# Granny @ Work

Aging and New Technology on the Job in America

Karen E. Riggs

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For Tom Riggs

# Contents

# Acknowledgments

# CHAPTER 1
# The New, New Deal: The Post-Retirement Era

> Old age policy is a crime, but worse is the treatment we inflict on the young, to expect to become throw-outs…. Society turns away from the aged worker as though he belonged to another species.
> —Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*[1]

This book explores the contours of old age as it meets up with new technologies in contexts of work. It is a rapidly changing intersection, considering that people aged 60-plus spend more time on the Internet than people of any other age group and have shown the largest increase in computer and Internet appliance purchases since 1998. Thirty years ago, such a development would have been unimaginable.[2]

My grandparents left their jobs at the cotton mill in about 1970 at ages 62 and 65. The mill that built their southern river community stood as a red brick symbol of more than forty years of work apiece, and families like theirs walked home from it with uneasy gratitude six days a week. The Chattahoochee River flowed like a moat between Columbus, Georgia, and Phenix City, Alabama. The sturdy mill, hulking over the Georgia riverbank, was everyone's benefactor. Its noisy textile looms welcomed several cohorts of weavers through the century. Their hair was filled with lint from their youth until they collected Social Security benefits. The mill had rescued them from stingy fields of red clay and sand in the country, brought them all survival through the Great Depression, and rendered something that resembled prosperity during the post-World War II boom.

In my grandparents' case, the mill had paid for a five-room bungalow with a shady cement porch where they could sit near the clay road and take in the humid days of retirement. The two of them were exhausted, in fact. My grandfather had a few summers' worth of piddling behind a hand plow in the vegetable garden before dementia shut him down entirely, and my grandmother soon afterward encountered a series of strokes and painful arthritis that have left her relatively immobile today in her early 90s. (Once in a while she rides past the old mill, which is now a conference center and museum.)

Children of my Baby Boom generation could see the writing on the wall back then. For those of us in the working class, it read something like this: *Work hardy retire, fish a little bit, and rest up till your time comes*. Most folks could expect to live only a decade past retirement, if they were lucky, and they could recall many in their peer group who had died well before the gold watch had come. In the late 1980s, my own parents faced this rite of passage by purchasing a thirty-foot motor home, which they would have driven until the wheels wore out had my father's cancer not abruptly canceled their plans.

The act of leaving work in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s was something widely anticipated and thoroughly deserved. It was made especially sweet for folks who could remember their own elders toiling in cotton fields and other undistinguished places until they died. End-of-life leisure was a relatively new phenomenon for Americans, whose life expectancies were creeping upward and who were perhaps the first in their families to look forward to Social Security benefits and private pensions. Similar events were occurring in the countries of Europe, Japan, and other developed nations. The Social Security Act of 1935 established 65 as the official retirement age for Americans, for the purpose of benefit collection. At the time, the life expectancy for Americans was 47 years old.[3] Not until 1964, the last year of the Baby Boom, did the life expectancy for newborn Americans reach 70. Americans who reached "Social Security age," or 65, during that year, could generally not expect to draw benefits.[4] Social Security had, in large part, been created as a Depression-era program to provide an economy-building safety net so that older men could leave manufacturing jobs to make room for younger workers. The gradual reconceptualization of retirement from a brief moment before death to a full-blown period of relaxation and leisure took most of the mid-twentieth century, starting from the Social Security program's beginnings in 1936. By the 1970s, Americans by the millions, largely men, began leaving the workforce earlier, abetted by early-retirement packages and dependable fixed-income investments.

For a time in the 1980s, swelling interest rates on certificates of deposit and lean-budgeted corporations looking to fill their ranks with younger, cheaper labor provided incentives for workers to retire earlier than ever, at least in the middle and upper classes. (Apart from financial inducement, among men the primary reason for retiring early has been poor health. Among women—who usually are younger than their husbands and who retire about three years earlier, accordingly—the main reasons for taking early retirement have been family reasons, desire for increased leisure, and health.[5]) Millions grabbed onto Individual Retirement Accounts with visions of retiring at 55 and taking it easy. Many Baby Boomers smiled at this looming picture on the horizon as they entered their own careers. That was before we learned that the Social Security Trust Fund was on the skids.

The image of the rocking chair—or the Sun Belt condominium—is a fleeting one for many of today's would-be retirees. Fat-salaried men in their 50s who

get downsized by big corporations find they still need to work for pay, either because they want to afford their current lifestyle or because they self-identify so strongly as workers. In many cases, their children are hanging on at home (or in graduate school) in their 20s and 30s, and they have taken on other economy-size debts, like the aforementioned motor home. In some cases, those grown children bring responsibilities for grandchildren. Additionally, employers and governments have cut back retirement programs, disability benefit programs, and Social Security benefits. At the same time, older skilled workers are encountering increasing difficulties in finding employment due to disparities between their anticipated wages and demand rates for their skills.[6]

Widowed and divorced older women, along with many older men, dangle just over the poverty line. They work for minimum wage at Wai-mart, long-distance telemarketing firms, McDonald's, and airport garage toll operations. City attorneys retire and pocket their pensions while rejuvenating trial-law careers. Firefighter pensioners collect garbage by day and watch business premises at night. Accountants on early retirement take limited-term jobs as office clerks and consultants to afford the upkeep on their sailboats. Gone is the expectation that 60 means slacking.

