katz 19). Health inequities can exist at any age and are often intersectional in scope. Biological factors alone do not determine what may be needed from health care. Indeed, caregiving may be necessary at multiple times and places throughout the lifespan. This is why caregivers are of every age, as are those cared for. A positive psychological view, for example, challenges the notion of decline as we grow older, and points to older adults as caregivers as nurturing of empowerment, strength, and growth (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi). What is important is to achieve a cultural acceptance of caregiving and support for caregiving throughout our lives.

The word *literacy* obfuscates the social determinants of health and the social justice-oriented, activist work that is inherent to improved health and wellness for groups historically disadvantaged by systems such as the medical-industrial complex. As Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola write, "the word [literacy] keeps us hoping—in the face of lives and arguments to the contrary—that there could be an easy cure for economic and social and political pain, that only a lack of literacy keeps people poor or oppressed" (355). They end on a note that brings us back to caregiving: instead of skill development of individuals, we should look at how we build spaces and how we all might best participate in these spaces together (Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola 366). How might we all work together—across the lifespan—to promote a culture of care as we age?

From Skills-Based Health Literacy to Distributed Literate Activity

In order to work together, the discussion of health literacy must change to reflect the roles that *all* stakeholders play in the construction of a culture of care, particularly given the importance of

caregivers across the lifespan. An older adult may have a caregiver, may be a caregiver for an aging spouse, or may perform caregiver duties for grandchildren or other family members in the home. A greater understanding of interdependence of older adult patient and caregiver, as well as the broader caregiver experience, is necessary to build this culture of care. For example, in Shelby Garner and Mary Ann Faucher's study of family caregivers of older adults, they find that consistent themes emerged related to caregiver challenges, including scheduling of appointments, medication adherence, being perceived as interfering, and having to constantly problem solve (68-69). One participant in their study noted, "Combat. I have to gear up my weapons, lie low, and approach the obstacles I face and fight" (69). Garner and Faucher argue that "identifying and understanding the perceived challenges and supports experienced by caregivers is imperative for development of policy, programs of care, and crafting communication between the health care provider and the family caregiver" (63). Garner and Faucher's study highlights the dissonance between what I witness in the waiting room—the families and networks of support surrounding the older adult patient—and the perception of a solo older adult patient navigating the health care system alone, or alone in concert with their physician. Health care as we age involves a revolving door of actors, from family members to specialists to community resource providers, and we need a framework for literate health practices that includes these actors.

Paul Prior's concept of writing as literate activity provides an important foundation. To Prior, writing is "situated, mediated, and dispersed. . . . Literate activity, in this sense, is not located *in* acts of reading and writing, but *as* cultural forms of life saturated with textuality, that is strongly motivated and mediated by texts. Given this perspective, it becomes particularly important to examine the concrete nature of cultural spheres of literate activity" (138). In the context of older adult patients, Prior's definition illuminates three sets of dichotomies (see Table 1)

> *"Health care as we age involves a revolving door of actors, from family members to specialists to community resource providers, and we need a framework for literate health practices that includes these actors."*

and the importance of resolving each of them by replacing the left-hand column with the right-hand column, or a more expansive, adaptive socio-cultural approach to literate activity in the health care context. The first dichotomy is between a skills-based literacy approach and a literate activity approach to health (similar to all patients yet disproportionately experienced by older adult patients due to their perceived drain on the health care system). The second dichotomy exists between a biomedical model of aging and a positivist view that incorporates the cultural and social worlds of older adults. The biomedical model focuses on what might be measured in the clinical setting, while a positivist view of aging reflects the social and cultural dimensions of the older adult patient, including home and community contexts. Finally, it is not surprising that the first two left-hand column positions in Table 1 (individual patient and biomedical model) would align with models of healthcare economics, in that what is specifically measurable in the clinical setting is also quantifiable in the health care system. Literate health activity would instead frame a health care model that takes into account care inside and outside of that system, and focus on value to patient rather than cost of

clinical care. Health literacy is a convenient rhetorical framing to sustain the biomedical, for-profit model of health care. For this reason, it is critical to bring literacy studies scholarship to the context of health literacy.

Table 1. Differing Approaches to Health Literacy for Older Adults: Health Literacy Versus Literate Health Activity.

Health literacy	Literate health activity
Focus on individual patient	Focus on collective and distributed action
Focus on biomedical models of aging	Focus on culture and social worlds of older adults, includes home and community
Cost-based; focus on for-profit model of medical-industrial complex	Care-based, focus on value to patient

A literate health activity approach also makes space for a humanistic approach to aging and acceptance of interdependence in the care of older adult patients. The participant-caregiver in the Garner and Faucher study referred to her involvement with health care "combat" (69) in part because there is no belief in or space for her involvement in her parent's health decision-making. The assumed relationship is expert doctor/compliant patient, so the advocate caregiver must be rocking the boat. This is in direct opposition to aging studies research that indicates that older adult patients who choose caregiver assistance have more comprehensive medical visits and feel more supported (Prohaska and Glasser). With an acceptance of distributed health literate activity (in conjunction with greater appreciation for shared decision-making practices more broadly), a more robust understanding of the distribution of labor across collective actors would replace a battle with a collaboration.

A Community Literacy Studies Model for Networked Caregiving

A humanistic approach to aging and interdependence in the healthcare setting requires a cultural shift that requires dialogue across differing epistemological positions. Community literacy studies offers a framework to intervene in the discourse of health literacy and to present an explicit move away from the biomedical model of both literacy and aging as individual skills/abilities or a lack thereof and toward a collective, distributed set of mediated actions to give and receive care. The Health Literate Care Model recommends "health-literate" community partnerships across clinical and community contexts. This is often called community care coordination, or working in a team with medical and non-medical professionals and caregivers to coordinate care. This recommendation is an extra step above what was previously recommended under the Care Model, which was to encourage individual patients to take these steps alone.

