REWRITING THE AGING BODY:
LITERACY, TECHNOLOGY, AND HISTORY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Millie Garfield gets out of bed each morning and makes a cup of coffee. She then goes to her computer and starts her day with a review of her favorite blogs, a visit to her son’s Twitter page, and a quick scan of reader comments on her own weekly blog posts. She looks forward to corresponding with a fellow blogger, who will help her get the most out of the e-reader she received as a gift for her birthday—her eighty-fifth. Accounts like this strike many as exceptional because dominant narratives about who possesses technological literacy—and why—obscure the life experiences of older adults like Millie. In this dissertation, I recover such stories in order to challenge the assumption that older adults are inherently unwilling or inept participants by identifying ways in which older writers find motivation to continue developing technological literacy. Literacy scholarship reveals that people take on the challenges of literacy to achieve greater public participation, or else because it is believed (usually falsely) to carry economic value. By examining the literacy and learning of older adults, I find other motivations—ones tied closely to the human body. Through rhetorical analysis of public texts and qualitative studies of literacy development and practice in and out of school contexts, I argue that older adults’ literacy is shaped not only by what their bodies can no longer do, but also (and especially) by what their bodies have been doing for a lifetime.

According to the U.S. Administration on Aging, the over-65 population will eventually make up as much as twenty percent of the U.S. population. However, with few exceptions, writing and literacy studies scholars have not deliberately examined how literacy—particularly technological literacy—functions in the context of aging. My introductory chapter offers a cross-disciplinary analysis of how age studies and writing studies might be mutually beneficial. As age
studies scholars have shown, old age, like any other marginalized and oppressed body-based identity, is partially a construction of social and cultural values and the discourses that bear those values. In short, we learn (and are taught) how to be old. But how does this process of learning find expression in our literate lives, and how can we become attuned to it in order to critique and possibly change it for the better? One way, I contend, is to remain attentive to age identities and aging bodies in the research and teaching of technological literacy. As we continue to call for attention to new media composing practices (particularly through work within the subfield of computers and writing), we must resist the tendency to associate such practices with youth-based values. Instead, by examining technological literacy from a lifelong, embodied perspective, we can identify technological literacy in situated terms and recognize the fluid relationship between age identity and literacy.

To further investigate the relationship between aging and literacy, my research moves among three sites: rhetorical worlds in which older adults engage in literate activity; embodied, narrative worlds of several older writers; and a multigenerational community literacy project. In my second chapter, which examines the first site, I identify ideologies of aging defined and promoted by what I call a curriculum of aging. Through rhetorical analysis of publications produced and distributed to millions of older Americans by AARP, a leading elder advocacy group in the U.S., I identify ways that public discourses attempt to shape older adults’ relationships to technology and technological literacy. I find that these rhetorics forward the message that older adults only use technology to repair their aging bodies, such as focusing exclusively on assistive technologies and conflating aging with disability, rather than representing information or communication technologies that might foster understandings of later life as a period of potential for learning, literacy, and social development.
In response to these limiting public messages about literacy and the aging body, the principal site of the project involves an in-depth qualitative study of seven adults born between 1925 and 1945, the so-called Silent Generation. In the third and fourth chapters, I examine the oral narratives, literate activities, and digital writings of these elders, whose life experiences have predisposed them to take on the struggles and challenges of learning new media outside of school contexts.

In the third chapter, I show how literacy narratives, paired with observations of at-home sites of literate activity through a method I call literacy tours, reveal much about the ways embodied experiences impact literacy development across the life course. The accounts of two participants—a 77-year-old man struggling to write his memoirs on the computer, and an 86-year-old woman who has achieved a measure of fame through her blogs—show that aging bodies are not experienced by older adults primarily for their impairments and, by extension, neither are their literacies. Drawing from the body-based theories of learning and epistemology, I argue that studies of older adults’ histories, with particular attention to the body and embodied experience, can resist limiting assumptions about “impaired literacy,” and can further contribute to embodied theories of literacy.

The fourth chapter expands this claim to demonstrate that digital technologies can play rich roles in the lives of older adults, even if those technologies are not used in the ways we have come to expect, based on the habits of younger people active in digital culture. In this chapter, I offer an extended discussion of the literate activity of an 81-year-old woman, whose life experiences with literacy and learning developed a “literacy affinity” that motivated her to adopt new literacy practices in digital times. Although her digital literacy appeared, at first glance, to be stunted by her advanced age, her forays into social media involved intermediations between
familiar (print-based) and unfamiliar technological literacy practices. Understanding literacy development as a process of intermediation, I argue, helps literacy researchers to resist an age bias in their assessments of what counts as literacy in digital times.

In the final site of my project, presented in the fifth chapter, I extend the consideration of age identity into pedagogical practice by offering a critical examination of community-based learning through two paired writing courses I designed and taught. Situated in the liminal space between university and community, this joint project brought together a group of undergraduates in a composition course and a group of adults aged 55 to 79 enrolled in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. As participants engaged in reciprocal research projects that required them to listen to and represent the life stories of learners from another generation, many of them began to practice strategies of mutuality and empathy in their writing and research. Through such practices, I contend that sites of community literacy pedagogy may be spaces in which older and younger adults can confront, challenge, and perhaps change ideologies of aging.

In bringing together interests from the fields of age studies and writing studies, this dissertation claims two overlapping objectives in its investigation of the relationships between aging and literacy in digital times. First, I offer a critical examination of the decline narrative of aging as it collides with the progress narrative of technology in American culture. The addition of age as a critical framework for literacy allows literacy researchers and teachers to become aware of the (re)production of age ideology through literate activity, and to question age-based assumptions about what it means to be literate. Second, in order to appreciate one consequence of considering literacy from the perspective of aging, I aim to expand body-aware theories of literacy by examining literate bodies from a lifelong perspective, and to push back against age-biased configurations of literacy and literate identities, particularly in digital times.
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Chapter One
Introduction: Aging and Literacy in Digital Times

When I was your age, ‘television’ was called ‘books.’
Peter Falk as “Grandpa” in *The Princess Bride*

Millie Garfield gets out of bed each morning and makes a cup of coffee. She then goes to her computer room and starts her day with a review of her favorite blogs, a visit to her son’s Twitter page, and a quick scan of reader comments on her own weekly blog posts. She looks forward to corresponding with a fellow blogger (whom she has never met), who will provide guidance on getting the most out of the Kindle e-reader she received as a gift for her birthday—her eighty-fifth. I suspect this account will strike some readers as exceptional, perhaps even doubtful. Such doubt motivates this study. Dominant narratives in the United States about who possesses technological literacy—and why—regularly obscure the life experiences of older adults. In response to these narratives, I seek to capture the literate lives of older adults like Millie in order to locate more complex perspectives of what it means to be literate, and what it means to grow old.

To be sure, there exists some kind of digital divide based on age, as older adults have not, on the whole, acted as pioneer users and producers of new media technologies. Yet, in the U.S., adults over age 65 have been the fastest growing group of Internet users in recent years, in large part because older adults are becoming the fastest growing population in the United States, as the “Baby Boomer” generation comes of age (Madden). According to the U.S. Administration on Aging, between 2010 and 2030 the growth rate of the population of adults age 65 and over will outstrip that of the under-65 population; further, the over-65 group will eventually make up as
much as twenty percent of the total U.S. population. Indeed, “there is more ‘age’ about than ever before” (Gilleard and Higgs 9). The rapid aging of the American population has garnered significant attention from businesses, policy-makers, and pharmaco-medical institutions that stand to gain (or lose) from this surge of older adults. However, with few exceptions (including Crow; McKee and Blair; Ray), writing and literacy studies scholars have not deliberately examined how literacy—particularly technological literacy—functions in relation to old age and aging. By closely examining the literate lives of older adults in digital times, this study argues that perspectives from age studies scholarship might benefit literacy and writing studies—and vice versa.

Often, as I will argue, public messages about older adults suggest that they don’t “do” technological literacy because they will not or cannot. The American culture of aging has convinced us, both young and old, that later life is devoid of meaning, partly because it lacks the richness of learning and literate activity. This study seeks to set aside this assumption, and asks:

What does literacy really look like in the lives of American elders?
What motivates adults to pursue new literacy practices in later life?
What values or beliefs from a lifetime of literacy shape elders’ literate activity, particularly in new technological environments?

In exploring these central questions, I take a close look at the relationship between the aging body and technological literacy. An attention to the embodied dimensions of literacy over the life course presents several opportunities: to challenge decontextualized notions of literacy in later life; to look beyond the digital present and into the life stories of people finding their way (or not) into digital literacy; to recognize the literate self as fluid and changing in response to
lifelong affective experiences that can endure as well as fade; and to trace macrosocial shifts as
new technologies, new economies, and new cultural values play out in everyday lives.

As new literacy technologies burgeon alongside the growing population of older adults, researchers and teachers need to include considerations of old age and aging in their agendas—not only because senior faculty need to be prepared to navigate new literacyscapes (although Angela Crow’s excellent work in Aging Literacies shows that this, too, is an important reason), but also because literacy must be understood from a lifelong perspective. If we recognize that literate activity is “nothing less than ways of being in the world, forms of life” (Prior and Shipka 181), we must pay attention to how ways of being shift and adapt over the course of a lifetime, how they are experienced bodily and materially, and how they interact with age ideology. An approach to literacy that is “agewise” (to borrow the term from Margaret Gullette) can aid in resisting reductive ideas about what literacy—and old age—can mean.

In this introductory chapter, I offer a cross-disciplinary analysis in order to make the case for incorporating critical perspectives from age studies into the literacy studies agenda. I begin by outlining an age bias in digital literacy research that circulates both within the academy and in popular media; this bias, I argue, contributes to overly narrow conceptions of literacy and obscures the actual literate activities of older adults—including what literacy teachers and researchers might learn from them. In order to partially explain and generate a framework for critiquing this age-based perspective of literacy, I present a brief review of age studies scholarship that traces and critiques a dominant narrative in Western culture, which depicts aging as a period of decline. Age-biased perspectives of literacy emerge in part from this decline narrative, in which aging is configured as a problem tied closely to the degeneration of the aging body; because older adults are seen as impaired minds and bodies, their literate activities are also
presumed to be impaired. To challenge these reductive views of aging and literacy, I propose the incorporation of age studies objectives into the critical and situated studies of literacy long underway in writing studies, in order to advance the development of body-aware literacy research and teaching.

**Age Bias in Digital Literacy Research**

In 1976, *Newsweek* declared that Johnny can’t write, gesturing at television to partly explain the erosion of literacy among American college students (Sheils). The turn of the twenty-first century brought predictions of the downfall of the English language, based primarily on the proliferation of text messaging technology and its (perhaps already outdated) abbreviated lingo, which was especially popular among young people (Crystal). Similar accusations of the dumbing-down of culture had been leveled against the typewriter, Gutenberg’s printing press, and even the technology of writing itself (Baron x). But whether new writing technologies are actually responsible for corroding language, literacy, and intellect (and I suspect this is not usually the case), cyclical crises of literacy and learning are often blamed on technological innovations: above all, the technologies and activities popular among young people.

Fortunately, work within the field of writing studies—especially the subfield of computers and writing—has made significant inroads into understanding and valuing the importance of digital technologies for literacy education in the twenty-first century. In 1999 Cynthia Selfe declared that the field’s agenda had changed (with or without our blessing): literacy *and* technology were now “our business,” as the link between literacy and technology had become overdetermined in public discourses and myths about literacy. With Gail Hawisher, Selfe has further argued that “Today, if U.S. students cannot write to the screen…they will have
difficulty functioning as literate human beings in a growing number of social spheres” (2). As reading, writing, and designing in digital environments have gained cultural currency, they have also become increasingly harder (and riskier, perhaps) for writing teachers and researchers to ignore. Beyond using technologies as a new delivery system for alphabetic texts, and beyond teaching students the mean skills necessary to use computers—what many have called “computer literacy,” in its most basic definition—writing teachers have now been called to go so far as to support the development of what Stuart Selber calls “rhetorical literacy” for the digital age. To be fully literate, suggests Selber, we must be able to consume, analyze, and enact change in digital environments and texts.

Although Selber’s definition of literacy may set the bar too high to account for the broad range of meaningful literate activity occurring in digital times (a general concern I take up later in the dissertation), when writing teachers and researchers do pay attention to the technology-rich activities of younger people, we find that they are not only worth paying attention to because they have been imbued with cultural value, but also because they might actually contribute to learning and literacy. James Gee, for instance, famously argues that video games provide a useful pedagogical model for teachers: one that offers rewards, develops players’ identities, and demonstrates “pleasantly frustrating” ways of learning new semiotic domains (217). Indeed, young people seem to be doing a great deal of multimodal composing in digital environments in the first decades of the twenty-first century, as they have written best-selling novels on their cell phones (Onishi), enacted transnational identities through online fan-fiction writing (Black), and even taken a stand against media corporations in defense of youth-driven digital literacy initiatives (H. Jenkins).
Partly as a result of such flourishing activity, new media technologies force us to confront our most basic definitions of writing and literacy. In her 2004 chair’s address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kathleen Yancey remarked on the “tectonic change” of literacy, in which we are forced to consider that “writing” might index not only print genres, but perhaps also images, audio, and video—in other words, the not-just-alphabetic composing by students, of their own volition. This work, Yancey (among others) suggests, must be incorporated into a changing notion of literacy. As Heidi McKee and Dânielle Nicole DeVoss summarize, “Whether one welcomes or rues the integration—at times, saturation—of computerized and digital technologies in our lives and in our classrooms, what constitutes writing and what provides for the contexts for writing have indeed changed with these technologies” (6).

But as literacy teachers and researchers continue to learn what video games (and computers and texting and social networking) have to teach us about learning and literacy, and to trust that young people’s preferred activities aren’t inherently the bane of education, a dramatic shift has taken place. We have begun to favor (and make generalized assumptions about) the literate expertise of young people. As a result, discussions of literacy in digital times often become discussions about generational divides. Consider these three examples from important work on the connections between literacy, learning, and video games:

(1) To illustrate what he calls the “problem of content,” which erroneously suggests that content and lived social practices are separable in learning, James Gee offers a hypothetical scene of a grandfather dismissing his six-year-old grandson’s videogame play as a waste of time because games have no content and can only teach “hand-eye coordination” (22).
(2) Adam Banks, prefacing a rich discussion of the digital divide along racial lines, describes the futility of his own attempt to keep up with his younger nieces and nephews when playing the latest iterations of the *Madden NFL* video game, later seeking solace in a much-older Atari football game (xx-xxii).

(3) Johndan Johnson-Eilola also missed his old Atari system and felt that his “age was showing” while he watched in awe as his daughter learned to play a German-language video game without the aid of instructions (2).

Here, age-based tensions over learning in digital environments place young people at the cutting edge, and older people struggling (and failing) to catch up, perhaps finding it impossible to “get it” at all. Although publicized panic over literacy continues to point fingers at the screen as an inferior replacement to the printed page, efforts to investigate the value of the screen to literacy and learning often rely on the same age biases—only this time, it is older adults who are left behind.

In truth, older adults’ literacy practices do appear to be lagging in digital times, as a digital divide based on age has appeared alongside other kinds of digital divides, including those created by economic and cultural difference. Currently, it is estimated that 78% of American adults use the Internet at least occasionally (Pew Internet & American Life Project). Likely due to continued financial and physical limitations of Internet access for older adults (Morrell, Mayhorn, and Echt 76), as well as to variances in education and career opportunities (i.e., on-the-job technology training), it is not surprising that less than half (42%) of adults age 65 and older use the Internet, compared to the 95% of Internet users age 18 to 29.

If we believe that to be literate includes the ability to access, navigate, and create texts in digital environments, the age-based digital divide should be of real concern to writing teachers
and researchers. Already we have begun to see some work toward incorporating older adults into
the digital literacy teaching agenda. Angela Crow’s *Aging Literacies* attempts to marshal interest
and sympathy within academia for supporting older faculty members in their late-life
technological literacy pursuits. Echoing calls from many computers and writing scholars, Crow
argues that, despite their many years of success with older, print-based literacy, writing faculty
are obligated to update their pedagogies to include the technological literacy practices demanded
of college graduates. But burdened by heavy workloads, care-giving responsibilities at home,
physical limitations, and emotional hang-ups, Crow argues that the senior professoriate needs
many different levels of support in order to develop the technological literacy that their teaching
obligations demand.\(^2\) Taking these concerns into community-based pedagogies, Heidi McKee
and Kristine Blair argue for the necessity of supporting older adults’ technological literacy
through community-based computer courses. McKee and Blair assert that “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). The proliferation of such technological literacy initiatives and increased awareness of the
pedagogies appropriate to older learners is increasingly necessary, and certainly there should be
more of this kind of work.

Yet, even while we must recognize the potential for marginalization that older literates
face as a result of the age-based digital divide, we must be cautious not to overstate or
overgeneralize the lack of technological literacy among older adults by demanding that their
literacies mirror the activities of younger people in order to “count” as literacy. Such an
overstatement of age-based (il)literacy appears, for example, when the Pew Internet and
American Life Project acknowledges that Internet users born in the 1930s and 1940s are
“competitive” when it comes to email use, but then adds that “teens might point out that this is proof that email is for old people” (Jones and Fox 1). Despite reporting evidence of elders’ increased engagements with digital literacy, Pew dismisses the commonest Internet-based literacy practices among elders as outdated and thus not really competitive after all.

Even among organizations that claim an interest in promoting positive images of older adults, such as AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons), an age-based ideology maintains its grip. In part drawing from Pew research, AARP also acknowledged the increased presence of aging adults online in its magazine, proudly insisting that older Internet users were “doing a lot more than just e-mailing their grandchildren and looking at family photos” (“We Rule” 94). Clearly, for AARP, sending email to grandchildren or viewing family photos is insufficient evidence of elders’ technological literacies.

The interpretive work of these reports replicates ageist rhetorics that pervade American culture, which support the assumption that older adults are ill-equipped to stay abreast of new developments. For one, older adults are presumed to lack the appropriate attitude or motivation for adopting new ideas. For another, even older adults who might possess the will to learn, the presumption is that they lack the cognitive and/or physical capacity to do so. Both of these preconceptions of older learners remain durable in part because they are supported by a master narrative of aging in Western cultures. Based largely on the biomedical definitions of and responses to aging, the decline narrative of aging limits the experience of aging to one of steady loss, beginning with the body: as the cells of the human body degenerate, so do all aspects of an older adult’s life. A perspective of aging so common as to be almost invisible, the interdisciplinary work gathered loosely under the name of “age studies” is largely dedicated to calling attention to it as a constructed view of aging, and to identifying possible alternatives to
this limiting view. In the section that follows, I outline some of this work to preface a discussion of the value of recognizing and responding to the decline narrative in studies of literacy.

**The Decline Narrative of Aging**

Cultural narratives of aging have been documented by scholars in the interdisciplinary and sometimes indistinguishable fields of humanistic (or critical, or narrative) gerontology and age studies, both of which are built on the basic understanding that aging is a “highly socialized biological process” (Gilleard and Higgs 1). These projects respond in large part to the traditions of gerontology. Although studies of aging had already occurred much earlier, formal gerontology emerged as a field in the mid-twentieth century on somewhat tenuous ground. As W. Andrew Achenbaum points out in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies* in 1987, researchers agreed that the central objective of the field was to solve the “problem” of old age, but that problem was wholly undefined (4). Would researchers view aging as primarily a biomedical problem? Socioeconomic? Psychosocial? Attempting to handle the multifaceted subjects of old age and aging (terms that are difficult to define consistently), the field of gerontology fragmented, with its two largest groups marking a clear distinction between social science and biomedical approaches to aging. But despite its disciplinary breadth, gerontology had no means of discussing aging from philosophical, artistic, or theological perspectives prior to the coalescence of humanistic studies of aging (Cole, Kastenbaum, and Ray xi).

Beginning in the 1970s, humanistic studies of aging offered important examinations of the meanings of old age, which included analysis of media and textual representations of old age (e.g., Blaikie; Hepworth; Featherstone and Wernick) and studies of creativity in late life (e.g., Woodward, *Aging*; Wyatt-Brown and Rossen). By 1988, enough work had been produced that
the Gerontological Society of America published an annotated bibliography on humanistic studies of aging (Polisar, Wygant, Cole, and Perdomo), followed in 1992 by the first *Handbook of Humanities and Aging* (Cole, Van Tassel, and Kastenbaum), which is now in its third edition (Cole, Ray, and Kastenbaum). Although these collections include a range of disciplines and an even broader range of subjects, at the root of all humanistic studies of aging lies the question, *What does it mean to grow old?* (Cole, “Humanities” xvii; Cole and Ray 1)—a question that was undeniably difficult for strictly positivist studies of aging and senescence to ask, let alone address (Aschenbaum).

Overlapping with humanistic gerontology, *aging studies* and *age studies* have also emerged to respond to the positivist tendencies of gerontology, which has historically privileged a biomedical model of aging. Both terms describe an interdisciplinary field (or an “intellectual movement”) that is fundamentally interested in interrogating the cultural aspects of aging, drawing extensively from feminism, cultural studies, and postmodern theory (Gullette, *Declining* 18; see also, “Creativity” 45). However, *age studies* differs from *aging studies* in that, where the latter calls attention to “the aging” (a misnomer that, in common usage, refers euphemistically to the eldest adults, rather than *all* people who age), the former term signals an attention to aging as an ongoing process of socialization that impacts people at all phases of life.

In this dissertation, I use *age studies* to refer to the collective body of work encompassed by humanistic gerontology, aging studies, and age studies. Although I recognize that these terms are not completely interchangeable, all three share an interest in age as a socially and culturally constructed, body-based identity, and all three interrogate the ideologies of aging—interests at the center of my project. Against the dominant biomedical model that defines old age in pathological terms (thus as a problem), the collective of age studies scholarship offers criticism
and alternative models that reveal, first, that aging is more than a biological process, and second, that the very notion that old age must be understood primarily in biomedical terms is partially a product of cultural narratives: “Whatever happens in the body,” Gullette asserts, “and even if nothing happens in the body, aging is a narrative” (Agewise 5).

Reaching beyond the biomedical model to reveal the social, cultural, and personal meanings of aging, much work within age studies involves the study of narratives, especially qualitative studies of the discourses and stories of older people themselves (e.g., Butler; Myerhoff; Ray, Endnotes and Beyond Nostalgia), as well as cultural studies of master narratives of aging as they appear and evolve in literature, art, and popular discourse (Cole; Cruikshank; Featherstone and Warnick; Gullette, Declining, Aged, and Agewise). A significant portion of this scholarship traces, critiques, and works toward altering one particularly troublesome master narrative of aging in Western (particularly North American) cultures: old age is centrally a period of social, spiritual, intellectual, and—above all—bodily decline.

According to age studies scholarship, the current dominance of the decline narrative emerges in part from Western cultures’ ways of imagining and representing the human life course. In The Journey of Life, historian Thomas Cole examines Western art and literature since the medieval period in order to document the “cultural and symbolic impoverishment” (xxi) that has established and continues to maintain the common assumption that old age is devoid of meaning. This cultural impoverishment is relatively new: it didn’t exist in its contemporary configuration until the mid-nineteenth century, when modern medicine, industrialization, and the quest for perfect health and independence brought about an intense value for youth, and subsequently the loss of cultural and social incentives to live into old age. Particularly as modern medicine flourished, the meanings of old age became narrowed to biomedical terms, and
a medical and cultural battle against aging began in earnest. Since this period, Cole writes, “Americans have come to view aging not as a fated aspect of our individual and social existence but as one of life’s problems to be solved through willpower, aided by science, technology, and expertise” (xxii).

Devoid of broader social meaning since the mid-nineteenth century, older adults’ social roles have continued to diminish. Today, as age studies scholar Margaret Cruikshank describes, old people’s primary role in capitalist America is to be sick, providing massive revenues for the medical-industrial complex (38-42). Of course, aging bodies do experience a decline in functionality as aging cells break down. Older people do get sick more often as their immune systems become compromised. However, at issue for age critics—and for this dissertation—is the over-representation of aging as bodily breakdown, and the unshakeable sense that there is nothing more to later life than the experience of bodily failure. The decline narrative, age studies scholars note, is reproduced everywhere, in both “subtle and blatant coercive discourses: we inhale this atmosphere every day from breakfast to the late news, thinking it’s normal air” (Gullette, Declining 5).

**Age Ideologies and Late-life Literacies**

Cultural representations of aging, both subtle and blatant, have real-world effects. They shape the way individuals imagine the course of their lives, and thus the ways they enact and experience the process of aging (Thane; Cruikshank). When the available representations of aging overwhelmingly suggest that later life is primarily about body failure and an ever-shrinking social, spiritual, and intellectual life, it becomes difficult to perceive old age in any other terms. Age studies scholars point to observable evidence that older adults internalize the
decline narrative, such as competitive talk in nursing homes and senior centers about medical problems in order to identify the sickest elder in the room (Cruikshank 39). As Gullette claims, the decline narrative “prevents people from knowing their own life course in detail” by training them to “automatically fill the slot where ‘age meanings’ should go with ‘decline’” (Declining 66).

As part of the “normal air” in the lives of many older adults, literate acts become fully implicated in the decline narrative of aging, both in the way literacy (as a condition and as a set of practices) is represented in age-based terms, and in the way literate activity is experienced by people who age—in other words, by all of us. At the same time, the literacies of older adults, as with seemingly every aspect of later life, are read through the lens of the aging body. Assumptions about impaired literacy—particularly, as discussed above, when that literacy involves new media technologies—take root in assumptions about impaired bodies. Because old age has been pathologized, it is easy to dismiss older adults’ intellectual enterprises as somehow lacking, based on the assumption that all older adults are mentally and physically incapable of, and furthermore unwilling to participate in, learning and creativity. A progress narrative of intellectual growth through literate activity finds no foothold in this master narrative of decline.

Within age studies, some efforts have been made to investigate and challenge this presumed decline in literacy by examining the intellectual and creative pursuits of older writers. Literary gerontologists consider aging, previously a “missing category” in literary theory, by examining authors’ late-life work in order to simultaneously expand literary criticism and contribute to developing theories of aging. Considerations of late-life writing style, for instance, present persuasive challenges to the idea that the works of older writers are necessarily inferior to the work produced in their younger years or by other, younger writers, while still taking
seriously the impact of aging on a writer’s work. Anne Wyatt-Brown, for instance, writes in response to her initial disappointment with a later novel by May Sarton, which marked a jarring artistic departure from her earlier work. To account for this break in style, Wyatt-Brown argues for an expanded list of models of aging writers, which include 1) the writer struggling to maintain continuity in style by connecting her present self with her remembered pasts; 2) the liberated author embracing opportunities to change, as brought on by aging; and 3) the confident author writing from a place of success and/or long-term experience, who feels justified in using narrative to impart personal wisdom and establish a legacy rather than catering to audience demands. By considering the difference age makes, literary critics can work with a variety of models for creativity in late life that do not hold the texts of younger writers as the standard by which work produced during all life stages must be measured.

Literary gerontologists also identify reasons why older adults may be better positioned to write about some issues than younger writers. Kathleen Woodward (“Late Theory”) argues for the theoretical value of late-life writing through a reading of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, in which Barthes (then sixty-five, shortly before his death) eulogizes his mother—an uncharacteristic departure into the personal, away from the critical style for which Barthes is best known. Rather than reading Barthes’s sentimental work as a sign of senility or a loss of intellectual acuity, Woodward argues that *Camera Lucida* presents an important theoretical challenge to the ill-formed conceptions of mourning yielded by Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Rather than conceiving of mourning—an increasingly familiar emotional experience in old age—as a process of forgetting (and thus ever more loss), *Camera Lucida* presents mourning as a means of motivating creativity and sparking a kind of emotional renewal, in which the pain of grief isn’t eased but made “more real” (Woodward, “Late Theory” 97). In late life, then, the grief brought
about by the inevitable separation of loved ones leading up to one’s own death proves an important creative catalyst that is unavailable to most younger writers.

Analysis of texts written by (and about) older adults is crucial to the critical project of age studies. Such methods align with critical work already occurring within writing studies, which has a history of analyzing texts to capture the relationships between literate activity, ideology, and identity. For instance, we can imagine that the analysis of texts composed by basic writers (e.g., Shaughnessy), by women (e.g., Eldred and Mortensen, *Imagining*; Enoch; Gere; Powell; Sharer), and by racial and ethnic minorities (e.g., Duffy; Cushman, *Struggle*; Royster) might parallel the literary analysis of age studies scholars like Wyatt-Brown and Woodward, who 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. These researchers work within their respective fields to turn a critical eye on the emergence and perpetuation of ideologies that create systems of oppression, even as they identify opportunities for the resistance to, appropriation of, or confirmation of dominant ideologies through literate acts. The incorporation of an age studies lens into the work of writing studies, then, seems a logical step.

As scholars in both age studies and writing studies are fully aware, the rhetorics that participate in the creation of oppression as well as opportunities for change are situated in material worlds. More than words are at stake in the construction of identities and ideologies. And yet, it remains too easy to “disembody” studies of literacy. In performing the important tasks of rhetorical analysis, the combined efforts of writing studies and age studies must remain vigilant of a theoretical dilemma that might threaten their shared objectives in examining the marginalized literacies of older adults and other body-based identity categories: the ongoing strain between treatment of bodies as discursive constructions *and* as physical producers of texts.
A symptom of modernist thought inherited from a Cartesian philosophy of body and mind, the body has been an absent presence across academic spaces and texts. Even in everyday experience, our own bodies remain strangers to us, ever fading into the margins of awareness. This absence has extended into scholarship in writing, literacy, and pedagogy, where we must be perennially reminded to pay attention to bodies—our students’ and our participants’, as well as our own (S. Crowley; Freedman and Holmes; Marvin). Part of the reason we so easily lose sight of physical bodies is that the postmodernist rejection of the mind/body split brings other problematic binaries that, once again, relegate real, live bodies to the margins. In an introductory essay for *Rhetorical Bodies*, Jack Selzer observes that, in rhetorical studies following the expansion of social constructionism, “Things in themselves…are sometimes being reduced to a function of language: genes, genders, jeans, and genetics have all be reconceived recently through the prism of language. Words have been mattering more than matter” (4). The result, he adds, is a failure of a field dedicated to understanding literate acts within situated contexts to actually articulate “the relationship of rhetorical events to the material world that sustains and produces them.” No longer a Cartesian mind/body split, emphasis on the constructedness of bodies effectually devalues the experienced body, and thus obstructs our efforts to understand the unfolding of literate acts.4

In continued efforts to resist beliefs that the pigmentation of skin, the presence of certain sexual organs, the functionality of our limbs, or other morphological features can predict literate potential, literacy researchers and teachers cannot overlook the centrality of the body’s role in literacy. A dismissal of the lived body in literacy and writing research would not only fail to address the body as a site of power struggle, but doing so might actually contribute to further subjugation of marginalized identities. As Carolyn Marvin explains, when we ignore the moving,
breathing body, it becomes easy to use the physical body discriminatorily in our scholarship, such as suppressing it from discussions of literacy among privileged classes of readers and writers (as though it didn’t matter), while raising it to the fore (as though it were all that mattered) in discussions of the Othered literacies of the working class, of African Americans, of women (130-131), or—I add—of the old.

Some scholars of literacy and writing have taken up the body as a central object of research on literacy and pedagogy by reading it as a site of literacy and learning. From studies of young children and the political implications of disciplining their literate bodies through the language of school (Luke), to examinations of the long history of bodies in pedagogical contexts (Hawhee), important—though still too few—efforts have been made to make sense of the body as a political and pedagogical site, wherein writers and rhetors have been trained by institutions to embody a particular literate or rhetorical identity. In part, my study of the literate lives of older adults in digital times demonstrates that the adoption of an age studies agenda by literacy researchers and teachers would not only add the “missing category” of age difference into our accounting of literacy, rhetoric, and identity, but an attention to aging also provides valuable opportunities for developing theories of literacy and the body. As in any other phase of life, bodies matter in old age. But to what extent do bodies impact literate activity among older writers? How do older adults write because of, not just in spite of, their aging bodies? To answer such questions, literacy studies will need to cultivate more robust frameworks for studying the embodied dimensions of literacy from a lifelong perspective.
Chapter Overview

In bringing together interests from the fields of age studies and writing studies, this dissertation claims two overlapping objectives in its investigation of the relationships between aging and literacy. First, I offer a critical examination of the decline narrative of aging as it collides with the progress narrative of technology in American culture. The addition of age as a critical framework for literacy allows literacy researchers and teachers to become aware of the (re)production of age ideology through literate activity, and to question age-based assumptions about what it means to be literate. Second, in order to appreciate one consequence of considering literacy from the perspective of aging, I aim to expand body-aware theories of literacy by examining literate bodies from a lifelong perspective.