Even if you do manage to retire, you find that retirement carries with it flurries of activity that stand in for work. You have to *work* at aging, it seems, if you want to cheat death, taxes, and shame. What used to be pitched as recreation and relaxation is now commodified as that most honorable activity, work. Retirement communities sell the trope of *successful* retirement to buyers, for whom a substantive itinerary translates as a sort of retirement integrity. Not shuffleboard courts and canasta parties at these middle-class sites but lifelong learning with an emphasis on Internet investing, travel, and tai chi. In my dissertation research in a Midwestern retirement community, in fact, I found that elders built a social framework around their television consumption practices, treating their use of "quality" program content, such as C-SPAN and PBS's *Masterpiece Theatre,* as a sort of avocation. These elders scoured the channels for "worthwhile" television that could become a form of capital in their conversations with neighbors as part of an implicit contract to guarantee a successful, worthy retirement for one another. Most of the time, this meant monitoring the information flow from Washington in the most detailed and analytical formats possible. For them, translating news talk into table talk meant democratic participation.[7]

Throughout American culture, of course, work is increasingly defined under the terms of the Information Revolution. Except in the plainest of manual work, and even in certain sectors thereof, it is difficult to find a place where Americans labor without microelectronics. Imagine the changes encountered by today's elders. Workers who today are 70 years old were children at a time when a trip to the moon must have seemed impossible. After all, Charlie Lindbergh's exploits stilled seemed amazing to their parents, many of whom still lived in homes without telephones. This was the day of downtown trips to

make layaway installments, the very infancy of revolving credit. Imagine the technological changes seen in the lifetime of such a person, who now may be called upon to retrieve email attachments, swipe debit cards, send faxes, and participate in real-time chat, all in a day's work. They have read about John Glenn going into space not once but twice, the second time as an elder. In many cases, these are people who can remember their mothers churning their own butter.

### Aging and Work

Old age is a problematic field, always subject to renegotiation of meaning due to changes in life expectancy; this has never been more true than in the critical first three decades of the twenty-first century, when the proportion of older people is dramatically increasing, with the developed world in the lead. For instance, in Italy, a land of drastically declining fertility rates, by 2025 people over 50 will outnumber people under 50.[8] Leave it to the Baby Boomers to ensure that aging would become sexy, at least from a marketing perspective. It is this cohort that has created a best-seller niche for our elders–Tom Brokaw, Jimmy Carter, and Betty Freidan–to extol the virtues of old age, once a near pariah for popular literature.[9] By January 2002, Amazon.com listed 4,448 responses to queries about books on aging. But, while the onslaught of Boomer elders is the largest contribution to our cultural preoccupation with the subject, that attribution is, of course, not the whole story.

In 1900, the average life expectancy at birth in the United States was 47 years.[10] Individuals we would think of as "elderly" today were indeed rare at that time. Medical advances due to the popularization of germ theory at the century's start and technological progress throughout the century, together with improved diet and safer living and working conditions, made for improved longevity. By the beginning of the current century, Westerners could fully expect to know their grandchildren and perhaps their great-grandchildren.

Popular conceptualizations of "old" in twentieth-century America and throughout the West clearly fell under indictment as older people gradually began to live longer and healthier lives and, abruptly, as the Baby Boomers–in the United States, the 78 million people known as the Me Generation– discovered that they were arriving in what they had heretofore tagged "middle age." Categories underwent revision, and the cultural vocabulary grappled with awkward new names. Euphemisms like "senior citizen" quickly fell out of favor except for use in talking about the most aged groups, such as those over 75. In general, it has become insulting to address a person as "elderly" unless that elder resides in a nursing home and presumably suffers from dementia and other forms of incapacitation. "Older adults," "mature adults," and simply no tag at all have become preferred, and even these choices are controversial, especially for people with money. Middleclass people in their 60s don their Reeboks and listen to their Rolling Stones CDs and don't want to self-identify

as seniors unless it means exercising their AARP discounts on Medicare supplements or their lodging at the Holiday Inn. The change wrought by the Baby Boomers' arrival into their 50s was exemplified by the American Association of Retired Persons' introduction of a second magazine for its younger membership, who did not care to have *Modern Maturity arriving* in their mailboxes. The magazine? *My Generation,* its title taken from a '60s hit by The Who. Acceptance of aging on these special, even "cool" terms was further legitimated by the magazine's first cover photo and profile subject—the "cute" Beatle, Paul McCartney, age 57. For Boomers, who may have internists, colon screenings, retirement portfolios, and grandchildren, getting older does not mean being old. After all, their own kids are still going to concerts to see Mick Jagger and Tina Turner.

Nicknames for "old" carry distinct burdens for women and men. Women know that youthful attractiveness is sheer capital that has spilled out of their bodies. Because many women among the generations who are now of advanced age have little other capital at their control, they shrink from age-related labels. And because women are four times more likely than men both to live alone in their 70s and 80s and to ultimately be institutionalized, "old" is a label they cannot afford if they wish to preserve their autonomy against those who threaten it, such as their own children.[11]

Old age in twentieth century developed-world societies has been increasingly perceived as a time of retirement, not a time of paid work. What recently has been considered late middle age, between 50 and 65, has been perceived socially as a time of steady decline in productivity, a combination of the mind/body slowing down and preparation for retirement. But data from manager surveys, physical productivity studies, and other sources counter this stereotype, demonstrating that productivity falls only marginally for most people in this age group.[12] What does change is cost to employers for health plan participation, rising from about 5 percent on average for all workers in the United States to 30 percent for older workers, and escalating.[13] Workers are simply less affordable as they age, and they perceive their fringe benefits increasingly as golden handcuffs. After all, it is unlikely that a 60-year-old man with a history of heart disease or cancer, for example, will be able to find affordable replacement insurance if he loses his job, no matter how satisfying or unsatisfying he might find the work.