In the context of older adult patients, this is invisible labor that would often be performed by the same caregivers that I meet in the waiting rooms of clinics. These caregivers often are given a handful

of brochures for free services as they leave with their relative or client, and it is up to them to attempt to apply and receive the services on their own time, rather than have an integrated approach whereby the clinic could streamline application and referral processes, and better support caregivers. A more networked and collaborative approach to care is a significant cultural shift for clinical practice, and for this reason, the ACA contains incentives to attempt this relationship building and practice transformation. This is a new and controversial activity, as it takes time separate and apart from the fee-for-service care that healthcare clinics and hospitals typically provide. For example, if a provider spends an hour on the phone with Meals on Wheels to ensure that a patient is eligible for services, that is not an hour that can be billed in the same way that a patient visit can be billed. Further, information technologies such as the electronic medical record do not facilitate data sharing outside of a siloed healthcare system. This is why the ACA (and some health insurance plans) incentivize this work—because under the current system, the healthcare provider loses time and money to try to work *with* caregivers rather than delegate work *to* them.

"A humanistic approach to aging and interdependence in the healthcare setting requires a cultural shift that requires dialogue across differing epistemological positions."

These incentives create an opportunity for a networked, caregiving-focused community literacy project. Healthcare providers, patients and caregivers, and human services professionals have very different vantage points when it comes to health care delivery, but all would agree that health care delivery is a site of struggle (or "combat," to continue the metaphor) in the United States today. From waiting room to nursing station to ivory tower, all agree that coordinating care inside and outside of the clinic is close to impossible. What all stakeholders are looking for—across institutions and communities—is a space in which to communicate with one another. That is, where can providers, caregivers, and community-based professionals work together? Linda Flower's rhetorical model of community literacy allows us to envision strategies for literate action (discovery and change) that simply cannot be envisioned within the rhetorics of health literacy. Flower describes community literacy as:

> an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* identify as sites of struggle. Community literacy happens at a busy intersection of multiple literacies and diverse discourses. It begins its work when community folks, urban teens, community supporters, college-student mentors, and university faculty start naming and solving problems *together*. It does its work by widening the circle and constructing an even more public dialogue across differences of culture, class, discourse, race, gender, and power shaped by the explicit goals of discovery and change. In short, in this *rhetorical model*, community literacy is a site for personal and public inquiry and, as Higgins, Long, and Flower (2006) argue, a site for rhetorical theory building as well. (19)

A community literacy rhetorical model offers an opportunity for older adults to advocate for resources necessary for healthy aging. For example, caregivers, as well as older patients like the older

adult participants in interviews conducted by Philippa Spoel, Roma Harris, and Flis Henwood, have the ability to push back against deficit notions of aging and advocate for services that may be necessary to comply with healthy living recommendations (141). A health care professional may not be aware that the infrastructure simply does not exist for a particular patient to be well; for instance, she may prescribe more exercise to control a condition such as obesity, yet without hearing about constraints from a patient or caregiver, may make the recommendation and blame a negative outcome on a patient's deficient health literacy. A care coordination plan instead requires that inquiry across difference take place so that caregiving is distributed across home, community, and clinic, and so that caregivers are visible in the equation of care.

"A community literacy rhetorical model offers an opportunity for older adults to advocate for resources necessary for healthy aging."

In sum, the Health Literate Care Model is problematic in its adoption of the rhetorics of health literacy but is still an opportunity to begin considering what a *rhetorical model* of an interconnected, networked system of care may look like. Despite its problematic characterization of patients as operating at a literacy deficit, the model also emphasizes the role of the system in making itself more transparent and more supportive of patients. The Health Literate Care Model begins to envision networks of care that are not tied solely to payment/profit; specifically, the community care coordination piece of the model is a first step towards an understanding of health and wellness beyond the biomedical model of health, or framing health through the testing, diagnosis, and treatment we receive in the clinical setting (Segal; Stone; Engel). Community care coordination extends the work of clinics and health professionals to build their care planning together with communities and caregivers.

Toward Networked Caregiving as Literate Activity

To illustrate how a community literacy model may aid in the re-framing of health literacy toward health literate practices, I return to the community care coordination project in which I am involved in mid-Michigan. This project began as I volunteered at a local legal aid clinic for older adults. A lawyer in that clinic had been in conversations with his clients for over twenty years, conversations in which older adults expressed needs for health and human services (Medicare claim disputes, Medicaid waiver eligibility for long-term care placement, SNAP food assistance, etc.) as well as legal assistance. He then sought to develop better lines of communication across all of these sectors, as well as with older adult clients/patients and caregivers. When I also began working at the community hospital, we sought to network all of these actors into an online platform where screening for resources, referrals, and care plans might be coordinated.

This networked platform in an example of a community computing project. Jeffrey T. Grabill identified community computing as an area of community-literacy study that focuses on "the implications of the interactions between information technologies, writing, and public institutions"

(9). An example that he gives, building databases for citizen action, is not unlike how we began this project. Part of the benefit of a care coordination tool for all involved was the creation of a continuously crowdsourced, updated database of available community resources in our area for older adult patients. Currently, no such resource in our area exists, other than a phonebook-style physical directory and face-to-face community resource fairs each year, and these were available to professionals only, not to caregivers or patients.

"The community care coordination tool creates a more accountable digital space in the clinic where representatives from the home (patient or caregiver), community (health and human services professionals), and clinic (provider) all participate to plan coordinated care together."

Community computing as community literacy emphasizes that data democratization is an essential component of activism (Grabill). This project accomplishes this in two ways. The first is the database itself, necessary to search for community resources and visualize the network of what services exist in our region and which do not.

This creates a data-driven approach to advocacy, in that we can also see what we lack by which organizations do not appear. Further, a networked technology can show the human services sector what services are being searched for. The data collected from the tool enables new ways of seeing resources and lack of resources for older adult patients in our community. In the ways that the healthcare system wishes to harness that data for cost control and savings, the human services and nonprofit sector can harness it for advocacy, for grant writing, and to make better evidence-based arguments more about resources and supports and their impact.

A community-driven approach is what makes this project a community computing project. While there are proprietary software tools on the market that do similar work as our community care coordination tool, the goal is not to democratize data, but to store, silo, and sell it. The most important aspect of this project for our team is that every community partner can, without cost, participate and use their usage data: number of searches that yielded their agency, number of referrals made, health outcome data, and so on. For organizations that, for example, provide free diabetes management education in rural areas, an understanding of how that education affects health outcomes is critical for their program evaluation, and, ultimately, their sustainability as a free community resource. Therefore, the creation of these networked writing spaces is not only creating space to support the patient, but to support the fabric of the community.

