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WHEN YOU’RE 64: PUBLICS, AGING AND COMMUNITY
IN SAN FRANCISCO

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

ANTHROPOLOGY

by

Richard Jason Alley

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Table of Contents

Abstract iv
Acknowledgements v
Prologue / On Language 1
Introduction 3
Chapter 1 / Frailties 33
Chapter 2 / Queer Expertise 69
Chapter 3 / Lifeworlds 108
Chapter 4 / Community 164
Conclusion 207
Appendix 216
Bibliography 217
Abstract

When You’re 64: Publics, Aging and Community in San Francisco

Richard Jason Alley

This dissertation investigates the politics of aging in the contemporary United States vis-à-vis welfare work, public spheres and everyday life. As a quick glance at any recent news headline will reveal, the demographic realities of an aging population has become a pressing concern for policymakers, families and communities throughout the United States. From documentaries about Alzheimer’s disease to debates around pension reform, old age has captured the collective imaginary with uncanny zeal. A city often identified with its bohemian youth culture, San Francisco is home to the largest urban older adult population in the state of California, approximately 14% of who are over the age of 65. For many residents, migration to retirement communities is either financially out of reach or socially undesirable, creating a new set of realities whereby seniors opt to “age in place.” Based on a year and a half of ethnographic fieldwork from 2009 to 2010 with a coalition of organizations focusing on queer aging, a group of seniors forming a nascent care network amongst one another as well as interviews with older San Franciscans, I examine the aging publics and lifeworlds coming into being in one American city. Throughout, I argue that aging offers a lens through which to analyze competing visions of American modernity—one vision focusing on individuality and independence, another stressing the importance of community and connection.
Acknowledgments

The writing of a dissertation engenders many debts to be paid. My first debts are to the members of my Dissertation Committee. To Nancy Chen, my advisor, I owe the greatest debt for her unwavering support of my intellectual pursuits over the past nine years. Nancy’s brilliance as a medical anthropologist has been equaled by an ethos of mentorship that treats the advisee as collaborator in the making of the anthropologist to be. I could not have asked for a better role model than Nancy, whose critical commitment to unpacking the politics of health and wellness in the present continues to inspire me.

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To Jim Clifford, my thanks come in the form of paying tribute to someone whose commitment to anthropology comes from being a friendly ethnographer of its practices and blindspots. Jim’s ability to see the possible in the impossible has made him a treasured interlocutor over the years, reminding me that cultural critique required neither the rhetorics of paranoia nor cleverness to be effective. Anthropology and cultural studies will never be the same after working with him.

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from Andrea through conversations with her and serving as a teaching assistant in her wonderfully titled course “The Horrors of Old Age” in the summer of 2010. Lisa Rofel pushed my thinking in new directions with her characteristic ability to trouble attempts to look for easy answers where none could be found. I could count on Lisa to always ask the sort of questions that lingered with me long after they were posed. Lissa Caldwell helped sharpen my thinking on social welfare while her enthusiastic engagement with my work has been humbling—in a good way. Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Mark Anderson and Renya Ramirez all offered friendly encouragement during my first years in graduate school and their support has stayed with me all these years since. Though my encounters with them were brief, both Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing exemplified a kind of critical joy in their pursuits that is hard to forget. To call Ruby Rich a mentor would be like calling Andy Warhol a painter—technically true but superficially scratching the surface. My success has been due in no small part to her consistent advocacy on my behalf in both significant and subtle ways.

Faculty at other University of California campuses also informed the paths my thinking and writing took. I benefited from sitting in on Carroll Estes’s final graduate seminar on social policy and aging at UCSF. Carroll helped remind me that passion was an important sensibility to bring to social scientific work. I would also like to thank Lawrence Cohen and participants in his medical anthropology seminar “Figures and Claims of Care” for opening up my thinking in productive and provocative ways.
around all matters related to “care.” Lawrence’s rhizomatic brilliance made the weekly trek to Berkeley always an adventure of sorts.

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To my cousin Robert Vega—and his wife Kathryn and son Adrian, my cousin Natalie Cervantes, my grandfather Henry Arreola, my grandmother Hope Arreola and my uncle Don Arreola all I can say is thank you for all your love and support over the years. This dissertation is dedicated to my great uncle Ralph Vega and great aunt Hope Vega who have both taught me more about the everyday joys and conundrums of aging than the entire corpus of knowledge known as gerontology ever could. Their unwavering, unconditional love has made me the person I am today.
The reader will encounter a range of terms and taxonomies in what follows, most of which I hopefully have cleared up. Two arenas require further foregrounding here. The first concerns the plethora of terms used to reference my informants. “Old people,” “the elderly,” “seniors,” “older adults,” “the old” all make an appearance alongside the qualifiers “aging,” “old” “elderly” and “older” and the generational descriptors “later life” and “old age” in this dissertation. To date there remains no agreed upon chronological age marking the passage into the generational landscape enumerated above. As of 2012, Americans can start collecting partial Social Security benefits at 62 years of age. Medicare health benefits begin at age 65. In San Francisco, the ethnographic site for this study, residents 60 years of age and older can participate in programs and receive services under the auspices of the local welfare state. Unlike many European nations, the United States no longer has mandatory retirement statutes, creating a situation where some work happily into their 70s while others are eager to leave the workforce the minute they have acquired the minimum threshold for public and/or private pension programs. In this dissertation, I refer to anyone 60 years of age or older using the above nomenclature. I do so fully cognizant that many would scoff at the aforementioned labels for later life and that where one stands at 60 years of age versus 80 years of age can look and feel worlds apart.

A second issue arises in my use of “America” and “American” to refer to the geographies, peoples and cultures of that entity otherwise known as the United States.
Critical geographers and anthropologists have suggested using “North America” as a way to remind everyone that the Americas are a broad constellation of nations extending from the Pacific Northwest to the Caribbean to Guatemala to the southernmost tip of Chile. An important intervention but one with its own blindspots. “North America” names an imagined unity with little anchoring—road trips to Toronto, drunk teenagers in Tijuana and the North American Free Trade Agreement notwithstanding. Mexico’s hybrid status—is it equally part of North, Central and Latin America?—should serve as a warning here. In the three places I do invoke “North America” below, readers should know I mean Canada and the United States. Otherwise, I have avoided the term due to my reservations around assuming that a federal republic and global superpower made up of 312 million residents and a sparsely populated, Francophone, constitutional monarchy still headed by the Queen of England can be said to form a geocultural unity. Anyone listening to the British Broadcasting Corporation or conversing with locals abroad will recognize instantly which country is being spoken about when “America” or “the Americans” are referred to. Until ordinary language use and journalism catch up with our professed desires to provincialize the United States, I have no problem following suit.
**Introduction**

Today, first time I’ve met people of good will who want to visit old folks living in a care home.

It was something of a jolt to think of myself as a recipient of community concern.

—Janet Carncross Chandler, “Appreciating the Appreciators”

**The View from San Francisco**

It was a gorgeous afternoon, bright and sunny, the kind of day tourists imagined whenever they thought of California. And that San Franciscans coveted. The crisp chill and overcast skies residents of San Francisco were all too familiar with were out of sight and out of mind. I was in Vivian Talbot’s quaint backyard, playing dominoes with her.¹ I had known Vivian already for several months when I found myself at her place for an afternoon of socializing and hanging out. Priding herself on her youthful spirit and zest for life, she regularly complained about the narrow attitudes expressed by other older people she found annoying. After a few more games, she invited me to come along with her as she had errands to run. I walked over with her to the nearby recreation center where she was taking photography classes and watched her chat it up with her middle-aged, gay male instructor as I listened to the two of them discuss the possibilities of knowing people in common from earlier work experiences. Vivian regaled her instructor with how she had seduced me into becoming a dominoes aficionado and how the two of us enjoyed

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¹Drawing on accepted protocol in anthropology, names of individuals, groups and other identifying details have been altered throughout this dissertation in the interests of anonymity.
entering the zone of distracted focus that made the hours float away. It was true. I had met up with Vivian several times at her neighborhood café, where we caught up with one another and talked current events while strategizing our next move or countermove.

After taking leave of her instructor, as we walked towards the supermarket, Vivian spoke wittily of how she didn’t want to be tied down to “an old woman” and how she hoped he didn’t take her enthusiastic chatter about our afternoon of dominoes as an open invitation to befriend her. It was pure Vivian. Unapologetic honesty tinged with wicked sarcasm. Walking downhill towards the corner of Church and Market Streets, we talked about the joys of city living and how neither of us could imagine living anyplace that wasn’t urban. Tucked into our celebration of the urban, though, I detected a shared sense that there were few places other than San Francisco either of us could live in. We were both “aging in place.”

As we got closer to the supermarket, Vivian surprised me in voicing an exclamatory “Fuck…I’m 68! How did that happen?!” These were not her exact words for I later tried unsuccessfully to remember the perfect turn of phrase I heard that afternoon. Riding the underground back to my neighborhood, I tried to capture the vanishing present on a bright pink slip of paper I had with me.

“Fuck me! I’m 68!”

“ Fucking a! I’m 68!”

Neither of them seemed right. I had to settle for the simple declarative “Fuck…” to capture the spirit of Vivian’s words. I tried to convince her that it sounded romantic,
like the spirit of revolt that gathered around Paris in May of 1968. Vivian didn’t buy it one bit.

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I first came into contact with Sophia Laurentz electronically, when I emailed her about posting flyers describing my research at the theaters hosting the film festival on aging she was curating. My flyers never made it to the festival venues as hoped, but Sophia did offer to meet with me to discuss some of the senior networks she was involved with and the possibly of being introduced to them. She also agreed to be my first official interviewee, answering questions about growing older and life in San Francisco. We decided to meet in her neighborhood, on the corner of 18th and Castro Streets, one March morning before settling in at a nearby eatery. A White, 70-year-old woman, I took note of her head of white hair, puffed out like clouds that had settled on top of her head. Throughout our conversation that morning, a feisty, yet deadpan, droll organized her thoughts. She grew up in Brooklyn, lived in Chicago most of her adult life and had been in San Francisco a mere six years when I met her in early 2009. When I asked Sophia what prompted her to move to the Bay Area, she offered that she was “…looking for adventure.” Because her brother was already living in San Francisco, working as a contractor and offering to help her with any real estate endeavors in the city, his encouragement gave her additional license to move. We talked about much that morning, ranging over a wide swath of topics from real estate to the weather to her life in Chicago and her work on the aging film festival. Proud of her varied endeavors, she told me “I’ve done lots of things by myself.”
Sophia’s life in Chicago had one important footnote. She left the city for four years in order to care for her ailing mother in Miami. From the way she spoke, I could tell that those years in Miami had left an indelible mark on her. Sophia’s son, who worked as a pilot, was going to be moving to San Francisco soon and living in one of the vacant units in the building she owned. With a hint of wry sarcasm, she talked about how her son admonished her to make sure and use the railings when walking down the stairs in her apartment. At the same time, Sophia acknowledged how the care her mother required at the end of her life had no doubt influenced her son’s loving vigilance. “He feels like he has to be there for me.” Yet, echoing her own mother’s sentiments, she also declared “I don’t want to be a burden on him.” When she related a recent fall she had experienced down her stairs and how her son’s cautionary concern may be justified, I jokingly conspired with her. “I promise not to tell him.”

We left the restaurant and started walking up the huge hill that separates the Castro and Noe Valley. I did most of the talking during our uphill climb. There was an excited passion in my speech—accentuated by my energy exertion—as I talked about my research, graduate school and prior teaching while Sophia listened with encouraging attention. We stopped midway up the hill and viewed the city’s skyline from our sunny, picturesque vantage point. It was a beautiful day out, with downtown looking like it was perfectly encased in one of those water-filled dioramas that the Walgreens pharmacy near my apartment sold along with miniature cable cars and T-shirts that said “I LOVE SF.” A sun globe as *tableau vivant*. In that moment
on the steep hillside that is Castro Street, I got the sense that Sophia saw me as someone she could mentor and felt the beginnings of rapport developing between us.

Long after the ethnographer leaves the field, words and images still manage to call out. It was a rainy afternoon in the city’s Richmond district and I was on a quick shopping errand and needing to get back to my laptop before losing writerly momentum as the day faded away. I was caught off guard by the presence of a string of posters hoisted on lampposts along Clement Street I had not seen in many months since they first grabbed my attention near City Hall. They were a series of brightly colored rectangles proudly proclaiming “THE NEW LAGUNA HONDA.” On one poster, a bright shiny, modernist, glass façade adorned a building that looked like it could be featured in the architecture section of The New York Times. “INNOVATION” was its tagline. On another poster was a photographic still of an older woman speaking to or being addressed by a younger, middle-aged woman. “COMPASSION” adorned its messaging. On the third in the series, another view of the building’s exterior was on display as tiny figures dressed in pristine white nurses’ and medical staff’s uniforms walked away and towards the viewer. “COMMUNITY” beckoned the passerby. Laguna Honda Hospital, at one time the nation’s largest skilled nursing facility owned and operated by the city of San Francisco, was now officially open. The building was a site of controversy when I first stepped onto the ethnographic scene in 2005 and learned that key players in San Francisco’s health and aging services community were aligned with local government against disability
activists, union members and others over the fate of an institution slated to be rebuilt with at least 400 less beds for patient-residents than it had at the time. Near the start of my research in 2009, I had the opportunity to tour the skeletal version of the future hospital with others as we snaked our way through empty spaces and construction debris and imagined a state-of-the-art facility where we would want to visit someone we cared for. Or volunteer in. Or live in ourselves. Weeks after my encounter with the posters on Clement Street, I visited the website for the hospital and rehabilitation center where I found a lengthy message from the Executive Director titled “A Journey From Institution to Community.” It read as follows—

Laguna Honda is an organization on the threshold. A civic icon that began life as a place of refuge for one of the first generations of San Franciscans, the Gold Rush pioneers, it is intimately connected with the story of San Francisco itself.

For nearly two centuries, the city has defined itself as a place of innovation where human possibility could flourish. Laguna Honda, too, has reinvented itself over the century and a half since its founding consistent with the social service practices of the day.

When Laguna Honda’s Spanish Revival buildings were constructed eighty years ago, it was Florence Nightingale-style open wards that were the accepted model for nursing homes. Today, the imperative is for environments that build community and offer opportunities for integration into the surrounding civic life.

Leading models of care emphasize meaning, worth and dignity as the essential elements of human health. Companionship, independence, the freedom to make one's own choices, and interaction with nature have become the new clinical interventions.

With 780 residents, the new Laguna Honda will be among the largest skilled nursing and rehabilitation centers in the country, representing one of the most extensive commitments of any city or county to long term care for a safety net population.

How can we as a city long concerned with caring for those in need once again reinvent Laguna Honda so that it will embody the principles of community living that comprise the new model of long term health care?
Our commitment, reflected in our 2009-2010 strategic goals, is to take the crucial next steps on a journey from institution to community. By providing programs and services that maximize independence, promote choice and integrate residents into the larger community, we aspire to become a center of excellence in long term care and rehabilitation.

In June of 2010, we dedicated the most modern skilled nursing and rehabilitation center in the country. Our new buildings are finished, but our work has only just begun. The new Laguna Honda will require a continual re-dedication – to community, to innovation, and to a shared vision of a skilled nursing facility that embraces quality of life as its guiding principle.

There is something to be said for thresholds, which, after all, are those places between the past and the future. They give us the freedom to become new again, something that San Francisco has known for generations. Our name, Laguna Honda, means “deep lagoon.” Those of us who live or work at Laguna Honda, and have participated in the remarkable transformations that take place here, have a reverence for the depth of its possibilities.

**Aging America**

Vivian was not the first person to find herself struck by the realities of the aging self. Countless commentators and ordinary Americans have been variously struck by what Margaret Lock, in the Japanese context, has referred to as “the turn of life” (Lock 1993) throughout the history of what came to be the United States. But the anxiety (playful or real) that Vivian gave voice to was not necessarily how Americans had always thought of growing older. In the late 1970s, historian David Hackett Fischer suggested that the sense of a strongly felt generation gap was a particular historical development rather than a reiteration of an endless theme in American society. Fischer made the argument that veneration—not degradation—of the old was the norm in early America, informing readers “Old age was highly respected in early America, perhaps in part because it was comparatively rare” (Fischer 1977: 29). He located the beginnings of a transformation in the middle of
the 18th century, drawing on evidence gleaned from church seating arrangements, changes in men’s and women’s fashion and language use in the 18th and 19th centuries.  