Generally, economic forecasters cheerily spread the news that today's elders are more affluent and better educated than any previous such group, but that is misleading. Statistically speaking, Americans age 65 and over do hold greater wealth than younger citizens, a phenomenon that has similarly occurred in other developed nations.[14] But, as Richard Disney points out, publicity of such affluence has concealed a tremendous growth in economic inequality that is spreading among the elderly. In Britain, for example, the median income in the top quintile of pensioner income distribution is four times greater than that of the bottom quintile.[15] In another example, a study of

workers in the United States, Thailand, and Taiwan in the 1990s, researchers found that income inequality increases among ethnic groups as their cohorts age.[16]

It is logical to conclude that the combination of increased life expectancy and changes in the workforce makeup of developed-world societies warrant the construction of new models for workforce and pension benefit participation, with emphasis on flexibility across age segments. Harry R.Moody, a proponent of the abundance view of aging, has called for social policies that retrain and create jobs for aging workers who have lost out in the postindustrial economy. (Although Moody's contribution came in 1988, it is only made more significant by the escalation of emphasis on technology in the workplace over the last decade and a half.) Moody's lifespan development model encourages a break from inflexible linear life and career planning. As Moody observes, most people are able to work for several years past 65, although they generally desire flexible work calendars for a variety of reasons, including a wish to pursue travel, hobby, and family opportunities and the need to accommodate health demands. Similarly, younger people, who currently are pursuing full-time work to meet the demands of income need and career track expectations, could benefit from segments of time outside the workforce, without penalty, for the purpose of raising children or caring for an elderly relative, for example.[17]

New models that would creatively reconstruct workforce participation likely would result in employers investing more in training older workers in high-value contemporary skills (i.e., technology-driven work) and democratizing such work across age segments. In other words, instead of seeing a "natural" association between newly minted younger workers and high-reward, high-tech jobs (versus a similar association between "un-retrainable" older workers and low-reward, low-tech jobs), employers will hold a more creative palette of role design. It will contribute toward clobbering the myth of "aging in the country of the young," as Moody puts it, but only if fairly implemented to counter middle-class career ism that keeps disadvantaged workers down.[18]

Revised models of work opportunity could contribute significantly to stemming both the feminization of poverty, generally, and the feminization of elderly poverty, particularly. It is widely known that women increasingly head households in developed countries, make less money than men, and are more likely to live in poverty (with children). What is less widely known is that older women, who are more likely to be single than younger women, are especially vulnerable. Women 65 and over constitute only 60 percent of the elderly population but make up 75 percent of the elderly poor in the United States, for example. They spend one-third more on housing (40 percent of their income) than single elderly men. After they pay for health care (spending twice as much as non-elders), little is left.[19] If workforce systems encouraged the participation of women over 65 as long as their health permitted them to work, such poverty would be alleviated. Even if they reach the status of the so-

called oldest old, 85-plus, they would have enjoyed the benefit of extended career participation and would be less likely to land in poverty.

Robert Butler, a celebrated geriatrician, coined the term "ageism," defined as a conceptualization of age in chronological years and based on beliefs that old people are ugly, sickly, and unproductive.[20] Ageism becomes age discrimination when these ideologically based beliefs about chronological age are used to systematically deprive people from opportunities and resources that others enjoy, including jobs.[21] Age discrimination is proscribed against by various national policies, including, in the United States, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, which prohibits mandatory retirement except in certain occupations, and, in Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Canadian researchers Julie McMullin and Victor Marshall have established that the experience of age discrimination in employment practices in Canada, similarly to the United States, is complicated by social relations such as age, class, gender, and race/ethnicity. In their study of Montreal garment workers, they concluded that older workers are quite aware of ageist practices that overlook them or otherwise marginalize them in the workplace. For instance, lower-class workers in marginal positions are further marginalized by advancing age, as are women and minorities. They might be overlooked for advancement opportunities, overtime, and other privileges. Furthermore, because of their positioning in particular cultural contexts, the workers feel diverse degrees of disempowerment. Workers who occupy especially marginal positions might feel there is little or nothing they can do to counter discrimination, and they tend to feel resigned to its effects. Such workers feel powerless in their dealings with management and their ability to play productive roles.[22] Such incidents underscore the complications that older workers encounter in their bids to achieve and maintain vitality among colleagues and competitors in the world of work.

Butler has cited a positive correlation between productivity and health, and, conversely, between unproductive living and illness. "Unless we begin to perceive older persons as productive, their lives will be at risk," he notes. "They will be seen as a burden."[23] Aging, health, and productivity are interlinked with socioeconomic status and are especially influenced by occupation, education, national origin and residence, race, and ethnicity, Butler continues. He concludes that these issues are not to be solved uni-generationally but that the generations must work together to ensure opportunities for productivity among the able-bodied aged.[24]

"Productive aging" is not without its critics as a concept, however, and for good reason. The concept tends to convey the expectation that if we all practice productivity in our later years—successful aging—then problems such as crippling arthritis, dementia, depression, loneliness, and, perhaps most especially, prejudice against the elderly will vanish. Productivity cannot monolithically occur, because some people are unable to practice it. On another front, the notion of successful or productive aging perpetuates a market

logic, underscoring the notion that every citizen's duty is to perform for the economy, as Caroll L.Estes and others have observed.[25] Such logic promotes inequality among the elderly, because, as Butler himself has noted, education levels and race/ethnicity influence opportunities for obtaining the plum work that will allow us to age successfully.