While this networked tool and its use continues to evolve through several pilot studies, I would like to suggest three examples from this project that highlight moves away from the rhetorics of health literacy toward distributed health literate activity for older adults and caregivers. All three aim to uncover Prior's "cultural spheres of literate activity" in healthcare settings and in homes and communities, such that a more complete and positive view of aging and interdependence might be facilitated in the healthcare system.

1. Feedback from older adults and caregivers as to the creation of spaces for literate activities that reflect

their desired experiences

As scholarship in age studies demonstrates, older adults as well as caregivers articulate their lived experience with the healthcare system as marked with frustration, discomfort and stigma, due to lack of trust in healthcare providers with sensitive issues (Greene and Adelman) and to difficulty navigating the complexity of the system (Garner and Faucher). Rather than create a system of communication that reinforces these difficulties, we have sought the feedback of older adult patients and caregivers in our legal and healthcare clinic sites to better understand how they might feel comfortable locating and coordinating resources for care, or having these located and coordinated on their behalf. This feedback overwhelmingly suggests, as age studies scholars Anne Glass and Rebecca Vander Plaats contend, that "social networks and improved health outcomes are strongly connected" (428). Further, while these social networks can be family, friends, faith community, or other personal ties, we might also seek to network caregivers in community, home, and health contexts who are known to one another, rather than sending patients and caregivers home to seek help alone by cold-calling phone numbers on brochures. Because the healthcare system privileges the doctor-patient encounter and relationship, a networked, distributed approach to coordinated care presents a cultural departure but one that better reflects the desires and well-being of older adult patients and caregivers.

2. Facilitation of dialogue across cost-based health systems and mission-driven community organizations who serve older adult patients/clients

As Linda Flower writes, "the *local*, *inter*cultural publics of community literacy work by circulating new models of dialogue across difference" (6). In order to change the ageist belief of older adults placing the healthcare system in an economic crisis, as well as the correlated belief that health care is an independent, individual responsibility on the part of the patient, new spaces to dialogue are needed. Community-literacy studies offers a framework to dialogue across those who hold these ageist and individualistic beliefs and those who are focused on a humanistic view of aging that integrates cultural and social dimensions of care and caregiving. The health system and its representatives hold very different beliefs about responsibilities for care in community contexts than mission-driven health and human services organizations. My work, first and foremost, was not to provide any answers about how to write community care coordination, but to create spaces for the dialogue to take place across these very different stakeholders to the conversation. Through public forums, private meetings, conference calls, one-on-one conversations, group emails, and scattered other forms of communication, we began to build a network of professionals and caregivers who could find common ground and begin to see their work, their literate activity, as shared.

3. Explicit involvement by patients, caregivers, and community sources of support in care plans for older adult patients

Creating an alternative to both (1) the rhetoric of a skills-based health literacy of the individual older adult patient and (2) biomedical models of diagnosing and treating the declining health of the older adult body are crucial to the cultural shift to acceptance of interdependence and distributed

health literate activity. The care coordination project seeks to find a method for the highly distributed and collaborative work of caregiving that puts on an equal footing clinical care and home and community care. In order to do this, home and community contexts must be made visible in ways that they currently are not in clinical medical practices and electronic medical records. The community care coordination tool creates a more accountable digital space in the clinic where representatives from the home (patient or caregiver), community (health and human services professionals), and clinic (provider) all participate to plan coordinated care together.

Conclusion: Toward a New Rhetoric of Care

Caregiving is often hidden in plain sight across the lifespan. While we care for others in our homes, and others care for us at various points in our lives, we rarely publicize it in the same way that we do our educations or careers. What is more often the case is "this work"—and self-management of chronic illness is indeed work (Arduser) is also unpaid labor for informal caregivers—family, friends, and community members who have other careers but also provide care (assuming the patient has this system of support in place, and many do not). Others have formal caregivers who may be paid but are not visible, permanent members of the home. What the care coordination tool project does is make visible (and quantifiable) the extent of this work to healthcare professionals and other stakeholders, showing them how much of the work to get or stay healthy often falls far outside of the prescription pad, and on the shoulders of those who do not stand to financially benefit. It also renders visible the distributed, networked literate activities of the many caregivers—professionals, relatives, friends, and patients—giving and receiving care across the lifespan. This looks much different than the rhetorical construction of health literacy that currently circulates.

As teachers and scholars of writing, we can create more visibility for caregivers and the complex ways care might be enacted. The community care coordination project is an example of how we might envision a notion of health care that is networked, distributed, and collaborative—socially-constructed rather than individualistic and skills-based. Caregiver relationships demonstrate how interdependent literate care practices truly are. As compositionists, we can support the creation of networks of writing, through facilitating database creation, through technology training, and as advocates for the writing work that is so vital for healthcare and community professionals as well as patients and caregivers to undertake in order to improve patient health outcomes. Building these rhetorical models requires collaboration across industry, community, and the academy, and while that coordination is difficult, it is of great cultural and social value. This resembles other community literacy projects (Grabill; Flower) and community-engaged writing collaborations in the field of composition studies (see, e.g., Rumsey et al.). This work also aligns well with critical and humanistic gerontology's turn to feminist perspectives of power "by stressing social relatedness, community good, and interdependence rather than individual good and independence" (Minkler 472). For literacy scholars, age studies scholars, and compositionists alike, the networked writing work of community care coordination presents an opportunity to reframe health literacy rhetorics and act for change.

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

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KEYWORDS

digital archive of literacy narratives; new literacy studies; pedagogy; age studies; older adults; oral history of pedagogy

"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.

> *"[A] failure to conceptualize age is a failure to conceptualize the reasons we read, write, and communicate with one another."*

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

> *"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."*

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.

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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Afterword
Horizons of Transformation:
When Age, Literacy, and Scholarship Meet

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All of us come to a scholarly project, or a rhetorical situation like this issue of *Literacy in Composition Studies*, from the dual perspectives of exigence and motive. We recognize exigence as a problem or situation in the field. . . in society. . . that compels our scholarly and rhetorical attention: in this case, made salient by the editors' call inviting scholarship at the juncture of "age" and "literacy" to expand and advance the work of composition. We take up this call with and from personal motives, not only as they infuse an immediate situation with purpose but as they reflect lifespan experiences of composing, literacy, scholarship, and development—our own and others'. Motive is, of course, closely tied to identity: as an "older adult"—I have just celebrated my seventy-eighth birthday—and still-active scholar, I am vitally concerned with the inquiries into "composing a further life" represented in this special issue. To position my response, I want to explain how exigence and motive figure into my own reasons and ways of reading and appropriating its meanings.