W. Andrew Achenbaum disputed Fisher’s positing of a “golden epoch” when negative representations had yet to be attributed to the old (Achenbaum 1978). Achenbaum argued that the history of old age in the United States belied a teleological vision of decline in social worth and status. Illustrating the complex social forces at play in the 20th century, he wrote—

…it seems logical to argue that the actual status of the aged in twentieth-century America changed as agriculture ceased to be a major source of jobs, as formal education became a more desirable asset than years of experience, and as pension plans coupled with mandatory retirement spread through business and industry. It appears equally plausible to postulate that these same factors made it increasingly difficult for older Americans to escape poverty through gainful employment, and in turn to propose that the elderly’s plight became more and more visible as their numbers grew. (105)

In his subsequent *Shades of Gray*, Achenbaum further developed his arguments in tracing another history of the present through shifts in public policy focused on an aging citizenry (Achenbaum 1983). In both books the Great Depression figured as the fundamental watershed, ushering in the contemporary framework of welfare

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2 On language, Fischer informed readers thusly—“In the next century many other terms of specialized abuse were invented. *Old cornstalk* (1824) was an Americanism for ‘an ineffectual old man.’ *Old goat* meant a lecherous old man, *fuddy-duddy*, a pompous old man, *granny*, a weak old man; *mummy*, an ugly old man; *geezer*, an eccentric old man; *goose*, a silly old man; *galoot*, an uncouth old man; *bottle-nose*, an alcoholic old man; *back number*, an anachronistic old man. Still another set of words was invented to express an indiscriminate contempt for age—*baldhead* (1800), *baldy* (1820), *oldster* (1829), *oldliner* (1855), *old womanish* (1775) and *old womanism* (1828). . . . The worst pejoratives were rude and vulgar salutations which any arrogant young man might use to greet any old one—words such as *old-timer* (1824) and *pop* (from at least 1889)—which signaled in advance that an elderly man was about to be treated as a member of a generational proletariat” (92-93).
support for the old. Though what the Social Security Act of 1935 accomplished was indeed important, the galvanizing of ordinary older Americans through the efforts of charismatic leaders like Francis Townsend, Upton Sinclair and Abraham Epstein should not be discounted. ³ Old age was made public on a national political scale like never before in the 1930s.

In the immediate years following World War II, economic prosperity and the desire to return to “normal” life following the disruptions of the 1930s and 1940s occupied most Americans’ priorities. In a period where optimism and opportunity were the dominant themes of American modernity throughout the 1950s, it could be argued that not many Americans were paying attention to the problems of old age.⁴ If being old in the 1950s garnered relatively little attention outside of immediate familial contexts, the futures of life after work were on many working Americans’ minds. “The rising emphasis on leisure, particularly among middle-class workers, ³See Putnam (1970) and Chapter 7 in Achenbaum (1978).
⁴While public discourse on old people as a distinct class of Americans may have been relegated to the gerontological literature of the 1950s, some historical caveats are in order. A quick perusal of popular culture of the period would convince many that aging was indeed a collective concern—but from a different segment of the life course. From Dr. Spock’s advice regarding childrearing to the romanticism of disgruntled delinquency in the figures of James Dean or Holden Caulfield, the conundrums of youth took center stage. From a differing vantage point, historian of medicine Elizabeth Watkins has looked at the disappearance of “andropause” (or “male menopause”) as a clinical diagnosis in a period where “In both popular magazines and medical journals, middle-aged men were depicted as fearful of growing old, of being superannuated, of losing their masculinity” (Watkins 2008: 339). Outside the worlds of medicine, aging was an obvious fact of ordinary life. Jillian Jimenez reminds readers of the continuing centrality of grandmothers in African American kinship networks following World War II (Jimenez 2002) while Elaine Kim has looked at representations of generational tensions in Asian American literature written or set during the same period as the more celebrated refusals of White teenage angst (Kim 2005). I highlight these other histories to account for the ways the elderly may have been invisible in the 1950s while aging was troubling a nation eager to reinvent itself following a prolonged period of economic hardship and war.
made ‘retirement’ an increasingly significant and pervasive phenomenon” (Achenbaum 1983: 59). Entrepreneurs like Del Webb seized on the opportunity represented by retirement and on January 1, 1960, his imagined community Sun City, Arizona opened for business. John Findlay details how the famous development underwent a transformation from positioning itself as “…a small, friendly village…” in its early years to an exclusive, perpetual vacation resort by the late 1960s (Findlay 1992: 190). But tourist visions of retirement were only part of the picture. In the 1960s, another wave of federal intervention brought older Americans to the foreground of public opinion as the government moved forward with enacting “…a new social contract for the aged” (Achenbaum 1983: 95). With former President Harry S. Truman at the table, President Lyndon Johnson signed Medicare into law on July 30, 1965 creating the country’s first national health insurance program. That same year, the Older Americans Act was passed by Congress and signed into law. In addition to creating the federal Administration on Aging, it authorized grants to states for community planning and services programs.

Social attitudes were slowly shifting as well due to the efforts of policymakers, gerontologists, health professionals and activists in the 1960s and 1970s. Dr. Robert Butler successfully created the National Institute on Aging in 1974 and the following year received a Pulitzer Prize for exposing the problems of aging in America (Butler 1975). In 1970, after being forced into retirement by the Presbyterian Church, Maggie Kuhn founded the Gray Panthers, a grassroots movement committed to fighting ageism through a broad social justice agenda that
garnered the attention of Congressional committees and national news media alike (Sanjek 2009). And in 1974, San Francisco’s Glide Memorial Church published Paul Kleyman’s book *Senior Power: Growing Old Rebelliously*, highlighting the work of seniors in the church as a model for old age activism (Kleyman 1974). But there were also fissures in the collectivist imaginary of the period. The politicoeconomic challenges of the 1970s—inflation, the OPEC oil crisis and unemployment chief among them—put President Johnson’s “Great Society” programs in peril. “Leaders of the gray lobby espoused intellectual positions that paralleled the logic and rhetoric of other interest groups” while “A growing number of commentators argued that public policy measures adopted since 1965 to meet the needs and demands of an ever growing elderly population were ‘busting the U.S. budget’” (Achenbaum 1983: 119; 132). In the world of letters, anthropologist Ernest Becker and historian Christopher Lasch argued that fear of death and the denial of age were part of the defense mechanisms and narcissistic drives of modernity (Becker 1973; Lasch 1979). Into such a mix of public sentiments stepped psychologist and gerontologist Bernice Neugarten. Neugarten was a pivotal figure in the landscape of aging research through her position in the Human Development program at the University of Chicago. In 1974, she published a short paper in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* entitled “Age Groups in American Society and the Rise of the Young-Old” (Neugarten 1974). With sharp foresight, Neugarten argued that a division was emerging in America’s age structure between the “young-old” (55 to 75-________

5Their work helped create the California Legislative Council for Older Americans.
years of age) and the “old-old” (those over the age of 75). Due to the widespread embrace of retirement amongst working adults, buttressed by Social Security and other benefits, the young-old were aging into a society where “…their relative good health, education, purchasing power, free time and political involvement…” (198) foreshadowed a future where “…they are not likely to become the neglected, the isolated or the expendables of society” (198).

As the 1980s unfolded, critiques of the excesses of the egalitarian 1960s and 1970s justified curtailments in social welfare under the Reagan administration, including the shift from direct federal aid to block grant revenue sharing programs between the states and federal government (Estes 1983). Neugarten’s bifurcated vision of aging America found disturbing class corollaries as seniors at the lower-end of the socioeconomic spectrum felt the brunt of President Reagan’s policies while middle-class Americans were being implicitly instructed to supplement their Social Security and Medicare benefits with private health insurance and individual savings as they aged into their “golden years.” In the past two decades, the tourist-inspired imaginaries that made Del Webb and his Sun City so prolific have resurfaced as the first cohort of “baby boomers” nears retirement age. What Kevin McHugh calls “positive stereotypes” are rampant, figuring in pharmaceutical advertisements, retirement brochures and prognoses about the opportunities opened up by the “silver industries” (McHugh 2003; Moody 2004-05). There is much irony here. At the end of her 1974 essay, Neugarten saw huge potential in what the young-old offered American society—
If, as seems presently true, the young-old will not form a strong age-group identification of their own, they might become the major agents of social change in building the age-irrelevant society. If they create an attractive image of aging, thus allay the fears of the young about growing old, and if they help to eradicate those age norms which are currently meaningless and those age attitudes which are currently divisive, they will do the society an untold service. Theirs is an enormous potential. (Neugarten 1974: 198)

What Neugarten did not foresee, of course, is how the young-old would be turned into a consumer market right at the historical juncture when the freedoms offered by retirement are not as universal as they once seemed. In a recent article, Achenbaum diagnoses the present thusly—

For some, work in their later years will be a necessity rather than a choice. Not only poor people, but middle-class folk who were the victims of collapsing pensions, corporate takeovers and outsourcing, and a job market that makes it hard for displaced middle-aged workers to get back on track, may be compelled in some cases to stay in the labor force full time. Yet shocking numbers of gainfully employed Americans are likely to find themselves still laboring in their sixties and seventies because of their own failure to save for the future...The Conference Board’s survey of older workers captures the new mixture: Fifty-five percent of the employees said they were not planning to retire because they still found their jobs interesting, while 75 percent said that financial concerns were a factor that would keep them working. (Achenbaum 2006: 56)

Reading Achenbaum’s article makes me think of the many conversations Vivian and I had after we became friendly with each other in early 2009. Once we met up to check out a sequence of mini lectures held in conjunction with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art’s 75th anniversary. Over lunch, she talked humorously about the differences between herself and her sister, especially around financial matters. Vivian was the responsible one, putting money aside and investing in long term care insurance. Her sister I was told “…spends money like a drunken sailor.” Months later, as she sat with me over an espresso, before we went into a movie together, she talked about being so relieved that she hadn’t committed herself to the trappings of a
career like so many others. We were sitting outside near the Financial District and if I remember correctly the sight of some stressed out professional passing by prompted her musings. Though Vivian had worked all of her adult life following her divorce from her first and only marriage, she had never pursued a single “profession.”

Looking back, I cannot help but wonder if her happily careerless, financially responsible self was an upbeat take on her compromised life choices as much as a genuine set of feelings and personal predilections.

**An Ethnography of Experiments**

As I learned from many seniors I spoke with, the transition to a consumerist, “boomer” vision of aging was not universal. Over the course of several months of interviewing, there was little sense of a teleological direction for people as the query “Are there things you think about in terms of the future?” garnered a range of improvised responses and musings. That things were not set in stone did not necessarily register as bad or foreboding for my informants. But the unknowable nature of things did not engender widespread calm or bliss either. Clifford Taylor, whom readers will encounter in Chapter 3, articulated both pride in his ascetic bachelorhood as much as unease with the tensions surrounding everyday life in the city. As he offered with nervous emphasis, “You could get shot out there. That’s another thing…It is unfortunately a dangerous time now. Because of the economy. Because of the desperation of some people. And this increasingly emotional edge. I see it everyday. So I have to be very wary.”
San Francisco, California, like Clifford Taylor, has continually found itself at the crossroads of contradiction over much of its contemporary history. Internationally recognized as a “global” destination for tourists, émigrés and other cosmopolitan wanderers, the city is also proudly provincial in its embrace of a Left-leaning localism (DeLeon 1992; Walker 1996; Brook, Carlsson and Peters 1998; Ong 1996 and 1999). Known for its charming, laidback ethos of urban living, immortalized in Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City* series (Maupin 1978), it has been at the epicenter of waves of real estate speculation, redevelopment initiatives and gentrification in the post-World War II period (Walker and the Bay Area Study Group 1990; Solnit and Schwartzzenberg 2000; Hartman 2002; Redmond 2006). And long recognized for its vibrant bohemian youth culture, San Francisco is home to the largest urban concentration of older adults in the state of California. This ethnography seeks to peer behind the layers of that demographic fact. Like other urban centers throughout the country, San Francisco currently finds itself at a crossroads. As commitments to social welfare have been eroded through policy shifts and budget cuts, the city has been forced to absorb fiscal responsibilities that have previously been shared amongst federal, state and local governments. At the same time, for many residents, migration to retirement communities is either financially out of reach or socially undesirable, creating a new set of realities whereby seniors opt to

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6 According to the 2010 census, as a percentage of population, 13.6% of San Franciscans are over the age of 65, compared to 10.5% of Los Angeles residents and 10.7% of San Diego residents. Shifting scales, looking at counties instead of cities, we find the following demographics—13.6% of residents are over the age of 65 in San Francisco County compared to 10.9% in Los Angeles County and 11.4% in San Diego County. See U.S. Census Bureau figures for further information at http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html.
“age in place.” If San Francisco’s seniors are not relocating en masse to elderly enclaves in Florida or Arizona, what visions of community make sense for those opting to “stay put”? What does it mean to build community in later life? What solidarities and tensions surface in such endeavors? And what does aging in place look like across the intricate realities of gender, sexuality, race and class?

Based on a year and a half of ethnographic fieldwork in San Francisco from 2009 to 2010, my dissertation answers these queries through an exploration of welfarist interventions, public culture and the quotidian realities, desires and double binds expressed by older residents. Relying on the qualitative detail of ethnography, I argue that aging offers a lens through which to analyze competing visions of American modernity—one vision focusing on individuality and independence, another stressing the importance of community and connection. Throughout my dissertation, I pay attention to the desires and ambivalences of seniors (and younger actors), showing how visions of old age provide an opportunity to examine the tenets and tensions shaping social life in the contemporary United States. In many respects, the chapters that follow place this ethnography firmly within the genre of “the community study” (which I discuss further in Chapter 4). I explore the everyday politics of aging in one American city with the peninsular boundaries of San Francisco’s seven miles by seven miles serving as my geographic container. My primary ethnographic sites—a nonprofit network focusing on queer aging (Chapter 2) and a group of seniors affiliated with a local extended learning program (Chapter 4)—are easily recognizable within the larger pantheon of small-scale societies,
villages and communities anthropologists have traditionally explored (Arensberg 1954; Redfield 1955). Yet inspired by the methodological call for multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), I have deliberately departed from other roads easily taken in and through the community study.

First, I have avoided the neighborhood/enclave orientation of much of urban anthropology and sociology—indebted though I am to the pioneering work of scholars in this domain (Whyte 1943; Stack 1974; Bestor 1989; Sanjek 1998). I do not offer an investigation of one particular community of seniors residing in close quarters to one another, sharing the intimacies of geographic proximity and cultural exchange. The seniors I dialogued with over the course of 2009 and 2010 came from all over the city as I often found myself traveling from café to public event to apartment building to street corner to barstool in search of ethnographic encounters of one sort or another. Though I cannot claim an exhaustive surveying, I felt convinced that no one neighborhood or urban hub could adequately capture the politics of aging in San Francisco—let alone contemporary America. Second, I purposefully tried to bypass the institutional impulse of ethnographic work in and around seniors as I argue that not all older Americans are hooked into what Carroll Estes has called “the aging enterprise.”