As a society, we must learn to honor elders not simply for their role in decreasing their own economic burden through more work but for the complexity of roles they play and have played among us. While it is heartening to see people over 65 enjoying workforce participation in a strange, new technological environment, it is just as significant not to spurn those who are unable to lead such lives—and to ensure that they are not severed from participation in society as a result. Butler and proponents of productive aging argue for intergenerational alliances to encourage elders to contribute to the maintenance of society. Estes and similar political economists who critique the productive aging view argue for citizenship models that promote society's interdependence rather than liberal individualism.

Taken together, these approaches can teach a valuable lesson: Advanced age is a complex dynamic, fraught with both opportunity and peril. It is important, but insufficient, to practice policies designed to eliminate simple ageism. The range of differences that create both our wonderful distinctions from one another and our differential access to opportunity play significant roles in the aging process. Policies aimed at enhancing economic opportunities for aging workers and retirees do damage to some if they are written in isolation. Policies designed to level economic access across lines of gender, race, and other cultural differences—throughout the generations—will enhance successful aging for everyone. For example, the United States could take a cue from Sweden in formulating its retirement benefits policies. Instead of offering pensions and health benefits on the basis of work history, as the United States does with Social Security and Medicare, Sweden does so on the basis of citizenship. Economic differences that are due to gender, race, and sexual orientation are assuaged by such a policy. Chapter 10 will return to these matters and will suggest an agenda for intergenerational success.

## New Technologies

Cultural scholars have been increasingly occupied with understanding the role of new electronic media technologies in the everyday lives of developed-world citizens. Among their important works have been attempts to understand and explain the paradoxically empowering and subjugating role that such technologies play. The most successful of this scholarship acknowledges that computers and related technologies—cell phones, personal digital assistants, and the like—tend to deepen structural inequalities brought about by the systems in which they are implemented, most notably late liberal capitalism. At the same time, this line of scholarship acknowledges, these technologies contain inherent

possibilities for at least partial equalizing measures of agency. Even as computers are used to dehumanize and deskill workers through what Chris Carlsson has identified as a "creeping monoculture"[26] (think Bill Gates), it doesn't have to end this way. As Pippa Norris observes, politics as usual may be altered by digital technologies through shifting the balance of resources among political interests, reducing costs of gathering and disseminating information, and benefiting fringe activists in the process. These measures, Norris argues, can shift the balance of resources from the holders of land and capital to parties with skills and expertise.[27]

In the case of the aged, the picture is mixed. Because most skills and expertise associated with computer technologies and the Internet are acquired through schooling and other activities most frequently associated with younger generations, people over 55 still generally lack such assets. Contemplating the Digital Divide and the "information poverty" that is associated with it, Norris likens the Internet to gunpowder. In this compelling metaphor, she observes that gunpowder deepened the power differential between societies that had and did not have the technology until it became broadly diffused. The question, though, for Norris, is how the Internet will become diffused in various societies around the world. She speculates that, while less-equipped social classes, age groups, and ethnic minorities will enjoy some degree of eventual "catch-up," the Digital Divide will never be completely erased because structural relations will prevent a complete leveling out. Some people will simply never have access to this asset for diverse reasons, some economic, some social, some cultural.[28]

But the horizon is not all doom and gloom. Elders are busy on the Internet. Beyond researching their genealogy, emailing grandchildren and snowbird pen pals, and looking for love online, elders are working (which does not preclude the aforementioned activities as acts of work). They comparison shop for cruises, second cars, and sweaters, and they research stock activity as acts of intelligent consumption. They rely on telemedicine to become increasingly proactive patients and Medicare consumers. They engage in lifelong learning to sharpen their skills and intellect. And, increasingly, they use the Internet to learn about technology itself.[29]

## Complicating Age

If the intersection of age-work-technology wasn't sufficiently complex to understand, we must figure that it is complicated by other cultural issues. Gender, sexuality/sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, social class, national identity, and religion also mark this experience. Scholars concerned with any or all of these categories are curious about how people occupying particular cultural positions find themselves embedded in the historical practices and developing changes associated with work and new technologies.[30]

Thinking through issues involving older workers gets help from feminist approaches, which appreciate the tenuous but almost predictable nature of

women's "place" in the work-technology contest. For example, in her book *Shaping Women's Work,* Juliet Webster demonstrates problems that flow from women's absence from the creative process; it is here that technologies later to be used in women's work are first developed and implemented.[31]

In her own critique of technology, Cynthia Cockburn has demonstrated similar points about the distance of women from locus of design and the resultant black-boxing of instruments of women's technological labor, from microwave ovens to assembly-line machinery. Women's work in both domestic and paid contexts gets regulated by common-sense structures that snub women.[32]

Can we similarly struggle to understand the unfolding relationship of older people to new technologies? How do these technologies enter into the world of work for older adults and how do they influence (or get taken up in attempts to influence) the status of older adults? And, perhaps most urgent: Given the rapid turn to both a technology-driven economy and an aging society, how can we understand the many points at which these two speeding trajectories will cross over one another, now and in years to come? How will rapidly updating technologies of work get along with an older body of workers?