I identify my own dual stance with questions asked by several contributors. In the mid-2000s, contemplating worldwide aging, Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk asked herself: "What is society doing to prepare for this huge and rapid demographic shift? And what can we as individuals do to make the elder years more meaningful and enjoyable for ourselves?" (37). In 2009, about to retire, I asked myself much the same questions, filtered through a focus on higher education and the impact I envisioned on the field of rhetoric and composition/writing studies (RCWS). To pose them publicly, I organized a multigenerational conversation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication on "retiring gracefully and living well in retirement." In my introduction to the panel, I argued that the breaking wave of faculty retirements (as baby boomers aged out of the academy) signified a generational shift with far-reaching consequences, requiring analysis from both individual and systemic perspectives:

> What does it mean for us personally? How can we help each other learn what we need to know to make good choices for retirement? How can we create new options and opportunities for ourselves. . . as individuals, or through collective action in our institution, systems, states, or across higher education? But it's also important to grasp the multiple implications and consequences for the profession. These changes will be transformational. They will affect our young incoming faculty, our instructional programs, the configuration of our departments, and a range of problems and practices from funding and technology use to governance, tenure policies, policies on pregnancy and child care, and the balance of personal and professional lives. We need to view retirement in the context of the entire arc

of faculty careers and the kinds of flexibility and choice available to faculty at all stages from beginning professor to emeritus faculty. ("Introduction")

I went on to list some questions to be addressed, including "how can [retirees] redefine their relationship to the rhetoric/composition community? How can they find new communities that meet their social, intellectual, and spiritual needs? How can the field draw on the wisdom of its elder generations while also taking up the opportunities for positive change offered by a younger faculty demographic?"

Following Goethe's advice to "do the duty that lies nearest to thee," I've worked in my field to respond to this exigence: seeking organizational support for retiring and retired professionals in RCWS; defining retirement as a multi-year process encompassing late career, transition, and post-retirement phases;[1] articulating a longitudinal concept of academic careers that calls for long-term career planning and support for all transitions; fostering cross-generational connections and reciprocities;[2] foregrounding caregiving as an issue linking and impacting all generations. But the panel also reflected my desire to understand the meaning of formal retirement for myself and others as a major transition in a life trajectory, marking one as "growing old." In arguing for humanistic contributions to age studies—narrative, in particular—Stephen Katz notes that "[u]ltimately, a subjective dimension in age studies means that we include ourselves in what we study and write about" (21). Julia Twigg writes of feminist gerontology that it is "strongly engaged, drawing on the personal feelings and experiences of authors as they struggle to make sense of their own and other's lives. Like earlier feminist projects, it recognizes that personal struggles and experiences offer an important touchstone for academic theorizing" (62). Likewise, I approach this reading with a personal investment in the question posed by Douglas Hall and Michael Harker: "What are we doing as scholars to maintain our literacy as we age and to develop our own literacy of aging?" (152).

Since 2009, while continuing my own "further life" as a scholar and part-time teacher/mentor to new generations of scholars (themselves of varied ages), I've become familiar with the distinctions and lived experiences of aging through life transitions traversed by myself and close family: the "third age" or "young-old" period of adulthood and the passage to, and through, "deep old age."[3] These intimate encounters with aging have led me to read, study, teach, and write about adult development, embodied cognition, identity work, lifespan literacy, and aging in relation to composing personal and scholarly lives. Although I've only recently discovered age studies as an interdisciplinary matrix for these interests, I bring to these topics a long-held view of composition studies as having a broadly ecological "developmental orientation" that encompasses the lifespan (Phelps, "The Domain of Composition"; *Composition as a Human Science*). In the present moment I look to this issue for resonances with my own project at the intersection of age studies and literacy: to memorialize a lifelong partnership with my mother in our literacy practices and dialogue over writing, reading, and rhetoric.

These exigencies, motives, and questions have come together seamlessly for me in trying to appropriate this issue for my own uses and needs as a literate person, scholar, mentor to younger generations, and "older adult." By appropriation I mean a process of following "the direction of thought opened up by the text . . . the disclosure of a possible way of looking things" that goes beyond what

the text "says" (Ricoeur 92). In this case, the "text" is not only the issue itself but the multidisciplinary knowledge base of work in which age has become a focus and a lens, accessed through the collective bibliography. In writing about what I have learned, am learning, and hope to learn from this issue, I anticipate not only that individual readers but also the disciplines we represent will make their own appropriations—recognizing, too, that appropriation is not a momentary rhetorical event but a process that will unfold and disperse over time, as we follow the lead of these articles and the bodies of work they reference.

I read this issue, then, from several perspectives of engagement and investment. The first is *phenomenological*: how does this work attend to and illuminate the lived experience of aging and aging literacies?

Phenomenologies of Lived Experience

Although only a few authors specify their research methods as phenomenological, most of the contributions are case studies that reflect how seriously the scholars in this issue, and others in age studies, take the idea that aging must be understood and studied in part from the perspective of individuals' subjective interpretations, symbolic expressions, and enactments of it. Broadly, these scholars adopt what Mlynarczyk calls "meaning-based approaches," concerned with the meanings that older adults make of their lives: "varieties of meaning from commitments to connectedness of different kinds, through meaning related specifically to time and generational meaning, to ethical meaning and grappling with the human condition" (Edmondson 1). Literate activity is itself meaningful and a source of meaning in people's lives. Literate and rhetorical activity are important ways for people to make meaning of aging, and also for us to access what aging, and literacy at older ages, means to them. While the subjects of these studies engage in literate activity (and learning) through late age, those forms of action and expression are vulnerable to losses, limitations, and fluctuations as the body-mind ages, especially in encountering accelerating literacies and new technologies. Phenomenological accounts document how older adults adapt and respond affectively to these changes, negotiating their social and cultural meanings in nuanced, complex, individualized ways. While contributors' methods vary in researching meaning-making and subjects' experiences, they typically examine literacies and aging in prosaic contexts of everyday life—home, library, church—and depend on "deep listening."[4] These studies attend closely to how participants themselves depict experience and ascribe meanings, especially through microanalysis of their speech, writing, and multimodal semiotic activity. But by observing older adults' activities and relationships in context, researchers seek also to understand meanings that may be more tacit.