Toward these ends, this dissertation examines literacy and aging in three sites: the rhetorical worlds in which older adults engage in literate activity; the embodied, narrative worlds of older writers; and finally, a multigenerational community writing classroom. I explore the first site in my second chapter, “The Curriculum of Aging.” As many age studies scholars remind us, part of learning how to be old happens through discursive constructions of the values and behaviors deemed culturally appropriate in particular phases of life. Through rhetorical analysis of publications produced and distributed to millions of older Americans by AARP, a leading elder advocacy group in the U.S., I identify ways that public discourses attempt to shape older adults’ relationships to technology and technological literacies through a curriculum of aging. I find that these discourses forward the message that older adults only use technology to repair their aging bodies: for instance, by focusing exclusively on assistive technologies and conflating aging with disability, rather than representing social or communication technologies that might
instead foster understandings of later life as a period of potential for learning, literacy, and social development.

In response to these limiting public messages about literacy and the aging body, the principal site of the project involves an in-depth qualitative study of seven adults born between 1925 and 1945, the so-called Silent Generation. In my third and fourth chapters I examine the oral narratives, literate activities, and digital compositions of these elders, whose life experiences have predisposed them to take on the struggles and challenges of learning new media outside of school contexts. Literacy narratives, paired with observations of at-home sites of literate activity through a method I call literacy tours, reveal much about the ways embodied experiences impact literacy development across the life course, and can therefore complicate assumptions that physical impairment is the primary lens through which literate activity (and life in general) is seen and understood. In chapter three, “The Literate Lives of Elders,” I draw from the body-based theories of learning and knowledge-making to argue that bodily histories—including the internalization of ideology through bodily practices, the development of bodily dispositions, and efforts to re-train the body to support new identities—have as much, if not more, to say about literate activity in later life as does age-related physical impairment. The fourth chapter, “‘You’d Better Do Your Work’: Motivation for Literacy in Later Life,” expands this argument by demonstrating, through an extended discussion of 81-year-old Beverly’s literacy, the affective and material dimensions of motivation for literacy and learning over the life course, which support interactions between past and present literate activities. Seen as intermediating literacies rather than as impaired literacy, Beverly’s digital work raises important questions about what literacy means in digital times.
Chapter five, “Life Stories Across the Generation Gap,” considers the third site of my project. In this chapter I extend the consideration of age identity into the contexts of pedagogical practice by offering a critical examination of community-based learning through two paired writing courses I designed and taught. Situated in the liminal space between university and community, this joint project brought together a group of undergraduates in a composition course and a group of adults aged 55 to 79 enrolled in a lifelong learning program. As participants engaged in reciprocal research projects that required them to listen to and represent the life stories of learners from another generation, many of them began to practice strategies of mutuality and empathy in their writing and research. Through such practices, I contend that sites of community literacy pedagogy may be spaces in which older and younger adults can confront, challenge, and perhaps change ideologies of aging.

How Old is “Old”? (A Note on Vocabulary)

In many of the occasions in which I have discussed my work, someone has asked me—usually with some trepidation—“So, exactly how old is old?” (Often, I suspect that the question they really mean to ask is, “Am I old?”) The somewhat disappointing, or perhaps heartening, answer is that age and old age are not clearly defined within my study. The social boundary lines of old age are always moving, and not just because life expectancies have changed and thus expectations for later life shift perspectives on what counts as “old.” Old age is in part a social identity that can be taken up or rejected by individuals, who might recognize particular physical features or behaviors as markers of socialized versions of old age. Among institutions interested in clearly defining older populations by chronological age, there is little consensus: you are eligible to join AARP at age 50, but you are a benefits-eligible “senior citizen” to the United
States Government somewhere between 62 and 70. For research purposes, the categorizations of older populations can be similarly dubious: the Pew Internet and American Life researchers bracket together all adults age 65 and up, whereas among gerontologists, gradations of old age distinguish the “young-old” from the “old-old.”

In this project, I am less interested in identifying groups based on chronological age than I am in understanding aging in relative terms. As such, I have chosen to use the terms older adult and elder. Although I use these different terms to describe the subjects of my study, I do not mean to suggest that they are interchangeable or inherently sensitive, as individuals will likely make different choices about how to self-identify as members of an age group or generation. Older adult is a relative term that flexibly describes a broad range of adults, without actually pinning down a cutoff age that would definitively include or exclude members. Elder further describes individuals of especially advanced age; I choose this term primarily because of its reliance on relativity—these are the eldest members of the older adult population. However, other arguments by aging activists, such as self-described elderblogger Ronni Bennett, support this term because, to them, it “conveys respect, dignity, experience, judgment and even, sometimes, wisdom” (Bennett, “FAQ”).

The terms senior citizen and elderly, except when used in the context of quoted language, do not appear in this text. Senior citizen (often shortened to “senior”) emerged in the United States in the 1930s as a political euphemism (“Social Security”). Although the term is still in common use, the term strikes me as particular to a political agenda, and as a patronizing label for a portion of the voting public used to manufacture a shared interest group, rather than to describe the actual age or status of individuals in their everyday lives, which is of central interest to this dissertation. The term elderly has by now accumulated clear associations with physical frailty
and victimhood (Mautner). While not unrelated to the research interests herein, this direct association with physical and mental feebleness would ultimately obscure the agency, self-possession, and strengths of the older adults in my study. I also do not adopt the terms *aged* or *old*, except in instances when my participants use these words to describe themselves. These labels suggest finality and decisiveness in relation to age—as though there is a measurable point at which individuals cross the threshold into the category of “old.” Except when raised in context, these static labels have been omitted. Although more dynamic, the use of *aging* to connote “old age” is also avoided, in an effort to push toward a lifelong perspective of aging, which includes the youngest of children together with the oldest of adults.

Notes

1 *Literacy*, as Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola demonstrate, is not necessarily the ideal term to use when referring to such activities, since the term has become mired in its association with neutral skill sets. Arguing that work with communication technologies is better understood as “a process of situating and resituating representations in social spaces” (367), Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola seek alternative terms that do not carry reductive associations. However, I have not chosen to experiment with such alternatives, and adopt the terms *technological literacy* and *digital literacy* alongside *literacy* in this dissertation. I continue to use the term *literacy* in referring to work with communication technologies because it resonates immediately with work within writing studies, thus linking work in digital media environments to the discipline(s) of writing and literacy studies at large—a connection that still needs to be made explicit (Porter). To me, the condition of *literacy* (of “being literate”) does not suggest a
neutral set of skills (though I recognize that it can mean this to many other people, particularly in public representations of literacy, and thus marks an important objective of literacy researchers who wish to change such definitions), but instead involves layers of meaning that include material, social, and cultural practices and values surrounding the production and interpretation of text using language, sometimes in conjunction with other sign systems. (In naming literacy as an act, I describe literate activity and literacy practices. Literate activity, as defined by Paul Prior, broadens the scope of literacy beyond the sites of textual production/interpretation (138). It is my understanding that literate activity can, when patterned by personal use and sociocultural values, form recognizable and somewhat durable literacy practices.)

I do not use technological literacy and digital literacy because I think these are fundamentally different from print literacy, nor because I think literacy should mean the same as “knowledge of”—it is for this reason that I have chosen not to use computer literacy, which signals “knowledge of a computer” more than “reading and writing practices on the computer.” I also do not use the labels “digital” and “technological” to suggest a clear division between print-based literacy and literacy involving other media. In this dissertation, technological literacy signals literacy with an attention to the technologies or material tools of writing (thus leaving it open to include orientations toward literacy technologies prior to the digital age, such as typewriters), whereas digital literacy signals literacy that heavily involves digital media, particularly networked media (thus literacy practices involving media that emerged at a particular point in time). In short, digital literacy and technological literacy are only shades of just-plain-literacy, rather than completely different practices or knowledge sets.
2 I should add that many of the concerns about training faculty to teach new media are not limited to concerns about older, senior faculty, as younger junior faculty must also contend with new literacy practices involving new technologies; see Eldred.

3 Prior to this period, for instance, the Puritans “infused aging with a wealth of social and religious meaning,” by valuing late life as an ascendance toward an uncertain afterlife (39).

4 As one of many critics within and beyond writing studies to issue such a warning, Kristie Fleckenstein writes that, “In sacrificing bodies to some illusion of either transcendent truth or culturally constituted textuality, we cut ourselves adrift from any organic anchoring in the material reality of flesh” (“Writing Bodies” 281); see also Bordo; S. Crowley; Haas and Witte; Hayles, “Materiality”; Stenberg.
Chapter Two

The Curriculum of Aging

“We are in great measure the architects of our added years. It may not be in our power to arrange for ourselves good living quarters, a decent wage; but it is within our power to enrich our later years by maintaining wholesome personal contacts with our fellows and by using our leisure time in some useful activity.”

Ethel Percy Andrus, founder of AARP (The Wisdom, 138)

The experience of old age, as with other bodily identities, is only partially the experience of an individual body and mind. Of course we experience aging because our bodies change, but also, as many age studies scholars remind us, we are aged by culture (Butler; Cole, Journey; Cruikshank; Gullette, Aged). For Margaret Cruikshank, learning to be old means “acquiring the knowledge that aging is a creation of this time and place, more cultural than biological, determined by social institutions, or, more optimistically, a set of life experiences we can consciously shape” (2). Taking up a critical resistance to the biomedical model of aging, other age studies scholars have explored the enculturation of aging in relation to sexuality and gender, physical appearance, capacity for work, and other markers that have been tied to cultural standards of youth. In this chapter, I add that literacy has been recruited into the social construction (and thus potential re-construction) of old age in the United States. Although aging is indeed a biological process that brings real challenges, I contend that the conflation of aging and bodily decline potentially limits the literate and rhetorical development of older adults.

Literacy, both as a perceived personal quality and as a social practice, plays a central role in the development and distribution of what I call a curriculum of aging: an assemblage of rhetorics that define and promote cultural ideologies about old age, and that have implications for the literacy of older adults. Popular discourses often link the state of being literate—as a personal quality or trait—with particular age groups; in recent years, the languages and literacies
of digital technologies, especially social media, carry strong ties to youth-based identities. Recent trends suggest that the elder demographic is making serious gains in technological literacy practices, particularly in social media use; for instance, Pew Internet and American Life research shows that between 2009 and 2011, the users of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn) age 65 and over increased by 150 percent, while users aged fifty to sixty-four (many of whom are working professionals) doubled (Madden and Zickhur 6; see also, Lenhart; Madden). Despite such evidence, popular discourses continue to represent a disassociation between older adults and digital literacy. While the rhetorics of aging and literacy are sometimes subtle, they are nonetheless pervasive: an age-based ideology of technological literacy appears even among organizations actively contributing to the welfare of older adults, such as AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons). In an issue of *AARP The Magazine*, the organization printed a feature story in which experts were interviewed and photographed with various digital technologies (Bloosten et al.). The “experts”—consulted for the benefit of older audiences—were children. Wrapped up in such age-based rhetorics of literacy are assumptions about older adults’ inability or unwillingness to take up newer literacy practices associated with younger people.

In this chapter I examine literacy’s interventions in cultural perspectives of aging through the published discourses of AARP, a group that openly attempts to shape perceptions and consumer behavior of older adults. Since its founding in 1958, AARP has done some excellent work in promoting elder adults’ roles as civic participants and self-advocates in American society, mainly by promoting and distributing texts and most recently by supporting textual environments in which AARP members are asked to represent themselves in writing. However, largely due to its interest in reaching a large and diverse audience of older adults (and securing
revenue), AARP often relies on problematic rhetorics that privilege youth-centered ideals and create limited representations of older adults’ literacy in digital times. These rhetorics rest on a metaphor of repair, which labels aging adults as primarily bodies in need of fixing and/or protection.

Although literacy can be shaped by popular discourses, it cannot be separated from lived experience; likewise, aging cannot be reduced to an “autonomous model” (Street). In other words, both literacy and aging are in part rhetorical activities. Literacy scholars have brought rhetorical studies to bear on literacy in order to ascertain how dominant and resistant rhetorics might impact perceptions and uses of literacy in particular identity groups and communities (e.g., Cushman, Struggle; Duffy; Eldred and Mortensen, Imagining; Powell). Such moves can be extended to studies of technological literacy.

Some age studies and literacy researchers have begun to outline important connections between literacy and the values that inform common understandings of old age. Ruth Ray’s study of elders reveals that social scripts place rhetorical demands on elders’ practice of writing their own life stories (76). In her investigation of aging and technological literacy among writing faculty, Angela Crow suggests that age stereotypes may have to be identified and addressed before some older adults engage with new literacy practices. Heidi McKee and Kristine Blair’s interviews with older adults learning to use computers reveal that “the message that technology is for the young is something that many older adults seem to have internalized” (25). By examining the rhetorics repeatedly circulated by AARP, I further capture some of the values that are associated with older adults and literacy technologies in texts targeted directly, and repeatedly, toward older audiences. AARP was founded with two goals (both of which support and extend its ongoing role as a lobbyist group) that have proven divergent at critical junctures
throughout its history, and that persist in the organization’s current work: the (re)education of older Americans and sales of insurance policies, pharmaceuticals, and advertising. These founding objectives, I argue, shape the messages about literacy and literate activity forwarded in AARP publications by perpetuating limited representations of aging identities.

Throughout this chapter, I draw from John Duffy’s “rhetorical conception of literacy development,” which not only understands literacy as a social practice, but also acknowledges that social worlds cannot be divorced from rhetorical symbolic worlds. Deriving his conception of rhetoric from Kenneth Burke, Duffy views rhetorics—to which literacy might grant access and membership—as symbolic worlds in which ideologies are “imposed, shared, understood, and overthrown” (17). For the purposes of my study, then, literacy is a way in to age-based rhetorics: the symbolic worlds that circulate ideologies of aging. The rhetorics detailed here are only a small part of the symbolic worlds in which older adults participate, but the presence of these rhetorics, and the ways by which they are made available to aging audiences, might have something to say about the rhetorical choices older adults can make and the ways they identify themselves as literate elders.

**Independence, Dignity, and Purpose: AARP and the Second Career**

Today claiming over 35 million members, publishing the world’s largest circulating magazine, and generating hundreds of millions in annual revenue (AARP Services, Inc.), AARP is the largest organization for older adults. Although there are many elder-interest groups in the United States, including the more politically conservative American Seniors Association and the National Seniors Council, AARP remains the most recognizable. AARP is believed to be so large and powerful, in fact, that it has been repeatedly identified as a formidable “eight-hundred-
pound gorilla” lobbying for pro-elder public policy (Howard 127; Morris xii). In short, messages endorsed by AARP reach audiences beyond its vast membership. In this section, I sketch a brief history of the organization in order to illustrate the group’s concerted efforts to influence the meaning of old age in America through an internally conflicting curriculum of aging. In its efforts to reach out to older audiences through the distribution of texts—and to profit from those connections—AARP has embroiled itself in the literate lives of millions of older adults, and not always with positive effect.

The history of AARP, in a sense, begins in 1944, when the first woman principal in California retired at age 60 (McCay; Rasmussen). Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, a former English teacher and principal at Lincoln High School in Los Angeles, had spent her forty-year career promoting social unity through community participation in education (Andrus, “Education”). Newly retired, Andrus transitioned quickly to a volunteer position as Director of Welfare for the California Retired Teachers Association (CRTA). After reportedly discovering a destitute retired teacher living in a chicken coop outside Los Angeles (Liu), Andrus launched what she would later describe as “a second career.”6 According to her AARP biographers, her experience with the CRTA (and, no doubt, her successes at Lincoln High) “led her to formulate her philosophy that aging can attain goals of personal dignity and social usefulness by recognizing their own individual worth in a crusade for service” (Crippen et al. 10).

Andrus’s crusade for service began in earnest in October of 1947, when the CRTA’s efforts to secure elders’ access to health insurance (among other arguments of national import) led to the founding of the National Retired Teachers Association (NRTA). Andrus became its first volunteer president. By 1958, Andrus’s mission reached out to retirees of all professions, as she became founding president of the American Association of Retired Persons (known today
simply as AARP). For former educator Andrus, the nascent AARP’s primary objectives were to improve the everyday lives of elders and to establish a recognizable place for elders in modern society. In conjunction with her role as AARP president, Andrus served on hospital boards, went on speaking circuits, and developed programs for lifelong learning and civic action; perhaps her most enduring rhetorical work for shaping public opinion of elder Americans, however, is found in her editorials for the *NRTA Journal* and AARP’s *Modern Maturity*. Until her death in 1967, Andrus used her public voice to respond to the view of old age circulating in mid-twentieth-century America: that it was a phase of decline in which active citizenship was no longer possible.

Andrus’s philosophies on aging align with the American ideal of “civilized” aging, propagated by nineteenth-century “aging manuals” (Cole, *Journey* 143). Texts that focus explicitly on the process of growing older, aging manuals document and represent the human lifespan to raise awareness and offer “instruction, inspiration, consolation, and advice about aging” (Cole, *Journey* 67). Marking a shift from previous cultural attitudes toward aging in later life as simply the declining ability to achieve one’s goals, aging manuals emphasized the positives of advanced age. For instance, Margaret White, Lydia Sigourney, and Lydia Maria Child all quoted the following chirpy passage in their aging manuals written for older men: “Useless, do you say you are? You are of *great* use. You really are. How are you useful? By being a man that is old. Your old age is a public good” (Mountford, qtd. in Cole, *Journey* 143).

Emphasizing old age as a “public good,” Andrus’s editorial work responded to long-held beliefs in the opposite: that older adults are citizens who have outlived their usefulness. As an extension of this belief, older adults were (and are) commonly defined by a perceived dependence upon others, including charities and the welfare state, based on pre-Social Security
status of older Americans as generally unemployable and thus poor (Palmore 71-72). In response, Andrus used her editorships to craft a curriculum of aging—one based on Christian, middle-class values and aimed to “promote independence, dignity, and purpose” in later life (AARP, “AARP History”).

Andrus’s role in the founding of AARP was crucial, but her efforts to construct a curriculum of aging were undermined from the first since, as Schurenberg and Luciano pointed out in a 1987 report, “AARP the advocate and AARP the salesman are both firmly embedded in the association’s origins.” Although not appearing in AARP’s current accounts of its own history, insurance salesman Leonard Davis had as much—if not more—influence on the establishment of the group as Andrus did. Davis, who set up a wildly successful by-mail health insurance plan for the NRTA, invested $50,000 to establish AARP, with most of this investment going toward establishing Modern Maturity, which advertised Davis’s insurance among the pages of Andrus’s editorial re-education of American elderhood (Morris 24). While the ability to obtain health insurance was much needed prior to the Social Security Act of 1965, AARP’s insurance dealings and healthcare-related lobbying has landed the organization in hot water more than once. The group continues to serve as a scapegoat in political debates, often stirring up implicit or explicit “greedy geezer” accusations, particularly in regard to health care policies and costs.

More than a sign of the group’s conflicts of interest, the perennial dramas of AARP’s health care politics are at the heart of an emerging curriculum of aging that departs from Andrus’s original vision. Overpowering its efforts to establish an active senior collective, AARP over-emphasizes health and the aging body as “the” central topic for elder Americans in order to ensure AARP’s political and financial survival. The business logic is simple: if Americans are
concerned about their aging bodies, they might purchase protection in the form of AARP-backed insurance, medical products, and pharmaceuticals. But by placing undue emphasis on the health challenges of older adults, AARP’s texts squeeze out other available meanings of old age—including the intellectual, creative, political, and social growth that might result from richer representations of late life.

Before turning to analysis of recent AARP publications for the ways in which they support or constrain the relationship between older adults and literacy technologies, I will offer an illustration of the impact that “AARP the salesman” might have on the organization’s rhetoric. In the next section, I identify one way in which AARP has deployed a body-centered curriculum of aging in its central publication, *AARP The Magazine*. Constructed as a self-help guide to aging—what might be called an aging manual—the magazine enacts the kind of relationship older adults are expected to have with literacy in the twenty-first century: reading and writing to manage health and monitor the body. This profitable focus on the practices of body maintenance and repair might, as I demonstrate, inhibit both the development of technological literacy and the broadening of what old age and aging can mean.

The AARP Reading List

“[A]ll elements of literacy instruction,” John Duffy argues, “including the selection of reading materials...are ultimately rhetorical and ideological, ultimately intended to promote a vision of the world and the place of learners within it” (17). As Linda Brodkey recalls her childhood spent poring over classic literature and emulating middle-class literate tastes and culture, we are further reminded that literacy embodies ideology, and literate activity can bring ideology into contact with a sense of self. As a widely read text that purports to represent the
interests of a particular population, *AARP The Magazine* actively attempts to configure ideologies of aging. AARP’s editorial texts remain reminiscent of nineteenth-century aging manuals which, like conduct, etiquette, and other self-help texts, seek to shape readers’ tastes and behaviors, as well as to provide advice and inspiration about getting older. In fact, much of the self-help discourse found in *AARP The Magazine*—particularly its body-centered content—echoes the discourses of women’s magazines, which construct femininity according to conservative norms. One needs only to glance at the cover lines on women’s magazines such as *Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan*, or *Redbook* to note comparable trends in bodily maintenance, for instance. It is on these body-objectifying terms that readers must negotiate (though not always uncritically) a sense of identification with other members of the magazine’s target audience. As Joke Hermes finds in her study of women’s magazine readers, many value the sense of “connected knowing” offered by such texts, offering “material for comparison” to their own everyday lives (149). As part of these efforts, *AARP The Magazine* represents and recommends literate activity for aging adults. In AARP’s curriculum of aging, as represented in its print magazine, the primary work of literacy is to assist in tracking and repairing the aging body.

Resonating with the discourses of American self-help literature since Andrus’s time as editor, *AARP The Magazine* urges readers to take charge of later life, including health, family, finances, spirituality, and national welfare. Featured most prominently, however, is a directive to take charge of the aging body. For instance, the magazine calls on readers to supplement professional medical care with self-care in articles like “Calling Dr. Feel-Good,” which recommends ways for readers to reduce stress without doctors, such as “crack a joke” or “walk it out” (Wooldridge). These and other self-help rhetorics offer directives about how to age well in
the twenty-first century. Following a particular habit of aging manual writers, AARP defends old age through “the recitation of its accomplishments” (Cole, *Journey* 143) by citing celebrities, marathoners, and senior Olympians, and by printing photos of youthful-looking older adults with few wrinkles, strong white teeth, and thick heads of hair. In this way, AARP offers inspirational stories of people who, by AARP’s standards, are aging successfully, with “success” often measured in bodily terms, as in articles about older super-athletes (Goodson; Hise), or news about celebrities who “show no signs of slowing down or losing traction,” as Clint Eastwood does (qtd. in Hochman 24). In other words, AARP focuses primarily on stories about “super seniors,” a term meant to be evocative of *supercrip*, which has been used in disability studies scholarship. Popular accounts of supercrips suggest that “a disabled person is presumed deserving of pity—instead of respect—until he or she proves capable of overcoming a physical or mental limitation through extraordinary feats” (Shapiro 16). In the same way, representations of “super seniors” not only mark older adults as unworthy of respect unless they abide by youthful standards, but they also replicate the idea that aging is primarily about body maintenance and repair to stave off physical and cognitive decline. Indeed, as former AARP contributor Susan Jacoby claims, AARP underscores the experiences of the “young old” and the exceptional “old old,” and usually ignores the majority of older adults (19). Such references to youthfulness attempt to establish a positive model for aging that places emphasis on physicality, creating personal goals that demand the money, time, and technology such youthful physiques might require.

Although the language of self-help can be affirming in that it helps readers to envision their own agency and possibilities for transformation (Grodin), it can also have detrimental effects. Marking “normal” bodies as unfit, discourses of self-help encourage disenfranchised
readers to take personal responsibility and “to see themselves as objects,” as Victoria DeFrancisco writes of women self-help readers, “and to define their bodies as possessions, finely tuned machines, or enemies” in order to uphold social norms (109). The targeted readers of self-help are urged to accept the text’s ideas about what constitutes a normal or good life and self, and to expend serious amounts of time and energy to policing the self—especially, as in the case of AARP, in policing the body. In such an effort, AARP writers advise readers to carefully consider food choices (Oz, “6-Month Plan”), how they move (Crandell), and even what they wear (Redford).

Generally situated within the genre of self-help and the sub-genre of the aging manual, *AARP The Magazine* embodies the purposes for reading that AARP appears to recommend for older adults. In so many ways—more of which I elaborate below—AARP writers assume that a dedication to bodily protection and repair is the sole motivation for reading in later life. Moreover, the reading-for-health mandate goes beyond the pages of the magazine. Occasionally, this policing of the body directly recruits writing activity, such as advice to keep dieting journals (Gotthardt), to write a diary or novel in order to promote brain health (Doraiswamy 42), and to write down health goals (Fischer). *AARP The Magazine* also takes aim at its readers’ broader literacy habits through the promotion of books on body and health maintenance. In a survey of the 2009 and 2010 issues of the magazine, AARP mentioned 144 book titles. Most of the book titles were used as shorthand credentials for experts referenced in articles, or quite possibly as part of a promotion agreement with publishers, but, not surprisingly, aging manuals also make regular appearances. In the 2009 and 2010 issues of the magazine, many non-fiction aging manuals were featured, including *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (Sheehy), *Staging Your Comeback: A Complete Beauty Revival for Women over 45* (Hopkins), *You, Staying Young:*
The body is a central organizing trope for twenty-first century aging manuals, including those promoted by AARP. For example, in his National Geographic-sponsored research project on longevity, Dan Buettner investigated global “Blue Zones,” or areas where human populations seem to live the longest. Having collected stories and wisdom from people living in those areas of the world, Buettner recounts them in *The Blue Zones*—a book and community health project that received a large amount of attention in *AARP The Magazine*, both through a feature story on a 79-year-old cancer survivor living in Greece (Buettner, “More Good Years”) and through a story about the AARP project that sought to recreate Blue Zone lifestyles in the U.S. (Buettner, “Minnesota”). Both in the book and in its AARP instantiations, take-away lessons from the Blue Zones include finding purpose in life and fostering social and spiritual activities, but by and large the message to older adults is primarily about controlling the body: keep active, reduce stress, drink red wine, and eat more vegetables but less of everything else.

Likewise, advice from makeup artist Christopher Hopkins—who became the central figure behind AARP’s 2009 Makeover contest—states that the goal for older women’s cosmetic care is for the outer body to match an “authentic” identity. As he writes in *Staging Your Comeback*, looking good will make you “say, ‘That’s so me!’ You stand taller, and your best self seems to come out naturally” (28). Although AARP’s effort to make clear that older women (and men) have a right to feel beautiful is in some ways commendable in the face of a youth-obsessed beauty culture, the resulting changes in hair, clothing, and makeup suggest that beauty means creating a high-maintenance, expensive, and (still) youthful appearance—a habit that points once again to AARP’s commercialist ties and middle-class sensibilities. In order to feel like an
“authentic self,” one must police the body at all times, lest a dowdy silhouette, a shaggy haircut, or other signs of aging appear. It is important to point out here that AARP did not promote Hopkins’s book only by offering a short review or casually mentioning a book title; as it has done with other aging manuals, AARP undertook a major promotional initiative that recruited the actual participation of AARP members, some of whom were given on-camera makeovers. For AARP, such initiatives seem to provide appropriate information for older Americans not only to read, but also to physically embody.

Through this review of recent issues of *AARP The Magazine*, I do not intend to suggest that all AARP readers—or readers of any self-help text, for that matter—engage in uncritical readings and necessarily follow recommendations for lifestyle or literacy. Certainly, as Kelly Coyle and Debra Grodin would argue, many readers bring complex interpretations of both the magazine and its recommended readings, just as they would any self-help literature. However, even if a reader isn’t directly persuaded by a particular piece of advice or representation offered by AARP, I agree with Coyle and Grodin’s assessment that reading self-help texts necessarily involves identity work, as self-help texts actively and forcefully attempt to shape readers’ thoughts and behaviors (62). In considering such texts, I contend that the literacy practices and activities recommended by AARP have, even if in small or subtle ways, an impact on aging identities. Older adults who read AARP’s serial aging manuals encounter, even if they ultimately reject, a series of texts asking that they identify as older primarily through problems with their bodies. In a more in-depth rhetorical analysis of a broader selection of AARP texts, I next examine the implications of this method of identification in AARP texts for technological literacy, and thus for the potential development of newer literacies in later life.
Rhetorics of Gerontechnology: AARP and Technological Literacy

As a further extension of its long-held interest in keeping aging bodies at the center of its members’ attention, AARP’s curriculum of aging presents a particular attitude toward technologies in the lives of older adults. Regularly, AARP adopts a popular move toward producing (and profiting from) technologies marketed toward older adults, which relies heavily on the widely familiar idea that “old age is a problem” (Gullette, Aged 7) that is best resolved “through willpower, aided by science, technology, and expertise” (Cole, Journey xxii). Thus, “technologies for seniors” marks a belief that technologies in the lives of older adults are primarily about bodily repair and protection. I call discourses representing such beliefs rhetorics of gerontechnology, borrowing a neologism from a nascent field by the same name.

Gerontechnology emerged in the early twenty-first century as a transdisciplinary field for shaping new and developing technologies to support the growing senior population (Bouma). The stated values of the International Society for Gerontechnology include support for aging adults’ social ambitions and “enhancing their dignity.” In practice, much of the field’s work emphasizes medical technologies, compliance, and accessibility—projects that figure older adults’ primary technological needs as related to disability and the medicalization of old age. Regardless of the society’s social goals, what gets most public press are the gerontotechnologies that promise easy profits because they speak readily to the idea that aging is a body problem, such as wearable GPS trackers for Alzheimer’s patients, a telemedicine system to monitor older patients, and other “machines to the rescue” (Taylor). Although such innovations may revolutionize geriatric care and, in many cases, help older adults sustain higher quality of life, they represent only one way technologies might be taken up in older adults’ lives, displacing other potential social, cultural, or even spiritual meanings and uses of technology. Likewise,
when AARP has addressed technology in recent publications, it has usually done so to proclaim technology’s ability to repair, protect, or assist aging bodies, such as hailing “Medical screenings that can save your life” (Fallik) or presenting a feature article on how “hearing loop” technologies assist hard-of-hearing passengers on New York subways (Gandel).\textsuperscript{12}

To capture these dominant rhetorics of aging and technology, I turned to regularly published and updated AARP texts that operate through and/or directly discuss technology in the everyday context of later adulthood: \textit{AARP The Magazine}, the organization’s technology page at AARP.org, AARP’s official Facebook page, and AARP’s Twitter page.\textsuperscript{13} Through a systematic survey of these four media, I archived and reviewed rhetorical units, isolated based on the visual layout of the page or screen (Wysocki 139-140); thus, rhetorical units include a wide range of genres and modes: articles with images, advertisements, linked web pages, videos, reported interviews, and so forth. In all cases, my goals of analysis were 1) to identify where and how often AARP represents technology in general to its audience of older adults; 2) to identify more specifically where AARP represents literacy technologies to older adults; and 3) to assess \textit{how} technologies are presented to that audience in relation to technological literacy.