We can approach these questions from a number of fronts. First, it is useful to ask how ageism might also come into play. If feminist scholars mourn the distance of women from the places where technologies are developed and implemented, what does this mean for research about older adults? As reported in the U.S. Department of Commerce white paper *The Digital Work Force: Building Infotech Skills at the Speed of Innovation,* three-fourths of computer systems analysts and computer scientists, and four-fifths of computer programmers, are under the age of 45. The study's authors found that almost half of information technology (IT) managers in their 20s and 30s—accounting for many of the sector's gatekeepers—had never hired a worker who was over 40.[33] Granted, the role of education accounts for much, but not all.

Bias against older workers is so firmly entrenched in the United States that legislation had to be implemented to warn against it in the Older Americans Act of 1965. It is useful to wonder what employers, supervisors, trainers, software engineers, and other gatekeepers of work and new technologies are thinking about the roles that older adults might or might not play in their worlds. In these spheres of increasing influence, it is important to know something about the structures in which older adults have labored previously and how changing work conditions likely will either keep such structures intact or lead toward change. Not to be discounted is simply the demographic shift, wherein the proportion of older adults is mounting furiously. Some countries, in fact, may exceed a median age of 55 by the year 2035.[34] People are living longer after retirement, and fewer new employees are being turned out to take their places. Many employers throughout the developed world have begun to see older workers as a compliant source of cheap temporary and part-time labor in flush times, which is both enabling and disempowering to elders.[35] For

example, in Japan, men are likely to be forced to retire at age 55 and must find other work, often temporary and almost always at much lower pay.[36]

This book attempts to provide a context in which scholars, activists, and others might begin talking about the changing role of work for older adults in a high-tech economy. Instead of offering a statistical breakdown that can be generalized to our entire older adult population, it tells the stories of real people associated with this complex set of concerns, demonstrating how difficult it is to paint any definitive sort of portrait of aging in American culture. Its primary usefulness might be in the recognition it offers that, like the rest of us who are reeling from the velocity at which change is arriving in contemporary life, elders are facing multiple tensions, consequences, and challenges and are meeting these with varying outcomes.

I am especially interested in the stories of the elders whose high-tech adventures are not celebrated in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and not championed on the home page of Seniornet.com. The middle and upper classes of retirees whose retirees have discovered the World Wide Web as a hobby destination have certainly been able to enrich their lives, a wonderful and laudable accomplishment. But the stress points of elderhood are much more provocative for me: the older adults who "survive" in the computerized pink-collar shop. The working-class unskilled laborer who craves computing classes for another, better chance at paid work, or the one who shuns computing from her home because of its forbidden and frightening threats to personal safety and security. The Gen X office manager who must bring older adult workers online or turn them out to pasture.

Most generally, these kinds of stories are complicated by struggles associated with other arenas of difference, including class, gender, race, and ethnicity. These struggles, when combined with the challenges of advancing age, can set the scene for serious negative consequences. But failure is not destiny. People caught in the "triple bind" of gender, race, and age disadvantages in the work place can thrive. On the other hand, the much-maligned white male worker, predictably in his peak earning years between 50 and retirement, can be awfully vulnerable to harsh employment conditions in which information technologies' roles bear on the deliberations by those who will decide his fate.

bell hooks has written about the uphill climb in privileging class as the concern of academic writing. She is right, of course. It is difficult for middleclass feminists to engage in ethnographic research, or research from other methodological traditions, without making references to people they understand well—other middle-class women, hooks insists that "class matters" as much as race and gender, especially in light of the ever-gaping digital divide.

I have the same feeling about age. In the conference papers I hear and the essays and books I read, feminist researchers of contemporary culture most often refer to themselves in the third person somehow, and very few of them are currently over 50. Thirty-something feminists write about the Oxygen channel and the pleasures of shopping. I have heard more *Buffy the Vampire*

*Slayer* papers written by young women in graduate school than I can keep straight. I have heard the youngest students at communication conferences deliver papers on teenage "girl power."

Such distinction makes complete sense, and it's a phenomenon to celebrate. Pieced together, as the quilt of cultural research so beautifully invites its readers to do, these writings from variously aged researchers helps to construct an intergenerational understanding of women, of feminism, that enriches a broad conversation. But, on the whole, the conversation says little about the role that older adults–women and men–play in contemporary culture, both in its production and in its consumption.

I believe a chief reason for this short shrift is that the idea of developing theoretical discourse on subjectivity just becomes unwieldy at a point. If we dare to cover, in our broad discussions, the entire package of the "holy trinity" of gender, race, and class (perhaps substituting sexuality for one of these, probably class), it becomes too onerous to think about other differences. After all, our conference papers must be limited to twenty-five pages. Studies focusing on young people, at least, can focus on children, teens, and young adults in their role as emerging consumers.[37]

Other reasons exist for the near absence of older age from the broad discussions of gender, race, and class. Scholars, like other members of our particular culture, easily identify as first gendered or as members of a particular race or ethnicity and, at least in cultural studies, the fact that they might occupy marginal positions because of such identities propels them into study and writing. As hooks has observed, this has been less apparent along the axis of social class. In Western society, people–even academics– are unlikely to identify first and foremost as old, middle-aged, or young. Age as subjectivity, unless it calls attention to itself through reminders of the limitations, is simply not salient for most people most of the time.[38]

Especially in North America and Western Europe, where the category of middle age has expanded terrifically to suit the sensibilities of sexagenarians whose parents are living longer than expected into old age, elderhood as an experiential concept is increasingly rejected. In countries where youth is supreme, growing numbers of people who would have, two decades ago, been considered elders at their present age now think of themselves as relatively young. This reprieve provides no small solace to a generation careening into the latter segments of life.