"Literate and rhetorical activity are important ways for people to make meaning of aging, and also for us to access what aging, and literacy at older ages, means to them."

Phenomenological approaches to aging put special emphasis on embodiment, especially the aging woman's body, as a nexus of somatic and sociocultural meanings. As Lauren Marshall Bowen's

introduction lays out, age studies experienced the same "critical turn" as other humanistic and social science areas of inquiry: reconceptualizing "old age"—and the aging body—as socioculturally and historically constructed; critiquing ageist ideologies and age-inequality; seeking to challenge dominant cultural narratives and give voice to older adults themselves; and developing educational and activist programs in service of these goals. But studying age, especially late age, has led many scholars to turn back to corporeal experiences of the body in theorizing age. As Twigg explains,

> [A]ging forces us to engage with physiology, not least because of the ultimate undeniability of death. Like pain it forces the reality of the body on to the analytic stage. It is for this reason that aging studies, together with work on pain and chronic illness, has been one of the key sites for the development of more philosophically complex sociologies of the body that challenge the excesses of postmodern epistemology and that place the phenomenon of embodiment at the heart of the analysis. . . . (63)

Many age studies scholars have noted the compelling need to understand their own embodied aging. Gerontologist Martha Holstein strives to

> understand my own aging against the still limited scholarship that might inform my heightened consciousness. Above all, I do not want to pretend that my body is 'not me'; I want to understand how I am experiencing it and how others perceive it. And I want to use that knowledge as the opening wedge in a strategy to resist how others seek to define what it means to be old. (314)

My own experience of the *coup de vieux*—the "hit of old age" (Bateson 98)—is intimately tied to my sense of self as literate. As I wrote recently, early in retirement an episode related to spinal arthritis was

> the first warning that my body was deteriorating irreversibly. . . . my muscles had imperceptibly become deconditioned; my ability to carry out normal activities of everyday life—going up and down stairs, getting up from chairs—was slipping away, foreshadowing loss of independence. As I struggled to regain these functions, the disintegrative events became a cascade. Crucial parts of my body were failing me—those I relied on to write, read, listen, travel: eyes, ears, hands, feet, the sources of an embodied professional identity. And with this, pain diffused throughout my body and became constant, fluctuating and circulating in and around joints, muscles, tendons, fascia. ("Identity Work")

One day, reading online about myofascial pain, I saw the heading "fascia as context": it became a metaphor for my diffuse, distributed pain and the disintegration of bodily integrity it signaled. The fascia is a continuous system of connective tissue that holds the body together in a three-dimensional matrix (a neuromyofascial web) essential to stability and movement; some describe its functions as nonlinear and fractal. Its ecological connectivity—fascia as context—underlies and symbolizes for me both the integrated wholeness of bodily identity—including embodied mind—and its disruptions in aging.

My fortunate access to modern medicine meant that many of these common, prosaic experiences of aging could be mitigated or meliorated with surgeries, medications, physical therapy, and massage, extending my vitality into "Adulthood II." Still, even in relatively good health "for one's age,"

recurrent pain and impairment, including changes in memory and cognition, are chronic features of late aging. But, as Suzanne Kesler Rumsey said of the homebound adults she studied, "the decline in their physical abilities is still a time of agency, purpose, and personal development" ("Holding on to Literacies" 14). For me (still in the long transition to "old-old" age), the very experience and contemplation of aging in myself and loved ones, complemented by generative, reciprocal relations with younger scholars, opened new paths in my scholarship and literacy, inspiring intellectual growth and adventure over the last decade and transforming my writing as a medium for re-composing identity and integrating new learning.

My awareness of these relations between a more vulnerable, aging body and both growth and decline in literacy was made more acute by witnessing intimately my mother's last years as one of her caregivers, supporting her in "*holding on* to dignity, independence, and agency" (Rumsey, "Holding on to Literacies" 14). As her literacy partner, I collaborated to affirm and sustain her core identity as writer, reader, and thinker against these disintegrative forces. Wanting to capture her experiences (and mine) of aging in the context of our shared lifetimes of literacy has made me particularly attentive to richly phenomenological accounts in this issue.

Here, then, are some of the themes that emerged from reading this issue through a phenomenological lens:

- "individuation": the great diversity in how age, aging, and literacy in older ages are experienced and enacted by individuals, defying cultural stereotypes
- the vast complexity of interacting factors that shape any act of literacy and any person's literacy development over a lifetime
- human beings' continuing potential for adaptation, growth, learning, and change, unpredictable and emergent, in late adulthood
- the centrality of the body for older adults in continuing, extending, growing, "alienating," or "holding on" to literacies (Rumsey, "Holding on to Literacies")
- the corresponding importance for aging literacies of material changes in literacy tools and practices: as the technologies of literacy evolve, embodied literacy practices and meanings ascribed to them by older adults are complex, nuanced, and diverse
- the way literacies in late life reflect and draw on older adults' cumulative life experience with literacy learning and practices, in a historical context of "accumulating" and "accelerating" literacies (Brandt, "Accumulating"; Keller)
- the interdependence of older adults' literacies with others, through their past and present embedding in familial and other social relationships
- the conflicts, contradictions, dissonances (reflecting mixed cultural messages) that older adults experience and negotiate around their literacies (for example, in relation to religion, social media, generational differences)
- a concern and investment (among researchers) in older adults' agency: to discern its subtle workings; to support it insofar as it is constrained, muted, or underestimated by systemic forces (as in the health care system).