\textit{Texts}

AARP’s magazine and website possess the broadest level of outreach through wide circulation. The bimonthly \textit{AARP The Magazine} boasts the longest history of all AARP publications and claims to be the “world’s largest circulation magazine,” reaching nearly 24.5 million in circulation in the United States in 2009 (Magazine Publishers of America). Also a relatively long-standing media source, the AARP website was established in the mid-1990s (undergoing its most recent design overhaul in May 2010) and currently draws over 2 million
visitors per month (AARP, “AARP Interactive”). The audience for both texts likely includes older adults across the spectrum of technological literacy, ranging from early-adopters to magazine-only readers who have not yet adopted extensive use of digital media into their everyday practices. In my analysis of the magazine, I reviewed twelve consecutive issues of 2009 and 2010, all published under editor Nancy Perry Graham.\textsuperscript{14} The website, when analyzed in June 2010, was organized by a tabbed menu of thirteen different subject areas. In order to better target technology-related discourse, I reviewed web content organized under the “technology” tab; these thirteen subjects, however, were used in categorizing the other AARP media content (see analysis below).

Capitalizing on the recent wave of adults joining social media services (Lenhart; Madden; Madden and Zickuhr), AARP has also established its own Facebook profile page and an official Twitter account. As of July 2010, AARP’s Facebook fan page had gathered over 14,000 fans, and its Twitter profile claimed nearly 1,500 followers. (It is unclear how many subscribers are actually older adults, as non-members of AARP are permitted to join the Facebook page and subscribe as AARP “followers” on Twitter.) During the study, AARP updated its Facebook status approximately twice per day and tweeted anywhere from five to one hundred times per day. From April 1 through May 31, 2010, I archived Facebook updates and tweets created and published by appointed AARP microbloggers, excluding tweets that were direct replies to a single Twitter user.

\textit{Analysis}

In order to identify the contexts of AARP’s discussion of technology for older audiences, I first categorized all primary rhetorical units from the magazine, Facebook, and Twitter based
on their subject content (AARP.org texts were already preselected under the “technology”
subject heading, and so did not need to be further coded by subject). The categories were adapted
from the list of thirteen subjects on the AARP website’s navigation menu: 1) health, 2) money,
3) work, 4) personal growth, 5) politics and society, 6) relationships, 7) home and garden, 8)
food, 9) travel, 10) entertainment, 11) technology, 12) giving back (volunteerism), and 13)
member benefits. I added a “phatic chat” category to the list to account for social media updates
that functioned as phatic communion rather than providing information (Malinowski 315), such
as “Good morning, tweeps!” The results of this subject coding are illustrated in Figure 2.1 below.

Despite AARP’s long-standing mission to promote a sense of dignity, independence, and
purpose among older adults, the most Andrus-like categories of “politics and society” and
“personal growth” were underrepresented in the magazine and on Facebook. Instead, health,
money, and entertainment consistently ranked as a top priority in terms of sheer quantity of
media space. When it came to texts featuring technology as a central subject, AARP The
Magazine had little to offer. Not surprisingly, however, Twitter and Facebook had more to say about technology, often linking to Facebook news or information about Twitter in metadiscussions of social media technologies. On Twitter, for example, technology became the central topic for several days’ tweets when AARP microbloggers tweeted frequently while attending a social media conference.

In the second phase of coding, I identified all references to technologies within all rhetorical units in the magazine and social media. Although “technology” is an elusive term that can range in meaning from simply “tool” to a shifting set of human processes (Haas xii), this project sampled discourse in which objects, practices, and designs were presented as new and newsworthy by AARP. While this coding definition did include the kind of digital technologies used for reading and writing practices, it also included other kinds of “new” technologies, which, in this case, were primarily assistive, medical, and safety devices and pharmaceuticals. Defined broadly, technology was, in fact, referenced regularly in AARP texts: about one-fifth of all magazine and Facebook rhetorical units and nearly one-third of all tweets referenced technology in some way. In short, readers of AARP texts receive regular exposure to technology talk through AARP’s curriculum of aging. However, technologies were not—with the exception of some Twitter work—consistently represented in activities beyond health, money management, and pop culture entertainment.

Further confirming the consistent association of technology and medicalized bodies, my analysis of AARP advertising categorized 411 print ads from all of the 2009 and 2010 issues of AARP The Magazine. Nearly a quarter of the ads promoted assistive technologies, such as Hoveround electric wheelchairs, LifeAlert emergency notification systems, or disability-accessible vehicles. An additional 14 percent of advertising was dedicated to bodily treatments,
such as erectile dysfunction devices and pharmaceuticals, and a smaller portion of advertising (9 percent) represented media technologies—most commonly cell phones and the Bose sound system (no ads included computers or software). However, even media or home-use technology ads were regularly configured in the language of gerontechnology by promoting the product’s benefits for bodily assistance or repair. For instance, in advertising the Doro PhoneEasy for boomers by touting its “Large, bright screen & text,” “Loud and clear sound,” and “Big raised buttons,” Consumer Cellular reminds AARP readers of the inseparability of age and disability, rather than suggesting the social or emotional benefits of cell phone use marketed in ads for broader (i.e., younger) audiences.

Having captured the broader, quantitative picture of how often and in what context AARP mentioned technologies, I was prepared to conduct a focused, in-depth analysis of rhetorical units relevant to technological literacy. In order to determine how AARP offered rhetorics of gerontechnology that might reinforce resistance toward technological literacy among its audience members, I reviewed each technology-related unit and noted emerging patterns that characterized AARP’s rhetorical positioning of technology use. I understand these patterns to be a part of AARP’s overarching (though sometimes conflicting) curriculum of aging. Facing a diverse audience brought together by little more than birth dates and American residence, AARP attempts to, as Burke describes, “confront the implications of division” (22) and make arguments for the unity of AARP members. In the following section, I outline the patterns of AARP’s textual unity-making and identification through a discussion of important principles of technological literacy currently ignored by AARP in particular, and American culture in general.
Three Principles of Technological Literacy for Older Adults

Analysis of representative texts reveals that AARP frequently reinforces rhetorics of gerontechnology by presenting limited ideas about what technologies can mean for the lives of older adults. By way of responding to AARP’s rhetorical limitations, I identify three principles that AARP—and other elder advocates—should consider when representing the technological literacy of older adults.

1. “Technology for elders” means more than addressing the body problems of aging.

   With remarkable consistency, AARP writers highlight connections between technologies and failing bodies, pitching technologies as solutions or adaptations to older adults’ body problems. The representation of technology as oriented primarily toward health and disability concerns was most readily apparent in analysis of AARP The Magazine. In addition to the dearth of articles primarily about literacy technologies (only six percent), most articles that did include technology (broadly defined) as a topic of interest were either explicitly about health or else described technologies in the medicalized context of the aging body. In a representative example, the May/June 2010 issue included 43 articles, six mentioning technologies. Of those six, three discussed medical technologies (pharmaceuticals and treatments), one offered a discount on a home security system, and the remaining two mentioned technology in relation to billing fraud and social etiquette.

   When encouraged at all in the magazine, the use of digital technology was often constrained to body repair, disability assistance, or damage prevention. In March/April 2010, an artistic rendition of the findings of an AARP-sponsored survey of Baby Boomers depicted nine technological innovations, of which four (exercise clothes, health-record implants, smart houses,
physical video games) promoted better health and safety, and two (cell phone projection and domestic robots to help “load the dishwasher”) were assistive (AARP, “Future Tech”). In May/June 2010, readers were encouraged to consider the use of technologies to communicate with their doctors (Ponchione). This pattern is consistent with AARP’s print advertising, with its leading advertising clients including Acorn Stairlifts, LifeAlert, Loud N’ Clear hearing devices, and other gerontechnology brands.

As with the magazine, AARP’s other media promoted technologies in relation to body care and repair. As evidenced by the frequency of health tips and topics in AARP Facebook updates (about a third of all Facebook updates were health-related), AARP microbloggers set up the group’s social media as a kind of health-focused gerontechnology, used for sharing tips on weight loss (AARP, “Check out”), receiving warnings about taking aspirin every day (AARP, “Do you”), or gathering facts about Alzheimer’s disease (AARP, “Does Alzheimer’s”).

Many of the technology articles on AARP.org drew attention to the aging body through emphasis on ways new technologies must be appropriate for disabled bodies in order to be considered valuable to older users (e.g., Gandel; Greenburg; AARP, “Sweet Spots”). Although AARP’s Twitter activity was less prone to emphasizing the repair model of technology, it did occasionally reaffirm the repair metaphor in the midst of rich talk about emerging technologies by emphasizing ease of use. In one notable instance, AARP uncritically retweeted (forwarded) a message about “iPad apps for Seniors” (Carpenter, “RT @ElderGadget”), linking to an article about a digital version of Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland. The article explains, “While the story is one designed for children, seniors will definitely appreciate the ingenuity of the app and share the story with children or grandchildren. The text appears clear and easy to read, and the navigation arrows allow for an easy page-turning experience” (ZBarangan).
As in ads for the Doro PhoneEasy and other “senior-friendly” tech products, emphasis on ease of use suggests that technologies for older adults must be simplistic, clear, and perhaps childish in order to adapt to older adults’ failing bodies (and minds). Further, such efforts must encourage seniors to buy separate technologies made exclusively for their age group (as though the regular technology would never serve older users), thus fostering a senior niche market.

While being certain that technology is user-friendly, intuitive, and adaptive to a range of needs is crucial, it is perhaps equally crucial for newcomers to technological literacy practices to envision other relationships between their bodies, their lives, and new technologies. Unless potential users are able to envision new technologies as possibly meaningful (not just “easy”), it is less likely that a non-user will take sufficient interest to meet the challenges of learning to use new literacy technologies.

2. Elders can be critical users, not just fearful victims, of literacy technologies.

Occasionally, AARP extended the repair metaphor of gerontechnology and promoted discourses of fear, reinforcing the widespread idea that older people are, or else should be, afraid of new technologies. Fear of technology, particularly communication technologies, is in many ways a response to the body problems of aging: anxiety about being harmed or victimized follows a sense of physical or mental vulnerability in old age.

Although such cases occurred in all four media, several egregious cases were reproduced on AARP.org, which featured “Confessions of a Facebook Addict” (Delahantey), “May I Have My Attention, Please?” (Read), “False Friends on Facebook” (Kirchheimer), and other cautionary tales that paint a threatening picture of digital media technologies, particularly social media, as monsters that destroy personal relationships, waste time, and change everyday life for
the worse—rather than representing the possible ways technologies might be meaningful for older adults. After reading the story of Bryan Hutberg, who became a victim of “a scam that is increasingly occurring on websites like Facebook, MySpace and class reunion sites” (Kirchheimer) when his Facebook account was hacked and used to swindle hundreds of dollars from his friends, it is unlikely that many reluctant users of social media would be inspired to try. With the exception of Twitter bloggers, AARP writers spent more time cautioning readers against the potential dangers of technologies than describing how they might bring social or intellectual enrichment to everyday life—as millions of regular social media users have already discovered.

That older people are afraid of or stubbornly resistant to learning or experiencing new things is, of course, a durable stereotype (Butler, Why Survive; Morrell, Mayhorn, and Echt; Palmore). However, researchers have found that some older adults do experience fear and anxiety when working with new technologies (McKee and Blair) and, as with any age group, older adults are often victims of cybercrime (Internet Crime Complaint Center). It is certainly within the purview of AARP to advocate for informed use of communication and information technologies; in fact, such efforts might participate in generating the “rhetorical literacy” Stuart Selber calls for in the digital age, thus fostering the potential for older adults to become “reflective producers of technology” (182). However, the imbalance between AARP’s representation of reasons why and reasons why not to adopt technological literacy practices could potentially curb the motivation of would-be learners altogether, thus quelling opportunities for deeper critical engagement and active participation.
3. Cultivating technological literacy means reaching beyond audiences of eager-adopters.

AARP’s very presence in social media represents an important effort to reach out to older audiences who may be exploring technological literacy practices for the first time. AARP bloggers are especially active on Twitter, not only promoting AARP services and events or retweeting aging-related news, but also with modeling affective, embodied technological literacy practices. Tammy G, one of the most active AARP bloggers during the period of study, regularly shared personal information in her tweets: “Went to the farmers market today & picked up mushrooms and asparagus. What are you up to? #Weekend ^TG”; “is cheering on her friend @sarahstanley who’s running the Boston Marathon today. Anyone else know someone running? ^TG.”

Such models of social media use may be valuable in helping newcomers to see the personal and affective as well as commercial/professional value in the technological literacy practices of social networking. However, these messages are not necessarily connecting with the right audience, as AARP regularly “preaches to the choir” by doing its best literacy advocacy within communities of elders who have already expressed interest in social media use. Compared with other popular media (including Facebook), Twitter reaches virtually no one who would likely be considered among statistics of the so-called gray divide: according to Tammy G of AARP, only AARP’s most techno-savvy “cusp” members use Twitter (“AARP isn’t”). Although AARP serves its community well by maintaining a presence at the cutting edge of social media, it should also seek to represent technological literacy practices in venues most likely reaching audience members who might have reservations about first ventures into virtual communities, as well as to those who are less likely to have easy access to technologies in the first place.
Yet, the publication reaching the largest audience of elder adults, *AARP The Magazine*, has the least to say about technological literacy, choosing instead to focus its occasional technology talk around issues of AARP self-promotion, health, and money, and only calling attention to Twitter twice during the period of study (Bloosten et al. 61; Fallow). Truly reaching out to elder adults means more than establishing a welcoming presence online; it also means finding ways to actively bring elder adults in, to help them to see ways that technologies might be useful and meaningful beyond the ability to preserve or repair the aging body, and to help them seek out the necessary resources for accessing those technologies. Above all, it means representing what real older adults already do with literacy technologies, and what technological literacy has meant for their lives.

**Beyond Repair**

Facing a diverse audience brought together by birth date and American residence, AARP attempts to, as Kenneth Burke describes, “confront the implications of division” (22) and argue for the unity of AARP members. Through its texts, AARP attempts to reach out and identify with a massive audience by relying on rhetorics of gerontechnology that, while familiar and highly marketable, carry narrow ideas of what meaningful activities and pursuits of later life might include. Although these AARP texts are not necessarily persuasive to all readers, they are at least pervasive. Rhetoric is often not simply a singular speech or text, but a “body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reënforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill” (Burke 26, original emphasis).

It is perhaps in part through the regular reinforcement of the belief that aging is a problem best solved through technological intervention that some older adults have difficulty seeing any
other purpose for technology in their lives. Developing literacy to engage in a new semiotic
domain, as James Gee describes, requires that learners are “willing to see themselves in terms of
a new identity, that is, to see themselves as the kind of person who can learn, use, and value the
new semiotic domain” (54). As many older adults read and potentially internalize AARP’s self-
help advice and its efforts to unite an older audience based on bodily failure and rhetorics of
gerontotechnology, it may become harder to envision themselves as savvy literacy technology
users, who can both benefit from and have a hand in shaping the affordances of new literacies.

While I do find that technological literacy has the potential to enrich lives through social
involvement and even (for some) rhetorical power, I do not uphold a “literacy myth” that
technological literacy could bring only hopeful outcomes for older adults, or that positive
outcomes will be shared by all. I will affirm, however, that AARP’s curriculum of aging and its
implications for older adults’ technology use is a reminder of the need to examine the rhetorics
of aging and literacy in addition to addressing issues of access, accessibility, and training. While
we must of course continue to support the development of literacy-related and other technologies
for learners of all ages, we must also be critical of how the rhetorical context of those
technologies might create or reinforce negative stereotypes in ways that counteract the gains of
increased mobility, independence, and agency.

With this in mind, we need to continue to develop a critical awareness of rhetorics of
aging and literacy, and—more importantly—to consider how these rhetorics circulate. How do
age-based assumptions about literacy manifest within our classrooms? Our departments? Our
everyday lives? Further, we must seek opportunities for recognizing and talking about the
meanings that older adults already make in their technological literate practices. We must
consider who and what counts as literate in digital times. To begin to answer such questions, we
must think beyond repair, and recognize, hold value for, and represent the technological literacy practices already burgeoning within communities of elders.

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Notes

5 A version of this essay is published as “Beyond Repair: Literacy, Technology, and a Curriculum of Aging” in *College English* 74.5 (Copyright 2012 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.)

6 This brief story, apparently initiated by Andrus’s former secretary in a 2001 interview (Liu), has become a refrain in stories of Andrus’s work. For instance, in a teaser to a page aimed at AARP’s business partners, the AARP assets website describes the organization in this way: “AARP: Founded on the simple premise that no one should have to live in a chicken coop.” The story continues: “In 1947, on a meager pension, it was all one retired teacher could afford. That’s when, Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus, a retired high school principal, made a shocking discovery. On a visit to a former teacher, she found the woman in an old chicken coop. She was in poor health and couldn’t afford medical care. Ethel got mad. She also got organized and set out to change the world for not only retired teachers but all older Americans, and in 1958, she founded AARP” (AARP, “AARP and the Beginning”; see also, for example, R. Jenkins; Schmitt).


8 For example, AARP was the focus of a 1978 *60 Minutes* exposé, in which the organization’s relationship with Colonial Penn Insurance—a relationship established by Leonard Davis, who was “honorary president” of AARP and founder of Colonial Penn—came under fire
After a lawsuit and a Congressional investigation, AARP extricated itself from dealings with Colonial Penn. Later, during the Reagan administration, thousands of AARP members resigned in protest when AARP persuaded the President not to veto a catastrophic health insurance provision of Medicare (Skinner 46). Then in 2004, the GOP pushed a new Medicare prescription drug law, also with AARP’s backing, while Democrats blasted AARP for backing a bill from which it stood to profit—followed by the departure of 60,000 protesting AARP members (Vaida). This incident did not spell doom for the organization, either, as it lived to face yet another round of political uproar based on its lobbying for health care reform in 2009. This time falling on the side of Democrats, AARP officially backed President Obama’s Health Care Reform plan. In uncanny response, CBS reported that, once again, 60,000 disgruntled AARP members dropped out of the organization (CBSNews).

9 The greedy geezer stereotype reproduces the belief that older adults in the United States share a selfish desire to aid senior populations, even at the cost of funding for future generations. Much of this stereotype, as Surowiecki’s article evidences, surrounds health care debates (Surowiecki).

10 Further, as Micki McGee argues, the “makeover culture” and self-help literature often creates more social anxieties than it soothes, reinforcing a sense of perpetual inadequacy (18).

11 The official journal *Gerontechnology* lists potential audience members as “designers, architects, standards developers, builders, engineers, marketers, manufacturers, medical doctors, pharmacists, decision makers, and related professionals in the health, social, business and technology professions” (International Society for Gerontechnology).

12 The AARP texts analyzed here also include moves that support technological literacy. Furthermore, AARP works to establish representation of its members in new and emerging
technological environments (e.g., Twitter). Thus, while I remain critical of its problematic rhetorics of gerontechnology, it is not my intention to represent AARP as wholly negligent or silent on the subject of technological literacy.

13 Excluded from this study is the AARP Bulletin, a print text that focuses primarily on the organization’s lobbying activities and political interests, but which also contains material similar to articles found in AARP The Magazine. Since virtually all information printed in the Bulletin is reproduced on the AARP website, I have only analyzed website content to avoid redundancy.

14 Tellingly, Graham previously worked as a journalist for Fortune, Money, and People magazines, and won an Investigative Reporters and Editor’s award for an article on medicine (AARP, “AARP Experts”).

15 There were four official bloggers tweeting on behalf of AARP at the time; although it was not always clear which blogger had authored a tweet, some identified their tweets with their personal initials and shared bits of personal news.
As many aging adults will freely admit, embodied experience in later life is significant and worthy of attention. The physical changes of old age are, for many, difficult to face. For art historian Bernard Berenson, for instance, his 86-year-old body not only presented new challenges to daily life, but also served as a constant reminder of his mortality:

My earthly tabernacle is too uncomfortable to live in. It leaks, it crumbles, it breaks away, now part of the roof and now a bit of the wall. The air blows through and yet it smokes and smells. It is no longer habitable. But where to go if I leave this wreck of a body of mine? And do I exist at all outside of this miserable carcass? (qtd. in Cole and Winkler 333)

Echoing and reinforcing the experience of aging as a body falling into disrepair, the dominant representation of aging bodies in the United States adheres to a biomedical model of senescence, which regularly conflates aging and physical degeneration. But by configuring aging as centrally, sometimes only, a body problem, we overlook other major sources of age-based oppression (social policies, economies, etc.), and we forgo an opportunity to examine how bodies actually participate in the lives of elders—including, as this chapter will discuss in detail, their literate lives.

In response to the kinds of rhetorics illustrated in the previous chapter, which—I have argued—obscure and perhaps curb the literacies of older adults, this chapter argues for an attention to elder bodies in literate activity. In part, I am concerned with the development of empathy, in that the aging experience might be made visible and knowable in order to create possibilities for new narratives that do not place such strict limitations on the meanings of old
age and aging. Empathy is a double-edged sword, however. While empathy can be a powerfully persuasive way to seek change through deeper understanding of personal experience, the rhetorical means of cultivating empathy might ultimately reinforce reductive perceptions.

I begin the chapter by considering this potential pitfall in a discussion of the tensions between aging and physical disability, as illustrated by efforts of the National Council on the Aging and the MIT AgeLab. Although these programs do well to try to raise a broader consciousness of the elder perspective in youth-centered American culture, they fail to read the experience of aging through any lens other than disability—a failure that serves here as a warning for literacy researchers examining the literate lives of elders. This extended preface to the discussion of my qualitative study is intended to make clear that, while I aim to challenge the conflation of aging and disability, I do not mean to suggest that disability is not a significant part of the aging experience. Rather, I hope to show that physical impairment is not the be-all and end-all of the meaning older adults make of their lives and their literacies, just as it is not the be-all and end-all for people of all ages and abilities.

Against this cautionary backdrop, I then outline a means of making the experiences of older adults visible and knowable to literacy researchers, but in a way that complicates the presumed relationship between aging and disability. By contextualizing the current literate activity of older adults within an autobiographical framework, I attend to the bodily dimensions of literacy without focusing narrowly on the “success” or “failure” of bodies in literate activity. Instead of reading aging through the lens of disability—or, for that matter, reading disability through the lens of disability—I “read for the body” (to borrow Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s expression) in the oral histories and live, narrated movements of older adults. A focus on the ways that older adults use their bodies in the telling of their literacy narratives and in the
structuring of their current literate activity, reveals literacy through a perspective of aging that neither presumes nor denies the impact of physical impairment.

I conclude the chapter with the findings of this approach to literacy research, presenting two cases from my study of seven adults born between 1925 and 1945, in which I illustrate how older adults, despite differences in their uptake and deployment of digital literacy practices, reveal (both consciously and unconsciously) the roles that their bodies play in literate activity. These roles are not, as the grand narrative of aging-as-decline would have it, restricted to an experience of their failing bodies creating an impaired literacy: literate practice that appears unsuccessful or less effective, presumably due to a physical or mental disability. Instead, these stories provide valuable historical context for the development of new literacy in later life, and make a case for paying attention to older adults’ literate bodies not only as problems, but also as carriers of embodied histories that play an important role in the motivation for literacy acquisition.

**Aging and Disability**

In 1976, the Advertising Council ran a campaign on behalf of the National Council on the Aging (NCOA), which hoped to spark a “grey liberation” movement for aging adults’ rights modeled on the civil rights and women’s liberation movements. The national campaign adopted the slogan, “Get off your rocker for grey liberation” and imparted an enigmatic missive to young people of America: “Don’t take old age sitting down” (Ad Council, “Aging Newspaper Ads”). In many renderings of the printed ads, a shadowy wooden rocking chair sits empty, the wooden slats of its backrest reminiscent of the vertical bars of a prison cell (see Figure 3.1 below). In television public service announcements, a variety of younger adults appear one at a
time, each sitting uneasily in a rocking chair, its joints squeaking ominously with each oscillation, as the voice-over narration warns of imminent old age and an entrance into minority status: “Get off your rocker while there’s still time” (Ad Council, “Aging TV”; “Grey”).

*Figure 3.1: 1976 newspaper advertisement for the National Council on the Aging campaign.*

The Ad Council’s “get off your rocker” slogan makes at least one compelling move, in that it turns a critical eye on a familiar euphemism for insanity or senility. To be off one’s rocker, as the idiom implies, is to demonstrate abnormal or unacceptable behavior by rising to one’s feet
and taking action, rather than remaining seated docilely, hands folded (or otherwise occupied with quiet, age-appropriate pursuits) and lips pressed in socially mandated silence. The imagined body of this metaphor for mental soundness is, of course, the body of the older adult. The ads suggest that no one should be imprisoned by a rocker, demonstrating sanity and normativity through silence, inactivity, and invisibility. Bodies, the ads acknowledge, are political sites where agency is either expressed or repressed. To “get off your rocker” is to refuse socially imposed exile in old age.

What muddies the message of the NCOA campaign, however, is that its ads explicitly target younger audiences and encourage them to become aware and active on behalf of older adults—or, more precisely, on behalf of their future, older selves. The ads ask younger viewers to imagine what they would want from their later years, as the doom-and-gloom images of rocking chairs represent an undesirable stereotype as the alternative. The NCOA leaves actual older adults out of the campaign—they are not visible in the ads, they are not recognized as a targeted audience, and their lived bodily experiences remain tied to the disability model of aging. In the ads, “liberated” elders-to-be are those who fold up the newspaper and tuck away the knitting, stand up in tennis shoes, and go out to do...something else. (The specific “something” remains altogether unclear, though some of the ads recommend that readers and listeners request a copy of Facts and Myths About Aging, a cartoon-emblazoned pamphlet distributed by the NCOA.) In the same way that it seems inappropriate for AARP to regularly represent its demographic through youthfully stylized images of not-so-old-looking bodies, it is perhaps equally inappropriate that the National Council on the Aging promoted Grey Liberation by placing demands on its viewers to reject one bodily image of old age (seated and docile) in favor of another (upright and active).
The rejection of the serene elder body, while intended to expand the images of aging beyond a particular stereotype, is problematic because it simply replaces one narrow view of aging (labeled “bad”) for another (labeled “good”), thus failing to recognize the spectrum of bodily experiences in old age. Categorizing “bad” versus “good” models of aging has been hotly contested for decades within gerontology, especially in response to the concept of “successful aging.” Gerontologists John Rowe and Robert Kahn defined successful aging as the avoidance of disease and disability, high cognitive and physical function, and active engagement in daily life through social relationships and meaningful activities. Feminist age studies scholar Margaret Cruikshank notes that such prescriptive or material measures of aging—however they might emphasize the potential for positive experiences in old age—ignore the elusive and immeasurable factors that constitute positive experience: “A poor and sick old woman ages unsuccessfully by material yardsticks, but suppose she raises two grandchildren and helps out a neighbor who is older and sicker than she is. Does this constitute ‘success’?” (Cruikshank 2). Further, the successful aging model makes bodily and cognitive fitness a matter of personal choice (Rowe and Kahn 37), thus firmly placing responsibility on individuals for their own physical, emotional, and social well-being. While there are certainly measures adults can and should take in order to better maintain health, models of successful aging and their close relatives fail to acknowledge that some bodily disability simply cannot be prevented, that race and social class contribute to inequities in achieving prescribed physical “success” in aging, and—a point I wish to emphasize—that the experience of bodily disability isn’t always one of loss and failure.

Of course, the reality is that nearly all aging bodies do experience impairment at some point, and many of the most common changes to aging bodies can impact literate activity.
Although the presence of senility and dementia is an overstated aspect of the aging process, the occurrence of brain-altering diseases among older adults is significant. Alzheimer’s—a fatal disease characterized by failure of transfer in brain synapses, followed by brain-cell death—is diagnosed in 13% of adults over age 65, and over 40% of adults over age 85 (Alzheimer’s Association 12); adults with Alzheimer’s often face serious impairments with literacy, as symptoms include difficulty in processing words, memory loss, problem-solving challenges, and difficulties with spatial relationships and visual images (7). Less dire physical conditions can also take their toll on aging bodies and present real obstacles to literacy development: changes in visual perception, for instance, can create new difficulties for older adults using literacy technologies, such as mobile devices with smaller screens (Scialfà, Ho, and Laberge), or a decline in working memory may require some accommodation in digital textual design (Crow 93-103). Such changes in ability are common perhaps to the point of inevitability. With this in mind, efforts to generate empathy and understanding of the aging experience will need to be cognizant of the physicality of aging bodies.

Fast-forward, then, nearly thirty years after the “get off your rocker” campaign’s denial of the embodied experiences of elders, when a new elder-empathy program has emerged with a keen awareness of the physical challenges faced by many older Americans. In 2005, under the direction of Joseph Coughlin, MIT’s AgeLab constructed the 1.0 version of the “Age Gain Now Empathy System,” or “Agnes,” in order to replicate the embodied experiences of a typical adult in her mid-seventies. In essence, Agnes is a suit specifically designed so that younger wearers experience a shift in embodied perspective, in order to rethink the elder-friendliness of products and retail spaces. The system features elastic bands to reduce range of motion in the arms, legs, and spine; a brace to restrict head and neck movement; yellow glasses to strain vision; cushioned
soles to make balance while walking difficult; and rubber gloves to make gripping and touching objects a clumsy process (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: MIT AgeLab’s Age Gain Now Empathy System (Agnes)

Photo by Nathan Fried-Lipski. Copyright Massachusetts Institute of Technology AgeLab. Used with permission.

Agnes and similar systems have received a reasonably high amount of public attention, almost universally heralded as a boon for improving sales to older adults. While such measures are important in that any steps to improve the design of products and spaces so that they are accessible to a broader range of bodily configurations and impairments, they are nonetheless built on a problematic assumption: that aging is reducible to a generalized experience of physical discomfort and struggle. Here, again, we return to a biomedical rhetoric of bodily decline that
eclipses the actual experiences of older adults and reduces their interactions with the world based on what their bodies cannot do.

The opposing extremes represented by the elder advocacy efforts of the NCOA and MIT’s AgeLab reflect an important theoretical distinction forwarded by social theories of disability. In their early work, prominent disability rights activists challenged a narrow biomedical model of disability by arguing for a social model of disability, which made a crucial distinction between disability and impairment. Where impairment continued to denote functional limitations of the body (and, for some activists, the mind) that required accommodation, disability was reconceived as a practice of social exclusion to which all people with disabilities were subjected, and around which all people with disabilities could unite in protest (Oliver).

Although teasing apart physical impairment from social oppression does, as in the case of the Grey Liberation campaign, make important challenges to the reductive views of aging as physical or mental disability that the Agnes suit illustrates, the continued separation of bodily experience from sociocultural worlds may do more to occlude the realities of people with disabilities than it does to reveal them (Hughes and Paterson; Shakespeare).

Given that aging is accompanied by eventual biological breakdown, physical impairment does not necessarily mean that older adults are no longer willing or able to live a life of quality, which includes, for some, meaningful literate activity. Rather than a pendulum swing from a denial of bodily impairments (or preferences) by “getting off your rocker” to a wholesale conflation of aging-as-disability, we might complicate the relationship between aging and disability by understanding disability as less to do with measures of impairment, and more to do with the contextualized experience and understanding of a body’s ability. One approach, as described by Meredith Minkler and Pamela Fadem (also critics of the “successful aging” model),
involves attention to “the individual, the immediate settings in which he or she lives, the larger contexts in which these settings are embedded, and the interactions among all of these levels” (233). Thus, literacy researchers might find value in questions emerging from an age studies perspective: Can we really ascertain an older adult’s ability to participate and live a “full” life apart from his or her social context, which includes a lifelong history of embodied experience? Is sitting in a rocker (or wheelchair) in later life a sign of personal or social failure? Can the aging body be experienced as anything other than impairment or disability?

In terms of literacy among older adults (indeed, among all of us), we must ask similar questions. Are we too quick to assume that bodies are either irrelevant to literacy, when they are young and presumably healthy, or the sole cause of limited literacy, when they are older and presumably impaired? How can we examine the roles bodies play in literacy development without beginning with such limiting assumptions? The simplest way to reach an understanding about the impact of bodies in later life, of course, is to talk to and observe older adults. Seeking the compassion of younger audiences, both the NCOA and the AgeLab initiatives neglect the lived experiences of elders as represented by older adults themselves. As a result, we find attempts to garner empathy in body-based terms that are both narrow and fear provoking.