Old age, as it embodies the perceived loss of vitality and the decay that signals death to come, holds no allure for most scholars. As Margaret Clark observed about her own field more than thirty years ago, studying the aged body is anathema to the anthropologist because it is "somewhat akin to necrophilia."[39] We are grossed out by the decay that greets us. We are reminded that it will happen to us.

Some wonderful scholarship from the humanities has taken place in the field of aging, however. Some of the most important contributions, many of which

have influenced my own thinking, have taken place in connection with the Center for Twentieth Century Studies (now known as the Center for Twenty-first Century Studies), located at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Former Director Kathleen Woodward's work on the images of aging, especially in literature, has been at the center of this project on age. One of the most compelling points that Woodward and many of her colleagues press us to see is that we cannot study late life without considering its roles relative to the occupants of other stages.[40] Intergenerational relationships are part of everyday life. We cannot theorize Grandma without also theorizing the many-aged people who are her kin, the providers who meet her needs and desires, and those who might exploit her. (I am not necessarily suggesting that these categories of people are mutually exclusive.)

The argument to study age, not just aging, is especially powerful in light of the changes being wrought by longevity, lower birth rates, and the aging of the Baby Boomers. There simply are going to be, in many countries around the globe, many more elders than we are used to having. Their numbers are uncomfortably rubbing up against those of younger workers, who labor to pay their pensions; care givers, many of whom belong to different class and ethnic groups; and children, whose very definition is being reimagined because of their changing ratio to elders. Never before at any time in the United States have there been so few children compared to so many elders.[41] These younger groups of people and elder generations are in the midst of many struggles to invent new intergenerational relationships that work, and the models are often hard to locate in practice. For example, in her work on care giving, Sharon Keigher has found that, increasingly, elders in need of (and able to afford) services are suburban whites, and paid caregivers are younger people of color living in urban areas. This presents much more than a transportation problem; it is also a larger one of deepening cultural and social divisions.[42]

Nowhere is this discomfort in inventing new intergenerational relationship models more pronounced than in the age-work-technology nexus. Elder workers often feel pressed to step aside in the workplace to make room for freshly trained, computer-hip personnel to spread their wings. A sliver of a generation of young workers is coming to resent having to "prop up" an unprecedented swell of Social Security pensioners.[43] In greater numbers than ever, 50-plus citizens return to complete undergraduate degrees or seek graduate education. Seated alongside pimple-faced "traditional" students, they turn the classroom dynamic on its head.

For many elders, notions of work are entirely bound by the concept of place; for their juniors, it is not. On the other hand, for the juniors, the Internet clearly is a place; for their elders, it is often an opponent. With all the rules changing faster than we can keep track, high-tech work in this postmodern era demands intergenerational bridges for which no blueprints have been drawn. The old rules were long ago thrown out (gold watch, respect your elders, honor seniority), and the rules for Generation X are that there are

no easily discernible rules (dot-com millionaires, dotcom layoffs, downsizing). The "rules" for Generation Y, the generation following X, are not yet entirely discernible.[44] Part of the mission of this book is to help draw some of those new blueprints for intergenerational bridges.

One way of working toward formulating bridges is by inviting phenomenology and disability studies to help broaden our understanding of elders' encounters of technology in the workplace. Phenomenology is concerned with reality as lived experience, and many practitioners of disability theory enlist this approach because they are interested in how people with disabilities live through bodies that are always a site of struggle and always subject to definition by others. As the phenomenologist Drew Leder notes, "Insofar as the body tends to disappear when functioning without problems, it often seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction."[45] Likewise, following phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, disability scholars Thuy-Phuong Do and Patricia Geist have noted, "Society encourages those with undamaged bodies to speak."[46]

One of the ways in which "society" encourages those with undamaged bodies to speak is through the implementation of technological innovation. Interfaces for accommodation of disability have been added on to computer technologies, to be sure, but they do not promote facile use in most workplaces. Arthritic fingers struggle to keep up with those of the acrobatic Xers. Bifocaled eyes squint at screens that are too dim and low-resolution to read in one's 50s. Youth can speed down the Information Superhighway. This is one highway on which *lack* of speed kills.

Disability is framed by its constraint on one's experience of the world. Many of the people who talked with me as I prepared to write this book spoke of their encounters with computers in the workplace as occasions in which their disobedient bodies—crimped by advancing age—restricted their ability to enjoy the freedom that younger colleagues and relatives could exercise. Whereas opening a sophisticated application, such as an Internet browser or PowerPoint, seemed to be akin to opening the throttle on a motorcycle for these young folks, it could be a stultifying, even painful one for less experienced, slower-reacting, less confident, sensory-impaired elders. "Humiliating," "emasculating," and "public loss of my competitive edge" were some of the descriptors I heard about this event. One woman in her 60s told me that performing such operations in front of more adept young colleagues made her feel as if she were going to fall. "Fail," she corrected herself. A Freudian slip, I wondered. All too commonly, injuries from falls precipitate elders' withdrawal from public life and shunt them toward a lifestyle of inactivity. Fear of falling and fear of failing are often, for many elders, essentially the same feeling.