In an age-segregated society like the United States, a common move for

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7Estes, a sociologist, described “the aging enterprise” in her book of the same name as “…the congeries of programs, organizations, bureaucracies, interest groups, trade associations, providers, industries, and professionals that serve the aged in one capacity or another…In using the term aging enterprise, I hope to call particular attention to how the aged are often processed and treated as a commodity in our society and to the fact that the age-segregated policies that fuel the aging enterprise are socially divisive ‘solutions’ that single out, stigmatize, and isolate the aged from the rest of society” (Estes 1979: 2; emphasis in original).
younger ethnographers studying the old has been to gravitate towards agencies, organizations and congregate sites that “serve” elderly Americans in one way or another. The nonprofit network I profile in Chapter 2 was one such organization. But the dangers of allowing well-intentioned welfare workers to exclusively shape my ethnographic vision was apparent as one of my dissertation committee members critically pointed out following a summer of participant observation at the Aging Services Office in San Francisco in 2005. Though ultimately I did spend some time in housing complexes, senior citizen centers, assisted living facilities and social welfare organizations, my hesitation to treat any of these sites as privileged mini-universes of elderly sociality allowed me to stay focused on other kinds of *elderpublics* in the making.8

So where did my desires to explore a wider range of elderly communities and “contact zones” (Clifford 1997b) lead me? The bulk of my fieldwork took place from January 2009 through September 2010. One of the advantages—or curses—of being both a resident and a researcher is having ongoing access to your fieldsites and informants. During the fall of 2010, I was able to wind down my remaining investigations and commitments fully so that as of January 2011 I had officially “left” the field as it were. In the months that followed, I showed up for the occasional meeting or public event I thought worthy of checking out. I also continued to meet

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8Throughout my research, I dedicated myself to ethnographic pursuit of the public lives of aging, taking my inspiration from the work of scholars investigating the formation of publics from rich historical and contemporary perspectives (Marcus 1989; Davis 1992; Callhoun 1993; Berlant 1997; Coombe 1998; di Leonardo 1998; Ortner 1999; Warner 2002; Chen 2003; Cvetkovich 2003; Rafael 2003; Meeker 2006).
up for coffee or an outing (usually a movie or a play) with those older collaborators I had developed real rapport with. And as readers will see in Chapter 2, I continued to grab drinks with Amy Johansson. For all intents and purposes, though, I had vacated the ethnographic scene in early 2011.

From January 2009 to January 2010 I spent time with Gray Pride, a nonprofit network focused on addressing the needs of aging lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender San Franciscans. Over the course of a year, I spent anywhere from 12 to 15 hours a week at the network’s main office and was locally incorporated into their universe through the role of “intern.” At my first meeting with Mark Hopkins, Executive Director, and Amy Johansson, Director of Programs, I presented myself as a graduate student working on my PhD degree in anthropology and expressed interest in learning more about the work of Gray Pride. I described my research as concerned with examining “aging in place” in San Francisco, an honest articulation of where I located my intellectual interests in the early months of fieldwork. I did have some familiarity with the network through previous meetings with the former Executive Director and intermittent volunteering at Gray Pride fundraisers in the two years leading up to fieldwork. Though I believe both Amy and Mark would have been willing to have me in the office more frequently, they were such a small-scale operation—made up of a staff of three—that I felt the cumulative acquiring of

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9“Aging in place” refers to the process of growing old 1) where one has spent a significant part of one’s adult life, 2) in places considered “home” and/or 3) in dwellings that allow individuals to remain “independent” for as long as possible. This later category would include everything from senior housing complexes to planned retirement communities to assisted living facilities to residential hotels. The desire to avoid—to forestall—a move to a skilled nursing facility (“nursing home”) is what unites these later life dwelling scenarios.
knowledge around their pursuits would more than compensate for not being in the office every day. I was assigned to work on coordinating the collection of information for a housing database (that never materialized) with the understanding that I would also shadow Amy throughout my internship. Amy and I became fast friends and as a result I wound up learning a lot about the organization through her. Many of my hours at Gray Pride were actually spent out of the office, attending resource fairs, discussion groups and special events. I learned a great deal about the kinds of publics Gray Pride was seeking to insert itself into and bring to fruition. At the same time, I was privy to the less than public—dare I say “closeted”—maneuverings that made the office a hotbed of anxiety, gossip and territorialism. A social welfare student would undoubtedly have bracketed such information out of their thesis. But an anthropologist-in-training treats everything as part of the cultural system s/he documents. Thus, I focus on the welfarist worlds I saw taking shape in public, inside the office and points in between.

10I am not alone in this regard. “I was learning one of my first lessons about anthropological desire: it offered Archimedean possibilities, totalities out there for the taking. Everything, everywhere, all the time, was grist for one’s interpretive mill…” is how one anthropologist describes his scene of ethnographic arrival (Cohen 1998: 16). Reminding us that reflexivity is not a luxury, Don Brenneis argues for the importance of paying analytic attention to the “institutional webs” that shape and delimit anthropological praxis. He writes “I’d suggest that there is a critical need to study those mundane, ‘not very exciting’ (to quote a colleague), yet highly important sites—bureaucratic, corporate, and institutional—that are often bracketed in our research…These sites are crucial parts of the institutional framework within which much contemporary anthropology takes place, and we often, I am convinced, forget or ignore the frame as we focus on the picture it surrounds” (Brenneis 2004: 581). I discovered quickly during my time at Gray Pride that the mundane and the dramatic were not polar opposites but regularly interrupted each other such that the dramas I witnessed unfolding became quite banal.
Alongside my work at Gray Pride, from February 2009 to January 2011, I spent time with The Senior Class, a group coalescing around reimagining community in later life. Though their activities to a great extent dovetailed with the extended learning program they were affiliated with, I also discovered how a group of seniors were collaborating around visions of aging and community that departed from a welfarist emphasis on totalizing, abject frailties as well as a consumerist ethos of purchased “peace of mind.” My interactions with The Senior Class participants consisted of monthly lectures and meetings in addition to potlucks and special events that occurred periodically while in the field. Here I found myself occupying the role of observer more than I would have liked to. Because my age marked me as visibly Other, I had to continually introduce myself to newcomers and those who sporadically attended. Even amongst the core group of participants I regularly came into contact with, there was a noticeable reticence around speaking much with me aside from a hello or a quick exchange following one of the lectures. I initially attributed this reticence to the cautious sociality that characterizes early fieldwork encounters before rapport can be built. Indeed, I had been on the other side of the fence as it were during the initial weeks at Gray Pride when Amy Johansson was talking my ear off and I was trying to maintain a professional façade as the new intern in their midst. As time went on, there was a thawing of sorts as I became a familiar figure around The Senior Class. Yet in one-on-one exchanges most people continued to talk in generalizing and guarded argot. Looking back now, I realize that The Senior Class was a unique group culturally and demographically. These were mostly
middle-class, educated, White San Franciscans in their 60s and 70s. Owing to the connections to their host college, I did encounter participants who had graduate degrees or were professors (both active and retired). Others came with rich professional backgrounds or life experiences. Irrespective of their actual ages or health status, their class standing put them squarely amongst Neugarten’s young-old. The intimate knowledge some of them had of social scientific research created another layer of distance. More crucially, what I saw was a group of aging adults who came to The Senior Class month after month in search of information, conversation and connections amongst peers. Ethnographic recognition—even from a friendly stranger—was not on their agenda. They were nominally okay with the novice anthropologist hanging out with them but in maintaining a certain affective distance they subtly communicated that I was on their turf. Thus, the door was proverbially open to me while they simultaneously cordoned off collective conversations from the asides, chitchat and shoptalk that invariably went on out of earshot.\textsuperscript{11}

In conjunction with participant observation, from July 2009 to October 2010 I conducted approximately 90 in-depth interviews with older San Franciscans around what aging looked like from their situated vantage points.\textsuperscript{12} I wanted to get a better

\textsuperscript{11}Lest I portray all my informants as calculating resistors to the ethnographic gaze—though some surely struck me so—I should note that I had many genuinely friendly exchanges with The Senior Class participants. The potlucks I describe in Chapter 4 regularly offered opportunities to break down the fourth wall over food, wine and socializing. And several people offered assistance and advice to me at various points that productively prodded my thinking or opened up new doors of exploration.

\textsuperscript{12}I write “approximately” to account for the hybrid situations I encountered in the field. Two interviews took place over two separate encounters. Though in both cases we met twice
sense of the everyday politics of aging and reasoned that one-on-one conversation would be one way to access those other scenes of later life. In a recent essay, Charles Briggs warns of the abuses in uncritically deploying interviews as anthropological “data” as it positions the ethnographer on the same plane as the contemporary market researcher (Briggs 2007). Briggs brings a savvy critique to the table with which I concur. I agree that we cannot treat interviews as the unmediated “raw” to the analytic “cooked” of ethnographic editing and interpretation—points I return to again in Chapter 3. Though interviews are a staged version of conversation in situ they allow the ethnographer to cover more ground with a wider range of actors than is otherwise possible in many fieldwork scenarios. Because of my decision to not limit myself to any one elderly milieu or neighborhood enclave, I felt an imperative to seek out as many seniors as were willing to talk with me about aging and everyday life. I recruited most people from public forums, referrals from other interviewees, announcements in community newspapers and flyers I was distributing around the city. I did also interview a few of the Gray Pride seniors I had gotten to know over the course of the year I spent with them. But overall, my sights were set on broadening out from my bases of ethnographic operation. Readers can consult the final list of queries I devised after experience necessitated adding questions and

(separated by several days), I count our dialogues as one interview. One interviewee and I had to stop mid-way through our conversation because he was not feeling well that afternoon. I had intended to follow-up with him but forgot to as the weeks went by. A few interviews lasted well under an hour making them feel less “in-depth” than the majority I was collecting. And I interviewed a handful of people who did not currently live in San Francisco—but who had lived in the city at some point and/or had ongoing connections to it through work or social activities.
modifying others while in the field (see Appendix). I should also add that in audio recording my interviews, I believe I was able to listen more carefully to the qualities of what Roland Barthes calls “the grain of the voice” (Barthes 1977) and the acoustic worlds—comprised of laughter, silences, cityscape noises—they took place within (Feld and Brenneis 2004; Kheshti 2005). Obviously no ethnographer can audio or video record every salient moment, making these recordings but one part of my larger ethnographic archive (Marcus 1998). They nonetheless offer an important way of accessing “the everyday,” especially when juxtaposed alongside the after the fact documentary work of fieldnotes (Sanjek 1990).

Thinking through my multi-sited maneuverings with some distance, I can more clearly see the tradeoffs of what at the time seemed like necessary ethnographic moves. In desiring to avoid the pitfalls of the village model of urban ethnography, I unwittingly wound up ignoring the everyday importance of neighborhoods in San Francisco’s multicultural streetscapes. Frances FitzGerald’s description of the city in 1960 still holds true in many respects today—

...though racially and ethnically diverse, the city was not truly integrated. It was low-lying and decentralized: a city of neighborhoods, each with its own main street, its own shops and restaurants. It was a city of villages—Irish, Italian, black, Hispanic, and Chinese. (FitzGerald 1986: 44)

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13 Midway through my research, I was given the opportunity to write a short commentary in which I argued “The elderly are as diverse and heterogeneous as other social groups, so why anthropologists have returned time and time again to the world of the clinic or care facility at the expense of the libraries, cafés, churches, bars and streets where seniors craft intricate lifeworlds for themselves is puzzling to say the least...in privileging such environs we run the risk of contributing to the place-based essentialisms we have critiqued with rigorous reflexivity in recent years. As we have learned to question the bounded Petri dishes that characterized earlier understandings of culture, we should remind ourselves that insights about aging are to be found in a wide range of social worlds.” See Alley (2009).
In a context where many older San Franciscans may spend time close to their neighborhood hubs—due to limited physical and economic "mobility"—I missed the opportunity to work with seniors who navigated a different San Francisco than people like Vivian and Sophia did. Similarly, since I was already spending time with one nonprofit organization, I was especially averse to doing institutional ethnography in another welfarist environ. Here too this orientation facilitated new kinds of inquires while closing doors that may have yielded productive insights nonetheless. “Poor” and low-income seniors regularly rely on a version of the welfare state that is much larger than the popular Social Security and Medicare programs in order to get their basic needs met. Nonprofit organizations function as crucial nodes in the sites where federal and state monies meet charitable affects and elder lifeworlds. Seniors struggling—or even managing—to stay economically afloat know this only too well. My decision to work around the edges of “the aging enterprise” kept me at a distance from the more pronounced socioeconomic frailties I might have encountered in another wing of the local welfare state. Though I did interact with and interview older residents from a range of class and ethnic backgrounds, these ethnographic decisions did lead me to spend more time with San Francisco’s middle-class, Euro-American “young-old.” I was conscious of the boundaries I was constructing while in the field but reasoned that in documenting the perspectives of older San Franciscans grappling with the politics of aging in their everyday lives, I was making an important intervention in a landscape where frailties come in all contours and varieties (see Chapter 1, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4).
I have also begun to see more similarities than differences between Gray Pride and The Senior Class. They both crystallized what might be thought of as *experiments in aging*. In her book *Cities on a Hill*, journalist Frances FitzGerald came to a similar conclusion in her survey of intentional communities in the 1970s and 1980s. Summarizing her endeavors, FitzGerald spoke of “Four different social experiments, then, and four very different new communities…Each community worked out its own destiny quite independently of the others. In many ways they might have lived in different countries” (FitzGerald 1986: 22-23).14 Similarly, Lisa Rofel describes the contemporary scene in China as organized around instabilities “…constituting the social field of desire as *experimental*” (Rofel 2007: 23; emphasis in original). There is a danger here though. Calling something an experiment gives it an aura of vanguardism. Like scientific experiments. Or experimental films. Or experimental ethnography. I have in mind something different. In this dissertation, I offer an ethnography of experiments in aging as unfinished, open-ended acts of collective formation linked closely to the frailties of later life (see Chapter 1).

Arguments, of course, could be made about the unfinished nature of social life in general. Where I believe I have something to contribute is in documenting and unpacking how it is that aging is emerging as a crucial “site” where transformations in public spheres, welfare states and individual lives are being intimately felt and publicly proclaimed in the contemporary United States. When Michel Foucault wrote the first volume of his imagined quartet on the history of sexuality, he creatively

14FitzGerald’s communities were San Francisco’s Castro, Lynchburg’s Liberty Baptist, Florida’s Sun City and Oregon’s Rajneeshpuram.
argued that sex—its discourses and practices—functioned to solidify a burgeoning set of subjectivities and “truths” important to the making of bourgeois modernity in the 19th century (Foucault 1978). I argue that aging might get us to similarly understand the transformations often gathered under the banner of “neoliberalism” taking place in the present. But because I am an ethnographer committed to understanding the dynamic interplay between macrosocial transformations and everyday life in the United States, I do not believe that neoliberalism can be read off of aging America like skimming foam off the top of a frothy cappuccino. In an essay arguing against the easy dismissal of identity politics, James Clifford reminds us of the aporias anthropologists have often brought to the table of cultural critique—

Cultural anthropology has characteristically made two irritating but crucial interventions, calling everyone up short: ‘What else is there?’ ‘Not so fast!’ The discipline pays serious attention to people at the margins: relatively powerless, non-literate or differently literate communities whose particular stories are left out of national or global histories. Of course this professional brief for diversity carries evident risks…But a disposition to perceive and value difference can also be understood not as a reification of otherness but as an awareness of excess, of the unwoven and the discrepant in every dominant system, the ‘constitutive outside’ of even the most hegemonic social or ideological formations. (Clifford 2000: 103)

I leave it up to readers to decide whether I have kept my end of the bargain, interrupting with irritating acumen as Clifford describes our praxis. That older residents (and younger allies) were grappling with how to craft programs, social ties and ordinary lifeworlds speaks to the saliency of aging as a marker of what “community” might start to look like in 21st century America. In what follows, I hope to show how the experimental and the everyday were fused together in the desires, anxieties and perspectives people brought to the prospects of growing older in a city imagined to be perpetually young.
A Roadmap

In the chapters that follow, readers will venture with me into other spheres—“public” and “private”—of aging in San Francisco’s America. Chapter 1, “Frailties,” offers the key set of theoretical framings informing my project. While gerontologists and medical anthropologists have tended to focus on the functional frailties of old age—dementia, limited mobilities and so forth—I place emphasis on considering the frailties that gather around a range of experiences in later life. For many of my informants, the upheavals of everyday life have proven more distressing than the conventional challenges often attributed to old age. At the same time, I found that the lively and robust connections people were crafting were nonetheless revelatory of fragile desires and social bonds in American society. I argue for the need to develop a more expansive understanding of frailty that would accommodate these other realities. In doing so, I turn to work in anthropology and cultural studies that opens up consideration of that which is ephemeral, contingent and transitory in social life.

Chapter 2, “Queer Expertise,” focuses on a particular form of welfarist world-making, based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork with Gray Pride, a nonprofit network of organizations working to build housing and connections for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (or LGBT) seniors in San Francisco. Here I follow the work of dedicated informants eager to position themselves as “experts” around LGBT aging issues both locally and nationally. Gray Pride offered a compelling case study precisely because of its desire to serve older LGBT residents in a city internationally known for its vibrant queer community. At the same time that it was building itself
as the network most poised to address the needs of LGBT seniors, it actively worked to discredit and disavow other local actors working around queer aging issues. Thus, I also analyze how Gray Pride’s expertise was built upon a deep anxiety about their presence out in the world and amongst colleagues encroaching on their welfarist turf.