To rectify the oversight of elder experience and to challenge the conceptions of aging as decline and disability, I outline an approach for accessing the embodied experiences of older adults engaging in literate activity, followed by a discussion of two counter-narratives that this approach has yielded.
Literacy Narratives and Literacy Tours

In this study I examine the literate lives of four women and three men, all of whom are members of what has been called the Silent Generation: Americans born between 1925 and 1945, notably during the Great Depression and World War II. While the term “Silent Generation” is a misnomer in the sense that adults born in this period are far from being inactive citizens, I have adopted the term because it has become somewhat apropos in recent times, as this age cohort is habitually overlooked by popular audiences and specialists alike. Amid panic about an impending socioeconomic crisis created by a swollen elder demographic, public discussions about aging in the United States have for some time predominantly centered on predicting the impact (usually negative) of the aging Baby Boom generation (born 1946 to 1964). Not only does this emphasis on “apocalyptic demography” (Kennedy 226) create tensions between Baby Boomers and younger generations by setting them up on opposing sides of a competition for resources, it also discounts most adults currently over the age of 65. Moreover, with the large marketing potential to be found in the buying power of Baby Boomers, most of whom are still working but often do not have dependents to care for at home (i.e., they probably have more disposable income), marketing giants like AARP invest an exorbitant amount of resources into representing and reaching out to Boomers, much to the exclusion of the Silent (silenced?) Generation.

Much stands to be gained from a careful examination of members of the Silent Generation, particularly in regard to literacy research. Time magazine, the originator of the “Silent Generation” label, notes that this was the last generation born before the widespread emergence of screen-based media that followed the appearance of the television (“Younger Generation”). The article further postulates that this generation is perhaps “the last generation in
this TV-enwrapped country to fully savor the written word.” Critique of this over-generalized view of literacy aside, studies of literacy among Silent Generation members nonetheless have implications for understanding macrosocial shifts (including technological change) as they play out in everyday lives. Far from silent, many of these adults have written and read their way through the shifting literate landscapes before and after the arrival of television, computers, and life on the screen.

To access this history, I spoke with and observed members of the Silent Generation who self-identified as computer users, though not necessarily claiming for themselves the slippery label of “computer literacy.” Data collection involved two related methods: life story interviews and spatially mediated accounts of current literate activity—a method I call the \textit{literacy tour}. At its most basic, life story research involves the collection of an oral narrative of a participant’s life, or of a significant aspect or portion of that life (Bertaux and Kohli 217). In our interviews, I guided each participant’s life story to focus on what Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen identify as “literacy narratives,” which “foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy…structured by learned, internalized literacy tropes,” and which “both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy” (“Reading” 513). In each case, I gathered participants’ oral stories about school, parents, siblings, work, personal hobbies and interests, and other aspects of life the participants recognized as rich with literacy.

These stories were useful in capturing a sense of motive for literacy in the lives of my participants. Analyzing for motive in this way, I aim for what Laurent Filliettaz describes: “not…identifying fundamental or ‘true’ causes for the action,” but “paying attention to how participants ascribe explanations to the actions in which they are engaged” (106, my emphasis). Through the process of interpretation and analysis, these subjective accounts become co-
constructed descriptions of literate activity, as I train my readings of the life stories and literacy tours on the body and its role in motivating literate activity. “Reading for the body,” as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe, means paying attention to bodies as sites of knowledge production, as narrators who tell their stories

…negotiate cultural norms determining the proper uses of bodies…engage, contest, and revise cultural norms determining the relationship of bodies to specific sites, behaviors, and destinies…[and] reproduce, mix, or interrogate cultural discourses defining and distinguishing the normative and ab-normative body. (41-2)

In this view, the literacy narratives I collect are not usefully understood as neutral storehouses of “facts” about personal history or present-day activity. Instead, they must be treated as narratives, constructed for a particular purpose on a particular occasion, bearing in mind the cultural contexts that might place demands on stories content and delivery (Atkinson and Delamont; Miller; Smith and Watson). In this way, we can adequately account for human action and the motives of that action “by invoking multiple perspectives and by examining the dialectical tensions that exist among them” (Wertsch 13, drawing from Burke).

To draw on the literacy narratives’ connections to present-day literate activity, I also employed literacy tours, in which participants conducted a narrated walk-through of the physical and sometimes virtual spaces in which they most often engaged in literate activity—spaces which were, in all cases, based in the home. Through such spatially mediated interviews, I was able to access accounts of the intentional use of objects and space in literate activity, as well as the effects of objects upon human behavior. Such multimodal methods of eliciting description of literate activity have proven useful for generating “thick descriptions” that are triangulated by
interviews and oral narratives. In this way, literacy tours serve as “walking probes,” which Jason De Leon and Jeffrey Cohen describe as useful ethnographic methods for eliciting responses and memories, in addition to the verbal prompting of a conversational interview.

Because they invited actual movement and attention to materiality, the tours were useful for calling attention to the embodied and spatial dimensions of literate activity. But perhaps more valuable—and surprisingly so—was the unexpected output of literacy tours: narratives about non-literacy-like activities that were nonetheless useful for interpreting participants’ literacy narratives. These narrative “tangents” often took the form of what David Barton and Mary Hamilton might identify as a “ruling passion”—a tendency to focus (sometimes to near obsession) on an aspect of literate experience that, at first, seems altogether unrelated to literacy (Local Literacies 83). However, as Barton and Hamilton find, ruling passions often have much to say about an individual’s literate life. For instance, Don, a 79-year-old retired satellite communications engineer, demonstrated some baffling digital literacy practices—or rather, lack thereof. Don was a near-expert computer user who thoroughly enjoyed repairing the computers of his friends and family, but whose time on the computer was primarily spent “souping up” his machine’s capabilities by adding on hardware and software to maximize performance. Don did not use this state-of-the-art computer for the kinds of reading and writing activities normally associated with literacy.

The literacy tours provided a crucial piece of information for interpreting Don’s unusual literacy practices: in showing me around his den (the room where he kept the computer), Don pointed out computer user manuals, photos of bridges, and—most importantly—model airplanes suspended from the ceiling on fishing line. What was remarkable about his models was that they all appeared naked, left as unfinished balsa wood skeletons. Don explained that covering models
with fabric “would hide the mechanical structure.” In light of Don’s guided tour, I find that, what at first appeared to be limitations of Don’s literacy, was actually an extension of Don’s interest to composing with physical structures in activities that were heavily mediated by texts (such as instructional guides and user manuals). In an important way, the literacy tour helped to broaden my understanding of digital literacy by helping me to look beyond the digital.

Literacy tours also served the further purpose of allowing me to observe as well as to partially inhabit participants’ bodily orientations toward literate activity. During tours, participants would offer narrated demonstrations of their literacy practices (such as showing me how they save documents on their computer) and often invited me to sit in their chairs, use their keyboards, flip through their book collections, and otherwise interact with their material environments. Although I was experiencing these environments through my own body, these often became valuable moments of intersubjectivity—initial steps toward an empathic understanding of the embodied experiences of my participants. What felt strange to my body became an opportunity to open up a discussion about bodily experiences that, to me and to my participants, seemed second nature. From my perspective, then, literacy tours became an opportunity to see bodily practices as more than signs of aging or impairment, and to understand (some of) them as meaningful orientations toward literacy, developed over the course of a participant’s life.

By bringing the spatially mediated narratives of the literacy tours into play with participants’ oral literacy narratives, I was able to recognize literacy as a social practice (Barton and Hamilton, “Literacy Practices”; Scribner and Cole; Street), and especially as a material social practice. Although situated studies of literacy were already aware of the macrosocial connections of local literacy practices, an attention to the material can further aid in tracing the
histories of literacy across time and space. As participants walked me through basement offices, kitchens, dining rooms, bedrooms, and even bathrooms, they pointed to the objects and arrangements of space that they deemed conducive (or not) to their literate activities. In this process, participants were usually able to articulate an associative history with an object that traced the object’s movements across space and through time, marking important patterns of object-oriented behavior that revealed much about their embodied experiences surrounding literate activity, past and present.

Two Accounts of Literacy from the Silent Generation

While it is important to acknowledge the kinds of interference that bodies can present to learners as they age (Crow; McKee and Blair), it is also important to value bodies as participatory in—not just obstructive to—new literacy practices. In what follows, I offer two accounts of literacy collected in this study. Each case offers an alternative to the body-centered decline narrative of aging, thus complicating the relationship between aging and disability. Further, these accounts of literacy point toward possibilities for theorizing literacy in relation to the human body.

Although the other five participants in my study also described rich life histories that complicate dominant understandings of aging and digital literacy, I have chosen to represent these two particular accounts because they express such different values and investments in digital literacy. Allan, the participant in the first case, claims a limited relationship with digital literacy, using it somewhat reluctantly to achieve a singular purpose that necessitates the use of a computer. In the second account, Millie’s, we find a digital composer who enthusiastically uses the web to create new social relationships, to play with her own identity, and to conduct a kind of
critical activism based on her personal experience. But both Allan’s and Millie’s stories are what Mary Sheridan-Rabideau has called “telling cases,” which “highlight the unexpected contradictions of everyday life” (8). We see older adults enacting the stereotypes of later life, including struggling to use technology and willingly discussing their body problems. But we also see them doing things that subvert dominant narratives about their age group, such as engaging deeply and consistently with digital literacy practices—or, at the very least, making earnest and persistent attempts to do so. The paradoxes and contradictions in these stories, however, are not so uncommon—in fact, such contradictions are part of all literate lives.

Allan’s and Millie’s stories are almost direct challenges to what I have called the curriculum of aging, which suggests that older adults need to learn how to monitor their bodies above all else, because older adults are, first and foremost, understood as social and medical problems. Rather than medical problems, here we will see bodies in motion at particular times, cultivating literacy as needed. Based on these stories, I offer two claims: first, that not all problems with literacy in later life are caused by “old age” in and of itself; second, that age-related (or other) disabilities don’t necessarily constrain literacy, but can, at times, support it.

*Allan: Regimented Bodies*

Allan is exemplary of a stereotypical Silent Generation computer user: he doesn’t use social media, he doesn’t like to send emails because he believes telephones are more personal and efficient, and he struggles with, or else is completely unaware of, some basic computer commands useful for writing, such as the “copy” and “paste” functions. Moreover, Allan is wholly dependent upon his wife, who is twenty-two years his junior, for help in using the computer. Once, as he and his wife recall painfully, Allan accidentally and permanently deleted a
significant portion of a large manuscript while in the process of cleaning out his old document files.

Despite his struggles, Allan uses his computer almost daily for one central purpose: writing his memoirs. As a 78-year-old Scottish immigrant and retired engineer, Allan certainly has a lot to write about his life, and he has good reasons for telling his story. Allan wanted to write his life story for his adult children, as a legitimate explanation for why he might appear to be an uncharitable American citizen. He explained to me:

I think about the fact that when I landed here [in the United States], I had four hundred bucks and a return ticket. Ok? I put myself through school [at the] University of Wisconsin. And I have got little or no sympathy, as you can well understand. That’s how I understand who I am. And my kids think I’m a hardass.

Allan’s conservative political leanings had recently widened the rift between he and his children, who had already felt overlooked by their career-driven father. In his retirement, Allan wanted to use his life story as a means of justifying his choices and, perhaps, of asking for forgiveness.

In my meetings with Allan, I watched as he demonstrated his rigid, regimented, segmented, and often wearisome writing process on the computer, which involved hours of formatting and reformatting the manuscript’s appearance, long lists of duplicate files renamed by date, paper notebooks full of notes tediously hand-copied from websites to be retyped into a Word document later, and endless lists and outlines for future reference. The computer, stationed in the bedroom of a sunny two-story home, required a trip downstairs (or a heart-stopping shout) to retrieve assistance from his enduring but frustrated wife. In light of these everyday experiences, Allan would tell you that his digital literacy is impaired. He is annoyed by the limits of his comfort level with the computer, limitations that prevent him from writing with the kind of
efficiency and fluency that he has come to value, resulting in what he calls “an impatience problem” with the computer. But if Allan is “too old” to learn how to use the computer, it’s not just because his body has aged. It is also because his body has accumulated durable dispositions toward literacy.

An examination of Allan’s 70-plus-year history of literacy, which provides access to the development of his values in literacy, his own definitions of literacy and learning, and his own knowledge of the processes and conventions of literacy as he has gathered them throughout his life, makes possible a nuanced reading of Allan’s literacy that is embedded within his bodily history. What we find is something like what Bourdieu terms *habitus*, or “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” that are dependent upon memory and the body (53). Bourdieu values not only the present-day activation of *habitus* within a given cultural field, but also the embodied histories that bring *habitus* into being. These histories are rooted, for Bourdieu, in the earliest of embodied experiences in childhood (68), during which cultural interactions are inscribed on the body. Allan’s life story reveals a kind of embodied history—both conscious and unconscious—in which literacy is variously understood as embodied activity not only in the present, but also as part of a lifelong trajectory.

*Allan’s Literacy Narrative*

Allan was born Glasgow, Scotland, in 1933. Evacuated from the city for two and a half years to avoid bombs dropped by the Luftwaffe, Allan’s childhood was divided between living with his grandparents in the country and with his parents, who were often sick and out of work.

Although Allan had little to say about his parents’ influence on his literacy (“there was no such thing as sitting with books and your parents reading to you as a young person,” he says),
he vividly recalls attending grade school, where he pinpoints his first memories of reading: “The
teacher would start at one end of the class and say, ‘I want you to read two or three sentences,
then we’ll go to the next person and you read two or three sentences.’ Well we didn’t just get to
stand. We had to stand on our chair. You had to stand up and stand up on your chair and read to
the class so many sentences.”

Allan recalled school as a “regimented” place where global territory was carefully
outlined in color-coded maps on the wall, indicating the progress of Allied forces and global land
mass claimed by the British Empire (which, Allan recalls, was always inexplicably marked in
pink). School was also a place where personal space was rigidly controlled, from the
hierarchical placement of students at desks (or standing on their chairs) to denote their scholastic
achievements, to corporal punishment (knuckles whipped with a switch) for those bodies deemed
out of line, to the organization of how students’ bodies entered the school at the beginning of the
day:

Say you’re on the playground, and the bell goes off and it’s nine o’clock.... We’d
all have to line up. I mean you’re lined up like a regiment. The highest grade
against the wall, and then so on. And then you went into school. The first class,
the highest grade school, would go in first, the second, and then—like an army…

Although he felt ambivalent about early schooling, Allan thrived in an educational
system regimented “like an army.” Yet, his early working life in Scotland—though similarly
rigid—felt somewhat less productive. After high school, Allan set aside his talent for art and his
interest in attending college, and took a job in a local shipyard to support his mother and his
father, who was out of work due to illness. On the job, he found a unionized labor structure that
measured work in discrete time-based tasks, as “rate-fixers” would assess an assigned project
based on the time it should take, and thus the money the worker could expect to earn if the task was completed on time. Allan, however, often found that the rate-fixer’s assessments weren’t accurate, and he would complete a job ahead of schedule and ask his boss to assign another. One day, as a twenty-one-year-old apprentice, Allan was faced with a conflict between his “vim and vigor” as a young worker and the structured labor system at the shipyard:

A man comes up, a journeyman, comes walking up to me, and he says to me,

‘Sonny, you’re working too hard. You’re making us look bad. Do you realize that when you work that hard there’s less chance that we’ll get overtime?’ I said, ‘You got to be kidding me.’ And he said, ‘Nah…I’d watch what I was doing if I were you.’

For Allan, such moments—along with the many other political changes of the mid-twentieth century, including the establishment of the National Health Service—represent a broken society. Allan says that he decided it was time to go where the “grass might be greener” for a young student and worker.

Having taken some college level engineering courses in a night school program, Allan decided to finish off his college degree in North America. At twenty-one, he left Scotland for Canada—where he was, yet again, met with resistance in the form of a rigid system: Canadian colleges would not accept transfer credits for any of the three years’ worth of college engineering coursework he had completed in Scotland. Under this system, Allan would have to start from the beginning. Frustrated, Allan moved to Beloit, Wisconsin, to work full-time and obtain residential status. After a year of working and writing letters to large Midwestern universities, Allan was offered advanced placement credit at the University of Wisconsin in Madison—an offer he is so grateful for that his voice grew thick with emotion in talking about it, even so many years later.
After completing his degree in engineering, Allan left the “openness” of the American higher education system and began what he now describes as a haphazard engineering career. “I’m a lousy engineer,” he says, believing that he had always been cut out to be an artist. But forces of circumstance, beginning with the need to take local work in a Glasgow shipyard, had funneled him into a career that eventually placed him at a paper mill in the 1960s. Once again, Allan found himself in a regimented system, this time a world highly segregated by gender, where only particular bodies engaged with particular literacy practices on a regular basis.

As an engineer working alongside primarily men on the machine floor, Allan recalls using computers early on as tools for monitoring papermaking systems. Eventually working his way up to become the manager of the entire mill, Allan’s working life moved increasingly into office spaces, and into the proximity of office-based personal computers. However, such spaces remained segregated: women worked most often as administrative support staff, seated just outside the doors of the managers’ private offices. As mill manager, Allan was assigned his own secretary and was therefore under no obligation to use an office computer on his own. Such an effort, as Allan explained, would have been a waste of his time: “I was time-oriented,” he said. “I could walk outside my office to my secretary and say, ‘Hey, I got to write a letter to Joe Blow.’ And I’d stand there…and say, ‘Dear John’ and I’d dictate something.” At one point late in his career, one of his secretaries offered some important advice: “Allan, before you retire, you’re missing the boat. You have to learn the computer,” to which Allan said (much to his later regret), “I don’t need it.”

Although Allan has since attempted to take several computer classes, he has yet to find one that teaches him the basics he needs to navigate the computer in the ways he wants. Instead,
he relies on his wife to come to his aid when he reaches the boundaries of familiarity with the computer.

More than a reluctant older learner, Allan tells a story about learning to follow regimented patterns of body behavior from childhood, leading to dispositions of standing in front of a secretary in a cultural context where some bodies stand, while other bodies sit. In studies of children’s literacy development, Allan Luke has recognized this kind of bodily inscription playing a part in the discourses of literacy education in schools. In “The Body Literate: Discourse and Inscription in Early Literacy Training,” Luke outlines a model of literacy instruction that includes an attention to the ways a subject (in this case, a young student) is constituted through pedagogical discourses that impact the material, embodied dimensions of learning. When primary school teachers ask students to sit up straight, face forward, and assume the appropriate literate postures for story time, they teach something more than reading: they teach students, through “ceremonial inscription of the body” (118), the construction of a habitus, bearing racial, socioeconomic, gendered, or other sociopolitical ideologies mapped onto the body.

Like the primary school students in Luke’s study, Allan describes his experiences as a child in school involving similar practices of “body mapping and writing” (Luke 118), as he was ordered to stand, sit, speak, and act in highly prescriptive bodily postures. Enforced by threatened or actual physical pain, this bodily discipline became incorporated not only into Allan’s school behavior, but also into his bodily disposition—a way of structuring his perspective on contexts similar to school. Allan’s continued reliance on the difference between structured contexts and “free” or “open” contexts of education and work suggest, first, a
recognition of the significance of his early life experience for his later choices, behaviors, and beliefs; and second, an indication of the internalization of those experiences. As is notable in the narrative, Allan’s appreciation of free and open workspaces, in which learners are not subject to rigid guidelines or rules, is in opposition to the workspaces into which “circumstances” have forced him. Yet, when given opportunities to design his own workspaces in later life, Allan finds himself struggling to break free from the rigid activity structures that reproduce social ideologies (e.g., a hierarchical, gendered division of labor).

In this sense, Allan’s narrative and his preoccupation with rigid or regimented systems of work and learning reveals the kind of internalized gaze described by Foucault’s theories of power (*Discipline*). Positioned in the classroom or on the machine floor in such a way as to be immediately visible to his supervisors, Allan developed a keen sense of the disciplinary gaze—a gaze that he soon turned upon himself, thus policing the movements of his own body and the shape of his own beliefs and motivations. Such self-policing of the body was established through experiences repeated so often, and imbued with so much cultural capital, that Allan found it difficult to deviate much from this bodily disposition—this *habitus*—in other sites of literate practice beyond the classroom. Like the stubborn Scottish accent that has not disappeared after well over fifty years of living outside of Scotland, Allan’s literacy practices have endured not (just) because his 78-year-old body places severe restrictions on his ability to learn, but because he has not, for the majority of his life, had sufficient reason to change them. Thus, even in the bedroom of his own home in the quiet Maine woods, during a comfortable retirement that affords him time and resources unavailable to him when he was at work and in school, Allan finds it difficult to operate outside of his lifelong understanding of literacy as a rigid, step-by-step, his-and-hers set of practices.
If we can accept that problems with literacy in later life are not, as Allan’s story reminds us, necessarily caused by the body problems associated with aging, we have already taken a step toward thinking about aging as something more than a deteriorating body. But however important this critical response to a reductive view of aging might be, it remains important to acknowledge that aging does, in fact, bring its fair share of bodily changes. It would be a mistake to discount these changes. Here, however, I want to intervene yet again to caution against an overstatement of the decline narrative. If aging should not be understood strictly through the lens of disability, then neither should disability be read strictly through the lens of disability—a claim supported by Millie’s account of literacy.

**Millie: A Woman’s (Blogo)Sphere**

Millie Garfield—also known online as “Thoroughly Modern Millie”—has been writing for *My Mom’s Blog* since 2003. Currently, the 86-year-old’s weekly blog generates hundreds—sometimes thousands—of visitor hits. Millie’s posts discuss just about anything she feels up to sharing: movie reviews, updates about her home repairs, memories of her deceased husband, even comments about the weather. In addition to her weekly contribution to the blogosphere, Millie’s process of reading comments on her work, and reading her other favorite blogs, has become an important daily morning ritual, which she described to me in this way:

I get out of bed…I put my glasses on, I come right in here [to the computer room]. I go see, do I have any comments on my post? I go visit certain people, and I don’t go visiting too many because I’ll never get in the kitchen. So I visit my favorites. And that can take me a good half hour or more. And then I visit Steve [her son] to see what he has to say. …I go to Twitter and I see what’s going
on for the day with him. And after a half hour or forty-five minutes, then I go in
the kitchen and have breakfast.

So important is this routine that Millie refuses to set appointments that would take her outside of
the house in the morning (including meeting with me).

Clearly, Millie is deeply invested in her digital literate activity in ways that most would
probably find surprising. What is perhaps less surprising is that, at age 86, Millie is not without
her fair share of medical complaints, including a long-term struggle with rheumatoid arthritis in
her hands, as well as a slow recovery from hip replacement surgery. While both of these physical
setbacks have, at times, constrained her literate activity, they have also provided her with a
certain amount of motivation for deepening her engagements with digital literacy.

Many of Millie’s blog posts include original videos. In two of these videos, Millie
demonstrates her progress with walking following hip replacement surgery. Although these
videos were posted primarily to keep Millie’s readership updated during her recovery, Millie told
me that she found the videos personally useful for marking her progress, which was otherwise
too gradual to appreciate day by day. In addition to her recovery videos, Millie also collaborates
with her son on an occasional video series appropriately titled *I Can’t Open It*, in which Millie
demonstrates her struggles to open various products, such as cosmetics, food packaging, and
once even a retractable suitcase handle. In these videos, Millie uses her arthritic hands and a
healthy dose of humor to fire back at the designers of product packaging who have not taken
bodies like hers into account.

As evidenced by her use of videos and blog posts to document her embodied experience
as an aging woman, Millie’s aging body was not always in conflict with her development of
digital literacy. Her struggles to heal and to re-learn how to move within her changing body have
at times served to support Millie’s interactions with web culture as an active subject, rather than rendering her incapable of participation. Millie’s web-based work does present an important challenge to the decline narrative, in that we do not see physical disability impeding the development of new literacy practices: her physical disability sometimes, in fact, enables her literacy and learning. However, if we were to stop there—to see Millie’s aging body as the one and only rhetorical situation for her literate activity—we would not have departed much from the decline narrative of aging. We would be right alongside AARP, assuming that age-related body problems define older adults’ literate activities, including their interactions with technology. If we turn to Millie’s life story, however, we find that her body’s impact on her engagements with literacy far pre-dates her experiences with arthritis and hip trouble.

As Donna Haraway has argued, embodied objectivity—the source of situated knowledges—is a way of seeing the world while consciously rooted within subjugated and marginalized bodies—not least of which, I add, are the bodies of older women. As I met with Millie in her beige-and-gold apartment in Massachusetts, she demonstrated a keen awareness of her embodied subjugation as she told me her life story. Looking back on her life, she regularly drew upon her understanding of gendered positioning and gendered knowledge to explain her motivations and actions regarding learning and literacy. Her interactions with other women, of whom she spoke often, marked for her a kind of narrative impetus: the behaviors of other women became central to the choices and priorities that shaped Millie’s literacy and learning experiences.
Millie’s Literacy Narrative

Millie told me that her mother led a “limited, small life” of cooking and baking at home in Chelsea, Massachusetts, while her father worked as a waiter. Her parents’ lack of formal education, her mother’s apparent unawareness of the world beyond her kitchen, and Millie’s solitude as an only child without the influence of a brother or sister, all contributed to what she understood as a dearth of literacy at home: no books, no music, and no art. In the end, Millie says, “I found it all for myself,” beginning with standing alone at the gates of her elementary school as the first student waiting in line to enter the first grade. Determined to be more social and worldly than her mother, Millie described an early passion for school and learning.

Later, as a high school student, Millie’s gendered view of the world made a large impact on her choices in adulthood that didn’t always align with her aspirations to seek a larger, more independent life than her mother’s had been. Rather than following a guidance counselor’s advice to take courses that would prepare her for college, such as a foreign language, Millie opted instead to take a course in what she calls “stupid office machines.” She explains that this choice was probably due to her lack of interest in breaking free altogether from women’s gender norms: “The thing was then,” she explained, “when you graduated and you went to work, you got married. You weren’t going to go conquer the world. You were just going to get married. So I wasn’t looking for a profession. …At that time the women didn’t think that way.”

Although Millie did not actually get married until age thirty, by then she had experienced a restless ten-year career in office work among those stupid office machines. Originally urged by her high school advisers to take a bookkeeping job in her hometown, Millie explained that she ultimately “didn’t have the confidence to do it.” At the time it seemed easier for her to take a less desirable clerical job where her neighbor (a familiar female face) worked, even though she now
says it was “not much of a job, which I stayed at too long.” After five years, Millie eventually found her way into a “typing job” at the Combined Jewish Appeal of Boston. She recalled the work there as more meaningful, not because of the tasks she performed on the job, but because of the many women with whom she worked. Working late some nights, she would often accompany “the girls” from work to dinner at a restaurant in the city. “I learned about all these different foods. My friend that I went with said, ‘How come you’re ordering chicken? You can have chicken anytime. Why don’t you get pork chops?’ Well I never had had pork chops. So that was an education. That was a great job. A learning-and-making-friends job.”

Among her final career moves working outside the home, Millie found her dream job as a bookkeeper for a small company, in which she took full charge of the books, billing, and occasionally the switchboards for a multifaceted business. (This job, too, came as the result of her acquaintances with other women, as a “lovely lady” who met her while she was working at her previous position arranged for her interview.) At last, she had found satisfying employment in the “orderly, systematic” work of a bookkeeper, a job that attracted her because she liked “things that come out right.” This fulfilling work was cut short, however, by the premature birth of Steve, her first and only child, after which Millie was unable to return to full-time work.

Millie only occasionally worked outside of the home as an Avon cosmetics sales representative or in short-term temp positions, so that she could be at home when Steve took lunch breaks from school.

When Steve was in college (but still living at home), he began developing an interest in computers, bringing home an early version of the Macintosh computer, spending increasing amounts of time locked away in his room to work with the computer, and once chattering excitedly about attending a meeting in Boston with Apple founder Steve Jobs. Some time later,
when Steve’s passion for computers went unabated, Millie began asking him questions about what took up so much of his time. Excited to share his newfound passion with his mother, Steve quickly offered to set Millie up with a computer of her own.

Although the first computer she owned (a hand-me-down from Steve’s wife) caused frustration, Millie fought hard to stick with it because, as she says, “this was something new in the world and I wanted to know what was going on.” Some time later, while Millie was reading the Boston Globe—a daily habit that she still continues today—she saw an unfamiliar word: blogging. After explaining what it was, Steve asked Millie if she would be interested in doing some blogging of her own. By then retired and a recent widow, Millie decided to give it a try. Steve set up a free blogging account for her, and Millie began writing a little bit at a time. Her first lesson in blogging—and one she still lives by today—was that it has to be done regularly, or else readers “don’t know when you’re going to show up.”

As her way of telling her life story indicates, Millie’s female body and ongoing negotiation of her identity as a woman serve as defining elements of her literate activity, before and during digital times. She begins tracing this pattern in her account of literacy by suggesting a sense of shame in relation to her past: she admits an interest in wanting to be unlike her mother, and later expresses disappointment with a career initiated by a decision to forego college for female-appropriate office work. Yet despite these indications of dissatisfaction with a life spent contending with womanhood in mid-century America, Millie’s embodied sense of self points to at least two ways that her body has shaped her digital literacy: by putting her in touch with office technologies, and by incorporating literacy and learning into her gendered social world.
Millie’s body became a resource because of her sex and her performance of a corresponding normative gender role. Millie’s deep interest in remaining within the company of women also meant remaining within the company of “stupid office machines.” As with Allan, and as with other women I interviewed in this project, when Millie entered the work force, the Cartesian mind/body split was clearly visible in the mid-century office: women’s bodies were the inscription machines that recorded the output from men’s minds. Despite the dissatisfaction Millie expresses in her retrospective account of her traditionally feminine career, her career path fostered a certain amount of comfort and confidence with office technologies, so that the adoption of personal computers as writing technologies was a smooth transition. The practices of her body—so (overly) valued by employers in her working life—can now support practices that she values because they develop her mind, her sense of self, and her social world.

While others might struggle to envision a connection between a new literacy practice and their sense of self, Millie had no such trouble in the case with computer use and blogging. Coupled with her ever-growing desire for experiences beyond the “limited, small life” that was perhaps expected of her, a retired Millie stood as one of the first elders in line to learn how to blog in 2003. As she says, “this was something new in the world and I wanted to know what was going on.” Equipped with a familiarity with typing and socially motivated learning, Millie could imagine herself as “the kind of person” (as James Gee might put it [54]) who would enjoy blogging, regardless of her age.

But it is not enough, of course, for a learner to envision herself as the benefactor of a new literate practice; Gee further suggests that learners must also believe that they will be welcomed into the new semiotic domain by others, into what Gee calls an “affinity group.” Despite her early interest in seeking success and literacy by herself (recall the only child, waiting alone at the
gates of her elementary school), Millie has nonetheless remained comfortable in situating her learning and literacy experiences within the gendered structures of social support networks. Although not precisely the affinity group Gee describes, Millie consistently described a fondness for working alongside other women and learning through social interaction—whether such learning involved the technological literacy associated with office work or the stirring of her inexperienced palate. As a woman with a self-proclaimed confidence problem in her early adulthood, Millie felt safest trying new things within the company of female friends.

In her current blogging activities, Millie continues this habit of finding satisfaction through learning, working, and socializing in the company of other women. In writing her blog and keeping track of her blogger friends (most of whom she has never met in person), Millie feels a deep and important sense of connection with other women bloggers. In talking about her daily blog-reading ritual, she described her sense of obligation to follow the blogs of other women—particularly those who seemed to have a lack of social support in their offline lives—and to serve as a distant source of emotional support. As though to confirm her entrenchment within a digital network of women, Millie was invited to speak about her work in 2006 at the national meeting of BlogHer, a media company that publishes and catalogs blogs written by women, claims to bring together the “best of conversations led by women in social media” (BlogHer).