It is this awkwardness toward computers that defines many older people's response to technological change, but, again, this phenomenon is not to be overgeneralized. Many of the women I talked with told me that the moment their

offices moved online and incorporated word-processing programs, it was a liberating experience. It allowed them to spring up the career ladder in the 1970s and continue to enjoy the fruits of those successes today. Growing up in a sexist society, they had been trained as typists in high school, unlike their male counterparts, and, fortunately for them, they did not suffer from arthritis in their fingers during their 50s and 60s, as so many women do. On the other hand, many of the men I talked with in their 50s and beyond felt awkwardness toward computers. They might ably operate the mouse, but they had no idea how to type and were so either left to "hunt and peck" or enlist the support of a secretary ("office wife") or wife at home.[47] For these men, encounters with the computer made them feel slow, ignorant, irrelevant—old. The luckier ones among them had forged relationships with support staff that made them champions of the machinery. They brought slide shows to meetings that someone younger and female had produced, for example, and they received congratulations for yielding research results from the Internet with unproblematic alacrity. For men in this age group, especially, gender has its benefits, and one of these means that you are more likely to be the boss.

But having been the boss for some time, even for a man otherwise well qualified, does not ensure continued success in a changing technological war zone, where younger men in their early 30s come into the shop spouting the vernacular of the Internet. As several of the men who spoke with me complained, they were not simply replaced but their jobs rendered "obsolete" by "young Turks" who were brought in to make their operation more relevant to a company that had begun not to resemble itself. As one man said to me: "The speed was dumbfounding." He meant the speed at which the "Turk" could operate his machine, and the speed at which the gray-haired man subsequently was on the street. "I'm used to being more careful, more purposeful in my work," the man later said. "What I took to be care in my work got me accused of behaving like a senior citizen. Moving too slow."

Accommodating disability theory and a phenomenological approach to consider elders' encounters with computers at work is not meant to underscore stereotypes of the aged as decrepit. It is useful to point out, however, that a computer-equipped lifestyle is readily accessible to people who are more comfortable with quickness, multitasking, and instability. Research continues to demonstrate that advancing age brings a preference for just the opposite: deliberateness, purposefulness, dependable routine. That the machines we find in office spaces have been designed by young people with young people's bodies and senses in mind only complicates the encounter for older workers. It is logical to see why that, the older workers are, the more likely they might be to feel like fish out of water.

This book takes up the experience of aging, not simply as elderhood or old age. I am interested in what it is like to feel that one is aging in the workplace and how one might experience older age relatively. For example, a popular stereotype of Silicon Valley is that it is populated by young, white men in their

20s. I attended a talk by a man in his early 50s who works in one of these stereotypical software shops. He reported being twice as old as any other employee—older than most of their mothers!—and he felt positively ancient. I met another woman who is the same age as this man, and her circumstances are completely different. She works as a nursing assistant in a residential home for the elderly. At the end of her shift, she reports, she cannot wait to get out, among "young" people. "I'm so tired of old people, I don't know what to do," she remarked.[48]

I present the stories and images of people who are in their 50s and beyond, not to muddy the waters about old age's complexity but to underscore the point that, as the longevity revolution lengthens life, there are greater differences among elders themselves to explore. As I've already noted, people in their 50s, and most people in their 60s, at least in developed-world societies, are unlikely to think of themselves as old (even if that's what many Generation Xers and most Generation Yers think of them). It was about three decades ago that sociologist Matilda W.Riley established parameters around the categories of "young-old" (ages 65–74), "old-old" (75–84), and "oldest-old" (85 and over).[49] But just as the cut-points between generations are being reallocated by demographers, new issues about work and technology are being raised for discussion.

For example, the Older Americans Act protects persons 40 and over. Implemented in 1965 for a minority of workers, it soon will protect the majority from discrimination. What are the ramifications of leaving the act unchanged, or of changing it? As another example, 75 percent of occupational injuries from repetitive stress involving days away from work in the United States occurred in workers 44 and younger.[50] Most of these are injuries among nonmanagerial workers, mostly women, and many result in permanent disability claims. What sorts of practices and policies might result in better product design or other solutions, and what effect might these ultimately have on economies and organizational structures? Finally, can the outdated Older Americans Act be revised to remedy such situations as this? I will suggest answers to these and related questions through this book in hopes of enlivening the dialogue about aging, work, and technology that policy makers, academics, and activists are joining.

## Content of the Book

Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 bring together stories about the experiences of aging workers in the digital economy.

Chapter 2 looks at several popular Web sites in the United States and several other nations that focus on the intersection of late life and work. The chapter draws conclusions about how older adults are depicted and addressed through the assembled discourse within these sites. In it, I include results of email

dialogue with some of the elders who use the interactive sites, focusing on how they frame their own experiences, participation, and plans.

Chapter 3 looks at the place of microcomputing in a typical corporation as it is encountered by diverse women at mid-life and in the later years of work. In its depiction of older women's work with new technologies at Harley-Davidson in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the chapter provides confirmation for notions about the embeddedness of technological change in webs of complex social relations, where class relations are challenging to understand.

Chapter 4 probes ways in which older, central-city women have encountered computing, both through desires for improved working conditions and through an interest in self-fulfillment and preservation of youthfulness. The chapter illuminates conditions that lead some working-class elders to see themselves through the struggle of acquiring access to new technologies even as they lead others to back away from what they see as a radical arena.

Chapter 5 examines the comments of people over 55 who answered my Internet query for stories about transitional moments with new technologies in the workplace. This chapter highlights the special vulnerability and creativity of aging people in the digital economy.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 consider three popular discourses on elders, work, and new technology. Chapter 6 offers a sampling of popular Hollywood film treatments of the subject and, in doing so, makes some observations about how other avenues, such as gender, race, and social class, intersect with this central concern. Looking at eighteen Hollywood films that were box office successes between 1950 and 2002, the chapter identifies three thematic commentaries on aging, work, and technology: revisionist history, the fairy tale, and the son becoming the father. Films as diverse as *Cocoon, Death Becomes Her,* and *Space Cowboys* constitute the sample from which this textual analysis is drawn.

