Over the Hill and Out of Sight: Locating Old Age in Nineteenth-Century American Culture

"GRANDMA, SEE WHAT I 'VE BROUGHT YOU."

OVER.

A recent *New York Times* piece on "superagers" offers strategies to keep your brain youthful, suggesting that it is no longer enough to maintain the face and body of someone decades younger; now, we must strive to keep our memory and attention "on par with healthy, active 25-year-olds." Women, in particular, are expected to remain preternaturally young. Glossy magazine covers frequently purport to offer the secrets of perpetual youth; readers are urged to "defy" age or to become "ageless" altogether. By the time they reach a certain age, women are expected to be less visible and less vocal, and those who refuse to conform to age expectations are disciplined and vilified. We can easily recall how the coverage of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign drew on long-held prejudices about old women as shrewish and ineffective.

Such age-phobic rhetoric is commonplace in American culture, especially as it relates to women, its history stretching back at least to the second half of the nineteenth century, a period that historian W. Andrew Achenbaum calls a "watershed in which the overall estimation of old people's worth clearly changed." In this essay, I trace the construction of old age, as we now know it, to the turn of the last century, which saw the rise of convalescent homes, geriatric medicine, and mandatory retirement. As we enter into an era in which most of our citizens will be elderly (what one writer refers to as a "demographic denouement"), it is useful to reflect on the first time mainstream American culture responded to the "graying" of the population and to consider one imaginative response to the dominant expectations for old age as it became a scripted stage of life.

1. The term "over the hill" first appeared in a poem on the cover of *Harper's Weekly* in 1871. The popular poem-turned-song describes the plight of an elderly widow and draws attention to the conflation of old age with economic dependence; the poorhouse becomes the only refuge for a woman barred from employment because of her advanced age. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Then, as now, we are taught how to inhabit our ages. Although we tend to think of aging as an inevitable biological reality, there are powerful norms and values that shape our experience of each life stage. Consider, for example, an essay entitled "Growing Old Gracefully," which appeared in an 1875 issue of *The Ladies Repository*. "The thought of becoming old myself brings always a saddened feeling, an inward shrinking—almost a shudder," writes Katie Clark Mullikin. She continues, "The American people . . . are entirely lacking in due and proper reverence for age and its accompaniments," and old people are "often considered burdens, spoken of as having outlived their usefulness and their day; spoken of often with thoughtless, if not heartless, lack of reverence." Mullikin's sentiments convey the extent to which old age was a stigmatized status, and she registers pre-emptive shame, what she calls an "inward shrinking," at the idea of becoming old, which she attributes *not* to concerns about frailty or loneliness but rather to the social stigma against elderly people in mainstream American culture (how old people are "considered" and "spoken of").

Discussions of old age as pathological and feeble pervaded late nineteenth-century popular culture as scientists and social workers classified "the elderly" as a population and made older people subjects of social organization and medical scrutiny. The rise of convalescent homes that specifically catered to older individuals reinforced the view of old age as infantile and socially useless. While the majority of elderly people did not spend their final years in nursing facilities or almshouses, one historian notes that "even the uninstitutionalized elderly began to be affected by the growing social differentiation of senescence."

Popular magazines and advertisements emphasized the separateness of old age by teaching readers how to appropriately inhabit this specific stage of life. A regular column in *Ladies Home Journal* by Virginia Ralston, editor of the dressmaking department, instructed women on how to dress for their age. Her columns included titles such as: "For Elderly Women and Semi-invalids," "The Elderly Lady at Christmas," "For the Stout and Elderly Woman," and "Dressing the Elderly Ladies." Ralston's columns served to entrench gendered age norms and to homogenize women along age lines, reinforcing generational barriers and disciplining women through the language of "age appropriateness." Indeed, this advice literature presumes that age is a stable, biological category, even as it does the very work of producing age as a cultural construct. That is, just like contemporary women's magazines, these columns exemplify anxieties about the proper performance of age and expose the unnaturalness of age expectations.