Millie has also extended her interest in networking with other marginalized identities by establishing ties with other older adults in a community known as the elderbloggers. A name coined by Ronni Bennett, one of Millie’s online women friends, elderbloggers regularly write about the experiences of aging, developing a source of support as well as a collective voice of some three hundred writers who represent “what it’s really like to get older” (Bennett). With her
online friends and connections to blogging communities, Millie finds herself deeply connected with the social worlds of women and older adults every day. When Millie chooses to represent her experiences with physical struggles online, she does so with an eye toward fostering connections with other elders—particularly elder women. In an interview, Millie told me:

  Before my [hip] surgery, I mentioned something about it [on my blog]. One of my blogging friends said in a private email that she has a friend also from the Internet, not that she knows the person [offline]. But that woman had had hip surgery and wrote terrific entries about her experience. So she told me about that woman. And I went to that woman’s site. …Before I went to my surgery I got pages and pages of information about how she dealt with it.

By talking about her medical experiences online, Millie contributes to her valued network of elder women, who offer each other insight not only about bodily problems, but also about a wide range of life experiences. On occasion, Millie even reaches out to elders who are new to digital literate practices of blogging and offers them her favorite piece of advice about computers:

“Don’t worry, you’re not going to break it.”

For Millie, then, physical impairment, along with her perspective from a woman’s body, has something to say about her experiences of disability, of literacy, and of her identity. But there remains one aspect of Millie’s digital practices that does not square so easily with her story of literacy-as-womanhood: her partnership with her son. Steve, who was responsible for bringing computers into Millie’s everyday life, does a bit more than provide her with technology. A closer look at Millie’s I Can Open It video series raises some important questions about Millie’s subjectivity as a literate elder. Consider the third episode of the series, in which Millie struggles to open a bottle of conditioner (M. Garfield):
Millie: I have this wonderful conditioner. It’s made especially for fine hair, and I need it. It’s got this new container. They’ve got a new covering. And I can’t open it.

[...]

Millie: (Handing bottle to Steve) There, see if you can open that one.

Steve: (Inspecting bottle) This one… (reads) ‘Pull to open, push to close.’

Millie: I know, but nothing comes out.

Steve: Nothing comes out?

Millie: No.

Steve: (Squeezes the bottle over his open palm, laughs) Let’s see. (Squeezes again, but nothing happens)

Millie: Nothing comes out.

Steve: (As conditioner squeezes out) Ah! (laughs)

Millie: Ah! (laughs)

[...]

Millie: Well, isn’t that a stupid container?

Steve: Yah.

Millie: (Opening and closing the bottle’s cap, while holding it upright) Down it’s closed, up it’s open. And then where do I have to push?

Steve: (Laughing, turning the bottle upside down for her) Down—you’ve got hold it up, just like this.

Millie: And push it in here?

Steve: And then push this top… (makes a squeezing gesture over the end of the bottle, opposite the cap)

Millie: Oh, on top?

Steve: …from the top, then it goes down.

Millie: (Squeezing, exactly as instructed, and nothing happens) Ah…I’m going to buy a different product. It doesn’t work. Look, it doesn’t work.

Steve: (Gesturing at the bottle again) Push here. Push it that way.

Millie: (Laughing, quietly this time. Tries again, but still nothing) Nope. It doesn’t come out.

[...]

Millie: No, it shouldn’t be that hard.

Steve: (Laughs)

Millie: (Not laughing) It really shouldn’t be hard. That’s no good.

There are, of course, several ways of interpreting this scene, and the many others like it in the I Can’t Open It series. First, this episode certainly demonstrates how Millie’s dexterity and vision have impacted her everyday life in ways that do not, for instance, inhibit her son, as Millie lacks
the strength to squeeze the product out of the bottle, while the task is relatively simple for Steve. Although Millie places blame on the bottle (“Isn’t that a stupid container?”), Steve’s instructions (“Push it that way”) and laughter conflict with—and perhaps undermine—Millie’s rhetorical aims and agency represented by her text-based blog. Steve’s presence seems to mark Millie as a poster child for age-related disability—or perhaps the butt of an ageist joke—rather than as a savvy advocate for social and technological change. (Or, in a more generous reading, Millie’s ineptitude is a clownish performance, but while intended to highlight the absurdity of the product, the performance too easily reads as a representation of an incapable elder.)

Second, in light of Millie’s physical impairment, the video might lead us to consider Millie’s literacy as also impaired—and not just because she plays the part of the bumbling elder on screen. Perhaps undermining her claims to digital literacy, Millie’s son, whose professional work as a video-blogging whiz revolves around developing a web presence for learners like Millie, appears to be a necessary prosthesis of her technological literacy. Considering the emphasis placed on multimodality and “multiliteracies” in digital composition practices (Cope and Kalantzis), can we consider Millie “digitally literate” if she doesn’t actually direct, edit, or post any of her videos, or that, even while Millie writes her own weekly text-based blog posts, it is Steve who adorns her text with images because Millie doesn’t know how? The fact that Millie continues to rely on Steve to do so much of the technical orchestration of her online texts might suggest that Millie is either incapable or unwilling to learn how to write multimodally.

Third, as an extension of this “impaired literacy” reading, the video raises questions about who really controls Millie’s digital composition practices. In this and in many other episodes in the series, Millie looks to Steve for direction on what to do next. In fact, Millie told me that neither My Mom’s Blog nor the video series was actually Millie’s idea. I Can’t Open It
began, in fact, when Millie complained to Steve that she had purchased a jar of coffee that she couldn’t open. Steve, who had recently become interested in video blogging, suggested that they go to the grocery store and make a video. Millie agreed to do it, but reluctantly. “That first [episode] I was timid,” she explains, “But now, I’m fine. He saw that that was a good thing to do.” If Millie is so passionately attached to her online women’s world, and is proudest when she feels that she has accomplished something by herself and flouted the idea that a woman’s world is a narrow one, what place is there for a man to come in and buy her technological equipment, show her how and why to use it, and have a heavy hand in composing her digital texts?

Without dismissing all these possibilities as valid readings of the I Can’t Open It videos, I want to point out that—for Millie, at least—the role Steve plays in her literate activity is not one that indicates a total failure as a digital composer, nor does it reflect an unwillingness to learn more about the affordances of digital literacy practices. For one, Millie sees yet another way that literacy and learning can contribute to her ever-developing sense of what it means to be a woman. In telling me about working with her son, Millie revealed a crucial component of their collaborations. Steve, she told me, is her “finishing man.”

We’re a team. And that brings us closer together because we’re sharing something like that. Otherwise he doesn’t want to hear about when I go out with the ladies. I know he doesn’t want to know about any of that. So this way we have something to share. And sometimes he finds out something about his mother that I never told him. So that’s good. Things like when I was single and I was dating. He hears about some dating experience or something that happened that I wouldn’t bother to tell him. But he reads about it.
As her only son and closest living relative since her husband passed away, Steve is an important part of Millie’s life—and, arguably, her identity as a woman and mother. But whatever he may contribute to reinforcing her valued sense of self as a woman, Steve does not easily fit into Millie’s womanly world. He doesn’t want to hear about her weekly mah-jongg night or her trip out to see the movies—both of which she enjoys with her group of women friends. He doesn’t know much about how she grew up as a woman, with other romantic ties or ambitions prior to her marriage to Steve’s father. Moreover, like many adult children, Steve is busy: teaching, consulting, writing, producing videos, traveling to conferences—all activities that keep Steve at a distance from his mother’s apartment or unable to make a lengthy phone call. In general, Steve might not have much to contribute to Millie’s embodied inter-subjectivity among women. But every Sunday night, Millie sends Steve a short email: “Just did my post.” And through this, Millie stays relevant as a mother and as a woman with a history, as well as a member of elderwomen’s communities, both online and off.

Millie’s web texts depict an older body that is both disabled (when she can’t open something) and enabled (by a computer-savvy and arthritis-free son). But situated in her literacy narrative, Millie’s present literate activity fits a pattern that embraces conflicted but valued senses of womanhood and elderhood. In short, Millie doesn’t rely on Steve’s help because she’s physically or intellectually incapable of learning how to post videos or photos, but because she sees the collaboration as a chance to maintain her identity as a mother: a gendered identity she values as much, and perhaps more, than her role as a pioneer among elderbloggers.

Contextualized within her life history, questions about Millie’s impaired digital literacy might be transformed into questions about how we might define literacy in digital times. Although new technologies certainly change the way we create and interact with texts, especially
in terms of multimodality, Millie’s case reminds us not to conflate literacy with knowledge of tool production. Although Millie does not necessarily know (either by choice or by capacity) how to add pictures to her blog, she does know why they are rhetorically important to her digital text. Above all, regardless of her familiarity with the digital tools of her literate activity, Millie accomplishes what she sets out to do in reading and writing online: she maintains old relationships, establishes new ones, and (re)defines her sense of self as an older woman.

**Lifelong Literacy and the Body**

In my work with Allan and Millie and the rest of my participants, I aimed for materially situated accounts of literacy that might respond to dominant messages about older adults and their bodies. In these local accounts of literacy, the significance of bodies in literate activity presented important challenges to the belief that physical decline is the defining feature of embodied experience in old age. Although I find that my study does contribute to this critical work (which I will review in the final section of this chapter), it also contributes to embodied theories of literacy, and makes a case for including older adults in writing and literacy studies.

The findings from my study align with and build upon the work of Allan Luke, who has called for examinations of “the cross-generational production and reproduction of knowledge and power” (108). Luke’s perspective supports questions about the body (and bodily activity) and its relationship to socialization practices. Such a framework allows me to ask how older adult’s bodies contribute (or not) to their ability and willingness to engage with new literacy practices. Whereas Luke’s study takes up similar questions in the local context of “literacy events” (Barton and Hamilton, “Literacy Practices” 8; Heath 93), such as a teacher reading to a group of young students, in my study of Allan’s and Millie’s accounts, the “body literate” is not
only a site of inscription during a particular literacy event; it is also an index of literate histories, which have much to say about how adults might value or deploy literacy later in life.

In order to distinguish the embodied and material dimensions of literacy beyond the locus of a literacy event, I have examined what Paul Prior calls literate activity, in which writing is understood as “situated, mediated, and dispersed” through time and space. Along with Prior, I find that literate activity is not only found at the site of inscription, in acts we might immediately recognize as reading or writing, but also “as cultural forms of life saturated with textuality, that is strongly motivated and mediated by texts” (138). For Allan and Millie, then, it is not just that their bodies moved through the local sites of literacy where I met and observed them; in their stories and material environments, I could see ways that their literate activity had been inscribed on their bodies and dispersed throughout the course of their lives. With Allan’s use of “open” and “rigid” systems of disciplining and segregating bodies, and Millie’s motif of womanhood, the body is recognizable as a guiding principle of their literate experiences, now and in the past. In making sense of Allan’s and Millie’s embodied literate activity, I integrate the body theories of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Haraway in order to build on the embodied theories of literacy forwarded by Prior, Prior and Shipka, and Luke, to theorize the body as a durable, yet malleable core of lifelong literacy.

With Millie’s gender-driven decision to take a class on “stupid office machines,” and in Allan’s obedience to (and enduring memory of) the many rules of conduct in school, we encounter docile bodies, which, according to Foucault, mark bodies that are analyzable and manipulable, and which “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Discipline 136). In Foucauldian terms, Millie’s and Allan’s literate activities are a particular effect of discourse, discipline, and inscription of the body occurring most powerfully within the institutions of school
and work. For Allan and Millie, the disciplinary gaze has turned inward, and the feeling that there are “thousands of eyes posted everywhere” (214) becomes a mostly unarticulated, even unconscious effect in everyday life.

The internalized gaze has been a long-term factor in Millie’s and Allan’s literate lives, as their bodily dispositions toward literacy—their *habitus*—shape their beliefs and practices from their earliest learning experiences onward. Described by Bourdieu as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” brought about by encounters with particular conditions (53), the *habitus* forms in the earliest of embodied experiences in childhood, when one is born into a particular “game,” the rules of which, in being born into them, are tacit and invisible (67). This unarticulated “feel for the game” can provide—or deny—the social, cultural, and even linguistic capital necessary for successfully competing in a particular social field. Thus, the *habitus* serves as a marker of one’s embodied capital, as accumulated over a lifetime: “The *habitus*—embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active present of the whole past of which it is the product” (56).

As the *habitus* is formed early in life, as we are shaped by cultural ideology from our earliest of days, those influences become manifest within the dispositions of our own bodies for years to come. Among these dispositions Bourdieu includes linguistic practices, as “‘[l]anguage is a bodily technique’ which is tied to ‘objective chances’ in the subject’s life trajectory” (Luke 113). Bodily techniques, then, can index linguistic capital that—depending on the field—can serve to advantage or disadvantage a particular “player” in a language game. Considering Allan’s and Millie’s life trajectories, we can recognize the durability of embodied linguistic capital. As social, cultural, and technological economies shifted from the first half of the twentieth century into the first decade of the twenty-first, Allan and Millie found it difficult to shake free from the
habit" that they had begun developing as children. Allan, who benefitted from his understanding of literacy as a his-and-hers set of practices that included a distancing of his body from feminized literacy technologies (typewriters and computers) and a recognition of literacy as a highly individualized practice, now finds himself unable to “cash in” on his embodied capital when required to work with new literacy technologies. With digital literacy, he has entered a new field of literate practices and finds that his bodily disposition no longer holds much value. Millie, on the other hand, finds that she has gained some capital, as her belief in literacy and learning as social practices serves to make her somewhat more “competitive” (or, at least, more comfortable and confident) than Allan in the social field(s) where digital literacy practices are highly valued.

However, the very fact that Millie and Allan are willing and able to articulate stories about their literate pasts suggests that they understand themselves to be so much more than docile bodies drawing unconsciously upon their dispositions in order to make sense of new literacy practices. In their literacy narratives and tours, Millie and Allan participate actively in constituting the embodied, literate self. Part of this self-making occurs through what Paul Prior and Jody Shipka call “environment selecting and structuring practices,” or ESSPs. In their study, “tuning consciousness” with ESSPs in order to write involves such acts as making the most of the material affordances of a space, seeking out or avoiding interactions with particular people, or deliberately structuring an environment to include particular objects and elements—all in the name of helping a writer manage consciousness (including affect and identity) so that writing is possible. Studies of ESSPs are especially compelling because they attend to the agency of actors (human and material), and focus on externalizing forces (the “output” of a writing body), not just the internalizing forces (the body being written upon). By arranging spaces in particular ways and by inviting or excluding collaborators, Millie and Allan manage their consciousness so that
they can write, but also so that they can enact and struggle with their identities as writers in digital environments.

In the process of using ESSPs, composing and reading digital texts, and collaborating with other composers, Millie and Allan work with and against their autobiographical identities (the always-changing, historical sense of self, drawn from memories of the past) in order to legitimize their perceived status as literates in digital times. As much as they are technologies for writing, these practices are what Foucault would identify as “technologies of the self,” which “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being” ("Technologies" 18). Although Luke recognizes that the technologies of the self in literacy practices are often conservative, in that they aid in the imprinting of subjugation and the internalization of a dominant gaze (and this is certainly true), in approaching literate activity of older adults rather than young children in school-based events, it is easier to see how technologies of the self permit older adults to open up new possibilities of selfhood. In these accounts, which capture literate activity from a lifelong, embodied perspective, I see individuals working with—or against—the culturally inscribed dispositions of their bodies, as they enter into a new cultural field: elderhood. Because of their embodied histories, what I do not see in these accounts are older adults conscribing wholly to the idea that old age is a state of decline.

**The View from a Body**

As a writing studies response to the kinds of empathy-generating strategies represented by the well-meaning elder advocacy of the NCOA and the MIT AgeLab, I have proposed a situated approach to studies of literacy that is attentive to older adults’ own accounts of their
embodied literate histories, as they understand them within the present context of their literate activity in later life. I find this approach useful to understanding embodied experience because it invites older adults’ to reflect on their current embodied experiences and practices in relation to their life histories. In other words, it provides not just a view of the body, but what Haraway describes as “the view from a body” (589).

Haraway argues that partial self-knowledge (as well as knowledge of the Other) is possible through a feminist objectivity that values situated knowledges from limited locations. As an alternative to the “god trick” of empirical objectivity, Haraway reclaims vision as a metaphor for objectivity: not in the “gaze from nowhere” but in “the view from a body, [which is] always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body” (589). Haraway requires a semiotic-material technology in order to see connections between meaning and the body (585). Although not likely the kind of technology Haraway intends, literacy narratives and literacy tours served as an opportunity for my participants (and for me) to recognize their ways of seeing. In telling me stories about literacy and in offering a moment-by-moment narration of their material worlds, participants like Allan and Millie had to see their lives not only from their perspective as storytellers and tour guides, but also (as any rhetor does in trying to reach an audience) from my perspective as a listener and visitor in their literate worlds.

My participants’ accounts do not split the subject from the object, the knower from the known. Because of this, their accounts aided in my search for an empathic understanding of the embodied experience of literacy in later life. While embodied objectivity is a way of knowing the world from a particular standpoint, it also provides the means by which one can work toward understanding another’s point of view. Participants articulate their literate selves not as finalized or complete, but as “always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to
join with another, to see together without claiming to be another” (Haraway 586). Through literacy narratives and literacy tours, participants and I could see, together, possible meanings of the aging body.

These possibilities included and extended beyond the experience of the impaired body. As was evident in the accounts of all seven of my participants, the aging body does experience moments of difficulty and impairment. We talked about the impact of age-related conditions like arthritis, stroke, cancer, and pulmonary fibrosis, as well as daily interactions with prosthetic technologies that included artificial hips, oxygen tanks, hearing aids, dentures, and other medical assistance devices that sometimes accompany old age. These impairments caused changes large and small, and often those changes made an impact on literate activity. In some cases, bodily impairment contributed to (or even necessitated) development of new literacy practices, as digital literacy technologies often proved useful for navigating the medical system, for offering new avenues for health research, and for coping with recovery or facing the end of life.

Sometimes, however, disability in old age can make aspects of literate activity impossible, whether the impairment is a major life change (such as blindness) that necessarily puts an end to one way of reading, writing, and knowing the world. This also included impairment brought on less by the body itself, and more by the emotional impact of physical changes that (temporarily or otherwise) arrest all other pursuits. At other times, impairment impacts the literate lives of older adults even when the bodies needing care are not their own: Carol, another of my participants, complained that she was not able to spend the time it took to learn how to use her computer to the fullest extent because she spent an excessive amount of time caring for the bodies of her mother with Alzheimer’s, her mentally disabled brother, and occasionally her husband and grandchildren.24
By recognizing the range of ways physical disability interacts with literate activity, it is entirely possible to avoid the pendulum swing between concepts of aging as purely social oppression (imprisoned in a rocking chair), or as purely a state of bodily impairment (held back by a body suit). In either of these undesirable extremes, we are left with a Silent Generation: older adults rendered incapable of speaking and of representing their lived experiences. Instead, I have suggested that literacy researchers participate in the development of their own “empathy system.” By gathering life stories from older adults, we might more appropriately understand their embodied histories of literacy: the lifelong orientations toward and away from literacy as experienced within, through, and on their bodies. Attention to these histories helps us to avoid collapsing older adults’ literacy into the strictures of physical impairment, and instead keeps literacies and bodies situated within lifelong trajectories of schooling, struggle, motivation, and failure—all of which come to bear upon literacy in later life.

Notes

16 Contemporary to (and more influential than) the NCOA campaign was the Gray Panthers Movement, founded in 1970 and led by Maggie Kuhn, who argued for elder rights, often in partnership with younger people, and for other political issues of national import. (See Kuhn.) Although it is possible that the Gray Panthers inspired the NCOA’s Ad Council campaign, the “Grey Liberation” movement positions elders as victims in need of rescuing—a far cry from the elder activism represented by Kuhn and the Gray Panthers.

17 See the discussion in chapter two of recent aging manuals promoted by AARP for models similar to the successful aging program.
The Agnes is not completely one-of-a-kind. As touted in *AARP The Magazine* (March-April 2009, 9), businesses like Nissan and university-affiliated associations are placing hard corn kernels in younger people’s sneakers and stuffing cotton balls in their ears to mimic painful steps and hearing loss associated with aging.

The term “Silent Generation” emerged publicly in a 1951 *Time* article, which cited the generation’s apparent lack of participation in political upheavals, including a “silence” in the war protests of the 1960s and a lack of emerging political leaders born in the age cohort. This label has subsequently been adopted by generational theorists Strauss and Howe, who use the term to name the age group born 1925 to 1942 (279). However, the 1925 to 1945 range seems more fitting, since the population increase known as the “Baby Boom” (which names the group following the Silent Generation) didn’t occur until 1946 (U.S. Census Bureau).

Apparently the practice of mapping the British Empire in pink is a “printer’s compromise,” rather the traditional British Imperial red, which caused problems with legibility in printing (Royal Museums Greenwich).

In such moments, Millie seems to interpret literacy to mean “cultural literacy,” or knowledge about particular subjects associated with a cultural elite (see Hirsch).

See S. Garfield; see also Steve’s video work at <http://www.stevegarfield.com>.

Prior and Shipka recognize that externalization often goes unaddressed by cultural-historic activity theorists who focus exclusively on younger learners, as these studies focus “on internalization and idealization, on the gradual move from externalized practice to interiorized practice, from external regulation of behavior (by environments and other people) to self-regulation (by inner speech)” (Prior and Shipka 228).
Angela Crow expands on the issue of care-giving, a responsibility that falls most often to older women (75-79). In a sense, caregivers may identify as disabled or impaired in their day-to-day activities, as much of their time is dedicated to the maintenance of a dependent.
Chapter Four

“You’d Better Do Your Work”: Motivation for Literacy in Later Life

On a visit to the home of a life-long family friend and research participant, I asked if I could use her computer to check my email. The eighty-year-old woman, Beverly, led me into her open, sunny bedroom where her computer sat on a tall wooden stand (see fig. 4.1). Like the rest of her house, the computer station was immaculate and free of clutter. The monitor’s screen was dark. As I sat down, I realized that her chair was raised to its highest possible height. The adjustable back support was locked stiffly, so it did not yield an inch when I tried to recline against it. The chair seemed designed to eject my body by lifting me up and pushing me forward. Perched awkwardly on the chair, I reached for the mouse and gave it a wiggle. I waited for the computer monitor to “wake” from sleep mode. Nothing happened. Glancing down at the computer tower, I realized that the power light was not on; Beverly’s computer was off, waiting in silence for its next use—a state of total rest that the computers in my world rarely enjoyed.

Figure 4.1: Beverly's computer chair
The computer chair was not like the other sites of Beverly’s literate activity, such as the cushioned chair at the kitchen table where she drank coffee and completed the newspaper’s crossword puzzle every morning, or the couch where she nestled among her handmade Afghans to read novels or the *TV Guide*. These spaces were comfortable. To me, a writing researcher and teacher who is rarely apart from her computer for more than an hour, Beverly’s computer station seemed eccentric, bounded, and counterproductive, a space that I initially believed marked the limitations of her literate activity on the computer. In my own scholarship, I take seriously the theoretical work of literacy researchers who place value on contextual studies of literate practice; however, in my first thoughts of Beverly’s computer station, I found myself subscribing to a decontextualized, ahistorical ideology of literacy: one that privileges the literacies and literate activities of younger people, and figures elder adults as digitally deficient. Beverly’s embodied habits at the computer, made evident by the careful arrangements of her physical environment, seemed (at first) like signs of old age, rather than signs of thriving literacy. Following further study, however, I found that Beverly’s bodily history—including her affective experiences over her lifetime—had in many ways supported her forays into digital literacy practices in later life.

My initial reading of Beverly’s literacy was not centrally framed by a belief that her physical health interfered with her literacy (though, certainly, this was part of my assumption); instead, my interpretation seemed to be based on a classic stereotype of older adults as reluctant learners. Robert Butler, who claims to have coined the term *ageism* in 1968 (11), sardonically describes ageist views of elders’ failure to learn and change: “Tied to his [sic] personal traditions and growing conservatism, he dislikes innovations and is not disposed to new ideas. Not only can he not move forward, he often moves backward” (7). Against this pervasive stereotype, older adults like Beverly are presumed to have impaired literacy not only because their bodies have
failed them, but also because they lack the motivation to overcome physical and other restrictions.

Beverly’s case offers a way of interrogating the presumed connections between aging and impairment. In chapter three, I interrogated the presumption that impaired bodies are the defining feature of later life, which often renders the presumption of an impaired literacy on account of old age. This chapter turns a critical eye on the presumption (including my own) of an impaired literacy among older adults in digital times, with a focus on motivation in literate activity involving new technologies and practices. I present Beverly’s story in detail in order to highlight two contributions that studies of the literate lives of elders can offer: first, building on the body-based theories of lifelong experiences with literacy and learning, Beverly’s account demonstrates the affective and material dimensions of motivation for literacy and learning over the life course; and second, the interactions between her past and present literate activities expand what counts as literacy in digital times.

Motivational Scaffolding

Affect and emotion, however deeply felt, cannot be read apart from the cultural dispositions that shape the lives of individuals (Micciche 77). In their study of older adults and digital literacy in community learning centers, McKee and Blair address cultural anxieties related to technology use, observing that “[o]ur society…certainly fetishizes young people—you don’t see grandma dancing with an iPod, for example—and the message that technology is for the young is something that many older adults seem to have internalized”; the result of that internalization is often a fear of learning to use technologies (25). Of course, stereotypes of old age do not predictably result in fear, anxiety, insecurity, or other feelings that can (and often do)
discourage literacy, but affective experience is always deeply enmeshed within literacy and learning. If some elders feel inadequate as learners because they have been moved by pervasive public messages that digital literacy is something only young people do, such feelings can impact powerfully their motivation to pursue literate practices with digital technologies. Although some older adults do experience anxiety and reluctance when learning to use new technologies (McKee and Blair 24-26), this idea is regularly circulated as a universal, static truth (Morrell, Mayhorn, and Echt 74), often masking the rich literate practices already underway by many elder adults.

Building on this interest in the ideological, affective, and motivational dimensions of literacy in my research with older adults, I have argued that before we can identify and acknowledge elders who are digitally literate, we must first understand what digital literacy actually looks like *in situ*—within embodied experience now and over the lifespan. In exploring the actual experiences of literate activity, an attention to motivational scaffolding can offer a robust sense of what digital literacy means in the lives of elders. The term *motivational scaffolding* usually describes in-the-moment feedback from the expert-teacher; examples include “acknowledging that the task is difficult; using humor; [and] providing negative or positive feedback” (Thompson 428). My study expands this notion of motivational scaffolding to contexts outside of the classroom or writing center and beyond the immediate teaching moment, to consider the sustained affective connections that foster Beverly’s literacy development over time and across a variety of literate contexts.

In studies of aging adults and digital literacy, attention to personal motivation is crucial, as elders do not necessarily share with younger people many of the same motivations or social imperatives to learn and use literacy technologies. For literacy researchers and educators,
particularly in the subfield of computers and writing, affect-based motivation proves to be especially powerful in technological literacy development among learners of all ages. Angela Crow, for instance, addresses personal motivation in her suggestion that the development of technological literacy among some aging faculty may be best learned when motivated by personal curiosity (109).  

Following Kristie Fleckenstein’s contention that literacy depends upon “feeling sufficiently at home in a place so that we will speak and write” (Embodied 62), this chapter’s extended analysis of Beverly’s motivation for digital literacy is both a move toward understanding the affective forces that support literacy (or not) over time, as well as the sociocultural, historical, and material arrangements that grant new literacies a home-like familiarity. By taking a dual focus on Beverly’s present activities and accumulated histories, I hope to reinforce the idea that digital literacy can only be understood in relation to broader sociohistorical contexts, including non-digital literacies and technologies—what Selfe and Hawisher identify as “cultural ecologies” (31-32). With Selfe and Hawisher, I argue that we must look to the stories individuals tell about literacy and how those stories are embedded within evolving social, technological, and cultural histories over time. Extending from Chapter Three, I continue to call for attention to the long-term embodied and affective experiences that individuals have with literacy, which can help us understand something more about the meanings of old age and aging, and about literacy, digital or otherwise. Resisting the compulsion to position elders as digitally deficient by default, we may find older adults’ literacy narratives—like Beverly’s—useful for understanding how embodied, affective sources of motivation endure and support literacy practices across the life course.
Literacy Affinity in Beverly’s Life History

My interest in working with Beverly began with her recent experiences developing and running a private competitive photo exchange on Flickr, a Web 2.0 photo-sharing service. I wanted to know how an 81-year-old widow, who had never expressed much interest in Web 2.0 practices before, had found reason and motivation to take on the struggles of developing a new digital literacy. I soon realized that, to truly understand what had brought Beverly to Flickr, I would need to reach further and deeper than accounts of her online activity, most obviously because much of Beverly’s literacy history had occurred before the wide spread of digital media. I quickly expanded the study to include life story interviews and observations of Beverly’s literacy practices at home.27

During our talks, Beverly described a fairly happy life story. She was born in Maine in 1927, the fourth of six children (one of only four surviving into adulthood) born to a Scottish-American father and an Irish-American mother, who had met during World War I. Raised during the Great Depression, Beverly and her family escaped the worst as her father maintained steady employment as a boiler engineer at a paper mill, working on the side as town clerk. Beverly’s mother, a former telephone operator who was not formally employed after marriage, produced a homemade filter system that Beverly’s family sold to the paper mill for extra income. A happy tomboy until her teenage years, Beverly’s early childhood was marred only by the stillbirth of her youngest sister and the tragic death of her only brother, who disappeared and was presumed dead following a boating accident. She otherwise led a relatively comfortable middle-class life, learning to play the piano, reading Nancy Drew mysteries borrowed from the public library, and completing high school with high marks in 1945, just as World War II came to an end. After completing secretarial school in Boston, Beverly returned to her hometown in Maine to accept a
comparatively high-paying job as a secretary at the paper mill where her father worked. There, she rekindled old affections with a local man, whom she married in 1948. The couple built a house, had two children and five granddaughters, and led secure and contented lives together until her husband died of cancer in 2006. When I met with her to talk about her experiences with digital literacy, Beverly was living at home and was visited regularly by her daughter, her son, and her friends, and she “kept tabs” on her grandchildren by phone and email.

In telling her story, Beverly revealed a significant affective disposition toward literacy in general—and technology by association—which in many ways motivated literacy development throughout her life. In my interviews with Beverly, literacy and the dedication it took to learn were prevalent not only in her accounts of current literacy practices, but also in the stories she told about her life. I label this disposition a literacy affinity, which describes an enduring attraction toward literacy, expressed and reinforced by affective and bodily experience. The concept of a literacy affinity draws in part on the habitus that is observable, as Hayles summarizes, in “the orientation and movement of the body through cultural spaces and temporal rhythms” ("Materiality" 160). For Beverly, the movements toward developing a literacy affinity were in part observable through her literacy narrative, which revealed the consistent development of a literacy affinity: the lasting pull of literacy in her life, in part as an asset to cultural and socioeconomic improvement.28

As do most people, Beverly located the foundations of her attitudes toward literacy in her childhood—specifically in her parents’ valuing of literacy and education. Beverly remembered that attending school beyond the eighth grade was not guaranteed during her Depression-era childhood. She explained,
If you could go through high school, you were lucky. Because you could be smart as a whip, and still [your family] couldn’t afford to let you. Because they were big families and they needed you at home. … So if you were lucky enough to be in school and you wanted to stay in school, you’d better do your work.