The chapter concludes with a brief annotated listing of other films in which these three elements are also prominent and identifies other thematic commentaries in film using these concepts.

Chapter 7 analyzes the depiction of elders in advertising in a variety of magazines directed at audiences both including and excluding elders around the nexus of information technologies, work, and older adults. Once entirely absent from advertising in which computers and related goods and services are marketed, images of elders are now plentiful. The implication is sometimes one of empowerment, sometimes not.

Chapter 8 looks at relevant themes in the growing body of self-help literature that is available to consumers and decision makers. From books geared toward "dummies" and "idiots" to best-sellers from influential management gurus, millions of published volumes now help gatekeepers and job seekers alike grapple issues surrounding the aging worker. Within this body of popular literature, we can see clear modes of explanation of the Boomer-led longevity revolution as a "scarcity problem" or an "abundance opportunity." The chapter concludes with a comparison of the two book

styles' addresses of their readers: the first as aging subjects seeking some form of cultural power, the second as decision makers studying how to maximize their power over elders. These two discursive strategies are seemingly at odds but often reinforce each other.

Chapter 9 draws thoughts on how this intersection of work, new technologies, and advancing age can become less hazardous to navigate. It organizes the policy-related questions raised by the earlier chapters and offers answers to them. It includes advice from thirteen pairs of elders (55 and over) and twenty-something year-old undergraduate students who participated in a semester-long study about Internet use, aging, and work in "intergenerational teams" (a parent or grandparent of each student).

Chapter 10 concludes the book with how lessons from this intergenerational project can contribute to agendas within the spheres of policy, education, employment, product development, and activism.

# CHAPTER 2
# Lost Boomers in Space: Aging Workers and the Soft Digital Economy

Member Information
**Phil**
Instantly receives group messages in inbox.
**Role: member**
*vintage diarist@hotmail.com*
Hi! I'm 58. Worked 25 yrs. in public sector. Retired 12/01. Wife retired too. Thought we had enough. However, familiar story, unexpected expenses, plus market drop, & now needed new job. Then serious thyroid and frequent need to go to the bathroom difficulties. MANY applications and resumes put out there, yet no interest. BUT, yesterday finally got a PT entry level food service job. It's a fresh start.
Trying to look on the bright side.
Member since 8/6/2002

Aging increasingly attracts the attention of Web sites, not just on "sites for old people," as the site for the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has been characterized, but in arenas that serve broader communities. Interest in aging forums has rapidly increased as older Web users realized that the sliding, technology-driven economy might be comparatively harder on them and that they might find strength, either practical or therapeutic, in electronic communities. The large numbers of aging Baby Boomers who have been out of work in the soft economy commencing with the so-called dot.com bust support their initiative to gather around virtual hearths. For example, the number of unemployed workers in the United States aged 55 and over had jumped 23 percent between June 2000 and June 2001, contrasted with a 10 percent jump in workers ages 20 to 24.[1] Although hard numbers are sparse and perpetually outdated, trade publications and the popular press frequently have reported that technology industry layoffs have widely affected older workers, Baby Boomers especially.[2] In her article positioning the white-collar workplace of 2001 as the new "sweatshop," Salon.com's Katharine Mieszkowski quotes author Jill Andresky Fraser:

In certain industries, like technology and Wall Street, by the time you cross that threshold of being 40 years old you're vulnerable. In fact, [there's] an expression in the high-tech community. If you're in your 20s, you're desirable; if you're in your 30s, you're expendable; if you're in your 40s you're unhirable.[3]

In January 1998, the U.S. Department of Commerce conducted the Information Technology Work Force Convocation, followed by a series of "town meetings" around the country in which various stakeholders voiced regional workforce issues. These town meetings included a refrain among mid-career and older workers and their advocates who cited barriers in the information technology (IT) labor market. The Commerce Department's report concluded:

The IT industry is populated by many younger workers. Approximately 75 percent of computer systems analysts and scientists, and nearly 80 percent of computer programmers, are under the age of 45. Many managers in the IT industry are in their 20s and 30s and may be uncomfortable hiring or managing older and more experienced workers. A Network World survey of 200 readers with some hiring responsibility showed that younger network managers are less likely to hire older workers than younger workers. Almost half of respondents 20 to 30 years of age had never hired a person over the age of 40.[4]

The "Information Superhighway" is dotted with aging advocates who have formulated positions and who monitor the progress (or lack thereof) in the age/technology realm. Much of this content focuses on retirement and the construction of the so-called senior surfer. Web sites that publicize the plight and progress of these silver surfers include Seniornet.com, AARP.org, and Third Age.com as well as any number of federal and state Web resources, including the U.S. Administration on Aging and the National Institute on Aging. Less prevalent on these sites but growing in prominence in recent years has been content focusing on aging workers and technology. AARP.org, the Web site of the American Association of Retired Persons, has taken the lead here, but there are dozens more venues for content than even I had expected to find when I set out to do research in this area several years ago, including a considerable assemblage of Web sites originating from the United Kingdom, the site of new legislation protecting elders from a mandatory age 60 retirement. Because marketers and employers have finally discovered the aging of the Baby Boomers, scarcely a work-oriented Web site can afford to pass up a page devoted to the senior surfer or aging technology worker. I have found the richest such content in the user forums on these sites.