Theoretical Frameworks

The second perspective from which I read the issue is for productive concepts and *theoretical frameworks*. Not surprisingly, for an issue that introduces age into the nexus of literacy and composition studies that defines the journal, most articles work at the intersections of two or more frameworks, many of them (like feminism, disability studies, and age studies itself) transdisciplinary. I always want to know in what sense theories are productive, as tools for our purposes and as a wellspring of insight and new ideas. In this issue, theories serve many purposes—as a source of concepts, an analytic method, an ethical orientation, a principled basis for defining problems. Although theories may lead researchers to particular problems and projects, at the moment the perspective I want to invoke is that of looking for concepts and theories that fit the phenomena observed, that both capture their complexity and generate new insights into them. From this perspective, authors in this issue are attracted to theories that help them to

- view an individual's literacy longitudinally, as developing and growing over the life course, including deep old age, with later ages reflecting cumulative experiences
- place aging, or older adulthood, in a lifespan perspective: not focusing on "old age" as an isolated part of life, but on age as a deeply significant facet of identity in the trajectory of a whole life
- think ecologically about the complex web of factors and relationships that shape the life course and literacy development
- analyze lives and literacies as interdependent, both individually and generationally
- consider the histories of literacies and of aging themselves, particularly their rapid changes in the last century, as co-present contexts for individuals' lifetime literacy learning and practice
- recognize age as a political location like others whose ideologies and discourses need to be analyzed critically, and account for how individuals' experiences and practices internalize its cultural meanings, roles, and scripts, even as they also modify and resist them.

At times one can discern a disconnect or even conflict in the age literature between the subjectivity of phenomenologically rich accounts and the critical dimension of age theories, which tend to emphasize analysis at what Neal King calls the "macrolevel—'institutional' level—which they equate with the abstractions 'structure' and 'power,'" over microanalysis of "observable, mundane behavior" (62). As Harry R. Moody remarks in his Foreword to Ricca Edmondson's book *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom: Meaning and Practice Across the Lifecourse*, in age studies as in other fields "we stumble, again and again, across dualities" (ix). But phenomenologies as practiced here are not naively subjective: their theoretical frameworks (for example, ecologies of writing, new materialism, new literacies) are chosen specifically to afford integrating dualities like agency and structure, aging as embodied and as suffused with ideology. An example is Ryan Dippre's posthumanist framing of agency as "socially constructed but individually enacted"; as "circulated. . . established situationally through the interactional work of actors, human and nonhuman alike" (77). In fact, such phenomenologies represent an emergence (in age studies, feminism, disability studies,

and elsewhere) of a viewpoint I'd call "postcritical," which attempts to recover a more grounded, embodied view of human experience without losing what was achieved by the critical turn in these fields. Yvonne Teems (this volume) describes how these fields have gone through "one turn away from the body with social constructivism, and one back toward the body with new materialism" (2-3). In another article ("'My *Body* Feels Old'"), Teems explains how in this last (postcritical) turn, phenomenology addresses this duality methodologically by creating a "dialogical space" between the two poles. The phenomenological—"felt"—body is already an integrative site of meaning, agency, emotion, thought, material being, discourse, and culture. In a nondualistic paradigm, "'lived experience' is itself a concept that refers to the collapse of these analytically separable domains into a perceptual unity" (Hughes and Paterson 336). Teems argues that "the metrics that compose 'old age' fall along a continuum of discursive and material construction, and it is that dialectical space that must be analyzed to obtain a fuller understanding of aging" ("My *Body* Feels Old" 12).

Of the integrative (nondualistic) theories drawn on here from age studies, the life-course paradigm strikes me as especially apt and potentially transformative in its applications to literacy studies and composition. This paradigm seeks to move beyond separate studies of individual development and historical change by focusing on their dynamic relationship, studying "how societal and individual changes interact as social and developmental trajectories through specific mechanisms" (Elder, "Human Lives" 33). It is distinguished by its multimethodological and multilevel approach to studying the interplay between macro-change and individual life trajectories, especially as mediated through a web of social relations among individuals in different age groups. Anthropologists Jason Danely and Caitrin Lynch describe a life-course approach (compatible with many of the theoretical frameworks adopted in this issue) as recognizing "that as individuals age, their lives unfold in conjunction with those of people of different ages, and that all of these actors, who occupy different and changing positions and multiple cultural and physical environments over a period of historical time, are shaping and influencing each other in important ways" ("Transitions and Transformations" 3).

Life-course theory specifies four key principles: *historical time and place*, *the timing of lives*, *linked or interdependent lives*, and *human agency*. Glen Elder elucidates these as follows:

> 1. *The life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime.*
> 2. *The developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person's life.*
> 3. *Lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.*
> 4. *Individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances.* ("Life Course" 3-4)

Deborah Brandt summarizes the contributions of life-course theory to understanding human development and explains the potential of this orientation to the longitudinal study of writing development in her chapter "Writing Development and Life-Course Development." Her own groundbreaking studies exemplify the powerful insights gained from examining longitudinally how

"people's writing lives are drenched in historical particularity, demonstrating how trajectories of individual writing development relate to larger cultural and economic developments with which they meld" ("Writing Development" 257). I am particularly compelled by the far-reaching implications for RCWS of life-course theory's multigenerational dimension, which considers lives as linked within and across the changing historical worlds inhabited by different cohorts and generations. I'll explore these in my conclusion.

Horizons of Transformation

I want to develop the metaphor of horizons in several senses to project the consequences of taking up "age" as an indispensable category of analysis for studies at the intersection of literacy and composition.[5] In doing so, I hope to reinforce and complement Lauren Marshall Bowen's comprehensive vision of its potential in her introduction to the issue.

Expanding Horizons

First, I want to add my voice to Bowen's in urging us to go beyond inclusion of older people in literacy research and the related political agendas of opposing ageism and its oppressions—the primary focus of this issue—to exploit the full conceptual potential of "age" for expanding horizons in composition (or, as it has become, rhetoric and composition/writing studies).[6] Attention to older adults' literacies and ideologies of aging is a catalyst for reconceptualizing the meaning and scope of *all* our subject matter by understanding time—or more precisely, chronotope—as a fundamental dimension of human lives, texts and artifacts, and their worlds. Age—a metric of *experienced, embodied time*—marks the life trajectories of individuals and social groups through their own niches of *historical time*, interacting with one another and with historical events and forces in an ever-changing material and social environment.

In 1988, writing about the implications of "process" as a key term for composition studies, I suggested that, in resonance with a broad contextualist pattern in postmodern thought, "[its] focus on event introduced a temporal/historical dimension into composition, even though dynamic axes have not been fully exploited at all levels of subject matter" (*Composition as a Human Science* 44). Similarly, in 1994 Elder wrote that the development of life-course studies was "part of a general conceptual trend that has made time, context, and process more salient dimensions of theory and analysis" ("Time, Human Agency, and Social Change" 4-5). But in 2018 composition has not yet transcended the limited temporal horizon of its beginnings in first-year college writing. Even in the broader arena of RCWS, it is only now that scholarship is coalescing around the effort to examine writing development—and its contexts—life-span and life-wide (Bazerman, et al.; Prior).