2. This trade card, advertising Ayer's sarsaparilla, represents the vision of elderly womanhood that became mainstream by the century's end. C. Ayer's & Co. Lowell, Mass., dated between 1870 and 1900. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Moreover, these columns reveal how age, and its supposed pathology, came to be scripted in concert with class and gender. That is, they lay bare the co-construction of gender and age, revealing the double marginalization of being old *and* being female. Ralston articulates what she calls "certain unwritten laws—laws which are known and intuitively obeyed by all women—which prohibit certain colors and styles to her who can no longer be said to be in the first flush of youth." Through these laws, Ralston's column teaches elderly women what Kathleen Woodward calls the "pedagogy of mortification," or the practice of becoming invisible. By urging her older readers to consider "jet in its many varieties" and explaining that, "most elderly women require a rather plain skirt, whether the material be cloth or silk," Ralston aligns old age with plainness and discretion. To be an old woman, she implies, one must become as diminutive and unobtrusive as possible, and such dictates mandate that only one model of old womanhood is appropriate.

Literary women chafed against such dictates. In 1894, when *Ladies Home Journal* ran a forum called "When is a Woman at Her Best?" a variety of well-known writers, including Julia Ward Howe, Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman), and Rebecca Harding Davis, almost unilaterally refused to answer the question as posed. For example, Howe acknowledged aging as individual and idiosyncratic, noting that "the development of character does not correspond with the period of physical growth and maturity." Their collective refusal to treat women's lives as quantifiable and uniform in their unavoidable decline serves as a feminist rejoinder to a culture increasingly preoccupied with aging as pathological and unattractive, especially for women.

In their fiction, nineteenth-century women writers resisted limited notions of old age. The old maids and widowers that populate the work of writers such as

Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett stage a subversive dialogue with the scientific and cultural denigration of elderly people, particularly elderly women. While mainstream periodicals articulated a disciplinary regime of dress and social conduct for older people, women writers railed against generational segregation and refused to sentimentalize the difficulties of old age. For the remainder of this essay, I turn to a story by Mary Wilkins Freeman to demonstrate possibilities for reading old age as a contested site, a politicized identity to be rigorously explored in its own right, rather than simply a metaphor for obsolescence or a marker of nostalgia. Although it was written more than a hundred years ago, Freeman's work anticipates our contemporary culture's obsession with "successful aging" and self-sufficiency and offers a vision of old age in which dependence and debility can be recognized as oppositional.

3. This pamphlet, an advertisement for Shaker Extract of Roots, explains that "old age is unlovely" and juxtaposes young and older visions of individuals. The pamphlet (ca. 1890) promises that Shaker Extract of Roots will counteract the physical signs of aging. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Freeman wrote primarily about old people. In a letter to the editor of *Harpers,* she wrote, "I am on another story with an old woman in it; I only hope people wont tire of my old women." Here Freeman acknowledges that fiction about old people, especially women, risks alienating readers and disappointing critics. Nonetheless, she was widely respected by the gatekeepers of the literary establishment, published in the premiere venues of the day, and was compared by her earliest critics to Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Her story, "A Mistaken Charity," published in the collection *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* in 1887, centers on two elderly sisters who are coerced into moving to an "Old Ladies' Home." At the beginning of the story, Charlotte and

Harriet Shattuck live together, rent-free, in a dilapidated home; they are described as having “old rheumatic muscles,” “feeble cracked old voices,” and “little shriveled hands.” Moreover, Charlotte is blind and Harriet is deaf. However, even as they inhabit a deteriorating house and aging bodies, Harriet and Charlotte are content, and “it could not be said that they actually suffered.” Instead, they take much pleasure from the natural world, and Charlotte, the blind sister, delights in the “chinks” in her consciousness, her word for the “light streamin’ in all of a sudden through a little hole that you hadn’t known of before.” These chinks suggest her alternative orientation, and the story’s own interest in opening up a previously overlooked, unseen reality to its readers.

The plot is set in motion when an intrusive neighbor, Mrs. Simonds, visits them one day and decides they must be moved to an institution. Representing a middle-class ideology that expects old women to be stationary and “comfortable,” Mrs. Simonds’s intervention exposes how benevolence directed toward elderly people often masks an anxiety about unfulfilled gender and age norms. The sisters, in other words, must be relocated not because they are unhappy or in danger but rather because they are too openly old and frail. The narrator notes that “the struggle to persuade them to abandon their tottering old home for a better was a terrible one.” Mrs. Simonds’s eloquence, her plea, her “struggle to persuade” and “convince” them, and her appropriation of the term “comfortable” highlights the force of her intervention. Through her coercive use of language, Mrs. Simonds interpellates these women into the physical and ideological space of old age; she must teach them to see themselves as needy and elderly. The very use of the term “Home” indicates the extent to which the emergence of age ideology in the late nineteenth-century involved the co-optation of discourse and the sentimentalization of old age in order to render it powerless and acquiescent.