The belief that literacy was a privilege was prevalent in Beverly’s literacy narrative, held across the overlapping cultural spaces of home, school, work, and community. Beverly’s affinity for literacy and education became so powerful, in fact, that her faith in its benefits exceeded her parents’. For instance, her heightened belief in the financial potential of literacy in part motivated her decision to attend college and earn a secretarial degree, despite her parents’ wishes that she marry or join the workforce immediately after high school. This decision paid off (literally) when the degree helped Beverly to secure a career as a relatively well-paid secretary.29

Beverly’s literacy affinity became so powerful, in fact, that she had difficulty understanding how anyone would not share her motivation to pursue literacy. In her retirement, she organized a reading program in her community and volunteered in an elementary school library to encourage students to read and write. While volunteering, Beverly believed that literacy development was a matter of attitude, and that struggling adults had not adopted the requisite you’d-better-do-your-work stance: “In my experience in Literacy Volunteers, every person except one of the people that we tried to help learn to read dropped out because it was too much work. And that’s pathetic.” In both her decisions to pursue a college degree and to support local literacy efforts many years later, Beverly demonstrated a lasting belief in literacy development as both privilege and economic necessity, never questioning the importance of acquiring or promoting literacy development.
This long-held value in literacy’s potential to enrich her life emerged in Beverly’s description of her motivations for developing digital literacy in the computer age. By the time Beverly retired from working in the business office of a paper mill in 1990, she had learned how to use a personal computer at work. Programs like Lotus 1-2-3 helped her to manage data more efficiently—efficiency that confirmed Beverly’s belief in the value of learning to use new technologies. In her fifties, Beverly purchased her first home computer, likely the highly popular Commodore 64, although she couldn’t remember with certainty. Before retiring, Beverly bought an IBM, and since then always owned a PC. Initially intending for her home computer to extend workplace efficiency into managing her personal finances, Beverly quickly found that her home computer was equally useful for cultural and social enrichment. In particular, the computer helped to fill her time while her husband (who never learned to use a personal computer) watched evening sports on television—a pursuit that the couple did not share with equal enthusiasm. By the time she turned eighty, her home computer had become a hub of her literate activity. Widowed and increasingly housebound, Beverly intensified her value in creative and social projects that almost always involved the computer. Whether she used it for searching for crochet patterns online, researching and compiling a writing project on local history, or emailing distant friends, the computer became deeply embedded in Beverly’s everyday life.

In September 2007, Beverly found herself desirous of a new creative project. Following a sleepless night, she emailed several of her family members, explaining her plan to create an exclusive digital photo club in which members’ entries would compete for the title of “photo of the month.” The request was met with resounding support. During the planning exchange, one of her granddaughters recommended that she find and use a photo-sharing website. Persuaded by her granddaughter’s positive experiences with Flickr, Beverly registered on the site and
immediately saw the benefits of posting photos and comments rather than exchanging emails with image attachments that would “clutter everyone’s inboxes.” Within weeks, the private group, which I call the “Friends and Family Photo Club,” was up and running with eleven participating photographers (all of whom were Beverly’s close friends or family members). Beverly never used Flickr to search for photos outside of the group, nor to network with people outside her closest friends and family; yet, the group became a reason to learn about the literacy practices involved in moderating a Web 2.0 space.

As with all of her at-home computer work, the literacy affinity Beverly had developed over the course of her life kept her motivated to address the many challenges that came with her effort to achieve the cultural and social enrichments afforded by the Flickr competition. Having long understood that she would have to “do the work,” Beverly approached what she called the “learning curve” of digital literacy with fierce determination derived from her consistent success with problem-solving through sheer grit. While Beverly acknowledged the stereotypes that position elders as “illiterate” or “afraid” when it comes to computers, she firmly believed that any discrepancy in digital literacy among older adults was simply the result of a motivational difference. As she succinctly explained, “If you’re a busy senior citizen, you don’t want to be bothered.” For Beverly, however, a lifelong literacy affinity provided the necessary motivation. “I’ve always liked a puzzle or a challenge,” she claimed. “It’s always been a puzzle to me. I can do this, darn it.” In her eighties, Beverly still possessed the internalized command of her parents, “You’d better do your work,” and believed her hard work paid off online. While it remains important to think about how motivational scaffolding might work in the immediate teaching moment (for example, how teachers and tutors can foster affective support through interactions with learners), Beverly’s case demonstrates the importance of understanding that affect-based
motivation has a history. What might appear, at first, to be a surprising display of motivation—such as an 81-year-old woman deciding to learn how to use Flickr—may in fact be in response to a long history of experience and literacy affinities.

Affective Alliances: Literacy, Work, and Friendship

While Beverly’s belief in hard work supported her continued literacy affinity in digital media, she was aware that she could not acquire literacy of any kind all on her own. In many cases, her literacy development was enabled, materially speaking, by what Brandt calls literacy sponsors, or agents who provide beneficiaries with the resources to develop literacy in exchange for some kind of economic gain (Literacy 19). These sponsors provided Beverly with access both to traditional alphabetic literacy as well as to technological literacies. For instance, her university degree, which provided literacy in business-related technologies and practices such as typing and shorthand, was made possible almost entirely due to a scholarship secured by her high school principal, who had hired her to work in the school’s main office. While literacy sponsors aided in Beverly’s lifelong pursuit of literacy by offering access to knowledge and material resources in exchange for her time and labor, emerging from within the system of sponsorship were other kinds of social exchanges: friendships. The occasional blurring of boundaries between literacy sponsorship and friendship acted as a source of constant renewal within Beverly’s life-long literacy affinity.

While it cannot be disputed that literacy operates within economic systems, and that literacy is often a form of currency and exchange between sponsors and the sponsored, the encouragement and pay-off of literacy does not occur in solely economic terms. Emotion may also act as a motivator of literacy, enticing learners with the “lure of feeling literate” (Strickland
47), or else motivating literate activity through a “desire to know, to connect, to communicate, and to share” (Radway 7). Despite a tenuous connection with social mobility and economic well-being, literacy remains highly valued when it supports positive affective connections (Mortensen and Daniell 24). Social connections can thus become affective allies of literacy—the acquaintances who aid in supporting literate activity through and because of a mutual exchange of friendship.

Several of these affective allies emerged during Beverly’s description of her unexpected promotion in the 1970s from secretary to purchasing agent at the paper mill, a move driven in large part by new affirmative action policies. The new job demanded that she know something about the discourses and literate practices of chemical engineering and business finance, knowledge she gained (in part) through cursory company-sponsored training at the state university. However, Beverly’s social networks contributed more to her training than did official support from the company. In addition to seeking at-home lessons from her daughter’s partner, who was a chemical engineering student, Beverly used her rhetorical savvy in the workplace—previously developed during her work as a secretary—to forge beneficial friendships with knowledgeable mill employees, who could offer their advice and contribute to her workplace literacy. In several cases, she established unlikely friendships that simultaneously served as invaluable alliances:

[T]he good thing was I knew a lot of people in the mill, and one of the people that helped me the absolute most was a very smart guy that nobody liked…. He was brilliant, and if I had a problem and didn’t understand what I was doing, I’d call him and he’d give me a heads-up and tell me what to do.
Among the various literacies Beverly began to develop in her new position, technology was central, since the paper company where she worked—as did many other large companies in the late-twentieth-century United States—adopted computer technology to streamline and centralize production and sales. Needing computer programs to assist her department with tracking supply inventories and preparing and tracing material orders, Beverly relied on a company programmer assigned to her department. While the programmers knew how to program the mainframe computer, and purchasing agents knew what information they needed from the computer, the two departments often struggled to communicate. However, Beverly’s rhetorical know-how helped her to locate both effective and affective sources of technological support:

I was lucky to befriend this really odd duck who walked around with…a big jug of Coke all the time, and [he] would come and sit and chitchat with me. And then [when another employee] who was assigned to do what I needed…screwed things up, I would tell the guy with the Coke bottle what I really, really wanted, and he understood perfectly. He’d do some finagling and get it to work the way my particular part of purchasing needed it.

In addition to relying on friends as literacy teachers, Beverly’s value in friendships sometimes sparked early adoption of technological literacy, such as her refusal to heed her supervisor’s advice, when she became manager, to require her secretary friends (all women) to do her typing—a decision that put her at the front lines for learning to use the personal computer when it arrived in her office. In telling me these stories of her sudden demand for technological literacy at the workplace, Beverly was clear about her affective attachments not only to the technology she learned, but also to the friendships she cultivated.
This affectively motivated value in literacy extended to Beverly’s digital practices, as she continued to understand the exchange of literacy sponsorship as part and parcel of her social relationships. As with her workplace literacies, her at-home computer literacies were supported not only by institutional sponsors (such as her Internet service provider’s technical support call center), but also by the social networks of expertise distributed among friends and loved ones. When something went awry with her computer, as she said, “I call Ghostbusters.” She would call or email her children, neighbors, grandchildren, and so forth, and while they assisted her with technical concerns, both Beverly and her “assistants” benefited from shared moments of camaraderie. Just as my own interviews with her were woven seamlessly into our meandering chitchat, Beverly’s requests for help were often as much about catching up with friends and family as they were about computer glitches.

Although Beverly was often in need of others’ help with technology and literacy, the pleasure she gained by learning from others did not lock her into a stable position of the novice forever in search of an expert’s help. In the same way that good friendships are not one-way sources of support, she identified as both teacher and learner in digital times. For instance, she often provided impromptu training sessions to her elder friends who had purchased computers. Being one of the only Internet-savvy members of her social circle of older adults, Beverly frequently served as a Google jockey during social and community volunteer gatherings, providing instant answers to her friends’ and co-volunteers’ questions—a role she performed with relish.30 She also served as a rhetorical educator of sorts even in working with younger friends in online literate activity, such as her heavy editing work to “temper” a much younger Flickr group member’s “literary language” to make collaborative postings more suitable for
Beverly’s intended online audience (her small group of friends and family members), which represented a broad range of ages and experiences with literacy. It is important also to note that the people in Beverly’s life—even the ones she loved and who were supportive of her literacy—did not always serve to usher her into digital literacy advancement. For instance, her use of more popular social networking sites like Facebook was prevented by her relationships with loved ones, rather than encouraged. Although Beverly enjoyed keeping in touch with her children and grandchildren (two of whom kept regular family blogs, which they shared with her), she refused to join Facebook, even though one of her children, all five of her grandchildren, and all of her sons-in-law used the service. In fact, it was precisely because her grandchildren were using Facebook that she refused to do so: “I’m afraid that I will see things that would upset me about my grandchildren, and I’d rather not know.”

From Beverly’s accounts of her workplace literacy and her current digital activity, I see a literacy affinity that is both economically and affectively motivated—evidence of the ongoing pull of literacy throughout her life. In her own studies of older adults’ life stories, Ruth Ray finds that older women’s narratives are usually “heavily peopled,” while older men’s typically center around career and personal success (80-88). Yet Beverly’s literacy narrative, like her literacy affinity, was driven by a rising career in a world heavily peopled with affective allies. Perhaps in part due to her gendered and classed experience of the world, Beverly expressed her value in literacy as a source of affective connection as much as economic gain, and her literacy affinity allowed her to fit in both at work and in the digital age. Attention to Beverly’s affective and material histories reveals that, working within functioning systems of economic sponsorship, affective alliances are highly valuable for literacy development across the lifespan.
Cut, Paste, and Remediate: The Interplay of Print and Digital Literacy

During one of our many conversational tangents about our daily lives, Beverly alluded to an upcoming convention for scrapbooking enthusiasts, where she and other scrapbookers would pack up their paper, scissors, stickers, and hole-punchers and devote a weekend to colorfully arranging photos of families, travels, weddings, holidays, and other memorable subjects. Beverly had been scrapbooking for many years, most notably producing five scrapbooks documenting the first eighteen years of each of her grandchildren’s lives, given as high school graduation gifts. To my astonishment, Beverly told me about her plans to make a new scrapbook about her Flickr group. She initially explained that she wanted each page of the scrapbook to document one month of the group’s activity, displaying photo work and the surrounding commentary. She described her plans to selectively preserve the online competition’s monthly photography and commentary interchanges, produced by Beverly and eleven of her closest friends and family members:

It’s just an organizational thing. What I’ll have, hopefully, will be the month, the theme, all of the pictures submitted, who won or who got the most votes, and who else got votes because I don’t want to let that fly by. And also the comments, but not all the comments. You know, the hilarious comments. The outstanding comments.

Intrigued by the idea of a print archive of her online activity, I asked her to keep me apprised of her scrapbooking project.

At first, the scrapbook served in response to shortcomings Beverly found in the Flickr interface. Primarily, she felt that the scrapbook provided her more authorial control through a print-based editing process, rather than the cumulative, participatory design of the digital
medium. With full control over the selection of text and images, she could create a record of the Friends and Family Photo Club activities, carefully selecting what she deemed the best photos and comments for posterity. As a writer-designer of scrapbooks, Beverly was able to further expand her audience across space and time: she wanted to share the photos and conversations occurring on Flickr with friends who did not have access to the private photo competition, either because they weren’t invited to be members of the group, or because they did not have online access. Further, the scrapbook could aim toward an imagined future audience, who might be in search of a historical record of the Friends and Family Photo Club. For Beverly, the unfixed space of Flickr did not appear to provide a sufficiently reliable or customizable space to meet her rhetorical purposes, but armed with scissors, adhesives, and colored paper, she felt confident that the Flickr group’s activity would not “fly by” unrecorded.

Seeing other, more durable purposes for the work of the Friends and Family Photo Club, Beverly’s scrapbooking work might be recognized as an act of remediation—a concept originally descriptive of material artifacts referencing previous media (Bolter and Grusin), recently extended to considerations of chains of semiotic activity, including the literate activity of people (Prior and Hengst 7-10). Yet, encountering Beverly’s scrapbook plans while embedded within age-biased ideologies of literacy, some might read her actions as proof that she is not digitally literate—or at least not sufficiently so. Her remediation appeared to work backward, away from the new and back into the old, as she ultimately relied on print-based literacies to rewrite digital texts. On closer inspection, however, her practices were more complicated than that. A further reminder that multimodality was not created by digital media, but has, in fact, “always been there” (Hawisher et al., 255), Beverly’s scrapbooking practices denoted a long-term interest in multimodal forms of expression and archiving. It is in part because of her interests in paper-
based multimodal composing that she was able to appreciate digital modes of Flickr (asynchronous commentary, hypertext, video, etc.) in their own right. As she continued working on her scrapbook alongside Flickr, her literate activity began to suggest a convergence of the two practices. In other words, Beverly’s remediation was not backward, but reciprocal.

Initially understanding Flickr as an ephemeral space of temporary display, Beverly used her authority as a group moderator to delete the collection of photos at the end of each month to “make room” for the new batch of submissions. At the same time, she would also delete her own entire photo stream, which at first contained only photos connected to the monthly subject- or genre-based theme, such as best self-portrait, best black-and-white photo, and best image of “writing on the wall” (photos of letters or numbers). As she began her scrapbooking project, however, Beverly began to rethink this cycle of uploading and deleting. Soon, she treated the Flickr site as a complement to her preservation efforts in the scrapbook. In later Flickr work, Beverly stopped deleting her photos, using them instead as a cumulative digital record of her creative work. Once she allowed herself this kind of archival approach to Flickr, she soon began using it to document other parts of her life, posting often-beautiful photos that were not related to the competition’s current theme, but to her own life and experience: photos of snow climbing the fence around her yard, her dog entangled in yarn on her living room floor, and friends bowling in her senior league. Flickr became a way of further reaching out for affective connections with distant loved ones, beyond the four walls of her house and past the boundary of her small town.

Persuaded of Flickr’s usefulness by its comparability to familiar practices Beverly knew and valued, it didn’t take long for her to become more curious. Imagining the possibilities of a medium that could accommodate high-quality photos and new media, and which could be organized in a way that she found personally compelling, she thought that “maybe somewhere
down the road we’ll find a place to make an album—a digital album.” While she professed that she would never fully replace her handmade practices of scrapbook-making (and, indeed, she never did), she hoped that a digital practice might provide another avenue for creative expression and friendship. A hope, Beverly told me, that she had already been discussing with her friends and family.

Beverly’s account of her Flickr scrapbook and the subsequent shift in perspective that occurred shortly after the scrapbook project began reveals the ongoing interplay between old and new media, as well as old and new literacies. As an older adult redesigning and reinventing processes of scrapbooking with digital media, she reminds us of Lisa Gitelman’s assertion that, despite common perceptions, media do not develop along a predictable, linear path toward progress and improvement. Instead, “new” media are sites of ongoing social development of meaning, and it is only through cultural readings of media history that we mark distinctions between old and new (6). Finding that “remediation” as a term implies a starting point (some existing thing that is then re-mediated), Hayles has suggested a new term, *intermediation*, as a similar model for understanding such non-linear development of digital technologies, texts, and subjectivities—a model that seems particularly instructive in light of Beverly’s activity:

Complex feedback loops connect humans and machines, old technologies and new, language and code, analog processes and digital fragmentations. Although these feedback loops evolve over time and thus have a historical trajectory that arcs from one point to another, it is important not to make the mistake of privileging any one point as the primary locus of attention, which can easily result in flattening complex interactions back into linear causal chains. *(My Mother 31)*
Although Beverly’s continued interest in the paper-based scrapbook might to some suggest obduracy in digital times, the endurance of her older literacy practices did more to support her new digital literacies than it did to hinder it. The intermediation of her scrapbooking and Flickr work illustrate the importance of seeing literacy in the terms Hayles describes—not as linear, causal trajectories, in which new should replace the old, since clinging to the old might somehow prevent adoption of the new. Seeing literacy (as we know it to be) in terms of scaffolding what is new with what is familiar, we come to appreciate the older, taken-for-granted practices that continue to hold meaning and value in newer literate contexts. For Beverly, scrapbooking was a way both to extend and rethink her print literacy practices, and to make sense of digital texts through print media. In the process of sense-making, she discovered newer, more durable ways into digital literacy.

**Sitting Up Straight: Beyond the Digital in Digital Literacy Research**

Having spent so much time talking with Beverly and learning about her past and present literate activity, I began to recognize the cultural scripts of aging informing my view of her literacy. At one point, initially assuming that the configuration of Beverly’s computer station was a sign of her advanced age and illiteracy, I naively offered to make adjustments to her computer chair that was so unpleasant to my body—an offer that she resolutely rejected. “What, are you trying to break my back?” she accused. The chair, and the way it held her body as she worked on the computer, was clearly important to her. Later, I asked her about it over email. Seated in the same chair, Beverly wrote her reply:

One of the criteria for a good typist (like a good pianist) was to sit upright with hands poised perfectly over the keys and exercise, exercise, exercise. Even in my
car I am most comfortable with the seat raised to its highest position with the back straight. Guess it adds to my concentration in some convoluted way. Also, since I don’t have arms on my computer chair it [the height of the chair] helps greatly in standing easily. (16 Apr. 2009)

Beverly’s chair, and her awareness of its position as an important part of her literate activity, reveals the value of the backward view in literacy research. The chair, like her body, has a history. That literacy history (as told by Beverly) was carried by enduring affective experiences and alliances, which form and reaffirm literacy affinities. Her body was inextricable from her literacy affinity, work ethic, and sense of self. With the proper (and, I acknowledge, gendered) body position developed many years ago as she trained in secretarial school, and perfected during her many years as a typist, she felt at home even in digital literacy practices.

Beverly’s embodied account of literacy reaffirms that literate activity is at once old and new, and that only by paying attention to the intermediation between the two can we begin to see what literacy might mean for the present. Seen this way, Beverly was not just an elder woman with an uncomfortable chair and a computer turned off when not in immediate use; she was also a trained secretary and a penny-wise child of the Depression. Her story reminds us of the entangled histories borne by individuals as they move from one context of literacy to another, histories that “emerge, accumulate, and compete with other literacies, and … also fade” (Selfe and Hawisher 5). Beverly, like so many others, drew on a rich literate past fraught with emotional and embodied experiences that carried her forward into new literate contexts. Through recognition of the ways literacy is part of emotional and even physical selves, we can recognize the richness of what literacy in digital times really is, what it does, and what it means—at any age.
By paying closer attention to the work of older adults, whose literacies are undervalued by default, 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. Through continued attention to elders’ literacies, and through continued challenges to the modern amnesia that constructs technological literacies as wholly distinct from, or somehow better than, older print literacies (Selfe), we might see literacy less in terms of measuring up to the most recent technological innovations, and more in terms of how individuals regularly innovate in order to make meaning in their everyday lives.

Notes

25 A version of this essay originally appeared as “Age Bias in Digital Literacy Research” in *College Composition and Communication* 62.4 (Copyright 2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission).

26 This interest echoes knowledge common among digital literacy scholars, who value informal, curiosity-driven, and experimental methods of “tinkering” as important pedagogical tools, as discussed by Jenny Edbauer Rice in *College Composition and Communication* and in the recent work of Anne Balsamo.

27 Amassing data over a period of two years, the study involved a three-frame approach: 1) life story research, in which I interviewed Beverly on several occasions about her past and present experiences with literacy, education, and learning, with a special focus on her history with computing—the resulting data comprises what Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen have called a “literacy narrative,” a genre which has become useful in unearthing the affective
and material histories of literacy development; 2) ethnographic observation of Beverly’s literate activity at home, where most of her literate activity currently occurs; and 3) participant-observation of her activities in the Flickr group online. This triple view allowed me a way to understand Beverly’s current literacy development on Flickr within the context of her life prior to and, now, apart from digital technologies.

28 In describing Beverly’s literacy affinity, I am mindful of what Harvey Graff calls the “literacy myth” and that literacy does not always result in economic gain. However, partly because of Beverly’s status as a white, middle-class college graduate, the literacy myth remains a deep-seated attachment that is consistently reaffirmed by the social and economic advantages that Beverly attributes to literacy.

29 Beverly’s decision to complete high school and attend college in the 1940s—unprecedented in her family—situates her within the twentieth-century shift toward an information-based economy of human capital, a shift which intensified cultural and economic value in literacy, though this value did not usually translate into individual economic gain (see Brandt Literacy and “Sponsors”; Goldin and Katz). Part of this shift, the large number of women entering clerical and secretarial careers during this period marks Beverly’s participation in a gendered labor system, in which the most readily available career did not necessarily match her abilities. However, as Deborah Brandt (“Sponsors”), Janine Solberg, Anne Ruggles Gere, and others have noted, clerical work (transcription, note-taking, letter-writing, etc.) became not only an important activity among women for the negotiation of gender identity, but also an opportunity for innovative appropriation of office- and organization-based literacy for use beyond the workplace.
Google jockey is a term normally used in education settings to describe a participant who synchronizes web searches to a classroom lecture or discussion and shares the search results with members of the class (Educause).
Chapter Five
Life Stories Across the Generation Gap

Robin, a 55-year-old university employee who had enrolled in my lifelong learning course on writing, described her early meetings with Johnny, a 19-year-old undergraduate with whom she had worked during an eight week life story research and writing project:

[Johnny] did say, on the first day of the interviewing, ‘There are a lot of older people around my home and they just kind of like to chill out, and I’d like to be like them and chill out and sit around on the couch. That’s what old people do.’ I said, ‘What age is old?’ He goes: ‘Fifty and up.’ And I’m like, ‘Okay, well I’m going to share some things with you over these next few weeks [and then] maybe you won’t think we all sit on the couch.’

As with other partners in the class, Robin and Johnny were tasked with interviewing each other in order to write each other’s life stories. Robin—who went on to talk with Johnny about her experiences with tap dancing, fitness classes, and a life lived for learning new things and meeting new people—also learned a great deal about Johnny, a “kid” who, upon Robin’s first impression, projected such intense earnestness and shyness that he could on occasion be misconstrued as either as angry or aloof. After the eight weeks were over, Robin characterized Johnny as “multi-dimensional” and “introspective”—qualities Robin illustrated in her story, “Just Chillin’ with Johnny.”

Robin’s was one among twenty-eight life stories produced as part of the Intergenerational Life Story Project, a community-based writing and research collaboration that brought together an undergraduate advanced composition course and a lifelong learning course on writing for
adults. Although the stated objectives of the paired writing courses focused primarily on the development of qualitative research and writing practices, the life story project provided an important opportunity for participants of all ages to confront their own shifting age identities. Required to represent each other’s lives through written narratives, Johnny, Robin, and many of their fellow participants experienced moments of empathy for their research partners, and subsequent self-awareness of their own perspectives and life experiences as members of different generations.

In the preceding chapters, I have considered the meanings of old age and aging in the twenty-first century United States through an examination of literacy—especially technological literacy—as it interacts with a narrow definition of aging as a period of bodily decline into disability. I have argued that researchers can participate in expanding the meaning of old age by attending to in situ studies of literate activity in later life. Such research efforts reconfigure approaches to research and rhetoric that either occlude the lived experiences of older adults, or else continue to reinscribe a reductive conflation of aging and disability. In this chapter, I turn to the Intergenerational Life Story Project to consider what literacy teachers might do to participate in the project of expanding the meanings of old age and aging in the twenty-first century. Based on my participants’ work and experiences in the project, I argue that life story research and writing in a community literacy context can present challenges to a perceived generation gap by highlighting the mutual construction of age identity, and by opening up possibilities for cross-generational empathy.

Limitations are placed on older adults not only by unfavorable ageist stereotypes, but also by the practices of differentiating age cohorts. While labeling a generation can have its uses for considering shared cultural reference points among a particular birth cohort, the labeling of an
age group can also erase in-group diversity. For example, statistics-driven headlines declaring that “Older Americans Are Less Enthusiastic About Growing Diversity” or “Same-Sex Marriage Divides The Generations” (M. Crowley 37-38) create a false sense of political homogeneity based on age. In such headlines, it’s not only that older adults are lumped together as one same-minded unit, but it is also that they are identified as a unit in contrast with an equally homogeneous younger demographic. Identifying a “culture war” between generations that is propagated by patterns of blaming older generations for the dire futures of the younger, Margaret Gullette proposes that, “[b]y sharing age analysis, we can end the state of ignorance in which [intergenerational] cultural combats occur, undo contrived emotions, invent tactics for resisting the assumptions about age that print and visual culture inculcate” (Aged 59). The Intergenerational Life Story Project responded to Gullette’s call by providing non-directed opportunities for multigenerational group of writers and researchers to engage collaboratively in age analysis.

By taking the Intergenerational Life Story Project as its subject, this chapter is in part a reflection on the purposes and values of community literacy—a discussion relevant not only to writing research and pedagogy, but also to the culture of aging in the United States. Especially following retirement or the death of a spouse, many older adults choose to seek out social networking or educational opportunities within low-cost (or no-cost) communities of other older adults, often forming subcultures of elderhood (see, for instance, Barbara Myerhoff’s Number Our Days, an ethnographic study of life at a center for Jewish elders). Those older adults who do not participate in such community activities are still often associated with community work, either as the beneficiaries of community-sponsored programs (such as Meals on Wheels) or as potential recruits into the unpaid volunteer workforce—an effort led most prominently by
AARP. As the culture of retirement begins to change with the economic and political environment in the United States, and as more and more older Americans seek employment or stay employed after age 65 (U.S. Department of Labor), an increased demand for digital literacy among older employees may very well drive older adults’ searches for accessible and affordable training opportunities within the local community.31

With such connections between older adults and community-based learning already in place, opportunities abound for literacy teachers to consider the meanings of old age and aging from a community context, and to participate in shaping the aging experience through community-based literate activity. Such literacy initiatives for older adults have already included technological literacy workshops (McKee and Blair), hospice-based literacy projects (Haussamen; Rumsey, “Family History”), and writing workshops for older adults (Ray; Winterowd). In the Intergenerational Life Story Project, I aimed to create a space in which older adults and younger students were positioned both as learner-subjects and as teacher-researchers. Plainly speaking, the project was not designed for younger students to “help the old people,” as some of the undergraduates initially assumed. Instead, I hoped to encourage writers positioned along a broad spectrum of ages to learn about each other’s lives, to consider their own age identities, and to begin the local process of interrogating what it means to age.

The goals for the Intergenerational Life Story Project adopted key objectives laid out by community literacy and service-learning scholars and teachers. A field that has grown rapidly in composition and rhetoric since the 1980s, community literacy and service-learning responds to interest in adopting a pragmatist view of education as preparation for democratic citizenship (Deans 7-8). In their foundational essay on community literacy, Wayne Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins describe it as a project in which both community partners and university
mentors step outside of their home discourses and use writing to “yoke community action with intercultural education, strategic thinking and problem solving, and with observation-based research and theory building” (200). Community literacy expands not only the sites of rhetorical education to include those beyond the university classroom, but also, in a rhetorical model of community literacy, the aim is to “seek an inquiry-based, deliberative process that can help stakeholders frame open questions as a community, elicit their multiple—and often conflicting—perspectives, and put those perspectives into generative dialogue that promotes change” (Higgins, Long, and Flower 11).

Situated in the liminal space between university and community, the Intergenerational Life Story Project sought to create a discursive contact zone in which younger and older writers would be charged with asking about, listening to, and representing the life experiences of members of a different generation. The project’s main purpose, as Thomas Deans might identify it, was “writing with the community”—to use writing and inquiry as a means of collaboratively negotiating social and cultural difference (Deans 16). In addition to guiding new ways of collaborating as writers and researchers, the project was designed as a backdrop for empathy: a chance to experience the world from the perspective of a different age identity. In what follows, I offer a critical review of the Intergenerational Life Story Project as a means of incorporating age identity work into the writing curriculum, with the ultimate goal of initiating cross-generational empathy.

**Different Perspectives: The Intergenerational Life Story Project**

Our life story project began, as so many projects do, with a conversation. I had arranged a meeting with Kathleen Holden, who was then the director of a relatively new university-
affiliated branch of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI)—a national lifelong learning program. OLLI, as Kathleen explained in a director’s message on the OLLI website, demonstrates that “learning is ageless” and aims to provide opportunities for adults aged 50 and up “to take a fresh look at your world and your place in it” (Holden). The thriving institute offers a wide variety of non-credit-bearing courses, study groups, reading groups, and other educational events that support the intellectual lives of older adults in the local community. Knowing little about the institute, I met with Kathleen to discuss the possibility of leading an OLLI course that would collaborate with an undergraduate writing course.

With OLLI Illinois in its third year of operation, Kathleen quickly identified several important caveats to teaching a writing course in her program. OLLI scholars, she told me, preferred an à la carte approach to learning; because many participants were working professionals or had other obligations such as care-giving responsibilities, medical appointments, and travel plans, attendance at most OLLI courses was erratic, and take-home assignments were highly unappealing to most OLLI scholars. Mostly, it seemed, OLLI scholars were accustomed to attending class when their busy schedules allowed, listening to a lecture, and participating in lively discussions that spilled into the hallways or in front of the Starbucks espresso machine within the freshly painted OLLI offices. With this culture of learning in mind, Kathleen and I sketched out the kind of writing course she thought might work for OLLI scholars: following a weekly lecture/discussion on topics related to life story research and writing methods, OLLI scholars would meet with undergraduate partners in research teams to interview each other, and ultimately each OLLI scholar would write the life story of an undergraduate, and vice versa. The stories would be kept short and would be shared on the final day of class at the end of the eight-week OLLI semester.
While Kathleen went to work coaxing OLLI scholars to enroll in this relatively unorthodox course, I went to work arranging an undergraduate sister class: a sophomore-level composition course that fulfilled the university’s advanced composition requirement. The resulting course was designed to consider the epistemologies and methods of life story research and writing to examine questions related to the course theme: “Pathways to Education.” Over the course of the sixteen-week semester, undergraduates were assigned to use life stories to investigate problems or questions about university life.

At the heart of this undergraduate curriculum was the eight-week collaborative project at OLLI, which we called the Intergenerational Life Story Project, described to undergraduates in this way:

This project will take place over the course of 8 weeks and will include collaborative as well as individual writing and research. Your goal in this project is to gather life stories from local community members (likely from a different generation than your own) in order to better understand some aspect of education and university life. The basic questions driving this project: *What does it mean to be a part of the university community?* and *What paths have been taken to get to the university?*

The sixteen advanced composition students and the twelve attendees of the OLLI class represented a 60-year span in age, from 19 to 79. The course attracted equal numbers of men and women among the older group, with seven women and five men, and eleven women and five men in the undergraduate group. The undergraduate group was racially and ethnically diverse, with six students identifying as African American, five as white or Caucasian, one as Asian American, and two as Hispanic. (Matthew, the sole OLLI member who self-identified as being
of color, admitted he was pleasantly surprised by the racial diversity of the life story project, as he participates in predominantly white OLLI classes.) As a writing course typically enrolled by non-English-majors, the undergraduate group represented a variety of disciplines, including psychology, human nutrition, chemistry, economics, and advertising. The OLLI group also represented a range of professional backgrounds, including agriculture, law, education, nursing, speech therapy, and music.