Lauren Marshall Bowen's introduction catalogs many areas of inquiry where examining age and its meanings can *expand horizons* through the intersection of literacy and composition—and, in turn, contribute to age studies. I want to elaborate the expansive possibilities of one theme she identifies—"cross-generational perspectives"—that is central to life-course studies.

I begin with two concepts from life-course theory: *linked lives* and *social convoys*. "Social

convoys" is a way of specifying the idea that individuals' lives are always linked, embedded in "the social fabric of evolving, overlapping networks of close and distal ties" (Moen and Hernandez 259). Life-course scholars examine "the dynamics of linked lives over time" by making social convoys—"ongoing relationships of two or more people over time" (259)—their unit of analysis. Social convoys are both intra- and intergenerational. Many studies in this issue focus on literacies linked in small social convoys: couples—husband and wife (Rosenberg), mother and daughter (Bean), longtime women friends (Mlynarczyk), a church-based group (Kelvie, Bean). The methodological importance of this approach is that its focus on relationships reveals how "[t]he impacts of large-scale forces on individuals and groups . . . are filtered through networks of close and distal ties (convoys) of obligation, expectation, and interpretation" (Moen and Hernandez 276).

> *"We need to infuse intergenerational perspectives into our research, not only on older adults but on traditional and nontraditional-aged college students, to account for their past and ongoing participation in diverse sites of literacy learning—familial, religious, civic, military, workplace—that integrate people of different ages and temporal horizons."*

Consider some implications of these concepts for research and instruction in composition. First, as we take up aging literacies and the longitudinal study of literacy our analytic unit should be relationships, not just individuals. We should conduct research combining micro- and macro-methods to analyze how social convoys mediate between macro-level changes in society and culture and individuals' literate lives. Such research would include cohort and generational effects, recognizing the central importance of the emergent four-generational family and its accumulating literacies. (See Allen and Walker for feminist perspectives on the diversity of contemporary families, especially late-life families, as age-integrative social units.) We need to infuse intergenerational perspectives into our research, not only on older adults but on traditional and nontraditional-aged college students, to account for their past and ongoing participation in diverse sites of literacy learning—familial, religious, civic, military, workplace—that integrate people of different ages and temporal horizons. The changes in pedagogy required by this insight go beyond teaching students a new curriculum of aging—an important step modeled by Hall and Harker in their article—to develop methods of instruction that take into account participation in cross-generational relations as a feature of all students' lifelong experiences of literacy learning, composing, and rhetorical action. It means too that composition's responsibility for literacy instruction is not bound to the college classroom, but stretches into the broadest reaches of literacy learning in communities of all sorts and ages (an important trend in expanding composition's horizon) to include the oldest adults.

Entangled Horizons

The metaphor in my title—"horizons of transformation"—was inspired by Jason Danely and Caitrin Lynch, who write of the transitions of aging as "a matter of entangled *horizons of transformation*," referencing "the webs of relationships and possibility that unfold through lives as they are embedded in social, economic, and political contexts'" (4, my emphasis). I liked the idea of

imagining the transformations that "age" brings to literacy and composition studies as "horizons" that expand, in part through fusing the horizons of different fields and historical times. "Entanglement" allows for many relationships—difference, reciprocity, competition, conflict, misunderstanding— that carry transformative potential. Although Danely and Lynch were thinking of macro-events and changes as the horizons for people's daily lives, the notion of "entangled horizons" struck me as particularly apt for characterizing relations between individuals, social groups, cohorts, and generations. Their entanglements could be analyzed in many terms—cross-culturally, for example— but my focus here is temporal: specifically, on the implications of linked lives and literacies across ages and historical times.

Cross-generational relations in literacy learning are encompassed in what I've written above about expanding horizons, so I want to point to some less obvious examples of how and where RCWS scholars might think about entangled horizons related to age and time. In the spirit of Danely and Lynch's observation, we can think of entangled horizons among generations as extending to their rhetorical events, cultural artifacts (texts, technologies, the material environment), and social worlds. So we need to reexamine rhetorical concepts like circulation and Bakhtinian intertextuality in their temporal dimension, as linking people of different ages and historical times. Circulation, a long-tacit dimension of rhetorical studies now receiving new attention as an "emergent threshold concept" (5), is defined by Laurie Gries as broadly "the study of writing and rhetoric in motion" (7): "a dynamic, ubiquitous flow of discourse, ideas, information . . . bodies, artifacts, words, pictures, and other things . . . within and across cultures to affect meaningful change" (5-7). Since that flow is conceived as spatiotemporal (4), or chronotopical, the study of circulation needs to be informed by considerations of age and the insights of age studies into the life course, different historical worlds, generational relations, and the ways that social convoys mediate historical forces.

Intertextuality among contemporary authors is a cross-generational practice, even without taking into consideration the ongoing life of inscribed meanings over centuries (that is Gadamer's point in *Truth and Method* about the role of horizons in understanding the past). Certainly that is the case for scholarship itself, which too often (using the present tense to attribute words and ideas) forgets that their authors are not fixed in the chronotope of their past texts but themselves age and develop over time. The intertextuality of this issue's quotations and citations, including my own, entangles horizons in temporally complex ways, if one considers the ages of authors in this issue, the dates of works cited, and the age of their sources at time of writing and now, as well as the histories of thought about aging and literacy that they evoke.

Continuing this focus on our own scholarship, I suggest that age-based differences and relationships play an underappreciated role in many research projects and areas of inquiry in RCWS as motive, object of inquiry, or problem. For example, professional and technical communication must consider generational differences and their entangled horizons in studying literacy practices and rhetorics in contexts like health communication (see Opel, this issue) or multigenerational workplaces. Intergenerational difference and cross-generational relations are key issues in studying the use of social media and digital technologies (see McGrath, this issue). Many projects (especially feminist) in rhetorical history and cultural rhetorics arise from a personal connection to past

generations through archives, artifacts, and family relationships, and often seek deliberately to make meanings from their entangled horizons. This cross-generational dimension is already evident in literacy research, like editor Suzanne Kesler Rumsey's study of her own Amish heritage literacy ("Heritage Literacy").