In Chapter 3, “Lifeworlds,” I turn to four of the several in-depth interviews I conducted with older San Franciscans as I examine the everyday joys and challenges of aging in the city. In this chapter, I place emphasis on the heterogeneity of aging, examining the ways race, class, gender and other life experiences fundamentally shape what it means to grow older. I consider the ongoing relevance of feminist theorizing around the politics of location, drawing on the work of Adrienne Rich (1984), Audre Lorde (1984), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and others as I explore the situated worldings of my informants. In addition to highlighting the life trajectories of my aging interlocutors, I aim to make two important arguments in this chapter. First, that age be figured more centrally in analyses of the intersections of power, privilege and social location. Second, that we understand that said privileges do not necessarily hold constant throughout the life course. Here frailties are made apparent in how older White San Franciscans and seniors of color experience “adventures” and life disruptions that require paying attention to how race and class privileges get unevenly reworked as people age. I also consider how “perspective” privileges “the everyday” as site of survival in a world beset by minor dramas and significant losses.

Chapter 4, “Community,” returns to the key ideas explored throughout my dissertation through a careful analysis of my fieldwork with a group of seniors,
affiliated with a local extended learning program, who were starting to form a “caring community” around members’ lifeworlds. Originally conceived as a study group to discuss aging, their meetings gradually shifted to considerations of how they might be accountable to each other and supportive of their unique circumstances in later life. Reflecting on the exchanges I was privy to, I discuss my informants’ collective conversations as well as their ongoing reticence around defining, once and for all, what form such a community might take. While anthropologists have conventionally approached “community” as the locus of ethnographic fieldwork and the “community study” is a rich tradition in the anthropology of later life, here I take inspiration from recent interrogations of the uses and abuses of “community” as a keyword in social life and cultural analysis (Creed 2006). Rather than interpret the false starts and resistances I witnessed as failed efforts, I argue for a more robust analytics that treats them as integral to how communities come into existence. Akin to Anna Tsing’s (2005) focus on globalization as a series of uneven collaborations, I explore how older Bay Area residents articulate and build community in complex, disjunctured fashion. In the Conclusion, I return to the themes explored throughout this dissertation through the sharing of a few final stories and vignettes as I return to the question of why aging allows us to interrogate the ambivalences surrounding individualist and communitarian values in the United States. Plus, the story inspiring this ethnography’s title comes to light.
Chapter 1 / Frailties

Lessened, impoverished, in exile in the present day, the aged man still remains the man he was. How does he manage to deal with a situation of this kind in his daily life? What opportunities does it leave him? What defenses can he put up? Can he adapt himself to it, and if so at what price?

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*

Why Frailties?

Why frailties? Why now? It may strike the reader as an odd move to want to focus on frailties in a dissertation hoping to unpack the politics of aging in the United States. Popular images of aging circulating in a range of publics demonstrate the marked progress of representations of old people away from the kinds of stereotypes that prompted Robert Butler to coin the term “ageism” in his 1975 book *Why Survive? Being Old in America* (Butler 1975). Images of vital seniors can be spotted in magazines, television commercials and other media catering to a mature clientele. Books, articles and news stories tell us over and over how the “baby boomers” are going to re-imagine work, retirement, aging itself in the coming decades (Dychtwald 1999; Freedman 1999; Roszak 2009). Like any cultural phenomena, the everyday images often point to a wider set of mythologies (Barthes 1972) about autonomy, individuality and self-actualization—important themes in American society. At the same time, the other scenarios of aging, hinging on decline, decrepitude and disease have not disappeared yet from the collective unconscious (Hazan 2000; Alley 2009). Which vision is dominant? “Both” could be a facile way to settle things as I take the reader along on a survey of ambivalences and contradictory representations, pitting
the public vibrancy of Betty White or Jimmy Carter against the melodramatic truths of HBO’s *The Alzheimer’s Tapes*.

Instead let me venture another way to enter the conversation. In lieu of a language of stereotypes that treats them only as manufactured manipulation, sociologist Stuart Hall has argued on behalf of a more critical understanding of representation—

Thus, while not wanting to expand the territorial claims of the discursive indefinitely, how things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation—subjectivity, identity, politics—a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life. (Hall 1996: 165; emphasis in original)

For Hall, sociocultural analysis requires a willingness to think about reality and representation, the semiotic and the sociological as part of any critical interpretive project. In this dissertation I too will be moving between a range of sites and scales as I unpack the logics of aging in the contemporary United States. Readers will encounter vitalities and liveliness amongst many of the older interlocutors I worked with during my fieldwork. But I want to bracket vitality for now so that I can pursue another line of inquiry. What would it mean to take frailty seriously, without denying vitality or giving in to geriatric ennui?

Frailties are weaknesses, lacks, fragile states. Anyone vaguely familiar with the physical and cognitive challenges of old age can easily recognize the reasons behind the multiple identifications of aging with frailty. The pain of arthritis. The slow moving gait that makes crossing a busy intersection an onerous event. The communicative lapses of dementia. So frailties are “real” in those embodied,
corporeal senses that medical anthropologists have urged us to examine (Schepers-Hughes and Lock 1987; Kleinman 1988; Taussig 1992; Martin 1994; Farmer 2003; Biehl 2005; Fassin 2007; Rouse 2009). But they are also socially produced. In a pointed analysis of the logics of care as they pertain to older Americans, Sharon Kaufman argues for the need to understand how lived problems are articulated as medical and welfarist ones (Kaufman 1994). I would extend Kaufman’s arguments about the social construction of frailty to include ordinary perceptions alongside expert knowledges. The obsession with bodily frailties in old age is a key arena where lay and expert visions cohere. In her critique of the dismissal of queer politics to the margins of the “merely cultural,” Judith Butler reads against the grain of a Leftist myopia around recognizing the relations suturing the sexual and the politicoeconomic (Butler 1997). I argue for a similar dynamic at play in considerations of the frailties of later life, rendered as the merely physical. When the challenges of aging are contained to the body’s weaknesses, then interventions can be delivered or denied, depending on the extent of the malady at hand. Said interventions are usually best handled by doctors, nurses and other care workers able to read the losses of old age with biomedical certainty. To be clear, I am not arguing for an absolutist critique of biomedicine along the lines of Ivan Illich, who suggested that all of medicine was iatrogenic in one form or another (Illich 1976). I do take seriously, however, the argument that biomedical knowledge, like any productive knowledge system, brackets out as much as it actively constructs. This is a critique

15 *Iatrogenic* refers to conditions and disorders caused by medical treatments, procedures or therapies.
Lorna Rhodes identifies in the work of scholars like Michael Taussig and Emily Martin when she writes “By placing the body and bodily experience in the realm of nature, biomedicine conceals both the social causes of sickness and the social embeddedness of the experience of sickness” (Rhodes 1990: 168).

The merely physical can obscure as much as it can focus attention. And it can bolster biomedicine in the face of its own failures. A successful therapeutic, surgical or pharmacological intervention restores our faith in the wonders of modern medicine. Yet failure rarely calls biomedical authority into question, malpractice lawsuits notwithstanding. Idiosyncratic physiologies and bodies become one readily available explication. Some interventions just don’t work on some people. Old age itself also provides a kind of perfect alibi for medical praxis, as Andrea Sankar has persuasively argued (Sankar 1984).16 If I have belabored these points, I do so in order to puncture the commonsensical understanding that physical and cognitive decline are the worst things about aging. They can be—and often are—turning points that inaugurate unanticipated suffering and pain for older and younger alike. Recent essays by medical anthropologists Athena McLean, Janelle Taylor and Nancy Schepher-Hughes give voice to the real frailties involved in being a concerned child of parents struggling with age-inflected losses of one kind or another (McLean 2007; Taylor 2008; Schepher-Hughes 2009). Yet were I to write a dissertation that focused

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16According to the anthropologist, “It is possible to resolve the gray areas of medicine that are embodied in old age if treatment is possible. When treatment is not possible, as we shall soon see, then the lack of resolution or certainty confronts the physician…A health problem is redefined as something beyond the scope of medicine and attributable to old age, to nature” (256).
only on these sentiments and scenarios, I would be missing a much larger landscape of realities, desires and double binds. I am indebted to the work of anthropologists who have taken seriously the myriad ways that biomedical knowledge and clinical practice position the frailties of age as productive to think and intervene with. In particular, Margaret Lock, Lawrence Cohen and Sharon Kaufman have all ventured across multiple field sites in their efforts to understand how aging is made into a set of sociomedical problematics in Japan, India and the United States (Lock 1993; Cohen 1998; Kaufman 2006 and 2011; Leibing and Cohen 2006). They have never settled for the merely physical. I will be following in their footsteps while also taking a different path, one that deliberately sidesteps medicine and its affiliated sites of health/care.

In this dissertation, I start from a different place of inquiry, one that neither begins nor ends with biomedical or gerontological imaginaries. Rather than starting with the proposition that aging is good for science and medicine to think with and then entering “the field” to unpack discourses and practices, I pursue a different set of tactics. Drawing on situated, ethnographic fieldwork, I examine those spheres and heterotopias (Foucault 1986) of the contemporary United States wherein aging is made public, focusing on welfare work, popular culture and everyday life. In all honesty, questions of longevity, health and wellness are often given voice in these spheres, reminding us that the politics of health cannot be contained to the clinic. But I read such articulations as a kind of banal biosociality—not the dramatic, neoliberal worldings of biomedicine often privileged in medical anthropology and sociology.
Instead, I advocate a more interesting analytics of aging that stays attuned to how ordinary social actors struggle to make sense of aging from the situated knowledges (Haraway 1991) they bring to the table. Such knowing includes the personal stories articulated in interviews and informal conversations. Or the entrepreneurial and welfarist maneuverings of queer advocates. Or the efforts to create “community” in situations where the meanings of community itself are up for grabs. Frailties are my name for those sociocultural dynamics most salient in understanding the contemporary politics of aging. They reference weaknesses and lacks as mentioned above. But they also point to what is ephemeral, contingent, fragile, transitory. In what follows, I intend to further flesh out this argument, focusing on these other renderings of frailty in anthropology and cultural studies. From the start, there is a promiscuity at play in my readings, bringing together disparate texts I deem worthy of analytic discussion under the banner of frailties. This is not a literature review where I carefully take the reader through a set of genealogies of historical pertinence to the present. Genealogies are important, but what I offer here is more akin to Elizabeth Povinelli’s use of the term in her amazing essay “Notes on Gridlock: Genealogy, Intimacy, Sexuality.” Povinelli offers an intricate reading of intimacy through the lens of kinship analysis, Australian Aboriginal politics, gay and lesbian families and Jean Genet’s novel Querelle (Povinelli 2002). Like Povinelli, I am interested in history, but not teleology. In traversing across texts and historical moments, my aim is to open up consideration of how frailties might get us to approach the anthropology of aging with critical creativity.
Other Frailties

Anthropologists have often been figured and figured themselves as those who write about the marginalized, the dispossessed and abject, making frailties part and parcel of our praxis. The elderly have entered this pantheon of subaltern subjects in recent decades, but there have been important precedents as Lawrence Cohen’s critical review has shown (Cohen 1994). Within social and cultural anthropology, age often served as analytic proxy for the discipline’s key objects of inquiry, including kinship structures, political hierarchies, psychological orientations and social change (Mead 1929 and 1970; Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Simmons 1945; Wilson 1951; Spencer 1965; Myerhoff and Simic 1978; Keith 1980; Kertzer and Keith 1984). When Margaret Clark articulated her sense of a critical absence of a literature on aging, her insights were tied less to systematically revisiting the classics than to advancing a vision for anthropology’s role in the burgeoning field of gerontology (Clark 1967). If the homeostatic reproduction of social life figures prominently in the classic ethnographic texts, my focus on frailties resonates with the shift away from the bounded, consensual, holistic understandings of “culture” anthropologists have been urging (Segal and Yanagisako 2005; Rabinow and Marcus 2008). But before I

17 In one of her quintessential polemics, Nancy Scheper-Hughes offers an image of the ethnographer as chronicler of frailty. She writes “I have an image, taken from John Berger (1967), of the ethnographer/witness as the ‘clerk of the records.’ The village clerk listens, observes, and records the minutiae of human lives. The clerk can be counted on to remember key events in the personal lives and in the life history of the community and to keep confidences, knowing when to speak and when to keep silent. The ethnographer/witness as clerk is a minor historian of the ordinary lives of people often presumed to have no history” (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 419).

18 Cohen identifies three crucial directions for the field he calls “geroanthropology”—“...a phenomenological focus on experience, embodiment, and identity; a critical focus on the
press this point further, I want to take the reader on a survey of some ethnographic
depictions of frailty.

One kind of frailty revolves around the accumulated dramas of the life course.

In her ethnography of later life amongst elderly Jews in Venice, California in the
1970s, Barbara Myerhoff offered a poignant illustration of this (Myerhoff 1980).

Working intimately with a group of Ashkenazi elders situated at a local senior center,
Myerhoff developed an analysis focusing on the social dramas and definitional
ceremonies she witnessed during her fieldwork.19 Privileging performance in her
interpretations of her informants’ lifeworlds, Myerhoff situated her analyses against a
backdrop of familial and everyday neglect—

Their culture was able to emerge as fully as it did because of the elders’ isolation
from family and the outside world, ironically, the very condition that causes them
much grief. Yet, by this separation, they were freed to find their own way, just as
their children had been. Now they could indulge their passion for things of the past,
enjoy Yiddishkeit without fear of being stigmatized as ‘not American.’ With little
concern for public opinion, with only each other for company, they revitalized
selected features of their common history to meet their present needs, adding and
amending it without concern for consistency, priority, or ‘authenticity.’ (9)

Myerhoff was keen to focus on the rejuvenating aspects of elderly sociality as a
defense against the frailties of their marginalization in youth-centric America.20 But
the past weighed as heavily upon her informants as the present. References to urban

dependencies and hegemonies through which aging is experienced and represented; and an
interpretative focus on examining the relevance of the ethnographer’s age to the forms of
19Her work was deeply influenced by the symbolic anthropology of Victor Turner, whose
ideas I discuss further in Chapter 4. See Turner (1967 and 1995).
20In addition they provided a model of an alternative life-style, built on values in many ways
antithetical to those commonly esteemed by contemporary Americans. The usual markers of
success were anathema to them—wealth, power, physical beauty, youth, mobility, security,
social status—all were out of the question. Lacking hope for change, improvement, without a
future, they had devised a counterworld, inventing their own version of what made ‘the good
life’” (20).
redevelopment, anti-Semitism and “survivor’s guilt” are offered to contextualize and punctuate the present. Though I take issue with her exclusive focus on the senior center, wanting a more fleshed out interpretation of the broader “community” and cultural logics at play, there is still much to value in Myerhoff’s project. Here frailty would be one way of describing the confluences of old age, Jewish “otherness” and an Eastern European neighborhood on the wane in sunny, redeveloped California. The anthropologist does not render frailty as absolute helplessness, but compromised belonging. Myerhoff’s interpretive insights lie with her ability to see the creative refashioning of Jewish traditions alongside the challenges of aging in place. I thus read her as an Eriksonian ethnographer attuned to how the dramas of old age built upon and reworked the experiences of the entire life course.21

Working in the West Bengal region of northern India, Sarah Lamb foregrounds the frailties of personhood in her analyses of aging (Lamb 2000). Lamb details the intricate ties of attachment that are gathered linguistically as maya, referring to the “…web of attachments, affections, jealousies, and love that in Bengalis’ eyes make up social relations” (28). The attachments of maya are multiple, including not only feelings about others but “…substantial or bodily connections as well. Persons see themselves as substantially part of and tied to the people, belongings, land, and houses that make up their personhoods and lived-in worlds” (116; emphases in original). Her informants repeatedly narrate that what makes aging