In an effort to capture the collaborative processes of the Intergenerational Life Story Project, I audio-recorded and/or video-recorded all of the joint class meetings at the OLLI center and kept a teaching journal of each session, documenting my observations of cross-generational interactions, age-related commentary, and other classroom performances of age-identity-making. I also collected all student work, including interview protocols, digital recordings of interviews, all drafts of life stories, and reflective writing by undergraduates. Finally, in an effort to understand each writer’s sense of the project, I conducted exit interviews with all sixteen undergraduates, and ten of the twelve OLLI scholars. During the semi-structured interviews, I invited each student and OLLI scholar to talk about their background in writing and interviewing, their original expectations for or interest in the course, and their reactions to the process of working with their life story partners. Captured in these data are the intersecting processes of co-constructing text, meaning, and identity, with a heightened awareness of the contributions of age and aging.

A Writerly Approach to Research

I had designed the advanced composition course for undergraduates and the OLLI writing course around the practices, philosophies, and criticism of life story research methods. As we
discussed readings and practiced during small group activities to prepare for data collection sessions at the OLLI center, both classes developed a working understanding of life story research as a method of inquiry that involved gathering information on the “subjective essence” (Atkinson 3) of the whole or part of a person’s life. Through this method, data is collected first in the form of an elicited oral account, which is then transcribed and refashioned as a unified, cohesive narrative—either completely in the words of the narrator, completely in the words of the researcher, or some mixture of both.

In *Beyond Nostalgia*, Ruth Ray argues for the importance of examining life stories in order to capture the construction and reconstruction of age identity. Through a study of older adults writing and talking in a life-writing workshop at a senior center, Ray demonstrates that stories about life experience participate in an identity-making process, and that the practice of sharing those life stories can have important implications for calibrating identities across (or against) difference. Rather than understanding life stories as privately composed texts about individual selves, Ray’s study points to the highly social nature of composing a life story. In the telling of our life stories, we index both what makes us like others—and thus validate our membership in a cultural group—and, in Western contexts at least, what makes us different; further, as we tell our own stories, we do so with an eye toward what makes that story worth telling (Bruner 71). With this awareness of audience and of the affordances of a given symbolic world, the process of telling a life highlights the social nature of identity-making. Thus, the life story project offered an opportunity for exposing ideologies and for confronting identity differences, including age ideology and age identity.

Both undergraduates and OLLI scholars entered the project bearing a social compulsion to represent their lives in writing—though in starkly different ways. As OLLI scholar Marilyn
described during a class discussion, entering old age was a parallel experience to being a young adult, as for both age groups the driving question seems to be, “Where do I fit in to the social order?” Navigating these transitional phases by writing about life experience has become a familiar practice in American culture. The keeping of diaries and the composing of life reviews, for instance, are stereotypically linked to teenage (or perhaps “tween”-age) and old age, respectively, and these forms have become further normalized in fiction: the familiar Bildungsroman of adolescence and what Constance Brooke calls the Vollendungsroman (“winding up” novel) of senescence (207) are genres that encompass familiar autobiographical transitions into new phases of life. The use of life-writing as an aid for entering both adulthood and later life marked, for the Intergenerational Life Story Project, a kind of common ground. Indeed, many of the undergraduates had recent experiences with autobiographical forms of writing (specifically the personal statement and the curriculum vitae) in applications to schools or employers. OLLI scholars were generally aware of a social compulsion to record their life histories, most often for the benefit of their families, such as the OLLI scholar whose son had given him a blank journal in which to write his life story, though the OLLI scholar had not, to that day, written a single word of it.

This presented an important opportunity for the Intergenerational Life Story Project. Using a form that would promote the construction of new and familiar selves within a social context that brought together writers from different phases of life, the project had the potential to underscore the in-process construction of age identity. By writing and talking about each other’s life experiences, they would (perhaps) encounter worldviews that differed from their preconceived ideas about youth, old age, the experience of aging, and—above all—the notion of a generation gap. By asking older and younger adults to work together to make meaning of their
lives, I hoped to see the beginnings of age analysis that might resist the contrived “culture war” between generations.

But aware as I was of this potential, I was also aware that a pedagogical focus on life stories might pigeon-hole older adults into the roles of human archives, as people whose primary value is in recalling their past, rather than living in the present or imagining the future. My confidence that the project would provide opportunities to expand understandings about youth and old age rested primarily on the requirement that the OLLI scholars and students participate in a mutual exchange, rather than a stable giver/receiver or expert/novice partnership. This exchange was designed with an aim toward reciprocity in the researcher-participant relationship, and mutuality in the teacher-learner relationship. Ellen Cushman (“Rhetorician”) points out that imbalances in a partnership can establish or uphold oppressive power structures—usually ones that empower researchers but not their subjects (16). Designing for reciprocity in community literacy research means seeking more equitable participation, in which both parties have something to offer the other. Because undergraduates and OLLI scholars had something to offer one another as participants as well as researchers in the project, they were equally positioned to benefit from the project as writers, researchers, and storytellers (though not in exactly the same way, since undergraduates were graded on their written work, whereas OLLI scholars were not).

Participants in the project were also teachers and learners, and as such I hoped that their experiences would involve mutuality: the co-construction of knowledge through language that does not definitively position a stable “expert” knowledge-producer against a “novice” knowledge-receiver. A useful concept for pedagogies that decentralize authority within the writing classroom (Wallace and Ewald; Welch), mutuality was the means by which undergraduates and older adults might identify age ideologies and engender critique of the
ideologies that placed uncomfortable constraints on age identity. Rather than viewing each other through a formal critical age studies lens, writer-researchers in the project had opportunities to work across age difference in order to recognize the processes of age identity construction and, in so doing, the ideologies attached to and embedded within those identities.

With a combination of interview practices and narrative construction, the life story method demanded that OLLI and undergraduate writer-researchers pay careful attention to their use of language. Quickly becoming a touchstone of the project, Sondra Perl’s (2007) “writerly approach” to research became a way for participants to consider the choices they had available to them for representing each other’s life stories. For Perl, as demonstrated by her co-authoring graduate students, qualitative research might be enriched by an attention to writing. For this to happen, “the work needs to have a credible and engaging voice, one that if we heard it at a party might make us want to meet the speaker” (307). The creation of such a voice involves an attention to the language and “a sense of drama,” with the ultimate purpose of drawing readers in and keeping their attention on a conversation or experience that they might otherwise be inclined to ignore. Students were ultimately invited to choose a writerly approach that suited their epistemological philosophies best, so long as the text both highlighted their research interests and invited the reader’s deep consideration of the story as data.

For the participants in the Intergenerational Life Story Project, considerations of the writerly approach to research quickly developed into questions about the relationship between life stories, creative writing, and fiction. Often, discussions about these relationships would focus on the role of the researcher’s narrative voice in the representation of the participant’s life.33 During one such class discussion, OLLI scholar Tom expressed his concern about the balance between truth-telling and editorializing: “We have to be careful about judgments we make on our
own. I take a very strict line of going with what I hear and not imposing any of my own observations in there about who I’m writing about.” Meanwhile, other OLLI scholars felt that adding a researcher’s observations were absolutely necessary to a writerly approach; Joe, who wrote about sophomore Erick, remarked in an exit interview that, “To try to write about Erick and remove myself from it, would have left a short bio of a nice guy, but not—to me—that much more.” Undergraduates were equally torn about how much of themselves to include in the life stories about OLLI scholars. Some students opted to use direct quotations extensively, while others incorporated moments of thick description that maintained the researcher’s primary voice throughout the narrative.

Regardless of the decisions they made, the writerly approach to research inspired at least some of the participants in the project to use writing as a means of knowing each other, working toward what Peck, Flower, and Higgins describe as “mutual learning and the transactional practices of writing and dialogue” (203). Working across difference, as Linda Flower has argued more recently, is necessary for moving from critique to transformation—in other words, the kinds of rhetorical work necessary to recognize age ideology. According to Flower, transformation in community literacy projects is possible through 1) critical analysis; 2) encounters with the personal—the lived experiences of others—in a safe “contact zone” (like a classroom); and 3) within that safe space, the active negotiations of a common life that accepts “civil dissensus,” the negotiation of a common life that does not avoid (but rather highlights) difference (3). In speaking with participants of the intergenerational project and in reading their written work, it became clear that working across difference was a central challenge. However, the writerly approach to life story research invited participants to address their differences
directly, by allowing writers to imagine themselves into the lives of their participants—and to
invite readers to participate in the same imaginings.

OLLI scholar Marilyn said of her partnership, “We’re about as far apart on this
continuum as any two could be in this class.” Marilyn, a 79-year-old white woman who talked of
growing up on a small family farm during the Great Depression, was partnered with 20-year-old
Lily, an African American woman raised in Chicago by a single mother. Initially, Marilyn
struggled to connect with Lily enough to gather her story. Although Marilyn—by Lily’s
description—was open and forthcoming about her past, Lily was initially hesitant to offer detail
because she feared that Marilyn might make assumptions about Lily and her lived world if she
revealed too much: “The area I grew up in Chicago wasn’t the best area. And most people judge
it.”

After a “tenuous” beginning that left her with more questions than answers about Lily’s
past, Marilyn tried to bring out Lily’s story by actively examining the differences between Lily’s
life and her own: to start, Marilyn created a written table that charted the ways their respective
families handled life events such as childbirth, schooling, and household management (see Table
5.1 below).
Table 5.1: Excerpt from Marilyn’s table, “Comparison of experiences of young Illinois women of different age, race, living conditions, and surroundings”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Lily</th>
<th>Marilyn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth &amp; family is household</td>
<td>Single mother (in hospital), grandmother, uncle &amp; aunt. First child</td>
<td>Father, mother, grandmother (at home), first child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household and home conditions</td>
<td>Family lived in apartment in _____, part of So Chicago close to the Ind state line. Birth in hospital. Mother worked, grandmother cared for her.</td>
<td>Family lived in tenant home on the farm of grandparents, in So Illinois; during the depression, father jobless. Birth was at home, country doctor present, along with neighbor lady.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre school activities</td>
<td>Preschool: Memories of classroom, walked to school with Grandmother. Different school for grades 1-3. Parochial school. Fairly strict</td>
<td>Walking to school across a pasture and woods. Walked first days with older neighbor kids. Seating in classroom, location of map, etc. Sat in our seats all the time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While reviewing the contents of the chart during an interview session, Marilyn encouraged Lily to accept and embrace their differences. Marilyn later told me, “I emphasized the difference, instead of trying to say, ‘I understand what you’re saying.’ Because I didn’t understand what she was saying a lot of times. And in reading [her story about me], she obviously didn’t understand what I was saying.” Echoing Marilyn’s experience, Lily confessed to being “confused” about aspects of Marilyn’s story, and noted that their age difference made it “hard to relate” to some of Marilyn’s stories about life before Lily was born. Lily also reported that she had to “guide” Marilyn in the telling of her own story as they exchanged drafts—including (eventually) teaching Marilyn more about the neighborhoods of Chicago.

As Marilyn and Lily continued to explore their differences, Lily’s initial concerns about being judged for where she lived began to fade, and instead she began to consider how her own
outsider’s perspective about Marilyn’s life might help her to write a better life story. A pre-veterinary student from an urban background, Lily had long wanted to live on a farm. Because of this desire, she was able to articulate Marilyn’s everyday experiences of growing up from the standpoint of an invested listener: just as Lily could only imagine Marilyn’s childhood, she wanted her reader to “imagine somebody going out in the field,” gathering eggs from ornery chickens, milking cows, and performing other tasks that, to Lily, seemed appealing rather than mundane.

Meanwhile, Marilyn locked onto one pattern that seemed central to Lily’s account of her personal history: the small, multigenerational apartment in which she was raised by her mother and grandmother. Taking this cue, Marilyn developed a life narrative that blended the biographical information Lily had shared with Marilyn’s own embodied memories of raising children. In an opening scene, Marilyn took license in recreating an emotionally significant moment between Lily and her mother, Maria:

Maria made their little nest in a bedroom of the crowded apartment. She was sitting down, holding the sleeping baby. Then, without warning, tears welled up from her heart and spilled down her face. With the tears came a gush of guilt, inadequateness, and fear. … Lily, wrapped in her blanket, began to whimper softly. Maria’s attention immediately shifted from her own guilt and fears to the needs of her new born daughter. … She carried Lily to get a bottle of milk, set it in a pan of hot water until it warmed a little. Back in her room, she placed the nipple of the bottle against the babies mouth. Almost immediately, Lily began to suck on the nipple; she closed her eyes and gave out soft little grunts of satisfaction.
Although each other’s lives and experiences would always remain partially unknowable, the writerly approach to research seemed to create a space for Marilyn and Lily to openly discuss the process of interweaving their perspectives into the telling of someone else’s life. Because life story data begins with an oral narrative co-constructed by the participant and researcher during interviews (Bertaux; Miller), life stories are valuable precisely because they are emergent from a particular time and place, and thus fully embrace the researcher’s and the participant’s roles in making meaning from human experience. In the writerly approach, the co-construction is carried further, as the writers draw from their own life experiences, their own perspectives, to represent someone else’s world.

The work of partners like Marilyn and Lily’s calls attention to the truth question of life story research. Drawing on the work of psychologist Donald Spence, Ruth Ray notes a crucial distinction between historical truth (involving factually verifiable information) and narrative truth, which “involves the connections between events” that are made by “values, interpretations, and emotions” (Beyond Nostalgia 113). For Marilyn and Lily, narrative truth served as a valuable space for identifying each other’s perspectives, and for articulating their own. Faced with the struggle to understand and empathize with one another across major age, socioeconomic, racial, and other divisions, Marilyn and Lily had to carefully consider the role their own perspectives might have in shaping an emerging narrative—and to value that role. Rather than falling prey to the guise of the distantly objective researcher, writers like Marilyn and Lily began to recognize their positionality as researchers and as participants, making use of their variously marginalized identities to complicate the “truth” questions of their research practices and to negotiate a narrative space in which their differences could remain intact, and yet where they could begin to negotiate a common life.
Civil Dissensus and Productive Conflict

While partnerships like Marilyn and Lily’s resulted in life stories and even friendships that satisfied both the researcher and the participant, not all collaborations came to such neat and gratifying resolutions. Several of the partnerships involved ongoing struggles over the ultimate purpose of their stories. Although these struggles were apparent throughout the project and were among the most frequently discussed issues in exit interviews, the disagreements that may have hindered the development of a “good” life story did not always prevent the development of empathy across difference. Undergraduate and OLLI writers, in most cases, learned to operate through civil dissensus, as their mutual respect and their earnest desire to represent each other ethically met with differing ideas about what constituted “good” life story research and writing.

Beyond the opportunity to encounter members of a different generation, this project required collaboration and active negotiation that did more than present opportunities for cross-generational fraternizing. In many cases, it meant managing expectations for the ultimate purposes and outcomes of the life stories being written. The undergraduates, who still had six weeks remaining in the semester after the collaboration with OLLI scholars was complete, were further tasked with using the stories they had generated to write scholarly arguments. Thus, at the start of the project, many undergraduates felt that their primary obligations were to the research question and to their academic audience, so that they could generate a “good” answer and subsequently a good grade. The OLLI scholars, who were not obligated to continue with such academic projects, mostly felt that the endpoint of the stories was to examine the achievements and potential of students’ lives, as well as their own. As OLLI scholar Ed describes, “I wrote the story the way I did [because] I wanted her to recognize what I thought she had in terms of potential. Give her a boost that maybe she won’t get from other people that she’s around.” On
the whole, undergraduates and OLLI scholars had divergent notions of research—and education in general.

The contrast in interpretations of the rhetorical situation was not, however, unexpected; in such community contexts where participants bring diverse social perspectives, it is inevitable that the rhetorical purpose and audience will be variously defined (Higgins, Long, and Flower 12). Thus, alongside being acutely aware of age difference, improvising ways to adjust to a mismatch in rhetorical aims became central to the work of the project—adjustments not always successfully made. In one instance, Marsha and her undergraduate partner, Bridget, both reported a sense of failure in the stories they had written, despite the fact that both felt that they had learned a lot about each other and had been pleasantly surprised by what they found during their hours of conversation. Marsha, for whom the OLLI class had been a welcome departure from a life spent mostly caring for her ailing mother, believed that a writerly approach to research meant to “approach it through feelings instead of just through logic.” In her story about Bridget, Marsha chose to write in first-person point of view (the only writer in the project to make this choice), using language from the transcribed recordings of their conversational interviews that had been rephrased in order to create cohesion. For example:

I didn’t enjoy reading much in my early school years. My class did have a reading competition which interested me, though. You could win lunch with your favorite teacher. I liked the competitive nature of reading rather than the books, themselves. That is, until Harry Potter came along. I loved Harry Potter, couldn’t wait to read the new installments as soon as they came out. I remember the night before the latest Harry Potter book would go on sale in the stores, I couldn’t go to sleep—just being so excited. As soon as I would get the book I would devour it.
Marsha liked the idea of using Bridget’s language and first-person point of view because it seemed, to Marsha, to capture Bridget’s personality more directly. To Bridget, though, reading the first-person representation of her life felt strange—as if the voice were both hers and not hers at the same time. Bridget felt that the form of the story only made the distance between Marsha and Bridget more apparent: “If it [were] me, I think I would have included more about how I felt. [Marsha] did an okay job of grasping that, but I felt like no one can really say it except for me.”

Likewise, when Marsha read the story Bridget had written about her, she was somewhat disappointed that the story focused exclusively on Bridget’s research question about the impact of shifting media technologies on her life. Here is an example of Bridget’s text:

> At the age of 6, Marsha’s family got their first television. They were one of the first two families in town to get a TV. It was an Admiral cabinet model with rabbit ears on top of the set and an antenna on the roof. They had 2 or 3 channels only from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Early in the morning before any actual programming was on she would sit in front of the T.V. and watch an Indian head, which was a test pattern. The neighbors would gather in her family’s living room to watch the black and white programs.

Because Marsha had identified “feelings” as the essence of a good life story, she found Bridget’s account lacking. “She knows what I did,” Marsha said, “but not who I am.” Bridget, meanwhile, shared a similar sense of disappointment and frustration about the story she had written. Feeling that she could never get deep enough into Marsha’s history because of a narrow attachment to the research question, she felt obligated to relate factual information about the technological equipment Marsha used in her everyday life as a child, as a student, and as a worker.
While the divergence in research goals did cause some difficulties in the interview partnerships, within the context of civil dissensus, the conflict between many OLLI scholars and undergraduates was sometimes productive. As a mutually acknowledged mismatch in aims, productive conflict yielded valuable opportunities for examining assumptions, beliefs, and truths, rather than achieving a “communal consensus” (Bruffee) sometimes claimed by models of collaborative learning. Productive conflicts highlight the social production of knowledge through differentiation, rather than through the silencing of difference that occurs in the process of reaching a unified consensus. Such ruptures in the intergenerational project were, in most cases, productive because they forced writers to confront their own assumptions, to recalibrate their rhetorical knowledge, and to navigate the multiple demands of divided audiences and aims.

Ruptures—in most instances—made visible to participants the process of mutual meaning-making. One primary “product” of the rhetorical conflict resulting from mutuality in the collaborative work between age groups was an increased attention to the ethics of qualitative research. This “product” of an ethic of care served as a step toward empathy, with an increased attention to the personal consequences of research and a sense of obligation to respect the participant’s values and perspectives, and to recognize the power structures of the researcher-participant relationship. In an essay I asked undergraduates to read for our class, Thomas Newkirk outlines the potential for “seduction and betrayal” in qualitative research and urges literacy researchers to be conscientious about the ways we invite our participants to be open and honest in interview settings. Newkirk recommends caution in analysis of participant-generated data, particularly when honest responses could be used—even in unintentional ways—to betray a participant’s trust by portraying her in a less-than-flattering light. Although students in both classes readily agreed that it would be disrespectful to say something overtly negative about a
participant, in working together students realized that the ethical dilemmas of representing others were more nuanced than they had anticipated.

Pajion was among the first undergraduates to comment on the struggle to represent her OLLI research partner. Pajion’s collaborator, Tom, was born in 1941, inherited his family farm, and worked for some time as a farm appraiser. Each week Tom would arrive early for class meetings, prepared with a notebook and many questions. As Pajion turned on the recorder to interview Tom about his life, she noted something strange: Tom would begin each interview session with essentially the same story, over and over again. He would tell Pajion about his German ancestry, the roots of his family farm, his successes in school, and finally a summation of his work as a farm appraiser. Tom spoke earnestly, seriously, and deliberately, offering only what Pajion came to describe as “facts” rather than stories. Although Pajion was impressed with Tom’s credentials, she struggled to breathe life into what she felt was a straightforward, dictated chronology. Frustrating matters, as Pajion writes, “[Tom] often stated that he was writing my life story as is, and wasn’t putting any of his personal opinions or views in it. With this constantly being said I got the feeling that he expected the same of me.” (Indeed, Tom had said as much to the entire OLLI group, as I noted earlier.) Knowing, however, that part of her assignment grade would depend upon taking a writerly approach to her research project, Pajion knew that she would need to find a way to reflect the models of research writing in Perl’s essay and make Tom’s personality feel real, so that her readers (her classmates and me) would come to know him and value his experiences as meaningful, knowledge-yielding data.

At the same time, Pajion was acutely aware of an even more exigent audience than her teacher and classmates: Tom. In reflecting on the project, Pajion noted that, in her past research writing experiences, she had only drawn on document-based resources, which allowed her
greater leeway (it seemed) in representing the words of others—a confession that might be troubling, though perhaps not surprising, to teachers of writing. In working with Tom, however, Pajion’s sense of obligation to her data source heightened drastically: “you have a person sitting here in front of you… You’ve got to worry about how you change what they say to make it work.” For Pajion, Tom’s embodied presence as a live, listening audience and subject placed serious demands on her choices as a researcher and writer. She recognized, more than ever, that she had to respect both her obligations to an academic audience and to her participant, who was entrusting her with the responsibility of truthfully representing his life.

Pajion’s solution was to mirror Tom’s restrained narrative style in her written representation of his life, using thick description of his demeanor to signal that her story was in some ways an embodiment of his buttoned-up personality:

…while the rest of our OLLI group members talked about being totally confused, and wondered what exactly we were supposed to be doing, Tom sat quietly. With a straight face, wearing a stripped button down shirt and a pair [of] khakis he scoped out the place. Interrupting his observations I asked would he like to be my partner. He replied with a simple sure, and from this point on Tom sat in front of me ready to reveal his life story.

Tom, meanwhile, eventually recognized his failure to keep his “opinions” out of his story about Pajion, as Tom’s OLLI classmates indicated places where Tom’s admiration for Pajion’s achievements manifested in his writing.

Tom’s and Pajion’s divergent assessments of the rhetorical situation for their work made visible the affordances of a writerly approach to life story research for examining identity difference. The genre of the life story, as consciously co-constructed by the researcher and the
participant, invited the writer-researchers in the project to challenge their expectations of research-based writing. In the process of developing, together, strategies for a writerly approach to life story research, undergraduates and OLLI scholars worked toward cognitive and affective understandings of one another’s lives, often struggling to achieve (or value) both. This balance presents no small task, Perl and her co-authors well know, as storytelling researchers who hope to “pass muster” must “aim to strike a balance between narrative and analysis, to discover the right voice(s) to convey the experiences of others along with their own, and in the words of Ruth Behar (1996), to make themselves ‘vulnerable’” (308).

Entrusted with each other’s personal stories, writers like Bridget, Marsha, Tom, and Pajion recognized their research and writing practices as the “negotiation of a common life” (Flower 3) through sometimes-competing goals. But the mutual experience of vulnerability demanded that participants demonstrate an ethic of care in their work, so that—even if they could not agree, in the end, upon a method of writing or a rhetorical purpose—most partnerships developed a sensitivity toward their differences, and a motivation to work with those differences. In order to tell each other’s stories effectively, participants would need to empathize with each other, and in the process, to confront their own social identities.

Identity Work Across the Chasm

To say that writing is an “act of identity” is to recognize that writing is situated within both sociocultural and biographical contexts (Blommaert 85; Ivanič 32). Writing can index or reveal an identity through voice and style, and it can allow us to deploy and navigate multiple possibilities of selfhood. This, writing always does. But what happens when the boundary work between self and other, so central to all literate acts (Ivanič 19), becomes an explicit part of the
writing process? What happens when the act of writing involves a highly conscious attempt to interrogate as well as to integrate the evolving identities of an authorial self and some other self being represented?

The Intergenerational Life Story Project aimed to make the identity work of writing and research highly visible to participants, and in so doing open up opportunities for direct consideration of identity—particularly age identity, which can be described as a “substantial sense of self-over-time” (Gullette, Declining 2). In asking writers from different age-based vantage points to try to understand and represent each other’s lives, I hoped that they would recognize age identity as a continual process of making and re-making the self over the entire life course, so that no one is the same “self” at one age that they were at an earlier age. In talking with participants at the conclusion of the project, it was clear that there were, for many, moments of age identity recognition brought about by conscious efforts to make sense of the relationships between members of different generations.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the undergraduates involved in the Intergenerational Life Story Project told me that they spent a large majority of their time in the company of other members of their age group. Likewise, the OLLI scholars recognized that—even though the “age fifty and up” age requirement of the OLLI program encompassed at least two generations of participants—their social and educational time at OLLI was spent exclusively in the company of other older adults. Thus, while most of the participants felt they had a keen sense of what their own generation was like, they had few reference points beyond their own family members to think about relations between generations. Writers separated by at least one generation, the life story partners regularly wrote and spoke about their lives in generational terms; in most cases,
these considerations went beyond recognizing the social and cultural differences between generations (and thus the “gap” between generations).

I will discuss two modes of age identity recognition that participants described most often: exploration of non-kinship ties between members of different generations, and consideration of intergenerational relationships beyond the OLLI scholar and undergraduate dyad. In both cases, the recognition of “selves-over-time” resulted from understanding their own identities in relation to their research partner’s. This relational work supported the development of age identity and cross-generational relationships beyond a conceptually divisive generation gap, even as they allowed for the existence of difference. As I turn to an illustration of each of these modes of intergenerational identity work, I want to point out that these practices represent articulated moments of identification, both in the sense that they describe moments of connectedness between two subjectivities, and in the sense that writer-researchers were able to speak (or write) about these experiences. This matters because, while such attention to the cognitive processes of understanding one another was important to developing a critical stance on age ideologies, the unarticulated affective experiences of building relationships between generations were also significant to the project of developing cross-generational empathy and the impetus for social change. I will turn to these unarticulated senses in the final section of the chapter.

The most commonly described mode of intergenerational identity work in the life story project responded to the tendency for older and younger adults to relate to one another in terms of kinship. For some of the OLLI scholars, the opportunity to collaborate with younger adults as a sort of surrogate grandparent was appealing. As the project unfolded, several OLLI scholars assumed the duties of a grandparent figure in working with undergraduates, including inviting
students, along with their friends and family members, into their homes for a meal and a visit after the project was over. Others told me at the very beginning of the project that they were interested in taking the course because they had college-age grandchildren of their own, and they wanted to learn more about what made students tick in order to enhance their pre-existing kinship. Several undergraduates also noted an affinity for working with older adults because of their close relationships with grandparents—this included one student who had, at the age of eighteen, tattooed his grandfather’s likeness on his upper arm.

Such opportunities to explore the grandparent-grandchild dynamic within an academic setting and to talk openly about family life, served as an important challenge to the model of the two-generation nuclear family, which does not reflect the diversity of individual experience or the complexity of the family life course (Allen and Walker 159). Since the industrialization of Western society, the three-generation family home has become less common, and older adults have been placed physically (through nursing homes and retirement communities) and conceptually outside of “the Family” (Allen and Walker 157). In the twenty-first century, however, we have begun to see a gradual change, as multigenerational family structures have become ever more important. Because of increased longevity and the declining stability of the nuclear family through high marriage and divorce rates, multigenerational families may be necessary to provide care and support for the twenty-first-century family (Cruikshank 43)—a shift evidenced, for example, by an increased level of public attention and support to the 2.5 million grandparents raising children (Generations United).

However meaningful the project became for participants interested in exploring their identities as grandparents or as grandchildren through non-kinship ties, many of the partnerships in the Intergenerational Life Story Project broadened the possibilities of relationships between
older and younger adults beyond the family structure. Breaking away from the
grandparent/grandchild dynamic was important to some participants from the very beginning:
about a month before the project started, I received a phone call from Robin, who was hesitant to
sign up for the class because she wasn’t old enough to be a grandmother to the undergraduates.
Others told me that they were initially worried about the partnerships because they had little to
no experience being a grandparent or a grandchild, as several of the participants were older
adults without children, or were younger students who did not have close relationships with
living grandparents. Indeed, I was concerned that the grandparent role could be problematic for
our project, even to those participants who enjoyed being grandparents, as the individuality of an
older adult might disappear into the familial role (Cruikshank 43-44)—a limitation comparable
to viewing women primarily as mother figures in all social contexts.

One particularly valuable relational identity evolved from the mentor/mentee roles that
some pairings adopted, which helped both undergraduates and OLLI scholars to experience a
“sense of self-over-time” by recognizing versions of themselves in each other’s stories. These
mentorships developed largely in response to the rhetorical situation of the project: although the
positioning of the community literacy project created an overlap of community and university
settings that complicated traditional roles of classroom participation, for many participants, the
project’s connection to the university, and our efforts to position ourselves as researchers with
questions about lifelong learning, rendered social roles that looked less like kinship (associated
with home spaces) and more like apprenticeship (associated with professional spaces).

For Rebecca, a retired musician and college music instructor, and Nathan, a senior
psychology major, the partnership did not mirror the relationship between grandparent and
grandchild so much as one between a seasoned professional and a professional-in-training.
Nathan, a quiet but bright student, was among the most reserved in the interview process, and he admitted his anxiety about being interviewed and about sharing his life story in class. Despite his reserved demeanor, Nathan exhibited a desire to become a scholar and a community leader in his future work. That desire manifested itself in the ways he represented his OLLI partner. In his story about Rebecca’s life, Nathan included the following anecdote, which he had elected to represent mainly through direct quotes (in order to reflect his belief that Rebecca’s actual words were the “foundation” of his project):

Rebecca had to learn to guide herself socially by taking her own feet forward. In fact, it wasn’t until Rebecca was confronted with an anxiety ridden event during her time in California that she would begin her steps towards achieving social contentment. Her story begins, “I once went to a dinner, a big room, and discovered I was the first one there other than the candidate for our new music chair, and I was so shy…” I asked her if she introduced herself, in which she replied, “I didn’t know how to introduce myself! That didn’t occur to me. So I walked out, and walked around the block three times and I walked back.” The ensuing event was monumental in her personal social development. She continues, “And I watched this man go up to her (the candidate), and just say, ‘I’m so and so’, and I said “Oh, that’s how you do it.’ I was so mad at myself for having wasted that chance…if only I would have known to just go up to her and say, I’m Rebecca.”

Surprised that Nathan had represented this story as a pivotal moment in her life, Rebecca told me in a later interview that she felt that Nathan had done so because of his own shyness, and perhaps
his surprise that Rebecca, a published author and a leader in her profession, would have experienced such insecurity as an adult.

Meanwhile, Nathan reminded Rebecca of her own self-over-time, noting that she had shared Nathan’s idealism in her youth. In an exit interview, Rebecca reflected on this younger idealist version of herself by telling me a story about doing urban community work as a young adult, when she drove straight into a smoke-filled city district, completely unaware that widespread rioting and violence had broken out, and that her services as a music teacher were—for the moment—desperately inadequate to the situation. In separate conversations with me, both Rebecca and Nathan noted that the stories written about their lives were useful more for the author than for the subject. While Rebecca knew that Nathan picked up threads of her account that resonated most with his own experience, Nathan described Rebecca’s story as “an authentic account of my life seen through the perspective of someone else,” further noting his value in Rebecca’s “interpretation of my words, whether or not that’s what I feel, [which was] irrelevant.” Comfortable in allowing the life stories to say as much about the writer as about the subject, Rebecca and Nathan evidenced their engagements with shifting age identities. As Nathan struggles to “come of age,” he learns from Rebecca’s story that the process of becoming a professional adult may be filled with contradictory experiences (such as being a leader in one’s field who still finds meeting new people to be a challenge); as Rebecca considers her position as an older adult, she recognizes how much different her current vantage point is from where she once was by seeing the world as Nathan does.