For Freeman, though, old age is not about docility or pathos; instead, she underscores the ethos of resistance that can characterize elderliness. Indeed, she envisions old women as liberated from gender norms and the expectations of middle class culture. Of the sisters, she writes, “They had been, in the main, except when pressed by some temporary anxiety about their work or the payment thereof, happy and contented, with that negative kind of happiness and contentment which comes not from gratified ambition, but a lack of ambition itself.” This “negative kind of happiness” suggests the unconventionality of their lives, which are not structured around striving or accumulating but rather from simply having enough—a repudiation of the rapidly evolving consumer culture that linked women with fashion and materialism.


WHY SHE KILLED HERSELF.

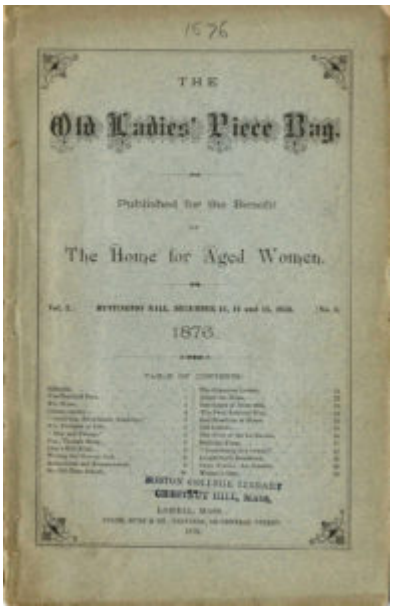
How she then Appeared.

4. The pamphlet includes a narrative of a woman who committed suicide in response to the visible effects of aging. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The community's impulse to move the Shattuck sisters to a Home is a way of standardizing their non-normative bodies and controlling their inappropriate modes of consumption and self-presentation. From the moment they arrive at the Home, "they were at total variance with their surroundings, and they felt it keenly." The most explicit evidence of their misfit with the institution and its expectations is in their dress. The Home requires them to dress more tidily, "but nothing could transform these two unpolished old women into two nice old ladies." To be "nice old ladies" would entail adopting the types of etiquette and gender performance outlined in *Ladies Home Journal,* but the Shattuck sisters "did not take kindly to white lace caps and delicate neckerchiefs." And beyond that, Harriet has "a suspicion of a stubble of beard on the square chin," suggesting an utter disregard for the expectations to keep their bodies under feminine control and essentially invisible, a refusal to participate in the proper performance of elderly womanhood.

Paradoxically, even as U.S. culture fixated on old age as a time of sadness and decrepitude, old women were expected to diffuse good feeling, to perform a kind of affective work to counteract the bad feelings their bodies ostensibly elicited. This logic is made explicit in an 1892 column in *Ladies Home Journal*: "If you want to keep from growing old, if you want to look young and charming, see that there come no wrinkles in your heart. Be as merry and as happy as you possibly can, finding good in everything and loveliness everywhere." Such affective requirements applied even in convalescent homes. The Home in Freeman's story may have been based on the Brattleboro Home for the Aged and Disabled, an institution located near Freeman's home and to whose residents she sent gifts at Christmas. The bylaws for this Home state that residents "will endeavor to diffuse cheerfulness and good feeling throughout the Home." In other words, residents living in the Home must comply with an emotional code of

conduct along with the behavioral norms. To be an appropriate old woman necessitates a kind of emotional labor, a perpetual “cheerfulness and good feeling.”