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21Erik Erikson was the renowned psychologist who hypothesized that psychosocial life could be divided into key stages of development, with their attendant conflicts requiring successful resolution by subjects as they age.
especially difficult is letting go of the affective connections to people, places and objects accumulated over the course of many years. Though Bengali villagers do acknowledge the bodily changes that accompany aging, it is the ties of maya that prove to be personally and socially distressful. She argues that “…a central problem of aging was not how to maintain family ties that threatened to be too loose but how to loosen bonds—to kin, places, things, one’s own body—that had become very tight” (115). Frailties here are not about lack but deep connections and affective excess. “They perceive old age as a paradoxical time of life, when relations are the most fragile but the pulls of maya the strongest” (115). Lamb goes on to describe the everyday routines whereby villagers attempt to cut these ties, including moving spatially to the periphery of the household, going on religious pilgrimages, cultivating argumentative personalities or just loitering elsewhere. She makes the crucial point that these are concerns of mostly upper caste Bengalis—who have acquired more material possessions and symbolic capital—but doesn’t develop her analysis further, possibly owing to her intimate insertion in a Brahman household during her fieldwork. Like Margaret Lock (1993), Lamb situates old age within the larger context of the gendered life course, reminding anthropologists to take heed of continuities in our discussions of later life. The everyday pangs of premature grief voiced by her informants—as well as the scandalous refusals of some to give up their worldly attachments in advanced age—force us to seriously question ontologies of
old age predicated on loss *sans* agency. Frailties name the third space of that dialectic.\textsuperscript{22}

Yet Lamb also echoes Myerhoff’s suggestion that nearness to death is what gives the dilemmas faced by the old a poignant saliency, an argument that seems equal parts existential leap and ethnographic interpretation. Ruth Behar (1996) offers a more convincing articulation of similar claims in an essay exploring the meanings of death in rural Spain (and her own family). Talking with aging villagers in Santa María del Monte, Behar gives us an intimate snapshot of changing attitudes and practices that she maps onto a modernizing Spain where disappearing lives are intimately related to disappearing ways of life. She narrates the transition from clerical to medical death as an instantiation of Spain’s transition to a cosmopolitan, “European” version of capitalist modernity. Rural exodus, a widespread demographic transition in many quarters throughout the 1960s and 1970s, has created dispersed kinship networks, forcing residents of Santa María to improvise what were once communitarian rituals around dying. Urban hospitals have built chapels where wakes can be held (during specified hours) while the Catholic Church, in the wake of Vatican II, has also sanctioned the transition away from “anachronistic” customs. In one interview with a priest, Behar relates his disavowal of the melodramatic mourning characteristic of an earlier period of funerals. We learn of how masses for the souls of individual loved ones are arranged by family members in the absence of collective praying for the departed that was previously a feature of the local liturgical

\textsuperscript{22}See Jonathan Rutherford’s interview with Homi Bhabha for further elucidation of “the third space” in postcolonial critique (Rutherford 1990).
calendar. Behar finds final confirmation of the transition from collective to individual in the tombs and cement niches that have overtaken the unmarked graves of the village cemetery. She argues—

These tombs bore witness to the influence of urban notions of space, of nuclearized family living, and of the denial of death. The plots on which the tombs were placed were bought, becoming the private, and permanent, property of the family that purchased them. (66)

And about the niches, she writes—

What strikes me as radical about the niches in the Santa María context is that they are a cruel symbol of finality, of death not as the regeneration of life but as the end of life, in this case the end of a particular, agricultural way of life. The niches seem to embody a collective realization that a continuity has been broken; that there won’t be a next generation to gather the harvest…But I was also struck by the way this cement structure so pregnant with a collective readiness for death was a strange kind of monument—a self-chosen monument—to the awaited passing of the last villagers who stayed behind to till the soil. (67-68)

The problematic romanticism in Behar’s account is obviously present. I do not need to revisit the critiques of the “salvage” impulse in anthropology to point out that Santa María may very well have a future beyond the ethnographic present of the late 1980s. Though the analytic dyad of tradition versus modernity overdetermines her arguments, Behar brings us back to some of the key insights of the older ethnographic literature. The anthropology of aging is not content with simply recording the stories of older informants but is committed to unpacking the social vis-à-vis the generational. Her illustration of the intertwined linkages between aging villagers, urban migration, religious praxis, symbolic capital and medicalized modernity is cogent and rich. Frailties come alive in a story that revolves around the dead.

Behar’s essay highlights a key tactic employed by anthropologists working critically around the edges of aging. Aging informants often enter the ethnographic
frame as key interlocutors in tracking social transformation more broadly. These are projects wherein the ethnographer has privileged other spheres of investigation, arriving at a nuanced perspective on aging refracted through other scales of analysis. Melissa Caldwell compellingly shows how an ethnography of postsocialism can proceed from examining what she identifies as “…Muscovites’ everyday survival practices” (Caldwell 2004: xii). Caldwell focuses on a series of soup kitchens operated by the Christian Church of Moscow, which brings elderly pensioners and volunteers from North America, Europe and Africa into regular contact with each other. Rather than a mere institutional ethnography, Caldwell situates the soup kitchens in a larger ecology of support, reciprocity and survival amongst older Muscovites.23 Fraillties are ever present where economic resources are perpetually tight and “making do” is the strategy Russians have had to cultivate in both the past and present. Though she is careful to not position her book as an ethnography of aging, Caldwell’s older interlocutors nonetheless figure centrally in her analyses of the politics of social welfare. In a situation whereby Russia’s uneven integration into the global economy has highlighted the centrality of interpersonal ties and networks in surviving food and cash shortages, older Muscovites become the privileged spokespersons for the contingencies of postsocialist progress. Her informants regularly critique the receding commitments to collectivist social support they witness

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23She writes “Public assistance programs such as soup kitchens, senior citizens’ centers, job training programs, and cultural events are still one more set of strategies nestled within this larger repertoire of everyday survival skills. In most cases, social welfare is not intended to replace other forms of income, assistance, and personal connections, but rather to supplement and enhance them” (54).
as much as they skillfully procure the affective ties they hope to be able to call upon when needed. Yet unlike rational actors pursuing their own self-interest with savvy abandon, there are breakdowns in the established systems of exchange that force people to question the meanings of “trust” or “friendship.” The anthropologist documents disputes involving accusations of people gaming the system or otherwise benefiting themselves above and beyond the logics of gifting and exchange. The instability of these gestures highlights the precariousness of contemporary Russia for many. Caldwell deftly illustrates how frailty has multiple inflections. It indexes the imperfect solidarity encapsulated in the aforementioned breaches in reciprocity. It also is the dominant semiotics of charitable intervention the CCM soup kitchens circulate amongst congregants, donors and volunteers. Reports on the severity of “hunger” and “poverty” in Russia abound during Caldwell’s fieldwork despite the fact that soup kitchen recipients regularly invoke the robust networks of social support available to them—including the CCM cafeterias themselves. Caldwell thus offers up a nuanced ethnography in which the old “talk back” to the imagined lacks that fail to fully account for the frailties in everyday life that truly matter.

If Caldwell’s informants successfully and strategically network amongst one another, James Ferguson details the limits of intimate management in his ethnography of modernity’s disappointments in the Zambian Copperbelt region (Ferguson 1999). Ferguson narrates the difficulties faced by former mineworkers who are caught between bifurcating narratives of “urban” and “rural” as they struggle to forge livelihoods following retirement. The options available to his informants are limited
owing to economic transformations since the 1980s that have made postretirement employment in the cities along the Copperbelt untenable. As a result, many older mineworkers contemplate “returning” to rural homes they have had little contact with during their working years. Ferguson documents the dread of retirees as the failure of cosmopolitan urbanites to cultivate durable connections with rural kin starts to loom large in their plans for the future. The neglect of kinship ties over the course of a working life leaves many forced to reckon with a debt that urban living has only “temporarily” protected them from. Once “back home,” limited finances, difficult agricultural work and the threats of deadly harm from rural family and neighbors all conspire against many of his interlocutors. In a series of ten case studies—including pleading excerpts from letters written to Ferguson—the ethnographer illustrates the imperfect compromises and real deprivations facing the men he interviewed. “Some managed the transition reasonably successfully…others fell by the wayside, sometimes ending up hungry, ragged, and almost destitute” (164). Countering the impulse to see agency in the patchwork livelihoods they piece together, Ferguson argues “…it also seems important to take note of the overwhelming fact that many people were not managing to cope” (165). For Ferguson, like Kaufman, frailties are socially produced—in this case, mandatory retirement at age 55 and a local urban economy actively working against any worker wishing to “stay” in town. His injunction to read contingencies as threatening to aging actors is an important rejoinder to many of the readings I am putting forth in this chapter. At the end of this
chapter and again in Chapter 3, I share some of the in-depth conversations I had with older San Franciscans struggling with their own versions of “chosen” compromises.

If ethnography teaches us anything, it is that frailties are integral to social life. Scholars working within and along the edges of cultural studies have pursued this analytic insight with critical aplomb in recent years. A resurgence of the essayistic impulse has found its way into cultural critique, illuminating a desire on the part of many authors to shed light on the contemporary moment through a willingness to engage with what is frail. More than a genre of philosophic discourse, the essayistic is a mode of what I call writing aloud, a way of investigating that approximates the thinking aloud one associates with a lecture or animated conversation. This writing aloud would come close to what Jean-Pierre Gorin describes as the central leitmotif of the essayistic in cinema, a being thrown into intimate contact with the way someone articulates and thinks.24 These essayistic endeavors complement the aforementioned ethnographic lessons through their epistemological openness to the ephemeral in content as well as form.25

I turn first to Isabelle Stengers, who writes critically about the need to acknowledge the frailties often disavowed in knowledge practices and political

25In “The Essay as Form” Theodor Adorno argues in defense of the essay’s unruly epistemological work. He writes “The essay does not play by the rules of organized science and theory, according to which, in Spinoza’s formulation, the order of things is the same as the order of ideas…In particular, it rebels against the doctrine, deeply rooted since Plato, that what is transient and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy—that old injustice done to the transitory, whereby it is condemned again in the concept” (Adorno 1991: 10).
interventions. In her essay “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” she evokes the figure of the idiot—borrowed from Fyodor Dostoevsky and Gilles Deleuze—as a foil to the norms of collective theorization and action. Idiocy in Stenger’s universe is a way to “slow down’ reasoning” in order to suggest “there is something more important” without knowing exactly the full extent of that other scene of import (Stengers 2005: 994). She argues the following—

In the term cosmopolitical, cosmos refers to the unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable. This is opposed to the temptation of a peace intended to be final, ecumenical...It is a matter of imbuing political voices with the feeling that they do not master the situation they discuss, that the political arena is peopled with shadows of that which does not have a political voice, cannot have or does not want to have one...It raises the question of the way in which the cry of fright or the murmur of the idiot can be heard ’collectively,’ in the assemblage created around a political issue. (995-996)

Stengers pushes for a politics of recognition whereby the frailties of unnamed actors, forces and constituents can be brought into the cosmopolitical fold. She argues against a well-intentioned liberalism eager to hear from the voices of the affected others as long as its self-assurance remains unchallenged. In recent decades, as citizens and social movements have come to question the unmarked authority of experts, government bodies have adopted a similar set of rhetorics around “community” input in policymaking. This kind of constituent feedback is at odds with Stengers’ project. To further elucidate her arguments, she introduces two additional figures—the expert and the diplomat. She tells us “Experts are the ones whose practice is not threatened by the issue under discussion since what they know is accepted as relevant” (1002). They operate in distinctive contrast to diplomats who “...are there to provide a voice for those whose practice, whose mode of existence
and whose identity are threatened by a decision. ‘If you decide that, you’ll destroy us’” (1002). Here Stengers introduces the specter of an angry standoff that is precisely the overdetermined version of democracy she is arguing against. “Politics ‘as usual’ is besieged by dramatic either/or alternatives that slice up our imaginations” (1002). Rather than a conceptual contradiction, I see her introduction of this distinction as integral to her critique of the polite violence of liberal deliberation. She closes with considering the work of another actor—the witness—who may be called upon as proxy for the idiots who prefer to be left alone, “…not arguing in their names but conveying what it may feel like to be threatened by an issue that one has nothing to contribute to” (1003). For Stengers, a cosmopolitics worth defending has to be able to account for the absent presence of parties whose livelihoods are always at stake in the most consensual of interventions. As a philosopher creatively working through the aporias of expertise and representation, I draw inspiration from her work. In Chapter 2, I explore these dynamics further through an ethnographic examination of the coming into being of a particular kind of aging expertise.

Yet if Stengers argues for an accountability towards the unknown, Paul Gilroy names that unknown as the postcolonial stranger in his recent examination of contemporary race politics. In *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), Gilroy paints a bleak picture of the ongoing dramas of race thinking in the postimperial present. He takes readers on a survey of thinking around race in the modern era—discussing W.E.B. DuBois, Carl Schmidt, Frantz Fanon, George Orwell, Jean-Paul Sartre
amongst others—before moving on to considerations of multicultural modernity in Britain. Gilroy revisits Sigmund Freud as cultural critic in his attention to White Britain’s inability to fully mourn its former imperial glory. Throughout, he unpacks instance after instance of a pathological reticence to address the legacies of racism and imperialism shaping the nation at century’s start. But rather than inhabiting the space of the melancholic himself in his diagnoses, Gilroy latches on to moments whereby neurotic nationalism way be giving way to what he calls a “‘vulgar’ or ‘demotic’ cosmopolitanism” (67). In the arena of transnational human rights work, he finds a “cosmopolitan solidarity” (80) in the work of young British and American activists serving as critical witnesses to Israeli militarism in the occupied territories otherwise known as Palestine. On the plane of popular culture, Gilroy sees possibility in a kind of postracial hedonism in the songs of The Streets, the racialized performances of Sacha Baron Cohen and the “ordinary hybridity” (120) of club (sub)cultures. At stake for Gilroy is another kind of cosmopolitical possibility—a cosmopolitan ethos that is antiracist, globally oriented and welcoming all at once. Some may question the suturing of such disparate scenes, warning against the dangers of conflating these varied theatrics into some kind of insurgent, cosmopolitan utopia. The dangers of the euphoria that accompanied discussions of globalization in the 1990s—another moment when pop culture and postnational politics excited the

26 About The Streets—a British rap/garage band—he writes “In The Streets’ playful ontology, race is not an identity that can fix or contain individuals; it is a practice that can be understood through a comparison with the strategic choice of drug that a variety of person opts for in a particular situation: “whether you’re white or black; smoke weed, chase brown, toot rock” (96).
intellectual imaginary—are there no doubt. But I read Gilroy as interested less in utopias than in what he calls “…the chaotic pleasures of the convivial postcolonial urban world” (151). Convivial and urban are an interesting juxtaposition, especially in light of the longstanding rendering of the city as inhospitable habitat, from Georg Simmel to Mike Davis. Therein lies the frailty of Britain’s multiculturalism. The city is the place where racialized violence can erupt yet is also the site of “a liberating sense of the banality of intermixture” and the “subversive ordinariness” of everyday life (150). Gilroy’s optimism is on tenuous ground, but still worth taking seriously in its attention to the antiracist affinities and sardonic solidarities being crafted from the ground up as it were.