We can also turn the lens of age on scholarship as a profession that is constituted and reconstituted temporally as scholarly networks of people, in one form of linked lives and social convoys. We would think about graduate education and acculturation to a discipline quite differently if we articulated and enacted these processes for both teachers and students as inaugurating reciprocal, cross-generational relationships that unfold and change over a career-span and beyond. These entangled horizons are indeed transformational for individuals; but one could also examine their transformational impact at the level of cohorts and generations, as age demographics and the longevity revolution reshape their ratios, roles, and relations in the academy. Life-course theory would focus special attention on transitions experienced by scholars and their literacies as they age and move through a career. And we should raise consciousness about how intergenerational relations cross and complicate the borders between professional and personal lives—for example, in caregiving.

It's been said that it took scholars' own aging to get them to pay attention to age as a fundamental aspect of identity, and it is certainly true that older scholars like me are bringing their lived experience to the study of age, aging, "seniority," and ageism (see Elliot and Horning). But younger scholars are actually leading the way in RCWS in studying older adults. These synchronous motives between older and younger scholars—and their complementary strengths and perspectives—argue that the most fruitful path for future studies is a cross-generational partnership. It will take the transformative potential of scholars coming from different age locations and historical experience to develop comprehensive, integrated understandings of age, literacy, and composing across the lifespan.

Over the last decade I've felt keenly the power of entangled horizons across ages in collaborations with younger scholars, including Lauren Marshall Bowen as one of my partners in designing and conducting the Survey of Academic Lifecycles on Retirement. For that project I sought out several younger scholars who shared my interest in age studies and who brought expertise I lacked to the study. This issue of *Literacy in Composition Studies* encompasses the spectrum of age and career phases from graduate student to retiree, modeling the fruitfulness of this approach. Its contributors have drawn me into a kind of cross-generational, intertextual dance, as I worked from my own horizon of scholarship and embodied experience to appropriate an accumulating scholarship on age and the new work presented here. It's fitting that Lauren's introduction and my response book-end this special issue, because our shared visions and aspirations for composition—mine from the past, hers developed in work on age studies—align here with emerging studies at the intersection of literacy, aging, and scholarship. That resonance is captured in expressions of hope for the future of the field written twenty-five years apart by myself and Lauren, respectively:

> *Louise, 1986*: [Composition] has undergone a sea change in bursting the bonds of the freshman writing classroom, and even the school, to study literacy throughout the course of human development and to consider all the possibilities in natural and school settings for supporting its growth. This expansion of the domain of inquiry and action opens a

sweeping intellectual vista. No longer confined to the bubble of the college writing class, we move back to watch literacy powers emerge from the speech matrix and develop through childhood in the home and at school. . . . In the other direction we move forward into virtually unexplored territory—the further growth of writing and reading through adulthood to serve a variety of functions at home, school, and work. . . the developmental orientation shifts us from a limited "event psychology," in the words of Heinz Werner, to the long view in which writing and reading experiences are understood as embedded in life processes and their greater cultural contexts. (Phelps, "The Domain of Composition" 192).

Lauren, 2011: [W]e need to actively consider the transformation of literacy research that might occur—*should* occur—if we were to frame literacy studies as an exploration of literacy across the life course, including schooled literacies, workplace literacies, and the literacies developing beyond a full-time, wage-earning phase of life. We must recognize literate activity as always on a lifelong continuum, from birth to death and extending across generations. Only when the age continuum is recognized in full can we sufficiently appreciate the active and changing nature of literate lives. ("Resisting Age Bias in Digital Literacy Research" 603).

It looks like it is finally happening—through the entangled horizons of the oldest and youngest scholars, studying how age connects us across generations.

NOTES

[1] I initiated and am part of a research team conducting a Survey of Academic Lifecycles and Retirement (Lauren Marshall Bowen, Laurie Pinkert, myself, and Rachel Street, co-investigators). Preliminary results were reported at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2018 (see Phelps et al.).

[2] For an overview of the work of the Task Force on Cross-Generational Connections (Louise Wetherbee Phelps and Christine Tulley, co-chairs), see its 2018 white paper (Conference on College Composition and Communication Task Force on Cross-Generational Connections).

[3] Adults (in developed Western societies, and increasingly worldwide) now experience older adulthood in two stages, generally referred to as the "third" and "fourth" ages of human development (Kail and Cavanaugh 504-506). The new, third chapter of extended health and vigor extends roughly from fifty to fifty-five to late seventies or early eighties, although Twigg notes the distinction is in fact qualitative: "it is the onset of serious infirmity"—and the related caregiving that requires—"that marks the point of transition" to deep old age (64). (On personal experiences of the third age, see Mary Catherine Bateson on "Adulthood II," and Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *The Third Chapter*.) With increased longevity, people may enter the fourth age later, sustain physical and mental fitness longer, and live into their hundreds, creating what Lynne Segal calls "temporal vertigo" (32). Together, these accelerating changes mean that "in the grand sweep of the history of humanity, 'old age is young' and its architecture is still incomplete; the effects of global longevity cross borders and generations," requiring transformative adaptations in the life course (Danely and Lynch 5).

[4] Mlynarczyk's use of "deep listening" (this issue) derives from a body of work (much of it feminist) in rhetoric and composition on silence and rhetorical listening, as developed by Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe, among others. There is also a tradition of deep listening in meditative or mindfulness practice and contemplative pedagogy that fits phenomenological research approaches.

[5] My variations on the concept of "horizon" build on Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of horizon as of "not a rigid frontier, but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further" (*Truth and Method* 217) as well as having the potential for fusion with other horizons (271-274).

[6] I view rhetoric and composition/writing studies (holistically understood) as convergent with international literacy studies, although (as in the case of "rhetoric") there remains—and will remain—a considerable surplus of meaning in each field outside their overlap. Note that the code descriptions negotiated with the National Center for Educational Statistics by the CCCC Task Force on Rhetoric and Composition Databases for the 2010 Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) repeatedly use the term "literacy," even though we were not permitted to include it in titles at any level. The Task Force wrote the following definition for the series 23.13, "Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies" (which was unused because at that level the code is specified by its subcategories rather than a description): *Instructional programs that focus on the production and use of writing and multimodal texts; literacy practices across contexts and media; writing development and composition pedagogy; and arts, theories, histories, and social practices of rhetoric.*"

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