5. The cover image of the periodical “The Old Ladies’ Piece Bag,” which benefited the Home for Aged Women in Lowell, Massachusetts (1876). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In Freeman’s story, not only are Charlotte and Harriet guilty of inappropriate affect, they also eschew the very cultural work expected of older women: they are neither mothers nor widowers invested in the preservation and/or reproduction of family values. On the contrary, “neither of them had ever had a lover; they had always seemed to repel rather than attract the opposite sex,” and Harriet has a “blunt, defiant manner that almost amounted to surliness.” Thus, they fundamentally diverge from ostensibly natural ideas about womanhood and its attendant responsibilities. Indeed, Freeman emphasizes their rebelliousness rather than their respectability, reminding us that old age might contain a range of affects and styles, some of which might be deviant. When they are forced to stay at the Home, they “looked like forlorn prisoners,” and just two months after their arrival, they run away. “Hobbling along, holding each other’s hands,” the escaping sisters are “as jubilant as children,” a description that destabilizes the Home’s singular definition of old people as docile and tame. In another affront to the expected behavior of “nice old ladies,” they hitch a ride from a stranger after underestimating the distance of the journey back to their home.

The story does not end in death, as one might expect, but rather with the women back at their actual home, gleefully observing the butterflies and pumpkins they have missed. The final words belong to Charlotte, who declares, “Thar is so many chinks that they air all runnin’ together!” (“Chinks,” as we learned earlier, are those moments of light and beauty that penetrate Charlotte’s

blindness.) This articulation of unbounded pleasure underscores the notion that old age may encompass ineffable joys as well as perspectives unknowable to those at other points on the age continuum—it is a final vision of old age a kind of sensory exultation; the little secret pleasures of the chinks are now dilating and encompassing their world.

Freeman's story flies in the face of the ageism that emerged at the close of the nineteenth century, and it also suggests a novel response to the directives and imperatives that shape old age in our contemporary moment. Freeman presages a world in which it is unacceptable to inhabit an old body, to reject the pursuit of advancement and achievement, and to jettison prevailing gender and age norms. Her characters, in their blend of frailty and zest, demand that we see old age as multifarious, neither a time of utter debility nor a period indistinct from midlife or youth. Moreover, Freeman reminds us that vigor can coexist with dependence. Her work repeatedly suggests that pure autonomy—at any stage of life—may be elusive, impossible, and even undesirable.

6. "The Home for the Aged & Infirm: Of District No. 1 I.O.B.B.," lithograph by M. Thalmessinger (New York, 1881). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In "A Mistaken Charity," the sisters do not own their home nor are they self-sufficient. On the contrary, "meaningful survival" in the world of this story entails both dependence and disability; these women rely on one another as well as on a community of strangers, including the man who lets them live in his house rent-free and another who gives them a ride back home. And, of course, their dependence on one another forms the emotional backbone of the story. In this sense, her work warns us against assessing old age according to the dictates of capitalism, which teaches us that to age well is to not age at all, not to need others, not to lose control, or even to slow down. Thus, while the story criticizes a culture of benevolence that smugly assumes it knows what is best for everyone, Freeman also dismantles the notion that autonomy is the *sine*

qua non of a good life or of good aging. Instead, she asks her readers to see how age ideology—its desire to naturalize and universalize seemingly innocuous values like comfort, respectability, and self-sufficiency—can do a kind of violence to the experience of aging, rendering the chinks unseeable, and thus disabling individuals at the end of their lives.

As we attend to age and its intersections with disability and other hierarchies, we should, as literary critic Heather Love reminds us, "check the impulse to turn [dark] representations to good use in order to see them at all." That is, we need not celebrate old age only when it aligns with the paradigms of success and beauty privileged by capitalism or refuse to acknowledge it at all. Rather, we must see old age as part of a whole embodied life that is unexplored, untheorized, and is inherently oppositional to the demands of power, capitalism, and gender.

Further Reading

The classic histories of old age in the United States include W. Andrew Achenbaum's *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790* (Baltimore, 1980), David Hackett Fisher's *Growing Old in America* (Oxford, 1978), and Carole Haber's *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past* (New York, 1983). See also Carole Haber and Brian Gratton's *Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994). Cultural histories of age, broadly defined, in American culture include Howard Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton, N.J., 1989) and Thomas Cole's *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (New York, 1992), and more recently, the excellent *Age in America: The Colonial to the Present*, edited by Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrett (New York, 2015). For a contemporary examination of old age, see G. Stanley Hall's *Senescence* (1922), a follow-up to his definitive tome on an earlier stage of life, *Adolescence* (1904). As he put it, "Ever since I published *Adolescence* in 1904, I have hoped to live to complement it by a study of senescence." The most current biography of Mary Wilkins Freeman is Leah Blatt Glasser, *In a Closet Hidden: The Life and Work of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (Amherst, Mass., 1996).

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