Gilroy’s postcolonial urbanism resonates with Gayatri Spivak’s reading of Alice Attie’s photographs of Harlem in a moment of transition (Spivak 2004). But “Harlem,” the title of Spivak’s musings, offers us not a vision of cosmopolitan possibility, but a series of scenes of urban erasure. The duplicity of redevelopment is noted early on. “Since the 1990s, Harlem has been the focus of major economic ‘development’...Part of the ‘development’ package seems to be an invocation of a seamless community and culture marking the neighborhood, on left and right…the American dream” (116). Pressing further, she writes “Here on the Upper West Side of New York, the question becomes: in the face of class-divided racial diversity, who fetishizes culture and community?” (116). She purposefully asks Attie to give her images to look over without any human figures. “The humanism of human faces, especially in a time of mandatory culturalism, guarantees evidentiary
memories…Therefore I asked for shots that inscribe collectivities and mark the
time of change” (119). Spivak then takes the reader through Attie’s photographs
as a curator might, lending her characteristically rhizomatic reasoning to Attie’s
haunting prints. Shots of fences, abandoned buildings, storefronts, graffiti—“WAKE
UP, BLACK MAN”—make up the exhibition. Spivak does not play semiotician in
her essay. She does not analyze framing, lighting, angles and so forth in order to
unpack the latent meanings in the artist’s work. Rather, she asks the reader to pause
with her on each photograph while she weaves in other tales and histories. Dublin,
Hong Kong, Ghana and Kolkata all are part of a larger map of memories and
international wanderings. There is a politics here, not merely a flâneurist exploring,
as evidenced by her consideration of W.E.B. DuBois’ Pan-African period. “We must
place Harlem in the world if we want to claim antiglobalism” (125). The essayistic
flourishes in Spivak’s prose as she critiques the desire for authenticity in the
municipal—read variously as corporate and “dominant”—archivization of Harlem.
She articulates an urgency to her endeavor—“How do we memorialize the event? As
‘culture’ runs on, how do we catch its vanishing track, its trace? How does it affect
me as a New Yorker? Has the dominant made it impossible to touch the fragility of
that edge?” (117). The subjective “I” that figures in Spivak’s essay is striking as it
comes from a critic who rarely positions herself thusly in her writings. The
photographs compel that “I” to register herself. There is something similar at play in
Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida, wherein he discusses the distinction between
“studium” and “punctum.” Studium refers to the normative realism of photography
while punctum is described as “…sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (Barthes 1981: 27). The frailties of Harlem’s presents and futures have similarly affected Spivak, exposing the critic to a reflexivity about her location as a “New Yorker” throughout. This is an important move for a scholar usually writing from the standpoint of verbose certainty. Analysis here moves along multiple scales, employing the textual and visual in the service of critique sans closure.

Adorno’s salvaging of the ephemeral finds common ground in Spivak’s Harlem.

If Spivak focuses on the photographic still, Kathleen Stewart gives us the still life as vehicle for interpretative praxis in her book Ordinary Affects (2007). Taking the quotidian spirit of Michel de Certeau’s work (1984) into the diners, freeways, gated communities, liquor stores, news cycles of the contemporary United States, Stewart gives us a rendering of the everyday that is uncanny and poignant throughout. She describes her book as “…an experiment, not a judgment” (1) before going on to delineate the meanings informing her title—

Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation. They can be funny, perturbing, or traumatic…Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible…At once abstract and concrete, ordinary affects are more directly compelling than ideologies, as well as more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than symbolic meanings. (2-3)

From vignette to vignette, Stewart offers a tactile rendering of affect that she characterizes using the language of circuits, daydreams, flows and reactions. “The ordinary is a circuit that’s always tuned in to some little something somewhere. A
mode of attending to the possible and the threatening, it amasses the resonance in things” (12). Here the essayistic and the ethnographic are one and the same, but crafted in a very different register than “thick description” (Geertz 1973). In a follow-up essay, Stewart discusses Eve Sedgwick’s (1997) notion of “weak theory” as theoretical inspiration—“Theory that comes unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters, or becomes undone by its attention to things that don’t just add up but take on a life of their own as problems for thought” (Stewart 2008: 72; emphasis in original). More than any recent exercise in experimental ethnography, Stewart pushes for a coming to terms with the fundamental frailties of social life and anthropological analysis. Frailties and affects keep us attuned to the precarious nature of knowledge production. Though Stewart takes this sensibility to the edges of ethnographic representation, I don’t read her project as a disavowal of other ways of researching and knowing in anthropology. Hers is not the kind of endeavor one could (or would want to) repeat in another milieu. Rather, Stewart’s work argues there are analytic advantages in opening towards the uncanny without demanding cultural coherence or ideological integrity from said encounters.²⁷

Finally, any consideration of frailties has to reckon with Lauren Berlant’s compelling work on affect and the American imaginary. In “Cruel Optimism” (2006), she offers readings of three literary texts as a way to delve into the affective

conundrums that she names with her essay’s title. In Berlant’s universe, affects are sets of relationships to the self and the world through desire. She writes “When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us” (20). There is an intimacy at play here “…insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us while others not so much” (20). The idea that motivations have both conscious and unconscious sources is, of course, a key psychoanalytic tenet. Continuing, she describes “cruel optimism” as “…a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (21) before staging the present she wants to unpack—

My assumption is that the conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world, even of relative wealth as in the U.S., are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject and that the irony—that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it—has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the ‘technologies of patience’ or lag that keep these processes in place...exuberant attachments keep ticking, not like the time bomb they might be but like a white noise machine that provides assurance that what seems like threat or static really is, after all, a rhythm people can enter into while they’re dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world. (23)

Attrition. Violence. Dithering. Tottering. Testing. Here the literary critic herself offers a literary rendition of the brutal and banal in American life, key themes she returns to again and again in her work. Like Fredric Jameson, her critique is aimed

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28The texts are an untitled poem about suburban ennui, a short story about race, money and upward mobility (“Exchange Value”) and a novel that places The Wizard of Oz at its intertextual center (Was)—all quintessentially American in one way or another.

29In her “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” the public lives of obesity become an opportunity for Berlant to revisit crucial conversations around sovereignty, biopolitics and capitalism in the contemporary era. See Berlant (2007).
at allegorical messaging, though her \textit{zeitgeist} goes unnamed (Jameson 1991). She argues forcefully against any investment in a world without ambivalence or utopian exit strategies narrated as agency. “The vague futurities of normative optimism produce small self-interruptions as the utopias of structural inequality…but shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world” (35). There is an ordinary schizophrenia to these maneuvers, not the pathos of existentialist doubt in modernist art and literature. But Berlant also recounts explosively psychotic scenes where the actors involved are unable to effectively incorporate utopian strivings into a larger lifeworld beset with deep disregard. Frailties simmer below the surface and have the potential to burst forth wildly in moments of imagining that things could be different. Berlant is far less sanguine than the other authors I’ve discussed, refusing to recuperate frailties into optimism, which is how I read her take on it as cruel. Her desire to hold onto critique as a negative endeavor has resonances with the work of the Frankfurt School as well as Ferguson’s aforementioned rebuke that “…it also seems important to take note of the overwhelming fact that many people were not managing to cope” (1999: 165). That negative orientation is an important stance because it interrupts commonsensical views and interventions as Stengers has shown. The idea that all actions on behalf of the old are good or unproblematic is a quotidian ethos in the welfare worlds I’ve moved in the years leading up to and during research. In engaging with Berlant’s affective cynicism, I want to keep her bracketing of optimism in play as I move through the ethnographic material that I introduce in subsequent chapters.
Frail Others

My choice of frailties as an interpretive focus for this dissertation comes directly from my fieldwork. Over the course of my research, I encountered instances or heard stories—again and again—of frailties of one sort or another. Reading Stewart, I cannot help thinking that her project and my research could have gone on endlessly in the cataloguing of life’s precarious moments. If the ethnographer expects to encounter frailties in the field, s/he nonetheless experiences instances of contact that strike him or her like Barthes’s punctum or Stewart’s intensities. In some instances, these frailties were readily apparent. In others, the weaving together of a set of life stories gradually opened up consideration of those moments when life went astray. Ethnographic empathy is an orientation all fieldworkers have to cultivate—whether “studying up” or becoming “vulnerable observer.” But the moments where that empathy gets put to the test are indicative of one’s own frailties and strengths as an ethnographer, opening up unanticipated exchange and interpretations along the way. In what follows, I narrate instances where I came face to face with frailties during the course of casual conversation, interviewing or just hanging out. In Chapter 3, I draw on my interviews with older San Franciscans as I examine the everyday joys and challenges of aging in the city, interrogating how race, class, gender and other life experiences crucially shape the meanings of growing older. Here I give readers a preliminary introduction to the quotidian frailties I return to in that chapter.

On Larry
Sometimes frailties reveal themselves in the most pleasant of conversations. It was an early April evening in 2009 when I met Larry at one of the bars frequented by older gay men in the city. A White, gay man, in his middle to late 60s, Larry’s quiet demeanor was offset perfectly by his sartorial style, an ensemble made up of comfortable pants, a short sleeve top and a Stetson hat perched perfectly atop his head. Looking him over, one would guess he had just come in for a refreshing beverage after a long day out on the golf course. I started off talking about how great the weather was and Larry told me how I had the best seat in the bar, as I could see directly out onto the passersby coming and going from every direction. I concurred, mentioning the great people watching opportunities where I was situated. He talked a little about a meeting he was at earlier of the committee hosting his upcoming high school reunion and how it was fun catching up with people who hadn’t been to any of the previous reunions. Over the course of the next hour, Larry and I casually chatted while I inquired into his background and thoughts on gay life. As is typical of bars, our conversation was supplemented by asides, interjections and detours offered by others.

Larry was a native San Francisco who had lived in the city his entire life. When I asked him what the most noticeable changes he had witnessed over the decades had been, he refused my conversational bait, perhaps because the changes had been both too subtle and too dramatic to instantaneously talk about. He retired early in 1998 from his job working as an educator with the developmentally disabled. Larry initially thought he was going to become a social worker but wound up
unexpectedly building this other career. In addition to his work as an educator, he pursued occasional stints in the real estate industry, which allowed him to supplement his income over the years. He humorously recalled the anxiety he initially experienced upon retiring, as he asked himself, “What am I going to do on Monday?” He decided to take an entire month off and was able to ease into retirement due to being asked to do some consulting work by his former employer. We talked a little about current events and how Larry was thoroughly supportive of President Obama but also harbored nascent fears that someone might try to assassinate him. He talked about being scared during the campaign that someone was going to kill him and how because everyone was so behind the newly elected President, it’d be devastating if something happened. Other minor topics informed our conversational exchange, including the interior décor that made the bar feel more like cozy pub than urban happy hour pit stop.

As we continued talking, our conversation shifted towards Larry’s partner of 20 years Steve. They were registered as official domestic partners before Steve passed away, Larry intoned with deadpan affect, “…six years ago last Wednesday” due to illness. He talked about how his friends were so accepting of the relationship he and Steve had, positioning their coupledom as a microcosm of shifting cultural attitudes. In response to my query around what the most striking changes he had witnessed in SF were, he posited a congruence between the accepting circle of friends he and Steve had in their lives and the ways that straight society had become more accepting of queer people. When I asked Larry his thoughts on gay marriage, it was
an abstract question for him that he couldn’t quite get his mind around. Again, he
talked of the wonderful 20 years he had with his partner and added, “I don’t know
what to think, because Steve’s not around…And it’s something we would have talked
about.” In other words, it wasn’t an “I” question, it was a “we” conversation. Steve
was gone, so when Larry said he didn’t know what he would do or think he meant he
didn’t know what they would do or think. As I listened attentively to the heartfelt
articulation of love and loss coming from Larry, I had to actively hold back tears from
welling up in my face. I wound up getting up to use the bathroom and was able to
compose myself before returning to my seat. We chatted a little further until an
attractive, masculine guy interrupted us in order to sell us both raffle tickets for an
upcoming fundraiser benefiting two local HIV/AIDS organizations. Unfortunately,
as I got interpellated into the flirty energy of the raffle ticket vendor, I missed seeing
Larry get up off his stool and slip away into the night.

On Paula

Sometimes frailties interrupt the everyday, asking for recognition. On my
way to meet a colleague for drinks in the city’s Mission district, I received a message
that she was running late, giving me the opportunity to wander around a bit on a
sunny afternoon. It was shortly thereafter that I encountered Paula. An older White
woman, visibly disheveled, with a huge bruise on her face, I initially read her as a
homeless person and was not surprised when she asked me for help getting something
to eat when she approached. Homelessness was such a regular feature of the
cityscape that one could ignore a hungry plea like Paula’s and not give it a moment’s
further thought. I remember walking near downtown in the later part of my fieldwork and thinking to myself “This is a mean city” as I moved amongst crowds jostling past each other, eager to bypass the poverty and homelessness embodied by those less fortunate flâneurs wandering the streets.

Though I hesitated and could have walked on, passing the time in a bookstore or other shop, I found myself face to face with real frailty. And so I decided to slow down and buy Paula something to drink and a muffin at a café a few steps away from where we were standing. I sat and talked with her awhile, subsequently piecing together parts of her story based on notes I quickly jotted down after taking leave of her. Paula was 63 years old and had been living in San Francisco a little over a year, after spending 22 years in New York City. She had gone to school at San Francisco State University, got her undergraduate degree and entered the working world shortly after college. After working in real estate she wound up running her own flower shop in Marin which, she told me with subtle pride, was still in existence. Paula mentioned that she was living on Social Security, probably all the income she had considering her less than ideal circumstances. Based on this and the references she made about her congregate living situation, I made the assumption she was living in a single room occupancy (SRO) residential hotel nearby. Paula then told me about being a recent

30SROs are rooms in older residential hotels that are the cheapest form of rental housing available in the city. Usually consisting of a single room with a bed and bureau, cooking, bathing and restroom facilities are all shared amongst other residents in dormitory fashion. Though some have been rehabilitated in recent years, the older slang moniker of “fleabag hotels” still accurately describes many of them. They are home to the poorest San Franciscans—including seniors, people of color, mentally ill persons, “alcoholics” and “drug users”—many of who would be homeless otherwise.
victim of theft where she was living. Both her money and shoes were stolen, forcing her to borrow slippers from a neighbor. The big bruise on her face suggested she had been a victim of physical abuse. She told me that she got it from falling. She also made reference to drinking. And to her son, who worked for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) in San Francisco. Everything about her current life situation sounded horrible. Sitting next to Paula as I listened to her talk, between taking hearty bites of the blueberry muffin I bought her, I found myself unable to ask any real follow-up questions that might have given more coherence to a life in obvious shambles.

Taking a stab, I might suggest the following. Paula either grew up in San Francisco or had strong connections to the city from her college days, prompting her migration back to California after years living on the east coast. Though she worked to support herself, she never pursued a middle-class “career” or “profession.” Hence why Social Security may be her only source of economic stability. Her quick reference to drinking I read as very significant, with several possible narrative strands. A reason for the bruise on her face, whether from falling down or physical altercation? An inability to manage a “career” or maintain steady employment? A reason for the estrangement between her and her son, who works for a federal agency in one the most expensive cities in the country but whose mother is aging in poverty? But this is an imagined life history. Not necessarily the actual frailties that brought Paula and her borrowed slippers outside in order so she might be able to eat that day.

On Irene
Sometimes frailties reveal the edges of the interview form. At the end of my research, I found time to meet up with Irene Langley over coffee. Irene was a resident at Pacific Manor, a senior apartment complex located near one of the city’s major traffic corridors. We had met through a small discussion group I had been facilitating over the course of several months in 2010. A plump, upbeat, talkative woman I guessed to be in her 70s, I thought she would add an interesting set of perspectives on life in the city as an older resident. After exchanging pleasantries and small talk, I began by asking her how long she had lived in San Francisco and what had brought her to the Bay Area initially. Over the course of our conversation that afternoon, I saw Irene struggle for the words and temporal anchors that signified key moments in her story. These were halting, difficult articulations that she was trying to tame through her narration.

“I’ve lived in San Francisco since around ’82 I think…Periodically…‘What brought me to the Bay Area?’ I got married and we moved down to San Jose…Sometime later went through a whole…Not a very nice divorce…Oh, I moved up here because the children decided to move with their father. I moved as close to them without too much [communication] between the two parents. So I could be there…And for a year then I went to San Francisco State and made the Master’s degree…”

“What’d you get your Master’s in?” I asked.

“I was trying to get the first MBA. And I had no math whatsoever…At any rate, so I moved…Went to Paris for a year…The second year for…Study in
Paris…Summer …And then came back and…[long pause]…found out my mother died. So I…When I came back to San Francisco I …Then started looking for a job because I was trying to get a job…So I could get my children back. Or afford them…That was the worst…One of the worst periods for unemployment since now…I had a small…Income…I had a great time for about a year or two here. And…[long pause]…So I lived in San Francisco for awhile…Oh, the day after the family turmoil, whatever…I guess I lost my apartment in effect. I couldn’t afford it anymore…I applied for…[laughter]…Exchange student…So I applied to Essex, the University of Essex. And then later received acceptance from a French university, from the French university system—which I should have accepted, but I didn’t. So I went…We were supposedly going to live in England. I always wondered what it would be like…I should have taken the French, let me tell you. At least I would’ve gotten…Been able to speak French finally, to a certain extent.”

“So did you wind up going to Essex?”