The second most commonly claimed experience of age identity in the making involved thinking about generational relations extending beyond the generations represented within the life story project partnerships. By far, life stories emphasizing multigenerational relationships
outnumbered stories developing any other narrative theme in the project. Stories about individuals’ lives quickly became stories about interactions between generations: narratives focusing on mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and grandparents and their grandchildren heavily populated the texts (and talk) produced during the project. For some, the generational theme was a highly deliberate and productive choice, and a welcome opportunity to think about the self not only as part of a single generation, or as part of a generation vastly different from another one, but also as part of a historicized series of generations.

Born nearly fifty years apart, Joe and Erick came to some personally valuable realizations about intergenerational relationships through their conversations and stories. Before interviewing Erick, Joe was concerned that he was unprepared for “discourse and exploration with the inexperienced youth of today.” But in working with Erick, Joe began to develop a generational framework to make sense of the connections between Erick’s life experiences and his own. Erick, the son of Mexican immigrants and a first-generation college student, reminded Joe of his own educational heritage:

My grandfather…was a coal miner and had a fourth-grade education. And so the situation of being a first-generation son of an immigrant family was something that I could see in Erick, and it helped me better recall and understand some of the influences that were in my father’s life, that had subsequently become lost on me, as I’d become the son of the son of an immigrant.

Among those reflections about personal responsibility, Joe began to consider the extent of his own father’s professional accomplishments in becoming a Mayo Clinic surgeon—accomplishments Joe recognized as both “phenomenal” and “horrifying,” given the enormity of the sense of obligation Joe’s father must have borne. In speaking and writing about Erick, Joe
felt that he could understand his father better by learning about Erick’s experiences carrying the same weight of personal responsibility to repay the sacrifices of his parents. Joe reflected his budding sense of generational affinity in the conclusion of his story about Erick’s life:

Today it is clear that Erick has a strong commitment and need for success, both to reflect well on his parents and to help provide them with a sense of accomplishment on their part, and to help afford them some of the advantages they had to forego in order to provide him with the opportunities they did. As a second-generation son of immigrants … I expect he will do very well indeed.

What the closing line of Joe’s story does not specify is that, despite Joe’s many accomplishments and healthy sense of self-worth, his work with Erick made him somewhat critical of his own life trajectory. Citing the old adage, “from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations,” Joe told me that, in light of Erick’s life story, he saw his own accomplishments thrown sharply into relief. Joe saw his life as one that had begun with a considerable head start, and thus one that lacked a sense of indebtedness to prior generations that had driven both Erick and Joe’s father toward what Joe called “responsible success.”

Intergenerational exchanges like these are personally significant in that they helped people like Rebecca, Nathan, and Joe to recognize the fluidity of age identity, and to see themselves connected with members of other generations outside of kinship structures. But the importance of this identity work extends beyond the personal. At work in these exchanges, we see the beginnings of what Gullette calls a “multigenerational front,” or a collective of younger and older adults whose conversations can yield the beginnings of solidarity for the purpose of responding to reductive age identifications. I share Gullette’s hope that “older figures and younger adults can start the conversation at a new place” (Aged 59) where they might participate
in the co-interrogation of age ideology and the awareness of the ongoing development of age identity. In other words, the kind of age identity work visible in the Intergenerational Life Story Project becomes a way of side-stepping the perceived generation gap and instead taking time to find common ground from which to consider age ideology.

**Eyes and Ears: Empathy in the Classroom**

Participants’ ability to articulate their experience of age identity, within the sociocultural framework made apparent by their shared life stories, was an important part of developing a critical perspective for aging and age ideology. Equally important to this critical project, however, was an experience that we were all somewhat less adept at articulating: empathy. I had hoped that the sharing and writing of life stories might not only expose the *logos* of identity construction, but also create a “felt sense” of empathy that might further contribute to possibilities of personal and social change—above all, a change in attitude or understanding about age and aging. The practices of telling and re-telling life stories seemed amenable to these goals. On the one hand, the telling of life stories (or the “life review”) can serve important analytical purposes: they allow us to develop a sense of psychic unity, or at least to see logic operating in the otherwise chaotic experiences of human lives. But the telling of life stories—and the writing of someone else’s—also serves the affective function of bringing people together through the mutual experience of recollecting and re-creating the past. In this practice of reminiscence, as Kathleen Woodward defines it, “we are less concerned with finding the truth [than] we are with creating a certain atmosphere…of companionableness” (“Telling Stories” 3).

A sense of togetherness and companionableness lays the groundwork for empathy—a project that has consistently been tied to the teaching, writing, and reading of narratives across a
variety of contexts. Academic and cultural pedagogues, from physicians to writing teachers to Oprah, have promoted the use of narratives as a means of developing empathy and initiating social change. For example, physician Howard Spiro was worried about the waning of empathy among new doctors at the end of the 20th century. Trained to abstract data from human life and to maintain personal detachment in order to manage the emotional toll of doctoring, doctors-in-training lost the love for patients that they almost universally claimed upon entering medical school. One remedy to desensitization, Spiro suggests, is through stories. Spiro argues that the reading of stories (including fiction), when supplemented by conversations with patients, can offer a deeper sense of compassion for the patient’s lived experience, and thus a better means of practicing medicine. Spiro’s pedagogy of empathy blames emerging technology (most notably the computer) for a reduction in empathic doctor-patient interactions. Listening to stories rather than focusing exclusively on the abstract “icons of x-ray films” might invert the pathologist’s usual priorities, in which “the eye counts for more than the ear” (845). Sustained listening, Spiro claims, might help the listener to imagine, “I might be you.”

While I agree with Spiro and others that an attention to the narratives of others is a crucial step toward identification—having argued for the practice of gathering and representing such narratives in the previous chapters of this dissertation—the act of imagining that “I am you” (or, alternatively, “I could be you someday”) is insufficient for opening up dialogue and building empathy that leads toward a critical awareness of, for instance, aging and ageism. Further, even if written stories about pain can elicit empathy in readers, this is not necessarily followed by action or change—the from-the-comfort-of-my-armchair perspective of narrative empathy can allow readers to consider another’s pain, yet remain a part of the social structures causing that pain (Jurecic 17). Likewise, because critical analysis of social systems is not automatically
produced by community literacy work (Herzberg 309), participants in such projects need more than the availability of stories in order to think empathically in ways that go beyond “I am you” or “I might have been you”—responses that collapse the experience of the other into one of self-awareness and self-preservation. Such responses are helpful for thinking about the formation one’s age identity, as we have seen, but are not necessarily useful for coming to an understanding of someone else’s age identity. Instead, we might aim for an additional empathic response: “I hear you.”

Just as Spiro’s visual media of chest x-rays, CAT scans, and pain scales do reduce the chaos of human experiences to useable, abstract data, language, too, can be a tool for abstraction, and as such often fails us. (Elaine Scarry’s *Body in Pain*, for instance, reminds us of the profound failure of language to convey the experience of pain through words.) Although abstraction is unavoidable, a premature commitment to seeing stories as data—an adherence to the *logos* and to perceiving with the eye rather than the ear—rendered, for a small minority in the Life Story Project, superficial stories that suggested a failure in achieving identification, and thus quite likely a failure to change the student’s views or subsequent actions. One such failure led an OLLI scholar to comment about the story his undergraduate partner had written, “He got the facts, but he missed the story.” The failure was not that the writer did not have the appropriate language to represent the life of their partner, but that they had failed to listen before writing.

In their own community oral history project aimed to counteract a lack of empathy for (and thus prejudice against) a marginalized population, students in David Coogan’s community literacy course recognized the limits of language. “People just don’t talk to strangers about their lives,” one of Coogan’s students notices (Coogan 98). Citing Celeste Condit, Coogan postulates that the trouble lies in the limitations of language—that there always remains “the unarticulated
in the inarticulate.” But however impossible it may be to articulate a story within a given sociocultural context—in Coogan’s and in our case, to an audience of strangers in a cross-cultural context—it does not mean that the unarticulated cannot be heard or felt. For Coogan and for the Intergenerational Life Story Project, it became necessary for participants to prioritize inquiry (“Who are you?”) above identification (“I could be you”)—to take the time to ask, to listen, to fail, and to try again.

Participants in community literacy projects that aim toward empathy might consider the functions of rhetorical listening, as described by Krista Ratcliffe. What Jacqueline Jones Royster might call a “code of cross-cultural conduct,” rhetorical listening is a way of “cultivating both our eyes and ears,” of “hearing what we cannot see” (206-207). While it suggests an openness, a willingness, and a receptiveness, rhetorical listening is also attuned toward invention and production—but rather than privileging the speaker/writer, rhetorical listening focuses on “a harmonics and/or dissonance of the desires of both the speaker/writer and the listener” (220). As a method of interpretive invention, then, rhetorical listening is a way of negotiating identities against the standpoints of others. Such positioning doesn’t guarantee agreement, but it at least foregrounds the political and ethical considerations of meaning-making (208).

In Ratcliffe’s call to “receive, not master” (209) the discourses of others through rhetorical listening, I see the development of a practice of empathy as it played out in the partnerships of the Intergenerational Life Story Project—particularly in the moments where, despite the failure of language to achieve the “truth” of a life, an intersubjective connection was made. Rebecca, an accomplished writer and interviewer, struggled for the entirety of the project to gain a complete picture of young Nathan’s life, and often felt that he would represent his life in different—even contradictory—narratives because of his reluctance to share the details of a
perhaps-complicated past. Yet, for Rebecca and others who faced similar challenges in the Intergenerational Life Story Project, a focus on inquiry led to a sense of connection with a partially unknowable other. “To this day,” Rebecca told me, “I still don’t know the story of [Nathan’s] life… But I feel connected.”

By attending to the unarticulated in the inarticulate, even as they manage to speak with and write about each other, partnerships like Rebecca’s and Nathan’s, Marilyn’s and Lily’s, and Pajion’s and Tom’s, marked the beginnings of empathy. In these partnerships, attention was given to both the ear and the eye: to the stories and interpretations offered by interviewees, as well as to the choices made in representing those narratives. But even some of the stories deemed to be “failures” maintain some value for the process of confronting age identity through empathy. As Ann Jurecic notes, “Empathy is not salvation; it’s not certainty or knowledge; it blurs boundaries in ways that can be both generative and destructive. In the end, empathy is a practice, a process that extends in time. To make it work takes both effort and humility” (22).

What the Intergenerational Life Story Project accomplished, at the very least, was presenting an opportunity and a few tools for writers to confront their identities—especially their age identities—through sustained attention to the lived experiences of others. Undergraduates and OLLI scholars alike attended to their culturally prescribed assumptions about age groups: that older adults are non-learners or inactive members of communities; that younger adults are “lazy”; that older (or younger) adults need to be helped, and therefore cannot be help-ful; or that the only way older and younger adults can relate in a meaningful way is through kinship ties. It would be an overstatement to say that all participants in the project managed to explode these assumptions completely by achieving empathy—in fact, there were a couple of cases where such assumptions appeared to be reinforced rather than challenged. However, the Intergenerational
Life Story Project marks a step in participants’ lives toward opening up cross-generational dialogues in ways that can both respect their very real differences in values and experiences, without leaving unquestioned the age ideologies that reinforce the generational boundaries restricting what it means to grow old.

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Notes

31 The Illinois Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI)—the learning program for older adults at the center of this study—was originally planned as part of a proposed multigenerational living-learning community to be affiliated with the University of Illinois. Although the residential project eventually failed due to a variety of reasons, the Lifelong Learning Institute has thrived as a social and intellectual space for older residents of the campus community, though very much at the outskirts of university activity. This project was the first to bring together OLLI scholars and students enrolled in university degree programs.

32 As I knew both the undergraduate and OLLI courses would heavily involve human subjects research, I opted to enlist both courses in the University of Illinois Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI): a program that had secured Institutional Review Board support for ethical human subjects research, provided the research conducted was related to studies of university life and culture, and that students would be able to contribute their research to a growing database of student and faculty scholarship about the university. Broken down into a series of linked assignments, undergraduates were asked to identify research questions and interests related to the university, based loosely on the subject areas identified by the EUI, including “Technology and Student Life,” “Diversity on Campus,” and “The University and the
Community.” After the students’ research proposals had been approved by the Institutional Review Board, they began interviewing OLLI scholars (and later other members of the campus community) with an eye toward using life stories as data for their semester-long research project for the EUI.

33 Here, the use of the term voice is being deployed as it was used by participants during our class meetings, primarily to indicate a concern over who (the researcher? the participant? others?) was important to the telling of a life story. We did not, as a class, theorize the term in connection with or in response to the extensive literature on voice in composition and rhetoric.

34 Lily, Bridget, Rebecca, and Nathan are pseudonyms; all other participants have been identified by actual names, according to their preferences.

35 Of course, not all failures were promising, either. In one partnership, for instance, there was clear evidence that working with each other resulted in the crystallization of age-biased assumptions about language and literacy, as an OLLI scholar left the class fully convinced of a claim she made during one of our first class sessions: that younger adults possess poor literacy and language habits. In another partnership, an undergraduate was so deeply invested in the role of the researcher that he did not, in fact, do much rhetorical listening at all, and could not in the end say much about his OLLI partner’s life experience in relationship to his own.
Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued for and demonstrated age-aware approaches to literacy theory and practice. By adding the factors of old age and aging to the literacy equation, work across the three sites of this dissertation offers contributions both to age studies and to writing studies. In this concluding chapter, I highlight and reflect on these contributions, and forward a final call for age-awareness in writing studies.

What Does It Mean to Grow Old?: Contributions to Age Studies

As discussed in chapter one, age studies has already taken important steps toward examining the connections between aging and discourse, with a particular interest in understanding how texts written by older adults present counter-evidence to the decline narrative of aging. Building on this work, I have suggested that a writing studies approach—with its focus on the process of creating texts, not just the textual products alone—affords new ways of answering the fundamental question, What does it mean to grow old? In particular, I have aimed in this study to further the age studies project of challenging the grand narrative of decline.

_Aging and aging bodies can mean more than the experience of impairment._

As demonstrated by age studies scholars, the decline narrative of aging is largely about the degeneration of the aging body. With the rise of Western medicine and the concurrent pathologizing of old age, the meanings of old age and aging have been reduced to the physical limitations of bodies, as studies of aging in Western culture have treated aging as a problem to be rectified through scientific analysis and technological innovation. At the same time, public
rhetorics of aging largely represent older adults with symbols of body failure (see fig. 6.1), thus perpetuating the general sense that “old age” means “physical impairment.”

*Figure 6.1: Older adults symbolized by markers of body failure in public discourses—a sign on a bus window in Boston, Massachusetts. (Photo by Jeff Bowen, 2011)*

Although age studies scholars do the important and indispensable work of telling other stories of aging that do not center on the body, physical disability can be a significant part of older adults’ lives, and should thus be examined from an age studies perspective—in other words, in seeing the aging body as something other than an impediment to a high-quality, meaningful life. One important way of understanding the relationship between the (impaired) body and the experience of aging is to study its impact on literate acts. Studies of literacy and creativity in later life access a broader range of experiences in old age because acts of creativity always involve a process of “self-discovery and self-creation” (Wyatt-Brown, Introduction 3). Thus, studies of late-life literacy and creativity, even when they directly address the aging body’s
role in the creative process, tend to treat aging as a meaningful and valuable phase of life and not as a problem in need of fixing. In one such study, literary gerontologist Anne Wyatt-Brown describes the fiction of Howard Engel, who has alexia sine agraphia (the ability to write but not read) as the result of a stroke. Of Engel’s Memory Book, Wyatt-Brown writes, “The novel is compelling on its own terms, but doubly so when one considers how much effort Engel had to expend in its composition” (“Resilience” 67). Here, Wyatt-Brown performs a kind of recovery move, in that she recognizes the value not only of Memory Book as a work of literature, but also the embodied practices involved in its making.

However, a new appreciation of the possibilities of creativity available to older adults despite their disabilities does not necessarily help us to understand how disability might actually be meaningful (or, perhaps, even meaningless) in the lives of older adults. From a writing studies perspective, then, I have examined the meanings older adults make of their bodies in relation to their literate activities. In this work, I have found many alternative understandings of the aging body. In addition to being experienced for their disabilities, bodies were also, for instance, understood as valuable resources (recall Millie from chapter three, whose hip replacement surgery became a catalyst for developing further connections with other elder women writers) and as carriers of durable dispositions (as with Allan’s habits of outsourcing his technological literacy work throughout his career).

_Empathy through mutual literate activity can complicate the meanings of old age and aging._

In Aged by Culture, Margaret Gullette describes the manufacturing of a culture war between age cohorts (specifically, between Generation X and the Baby Boom generation) and remarks on the fallout of a perceived generation gap. She writes,
Getting ‘the young’ to parrot negative, dismissive feelings against another age group has strengthened age as a category. When age dominates, as we’ve seen, it obliterates differences within a cohort: gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical ability. ...[C]ohort naming breaks the sense of life-course continuity, which underlies any hope of generational unity. (58)

Although I am less convinced that such cultural wars between generations are the deliberate orchestrations of a dominant class of people, the division between generations is nonetheless real and problematic, and Gullette’s notion of a “shared age analysis” would identify, question, and resist such divisions (Aged 59). Gullette’s concern is directed primarily to the workplace environment, in which older and younger generations are finding themselves competing for jobs and resources—an environment ripe for creating and enforcing a generation gap. But what about other contexts in which older and younger adults are not expected to work together—where they are, in fact, actively segregated as much as possible? And how would such a project of “shared age analysis” work?

As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, literacy and writing studies are primed to expand upon age studies work in interrogating and disrupting the generation gap. In demonstrating the age bias of digital literacy and web culture in chapters one and two, I have shown ways that a generation gap has been constructed: by representing digital literacy as something only younger people do and do well, and by simultaneously representing older adults as having impaired literacies in digital times, older and younger people are segregated by their literacy practices. As I argue in chapters three and four, however, this segregation is more perceptual than actual: older adults can and do find their way into digital literacy. But, as I show in Beverly’s case, their digital literate activity must be recognized as integrated within their life
histories, including their bodily dispositions and the practices of intermediation with literacy practices developed earlier in life.

What makes this recognition possible, I contend, is an empathic approach to research. In chapter three I described two attempts to establish empathy for the embodied experiences of (other) older adults; however, in the Ad Council’s “Get off your rocker for grey liberation” campaign and the MIT AgeLab’s “Age Gain Now Empathy System” or Agnes suit, older adults are not asked to represent their own embodied experience. As a result, the assumption that the elder body is primarily about physical impairment becomes the basis upon which empathy must be obtained. A writing studies approach adds an important dimension to the age studies project of understanding what it means to grow old because it operates on a basic interest in localized, situated knowledges (see Barton and Hamilton, “Literacy Practices”; Street; Scribner and Cole). Having developed an ethical interest in questions about representation, or “Who may say what about whom, and how?” (Mortensen, “Going Public” 185; see also Mortensen and Kirsch), the interest in including the voices of participants more and more into research accounts has become central to writing studies research. In chapters three and four, the extended stories of Allan, Millie, and Beverly provide fruitful data, and in doing so provide opportunities for empathy with members of an age cohort fashioned by culture.

But while it may help ameliorate a sense of a generation gap to read such research reports about the lives of elders—and I sincerely hope it does—narrative alone is probably insufficient to achieving empathy in the terms age critics like Gullette might demand. In chapter five, I outlined one way that writing and literacy studies might enact calls like Gullette’s, by turning to a social context in which older and younger people are almost entirely isolated from one another. In a community literacy context, the Intergenerational Life Story Project brought together
learners who, in the courses of their daily lives, almost never came into contact with people born two or three generations apart. As a practice in mutuality and reciprocity in research and writing, the project provided opportunities for participants to conduct a sort of age analysis by working to listen, to understand, and in some ways to inhabit the perspective of someone at a different point in the life course. For some, this yielded not only a sharper understanding of age identity, but also lifted out other markers of difference that are occluded by an emphasis on generation gaps. It is through such practices, I have argued, that teachers of literacy can contribute to the age studies agenda of recognizing and challenging limited notions of aging.

What Is Literacy?: Contributions to Writing Studies

Older adults have not been consistently included as subjects in writing studies, a field that has traditionally emphasized research on literacy among college-age writers. But by examining the literate practices of older adults in this dissertation, I aim to do more than add an underexamined population to the writing studies conversation. Studies of older adults, I have argued, have valuable implications for advancing research on literacy and writing; in particular, it can help researchers and teachers to consider important questions about what literacy means.

Literacy is rhetorical and ideological.

Studies of literacy among older populations allow us to better understand literacy as rhetorical and ideological because age ideology is omnipresent: “Everything we know of as culture in the broadest sense—discourses, feelings, practices, institutions, material conditions—is saturated with concepts of age and aging” (Gullette, Declining 3). Appearing in all cultural conditions of life, and impacting the identities of younger and older people alike, ideology
provides an important test case for examining the interweaving of literacy, rhetoric, and ideology in everyday discourses, including those outside the contexts of formal (school-based) literacy development.

Named by Brian Street and enacted in the work of Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, Shirley Brice Heath, and other like-minded literacy researchers, the “ideological model” construes literacy as a social practice that varies from context to context and is embedded within cultural worldviews. These ideologies are, as John Duffy describes, “made known…imposed, shared, understood, or overthrown” through rhetorical means (17). Further, acts of literacy can also be understood as acts of identity-making (Blommaert 85; Duffy 17; Ivanič 32), as practices of reading and writing require a negotiation of the self in response to culture—or, further still, as acts of sociogenesis, in which both the self and social context are mutually and simultaneously remade (see, for instance, Prior). Thus, I have described literacy as a way in to ideological rhetorics. In examining the literate activities of older adults who read, write, and live in a cultural context in which *AARP The Magazine*, Agnes suits, and Ad Council campaigns share a particular age ideology, I have argued that rhetorics of aging propose definitions of literacy for older adults, and that these propositions can be forwarded through direct or indirect literacy instruction.

When *AARP The Magazine*, for example, offers readers a literacy directive by telling them what to read and why to write, embedded within those proposed literacy practices (e.g., of reading self-help books on aging, keeping diet journals) is a particular age ideology. Even if readers choose to ignore AARP’s literacy instruction, they are nonetheless asked to negotiate their identities within the act of reading the magazine. In constructing their audience, AARP asks readers to identify as part of a collective group, most commonly on the basis of a shared
embodied experience. The rhetorical work of AARP—whether persuasive or otherwise—nonetheless asks older adults to accept physical impairment as neutral ground for identification as members of the cultural group of older adults. Examinations of a curriculum of aging, then, demonstrate how literacy becomes a way in to ideological rhetorics.

But as “a way in,” I do not mean that literacy simply feeds readers and writers into the dominant ideology machine. Literacy is also a way of negotiating with competing ideologies and enacting ideological change. While this dissertation does, in part, support Gullette’s claim that age depends on “the din of representations, unseen internalizations, unthinking practices, [and] economic structures of dominance and subordination” (Aged 27), the meanings of aging might also, at times, be negotiated more consciously through “technologies of the self” (Foucault).

As Allan, Millie, and Beverly were variously aware of the impact of age on their literate activity, they also demonstrated awareness of other ideologies at play. For example, all three accounts drew attention to the impact of gendered worldviews on their literate lives. For all three, the lens of gender was, at times, more influential than the lens of age in the meanings they made of their lives and their literacies. Although gendered ideologies did not allow them to break free of their enmeshment within culture and the discursive constructions of their identity categories, they did provide an alternative space from which they could respond to and challenge the narrowness of age ideology. The long-term, autobiographical view of literacy that older adults possess can be a valuable resource for understanding the ongoing negotiations of ideology through literacy.
Literacy has a lifelong history.

Within literacy and writing studies, attention to the embodied dimensions of literacy has gained some ground. We have begun to understand the body as a site of cultural inscription, in which the discourses and practices of institutions such as schools and workplaces make their marks on bodies and subjectivities (e.g., Luke). We also have considered the implications of the body as the source of perception—both of perceived material reality and of an imagined or possible future—for literate activity (e.g., Fleckenstein, *Embodied*); as such, we have begun to resist the “disembodiment” of literacy by approaching literacy not only as a social practice, but also as embodied activity (Prior and Shipka; Haas and Witte).

But if we are to examine literate activity as “ways of being, forms of life,” as Prior and Shipka do (181), we need to understand embodied literate activity as part of lifelong material and social practices. Building on embodied theories of literacy, I have shown that literate activity from a lifelong perspective captures individuals working with—or against—the culturally inscribed dispositions of their bodies. In working with older adults who have longer life histories, and who have encountered personal and social shifts that place them in new cultural fields (such as old age and digital media culture), we can appreciate the durability of bodily dispositions inscribed at various stages of life. We see Allan, for instance, who was trained in primary school to be a productive and successful worker by enforcing rigid social hierarchies maintained by bodily discipline. In light of this history, Allan demonstrates—both consciously and unconsciously in his bodily movements and in his narratives—that such practices of discipline can have long-term generative effects on literacy, both by conscribing literate activity into the maintenance of power (even as power shifts over time) and by creating friction in the development of literacy in later life.
But while inscribed dispositions are durable, they are not altogether immutable. The long view of literate activity also permits us to see how older adults manage and struggle with their motivations to enter new cultural fields. Thus, we can see people like Beverly, who initially doubted the affordances of digital literacy technologies, and refused to let go of print-based literacy practices—such as printing out her digital images for scrapbooking—because she was, in part, a “product” of the print age, and had benefitted largely from the production of print-based texts throughout her life. However, the motivational scaffolding for literacy built up over the course of her life supported her gradual entrance into digital literate activities. Her bodily disposition, inscribed earlier in her career, was slowly reshaped (though never completely changed) through the intermediation of her literate practices.

**Toward an “Agewise” Writing Studies**

By way of coming to a close, I extend an appeal for further research into the embodied histories of older adults, with further consideration of the intersectionality of bodily identities. Although the demographic make-up of my participants was not designed to represent a cross-section of older adults in the United States, it is nonetheless important that we do more to understand how other material and cultural differences impact embodied histories and later life literacy. We must explore more deeply how gender, race, social class, sexuality, and other bodily and materially based identities interconnect with old age and aging. For example, issues of class (which often overlap with gendered and raced identities) quickly come into play with the curriculum of aging. Although the curriculum of aging aims at all older adults, older people who are affluent, or at least financially secure, have an easier time enacting the recommended behaviors for so-called successful aging (Cruikshank 2). Further, the curriculum of aging—and
its commentary on literacy—reaches older adults with low levels of literacy or infrequent literate activity through mass media. Sophisticated user-producers of media who continue to develop new literacy in later life can sometimes defy mass media representations of later-life literacy, and lead their lives in unexpected ways—but this, of course, assumes that such sophisticates have access to technologies, support systems, and literate histories that cultivate such practices.

Beyond an examination of material markers of difference, we must also examine the impact of physical impairment and health status on literacy. In this study, I met with seven older adults in various states of physical well-being; none, however, complained of any cognitive difficulties, and only one noted a severe (terminal) illness that significantly impaired routine activity. Rather than including the perspectives of people with disabilities in the “classic research approach” to understanding “normal” bodies by “attempting to infer the whole from the fragmented, the normal from the aberrant, the functional from the dysfunctional” (Emig 60), studies of literate activity among people with disabilities would help expand our notions of “normal” bodies and “normal” literacy.

Particularly from the vantage point of older adults, whose experiences of disability will have longer histories and thus more experience with a body’s changing capacities, we may be able to understand disability, as well as literacy, along a continuum. For many adults, the physical limitations of old age are not like the experience of stepping into an Agnes suit. Instead, old age should be understood as “a dialectic involving losses as well as gains” (Minkler and Fadem 232), an understanding best gleaned from studies of the lived worlds of adults aging with or into physical disability. In this way, we can heed the call within disability studies to avoid pitying people, including older adults, with disabilities (Shapiro), and instead move toward understanding disability as meaningful. At the same time, studies of literacy among older adults
could also contribute to disability studies by capturing the emotional dimensions of disability; although pity may not be the ideal social response to disability, older adults—particularly those who experience sudden or rapid bodily changes—and their caregivers must have space in which to grieve the loss of capacities, including the transition into the end of life. As a potential context in which the experiences of loss in later life can be sharpened, negotiated, and ameliorated, literate activity could prove an important site for expanding studies of disability.

In addition to physical impairments, we must also consider mental and cognitive changes in old age. With growing proportions of aging adults facing diagnoses of Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of neurological deterioration, we cannot simply dismiss such populations from literacy research altogether. Doing so might place older adults with mental illness in a “rhetorical black hole,” as Catherine Prendergast describes: when recognized only as an index of a disease’s symptoms and progression, the texts produced by mental patients (young and old) are rendered all but invisible (53). In examining the literate activities of older adults, both with and without diagnosed cognitive impairments, we not only take into full consideration the impact of the body on literacy, but we also might begin valuable work in rethinking what ‘counts’ as literacy. As with writers and readers with physical and mental disability, older adults (primarily because they are closely associated with disability) are too often discounted as less-than-literate—as having impaired literacies—because of their advanced age.

While it is necessary that we include more studies of older adults in literacy research, we must also take the more difficult step of going beyond a literacy-studies-plus-elders move. Such an additive measure, while no doubt presenting challenges to the current age bias, would not necessarily result in deeply infusing later life into the schema of literacy. As we have learned from similar calls to pay attention to overlooked dimensions of literacy, the result has not always
been to fundamentally transform our definitions of literacy outright: for instance, calls to pay attention to technologies in literacy (Selfe’s, for example) have been answered by rich and growing deposits of research, but such work remains frustratingly marked as other (Porter). Although it has now become difficult to imagine literate activity that involves only print-based technologies, “literacy” is still widely understood in print-based terms, only recognized as otherwise when it is labeled “digital,” “technological,” “multimodal,” and so forth.

In the case of extending our scope in literacy research to include older adults, we should aim for more than the appearance of a subfield of elder literacy studies. Instead, we 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 literacy in school and at work, and literacy developing beyond a full-time, wage-earning phase of life. As Gullette reminds us, “no age class exists in a capsule, insulated from whatever is impinging on the other age classes” (*Aged* 18). Thus, the age ideologies that impact one generation necessarily impact another: when older adults are labeled as digitally illiterate, younger people are defaulted as digitally literate—an assumption many writing teachers will recognize as dangerous for students.³⁷ Such zero-sum games obscure the lived realities of both age groups. Writing studies researchers and teachers must recognize that literate activity always occurs 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.
Wyatt-Brown’s reading of Engel’s work is characteristic of a “super senior” argument—see my brief discussion of such figures in chapter two.

Marc Prensky’s concepts of “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” speak to these assumptions, which quickly gain traction in popular representations of literacy.


---. “Check out this piece on 10 ways you can trick yourself into losing weight. Do you have any get healthy tricks up your sleeve?” 13 Apr. 2010, 12:41 a.m. Facebook update.

---. “Does Alzheimer’s affect you or your family? New research is lending further answers about the disease, and new potential ways to finding a cure.” 24 May 2010, 2:16 p.m. Facebook update.

---. “Do you take aspirin every day? New guidelines say it could pose serious risks for certain folks.” 4 May 2010, 8:51 a.m. Facebook update.


Tammy G (AARP). “AARP isn’t on MySpace. Our members tend 2 B on AARP’s online 
community, Facebook, YouTube and our cusp members on Twitter. #SM4SG #VolWk ^TG.” 20 Apr. 2010, 9:50 a.m. Tweet.

--- (AARP). “is cheering on her friend @sarahstanley who’s running the Boston Marathon today. Anyone else know someone running? ^TG.” 19 Apr. 2010, 7:50 a.m. Tweet.

--- (AARP). “Went to the farmers market today & picked up mushrooms and asparagus. What are you up to? #Weekend ^TG.” 25 Apr. 2010, 11:43 a.m. Tweet.