“I wound up going up to Essex for a whole semester, a whole year…I tried to stay over there, tried to get a job teaching English as a second language. Which…I didn’t get much…You have to be a member of the European…A citizen of the European community. And the only replies I got back were in very poor English…At any rate, I finally came home and came in a bad [economic] environment …Tried to get a job…Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. So enough is enough…”

Though Irene and I did talk for a full 40 minutes that afternoon, it was the most uncomfortable I’d ever seen her. I had thought the rapport we had developed up
to that point would make the conversation flow fairly easily between us. Though we both laughed at differing points and I witnessed a willingness to keep on talking, the reticence was palpable as well. I was asking her to survey some very difficult points in her life trajectory. Divorce. Separation from her children. The death of her mother. Financial difficulties. As the interview went on, I learned that Irene’s worldly sensibilities didn’t begin when she decided to go to Essex. She had been employed as civilian staff in the Special Services division of the Army, working in Tokyo at a community center and Korea as an assistant librarian, all of which “…prepared me for the suburbs…Long periods of dull or boredom with intermittent crises.” She had met her ex-husband in Korea and came back briefly to her hometown of Portland before moving to San Jose to start family life.

Her disappointments with family life were real and rendered honestly. She and her husband had moved between various Bay Area communities—San Jose, Newark, Redwood City and Palo Alto. She had successively had five children in the space of six years. Her husband was traveling quite a lot for work then, leaving her alone with the children often. She thought Palo Alto was the best out of all the places they had lived as she found herself in the company of interesting neighbors. “If you don’t like suburbs, Palo Alto is one of the better places to live.” She got up to San Francisco when she could during those years, usually for shopping or to visit the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. “We didn’t have much money” she told me. Flashing forward to the 1980s, she painted two portraits of life in San Francisco following her divorce. “For the first few years I lived in San Francisco, it was lonely
and I worried about the kids…But it was fun.” Suburban isolation. Interesting
neighbors. Loneliness. Fun. When I asked Irene what she didn’t like about living in
San Francisco, she told me “Everything has gotten so expensive...” before talking
about how she was living on a fixed income made worse by the fact that the widow of
her ex-husband has been keeping money from his estate owed to Irene. She doesn’t
specify the details but made reference to needing to go back to court, which she had
been putting off for some time. “I’m just barely surviving right now.” At the end of
the interview, as I thanked her for taking time to come talk with me, trying to
downshift into more social chitchat, Irene let me unambiguously know that she was
still consciousness of the small audio recorder that laid between us. “If you turn that
off, I can ask [you] another question.” I immediately obliged.

If I have lingered on my interview with Irene, I do so to highlight the linked
frailties of aging and ethnographic exchange. That people have complicated lives is a
banal truism as is the fact that some find it easier to talk about themselves than others.
What was different was that I was asking Irene to juggle her friendly presentation of
self with another self that emerged as a result of my queries. As she struggled to
piece together a narrative trajectory at the start of our interview—searching for words
and sequences of events—she moved through decades and experiences as quickly as
she could, owing to the trials embedded in those temporal markers. There was a
denotative quality to her survey, not the warm, lively cadence I was familiar with.
When she emphatically declared “At any rate, I finally came home and came in a bad
[economic] environment …Tried to get a job…Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. So enough
is enough…” that was a clear gesture of pausing the narrative worlding I was asking her to undertake. Maybe Irene had agreed to coffee thinking I was just going to solicit her current opinions of life in San Francisco. Or her thoughts on aging in a philosophic, abstract—in other words, safe—vein. But no. I had pushed into intimate territory, asking her to revisit painful pasts she was unprepared for, trying to keep her upbeat cool yet responding with visible unease.

**Coda**

In a set of remarks following a recent conference on queer sociality, Judith Butler asks “How do we understand this way of being bound up with one another, of being implicated in each other’s lives, a mode of interdependency that is hardly chosen and never precisely easy?” (Butler 2011: 384). I have argued that in taking frailties seriously we might begin to answer Butler’s pointed query. As hegemonic imaginaries attached to aging, as embodied set of limits, as socially produced problematics, as essayistic engagements with the ephemeral and as objects of ethnographic investigation, frailties are good to think through and through. In the chapters that follow, I will be exploring the public and private lives of aging in the United States, returning to frailties frequently in my observations, interviews and analyses. More than theoretical framework, frailties for me are one way to ignite the ethnographic imagination, especially around a topic usually beholden to medical and gerontological prerogatives.31

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31A view that I share with Lawrence Cohen, who succinctly states “The bulk of gerontological practice remains the transformation of critical agendas into routinized
Chapter 2 / Queer Expertise

Instead of becoming a bureaucrat, one learns, with striking rapidity, to do bureaucratic things.

—Donald Brenneis, “Discourse and Discipline at the National Research Council: A Bureaucratic Bildungsroman”

Gay Shame

It was a Friday morning as I looked away from my laptop and saw that Amy Johansson was calling my cellphone. It had been less than 24 hours since we last saw each other, having spent the prior evening drinking and socializing at our usual watering hole in San Francisco. Amy worked for Gray Pride, the nonprofit network I interned with throughout 2009 that was working to build housing and connections for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender—or LGBT—seniors in San Francisco. An affably extroverted woman of color in her late 30s, Amy and I regularly caught up over drinks, with she telling me the latest organizational goings on and me usually offering advice or sharing appropriate outrage. The previous night, shortly before our third round, we managed to make fast friends with a group of cute, young men seated next to us. After some conversational back and forth, one of the young men expressed interest in hearing more about the perspectives of queer seniors. As it turned out, he was taking a queer history class and was interested in possibly interviewing an older person for one of his assignments. Not skipping a beat, Amy talked about one of the more visible seniors Gray Pride had been working with—Georgina, a transgender Latina woman in her 60s who was an active advocate and scientistic jargon abetting the biomedicalization of and control over old persons” (Cohen 1994: 155).
periodic performer at a local bar. My mind wandered as I thought about Georgina’s perfect lip-synched rendition of a Spanish-language love song, a heartfelt canción, I recently saw. “She’d be perfect!” Amy exclaimed and I nodded with tipsy agreement as she regaled our new friend with details on Georgina’s fashionable presentation of self.

This particular morning I could tell Amy was nursing a bit of a hangover—as was I. Though we dished a little about the cheap, $3 happy hour drinks we consumed, there was a decidedly contrite tone in her voice.

“It was really unprofessional for me to have told that guy I was going to hook him up with Georgina.”

Brushing her concerns aside, I told her “It’s not like you gave him her phone number, you just exchanged your business card so he can find out about getting plugged into the organization.”

“Travis Lee [another senior] would be much better for that kind of thing,” she quickly offered.

Our conversation transitioned to the real reason behind her call—information on a senior housing complex I had been spending time at—before I told her that I would see her at the upcoming Castro Street Fair and hung up. I had been thinking a lot about this phone call when I first committed it to paper. A palpable sense of shame—subtle though it was—permeated her apologetic articulations. This was not the kind of playful apologizing I was used to, where the speaker issues an ironic mea culpa for actions s/he feels not the slightest guilt about. Such utterances I was used to
hearing from Amy, usually around one of our drinking outings, but this apology sounded more humble and genuine. As if directed to other, phantom audiences.

I offer this vignette as a way of opening up a set of reflections based on my ethnographic fieldwork in San Francisco, California. Throughout 2009, I spent time interning and conducting research with a network of organizations advocating on behalf of LGBT seniors. Based at their central office, I followed the network’s everyday maneuverings as I witnessed the work of dedicated informants eager to position themselves as “experts” around LGBT aging issues both locally and nationally. In this chapter, I am going to examine the making of a peculiar kind of expertise as I saw and heard it evoked, circulated and grappled with amongst my informants. A queer expertise. Anthropologists examining the politics of science, planning and development have critically analyzed the world-making flaws of expertise, while scholars of bureaucracy have pointed out the “indifferent” logics of state power in their micro-manifestations (Weber 1946; Rabinow 1989; Herzfeld 1992; Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 2002; Li 2007). The queer expertise I track here is indebted to these critical interrogations of modernity. Rather than merely translate these insights into new ethnographic terrain, I want to explore something different. What happens when we unpack the workings of expertise not only in their problematic effects on people’s lives but also in the inconsistencies, false starts, utopian hopes of those laying claim to them? When we track the emergence of an expertise that works across multiple registers—welfarist, pedagogical, activist—while claiming a unified vision of the future?
As new kinds of programs, products and imaginaries coalesce around a vision of elderly engagement and vitality in the contemporary United States, there is a need for ethnographic attention to the actors bringing these to the fore in public policy, welfare work and popular culture. In this chapter, I offer snapshots of an expertise that was throwing itself into numerous spheres of activity, unmistakably contingent but nevertheless forceful. Gray Pride offered a compelling case study precisely because it operated with entrepreneurial independence while it also tried to insert itself more fully into the local welfare state and nonprofit landscape. Yet I also detail how Gray Pride’s expertise was built upon a deep anxiety about their presence out in the world and amongst colleagues encroaching on their turf. Towards chapter’s end, I try to think through how it might also shed light on what Lawrence Cohen has called a “politics of care” (Cohen 2008).

The Network

As brief background, Gray Pride operated as a decentered network of organizations working to advance the social service needs of LGBT seniors living in San Francisco. Formed in the late 1990s to push for the building of a queer retirement community in the city, their work subsequently evolved to include a wider range of issues and concerns. Indeed, one of the things I discovered in my work with them was that as the national real estate market experienced the tumultuous downtown that sparked the current recession, a shift in messaging took place. In much of their published materials prior to 2009, a decided emphasis was placed on housing as the key contribution Gray Pride was making to help queer seniors “age in
place.” In April 2008, Gray Pride won official support for its “LGBT-welcoming” housing complex from the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. A partnership between Gray Pride, the Mayor’s Office of Housing (MOH) and a private developer, the complex received final approval due in large part to advocacy by Gray Pride supporters and a promise by MOH to finance the apartment units so that the monthly rents fell “below market rate.”

When I started with the network in early 2009, they were working actively on several fronts. First, they were undertaking “cultural competency” trainings of senior service providers, in an attempt to make them more “sensitive” to the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender elders. Second, they were beginning to expand their social welfare focus more, working on connecting LGBT seniors to already existing housing and services in SF. Third, they were facilitating monthly discussion groups for queer residents at several senior centers throughout the city. Such pursuits, in and of themselves, would be enough to keep any network busy. Working out of a small office, located near the Castro, San Francisco’s famous gayborhood, I never ceased to be struck by the ambition with which they were pursuing their work over the course of the year I spent with them. Such ambition is not uncommon in nonprofit organizations, but in light of the scale of their operations was especially noteworthy. Amy was one of only three staff members at Gray Pride. She

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32“Below market rate” (or BMR) is a designation attached to rental units that fall below the designated area median income (AMI) as calculated by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The AMI for the city and county of San Francisco is actually a joint figure, owing to the designation of San Francisco, Marin and San Mateo counties as one metropolitan region by HUD.
coordinated all of the programmatic activity within the network and served as a key spokesperson for Gray Pride’s work at trainings, social services meetings and other public forums. Mark Hopkins, Executive Director, had only been in his position a few months before I started interning with the network, having come from another LGBT organization, yet with no prior experience working around aging whatsoever. Rob Sanchez, Office Manager, had been there even less time. Despite having been in existence a decade, they still felt very much like a startup, the entrepreneurial form par excellence of Bay Area capitalism. Small. Driven. Self-Conscious. And prone to futurist rhetorics.

Though they had the ostensible support of their network partners, staff at the central Gray Pride office were responsible for bringing these projects to fruition. What I discovered early on, in essence, was that the network was a network in name only. Though there were monthly meetings of the various partner organizations, they functioned like Boards of Directors meetings, with representatives chiming in on overall strategies while remaining quieter about everyday operations. The net result of such a situation was that Gray Pride staff were both overwhelmed by the work they were pursuing and overconfident about their unique position within the city’s aging services landscape. Feeling overwhelmed was understandable. I myself had worked in several nonprofit contexts prior to fieldwork to understand the stressful sense of beleaguered purposefulness I saw at Gray Pride. Yet it was their overconfidence that

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33The previous Executive Director, whom was my initial point of contact with Gray Pride, left at the end of May 2008, after three years of shepherding the network through a crucial period of its formation.
often threw me for a loop—most often because it revealed a deep set of anxieties that had consequences for the way they were positioning themselves out in “the community.”

During my time with them, they were not operating as a “service” organization. The ethnographer looking for a hub of elderly talk, ritual and sociality would surely be disappointed by what s/he encountered. Staff typing quietly on their computer keyboards. File drawers opening and closing. A phone call, the office microwave, the color printer periodically puncturing the silence. What little foot traffic there was in and out of the office was mostly of a professional set—colleagues, consultants and Board members. As time went on, I did start to see more seniors stop by the office to check-in with Amy or pick something up. But these were fleeting visits. In short, I was in a different welfarist world than other ethnographers of aging who had examined senior centers, charities, nursing homes and so forth (Myerhoff 1980; Stafford 2003; Caldwell 2004). Here was a version of welfarism unburdened by the flow of clients, case files and complaints one traditionally associates with social services. Grappling with what I was witnessing, I wrote at one point in my fieldnotes—

They operate variously like an advocacy organization, a policy workgroup, a social service agency, a nonprofit housing developer, an events-focused networking hub and a training institute. Meals on Wheels meets Human Rights Campaign meets The Commonwealth Club.

34 These were usually people already plugged into the organization. Rarely, if ever, did I see someone come in just “off the street.”
I will return at the end of this chapter to these hybridized practices. For now, I want to highlight their distinctness from older models of senior care and assistance. And while their donors were mostly upper-middle-class, middle-aged professionals, the seniors Gray Pride regularly interacted with were living on limited, shoestring budgets as they struggled to “stay put” in one of the most expensive real estate markets in North America. I was reminded of this in the fall of 2010 by Sonny, a sweet, older Latino gentleman, who regularly spoke at Gray Pride trainings. Sonny and I had been meaning to catch up over coffee, so it was with serendipitous pleasure that we ran into each other riding one of the underground trains headed towards the Castro. Over coffee, and later a glass of wine, we chatted about our respective goings on. Sonny was thrilled to share with me some of his creative writing, which had been recently published in a small journal that came out of a writing workshop Gray Pride had co-sponsored. He was abuzz with excitement, but it was towards the end of our coffee that he talked of his new living situation. He had recently moved to Newark, California, a city an hour southeast of San Francisco, partially because of a tense roommate situation, partially because he was unable to afford more than $400 a month in rent. Were it not for the discounted fare he paid riding public transportation, I doubt he would have remained as active a participant in Gray Pride’s activities or in the Castro’s everyday streetscape.

**Futuretalk**

On a bright and sunny October afternoon in 2009, I had a meeting with Janice Schwartz, one of the founders of Gray Pride, at her office in San Francisco. I had
been wanting to interview her in order to learn more about the history of the network and her own take on the landscape of queer aging. In addition to advocating for the network as key spokesperson and Board of Directors member, Janice had extensive research experience, having undertaken projects involving qualitative interviews with older lesbians. Yet it was her work as an accomplished therapist in private practice that I realized would influence our conversation that day. As I got out of the taxi and walked quickly up the street to her office, situated in one of the city’s quaint shopping thoroughfares, I was slightly uncertain whether we were set to meet at this time or half an hour later, having neglected to put our meeting into my appointment book immediately following our telephone confirmation. I rang the doorbell a couple of times, but to no avail. As I turned around and started down the stairs leading to her office, I saw Janice walking up the street, with folded newspaper and the remnants of her lunch in hand. We exchanged greetings and I apologized for arriving early, but she agreed to bring me inside while she gave herself a few minutes to get situated.

We walked through a series of doors before entering the room where she did her counseling. Though it was a sunny day outside, there was no way of telling as the space I sat in had a dark, cavernous feel to it, purposefully cut off from the world. The curtains were drawn. The furniture, a collection of old couches, blended into a nondescript hue matched by the fading carpet. And it was dead silent. I sat there alone for several minutes, taking out my audio recorder and preparing myself mentally for our exchange. Previous fieldwork experience in the city’s Aging Services Office had taught me that interviews with unit heads rarely took the form of
exchange but functioned more as presentation or monologue. Upon returning, Janice sat herself down in her black swivel chair and started opening up the conversation before I was even able to broach the question of audio recording our exchange. I became quickly aware that I was on her turf and knew that puncturing through her careful directing of our conversation was going to prove difficult.

She first asked how my research was going and I briefly talked about my project, sharing how I was eager to peer behind the apocalyptic rhetorics circulating about seniors in the contemporary United States. My use of the phrase “apocalyptic rhetorics” hit Janice right away and hearing my description as a diagnosis of the economic present, she countered that it was only in the past year that things had gone awry. I responded that I was speaking of the work of policy people—and, in some cases, gerontologists as well. A tall, lanky woman, whose entire body occupied the chair she was sitting in, I saw Janice’s eyes shoot me a quizzical look from behind her glasses. As I watched the reaction on her face, I could tell she was having a hard time with my critical take on things, reminding me of the dangers of casual intellectualizing in front of one’s informants.

Yet rather than close her down, my cynicism opened up a path for intervention. She started off talking about how there had been a shift amongst several queer organizations—such as The Gill Foundation, The Horizons Foundation and others—towards privileging attempts to get state and national legislation passed that advanced the rights and protections of LGBT communities. In her view, policy

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35“Apocalyptic rhetorics” is indebted to Ann Robertson’s pointed critique of “apocalyptic demography” (Robertson 1997).
actors—by which she meant the liberal, legislative-focused, policy community—had been quite successful in their efforts. But, she noted clearly, in a way that privileged “policy” at the expense of “services.” Janice then referenced what she saw as a shift amongst some of the leading LGBT organizations and funders towards “advocacy” work. Suturing history and biography, Janice then went on to lay out her view of the present state of affairs. She talked about people “in the community” starting to discuss aging issues in the 1980s but that the realities of the AIDS epidemic were omnipresent and directed people’s energies in other directions. She briefly touched on attending some of these early meetings but feeling that the direction they were pursuing didn’t appeal to her. When I asked her what were the conversations they were having back then, she dodged the question and told me to speak with a fellow Board Member who was involved in those early endeavors. This is another way Janice signaled she would engage in our conversation on her terms. She then persuasively spoke of the period of lesbian and gay life in the 1970s, narrating a personal vignette about standing in line for the movies in the Castro and looking all around her and realizing most of her fellow lesbian and gay moviegoers were all in their 20s. She continued, “Sure there were older people…Like Phyllis [Lyon] and Del [Martin]36…” but for the most part she saw a community that had sprung up overnight without any older role models. This was unlike what she had known growing up, where older people were a vital part of everyday life.

36Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin were co-founders of the Daughters of Bilitis, started in San Francisco in 1955 and viewed by many as the first social and political organization for lesbians in the United States. Their co-authored 1972 book Lesbian/Woman helped demystify and denounce stereotypes of lesbian life for a broad public.
At this point in our conversation, she initiated a series of queries and comments in an effort to solidify our common bonds vis-à-vis the work of Gray Pride. They’re asked, or delivered, in perfectly direct and friendly fashion. But there’s a charismatic appeal to them as well. She first asked me about my ethnic background and went on to talk about being Jewish, drawing parallels between the *longue durée* histories of Mexican and Jewish peoples as she spoke about the pogroms that forced many Jews to leave parts of Eastern Europe, referencing her own German-Hungarian familial line. Other themes became recurring leitmotifs. First, there was the contemporariness of the queer community, which she dated to the Stonewall rebellion of 1969 and contrasted to the aforementioned histories of Jewish and Mexican peoples.37 Mentioning how people have told her the gay community doesn’t give much (by which they and she meant monetary donations to nonprofits and social causes), Janice said she’d looked at giving figures that confirm that but shot back that since the community is “only 40 years old” that made perfect sense. Second, Janice fixated on the uniqueness of the “global” present. Speaking of the two of us again, she pointed to the features of what she called “multicultural, intergenerational, global societies.” “Look at us. I’m an older Jewish lesbian and you’re a young gay Chicano man…And we’re working on these issues together.”

37The Stonewall riots conventionally mark the beginnings of the contemporary LGBT rights movement in the United States. The Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City’s Greenwich Village, was the epicenter of several days of spontaneous demonstrations sparked by a routine police raid on the bar on June 28, 1969. Stonewall’s iconicity within narratives of LGBT history as the “first time” queers stood up to police harassment has not gone unchallenged, as alternative “firsts” have come to the foreground in recent years. Victor Silverman and Susan Stryker’s 2005 documentary *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria* gives San Francisco’s hustler, drag and transgender communities the role of vanguard resisters.
Later on in our conversation, she remarked on Hillary Clinton’s role in President Barack Obama’s administration. “She’s working for him!” she emphatically remarked. Her comment was offered to index the social progress of an accomplished White, female, Democratic leader finding herself working for the country’s first Black Commander in Chief. Yet I couldn’t help but wonder if, in an unconscious slip of analogy, she was drawing parallels between the Obama and Clinton roles in our exchange. Finally, noting the age, gender and ethnic backgrounds of Amy and Mark, Janice offered us all up as the very embodiment of the “multicultural, intergenerational, global societies” she made repeated reference to.

It was an amazing set of rhetorical moves on her part. Directly referencing the Gray Pride housing complex, she positively pontificated. “So is [address of housing complex] going to be delayed? Sure. But we’re not going to stop. We’re not going back.” Here Janice offered a persuasive teleology whereby the forward movement of the housing complex mirrored that of the Obama administration and “global” societies. I couldn’t help but be reminded of the leitmotifs of 1990s queer activisms—“We’re Here, We’re Queer, Get Used to It!” Towards the end of our conversation, she remarked on what she noticed as the change in perspective she’d been able to provoke in me. With relaxed confidence, Janice offered that she often had the ability to get people to look at things from a more optimistic perspective, no doubt gleaned from her extensive experiences as a therapist and advocate. “See, I can see it in you too,” she told me. “You came in with a particular point of view and now I can see how after listening to me, maybe you see things differently.”
For several days afterwards, I could not help but think I had been privy to the phenomenon Susan Harding describes as the power of evangelical interpellation in her work on Christian fundamentalist publics in the United States (Harding 2000). I was being interpellated into a set of visions of and for the future. It was charisma at its best—seductive, persuasive and strategic. Though I was conscious of the particular role I was being assigned in our exchange, I couldn’t help but marvel at Janice’s rhetorical power, turning the challenges faced by the stalled housing project into an image of forward movement, evoking the procession of a political rally. Her narrative strategies offered an unwavering trust in the future that I call simply futuretalk. As Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding remind us “…the future is not so much underdetermined as overdetermined” (Rosenberg and Harding 4: 2005). In Janice’s case, this was no doubt true as she drew on the past—anti-Semitic violence in Europe, the Stonewall riots, the AIDS epidemic—to articulate a teleological vision for Gray Pride and LGBT seniors. In her analysis of the politics of anti-aging medicine, Courtney Everts Mykytyn argues intriguingly about the role played by predictions in social life—

Predictions necessarily affect what we do today—mobilizing professional roles, marshalling resources, outlining duties. Predictions provide a means for ‘facts and factoids [to] make their way into logics and grammars’ by laying out a future that comes to shape contemporary practice. I argue that not only do predictions shape contemporary practice, they also redraw relevant history. (Everts Mykytyn 2006: 7)

In Janice’s version of futuretalk, I encountered a similar dynamic at play. Her figuring of a global future was predicated on its radical otherness from the past. It’s a progressive narrative whereby young people first created the gay community (via the
Stonewall riots), established gayborhoods in the 1970s (her reference to standing in line for the movies in the Castro) and then started to reflect on the absence of older role models in the community (pioneers like Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon notwithstanding). In her tale, the potential visibility of aging in the queer community became overshadowed by the grim realities of HIV/AIDS—a radical narrative rupture that prevented the story from moving further ahead. Interestingly, multicultural and intergenerational forms of collaboration were not part of the past she narrated. But they were part of the emergent “now” and future she conjured forth. Lastly, Gray Pride itself became indicative of the future, bringing forth connections across age, ethnicity and experience, not allowing the setbacks of transnational recessions or bad real estate markets to deter it whatsoever. “But we’re not going to stop. We’re not going back.”

Like any effective leader, Janice was also conscious of the mediated nature of her messaging. Upon wrapping up our conversation, she remarked, “How do you keep track of what we’ve talked about? You haven’t taken any notes during our conversation.” I replied, “Anthropology is a lot like your therapeutic work. I’ve become very adept at the art of active listening.” The tone of Janice’s voice informed me that her question was less a genuine query and more a pointed observation. A way of reminding me that she was conscious of the constructed nature of our exchange. In appealing to the similarities between ethnography and psychotherapy, I

38 A cursory glance at the history of the civil rights movement—including the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)—would give us reason to pause here.
countered by making a claim for a shared set of professional practices. Two kinds of expertise in dialogue with each another.

**Competing Expertise**

If Janice Schwartz’s vision of Gray Pride offered a compelling set of narratives about the future, the version I encountered in their central office was often far from what I heard that October afternoon. For instance, the gossip I heard circulating amongst staff during my ethnographic tenure was particularly telling. Amy was especially verbose in this regard. It was not uncommon for me to be sitting at my desk and for her to wheel her chair closer to mine and whisper an aside, a quick comment, a critique in my ear. Our rapport had been solidified early on due to shared biographical trajectories. Amy and I were in our 30s, queer and had connections to both Los Angeles and Santa Cruz. We also held similar critiques about the “LGBT community,” particularly concerning the hypocrisies of racism and sexism we encountered. Our fast friendship thus made sense. Yet I found myself often uneasy about the degree of gossip that flowed between us, as ethnographically rich as it was.

One kind of gossip was of the collective variety one found in office culture—quips about colleagues, organizations, “the field.” Out and Old, an organization within the network that had been working with lesbian and gay seniors since the early 1990s, was the recipient of regular commentary throughout my research. At first, I interpreted initial stories about them as a sharing of particularly bad, ridiculous experiences, along the lines of “Can you believe this?” Amy once told me how she had witnessed a transphobic exchange during a meeting at Out and Old to which I
appropriately shook my head in disdain. Subsequent remarks about the organization’s unavailable Executive Director were as consistent as those about the sizable funding it received from the Aging Services Office. By the time I listened to Amy gleefully share with me and Mark how she had received a call from an older resident wanting to plug into Gray Pride after being resolutely “unimpressed” with the programs at Out and Old, I barely batted an eyelash.

Another kind of gossip zeroed in especially on colleagues. Or so I thought. One February morning, before lunch, I was treated to a particularly dramatic example. As I sat at my desk, Amy was on the phone coordinating an upcoming public forum. The conversation proceeded along typical logistical lines when I heard Amy make a point of mentioning that she didn’t think someone would make a necessarily appropriate speaker. “To clarify,” she continued, “I have nothing against Susan,” and reiterated the point she had just made about Susan’s fit for the topic being explored. After another few minutes, Amy finished up the phone call and then let out an exasperated “Hell no!” before walking towards Rob Sanchez’s workspace. When she returned, Amy started filling me in on the background story that was obviously there.

The Susan that had elicited such a strong reaction was Susan Collins, a consultant on senior LGBT issues and former Gray Pride staff member. In Amy’s view, Susan was someone always “…trying to take the wind out of Gray Pride’s sails.” She continued, describing Susan as someone who was always trying to position herself as an individual expert, never giving credit to the organizations she
was or had been affiliated with. Amy cited a recent radio show as an example in which Susan talked continually about “…the work I’ve been doing…” without mentioning Gray Pride or acknowledging how the network had given her an organizational platform to pursue her work. She also chastised Susan for referencing programs taking place at a local senior center without mentioning the fact that Gray Pride “Made things happen there…” initially. On a roll, Amy then talked about a noticeable pattern of Susan’s behavior, whereby she saw her as someone who remained silent whenever criticisms were lodged against Gray Pride. The plot started to thicken interestingly. Gesturing upwards with her hands—signaling upstairs—she talked about how Gloria Stiles, another colleague, and Out and Old staff had critiqued Gray Pride for “taking over” and moving into territory previously occupied by Out and Old.39 Wanting to clarify between gossip and public critique, I pressed Amy further and asked whether such views had ever been publicly articulated. She answered affirmatively, citing a recent health-related meeting Mark attended in which Gloria accused Gray Pride of not acknowledging the crucial “cultural competency” work Out and Old had been spearheading for some time. Amy stated that she didn’t see that as the case and had never heard any constructive feedback from Gloria on what Gray Pride could do to remedy that perception. In a final flourish of outrage, she then mentioned an exchange with Susan after another meeting. Amy felt particularly put off and “silenced” around being able to broach what she heard as racially insensitive remarks by meeting participants. Back in the Gray Pride office,

39Gloria Stiles worked for a queer legal clinic that was part of the network and located in the same building as the Gray Pride office.
after offering brief empathy, Gloria turned to Amy and said, “Now you know how LGBT seniors feel when they’re dealing with mainstream senior service organizations.” Recalling this comment, I could tell it still infuriated her and she quickly quipped that she didn’t need the meeting to educate her about “being a minority.” Getting up out of her chair, Amy issued an emphatic “No way is that bitch going to present!”

The deep anger I heard that afternoon—despite being bracketed by similar accusations and disavowals I heard from Amy—continues to strike me. In a context where Gray Pride and Out and Old were ostensibly after similar goals—creating opportunities and support for LGBT seniors to connect and “age in place”—I found myself puzzled by the petty territorialism I heard regularly at the network. My sense was such claims were about solidifying the efforts of Gray Pride staff via the argot of *dishing* (or gossip) familiar in queer social worlds. But it was a thoroughly dismissive form of dishing that carried lethal language with it, akin to what Jeanne Favret-Saada discovered amongst her witching informants in rural France (Favret-Saada 1980). People like Gloria Stiles and Susan Collins were competitors, not colleagues, in the world of queer expertise Gray Pride was building for itself. One could disagree—even continually—with colleagues yet still recognize their shared sense of purpose. Competitors were meant to be eliminated or cordoned off into another corner of the marketplace.

Gloria Stiles and Susan Collins represented a kind of expertise focused on individual charm and knowledge. They both had been working around LGBT aging
issues for several years and had built constituencies of followers and allies, including many queer seniors themselves. And as older lesbians, they were both members of the demographic community their work revolved around. Out and Old and Gray Pride represented organizational kinds of expertise, with Out and Old having the advantage of a longer track record, sizeable mailing lists and a steady funding stream from the Aging Services Office. Susan’s refusal to pay tribute to Gray Pride or defend it from public critiques made her especially disliked in the office. As a consultant, her lack of organizational allegiance brought other anxieties to the surface. To illustrate, Gray Pride, along with two other local LGBT organizations, had made a pact to divide up the Bay Area for the purposes of the “cultural competency” trainings they were delivering. Gray Pride would only respond to requests for trainings in San Francisco and along parts of the peninsula, while Alameda, Contra Costa and Marin counties would all be left to their sister nonprofits based in those locales. I had learned that Susan was consulting for the Marin organization when one day the office was abuzz with consternation at the fact that she had recently spoken at a training south of San Francisco. Mark and Amy were visibly pissed off, prompting Mark to call a meeting between all the players involved, including Susan, to reiterate the terms of the agreement they had earlier signed onto. “Who does she think she is?” Mark asked with rhetorical anger. A key frustration Susan’s behavior posed was its unknowable nature. According to Mark and Amy, Susan had been saying repeatedly that she was eager to retire from her consulting work yet showed no signs of slowing down in the least. The day after Amy’s
outburst, Mark talked about how consultants work for the organization, not the other way around, and how he has never seen behavior like Susan’s in the numerous consultants he had worked with.\textsuperscript{40} He then mentioned how he felt at some point he needed to sit down with Susan and talk to her about how she needed to take a step back and the let the organizations working on LGBT senior issues develop their activities and public presence especially since she “…doesn’t want to do this work anymore.” With pithy contempt in his voice, Mark opined that Susan’s maneuvering might be acceptable in Marin, but let his comment trail off. Such behavior was obviously taboo amongst the tribe I was with.

**Performance Anxiety**

As Gray Pride started to more actively position itself within the local version of “the aging enterprise,” conundrums in and around “care” came to the surface. The story of Mr. Kirkpatrick provided a case in point. An elderly gay gentleman living on his own, Mr. Kirkpatrick became the subject of ongoing anxiety in the office over the course of several months of fieldwork. He first came into Gray Pride’s orbit when a donor to the network contacted the office directly about him. The donor was a younger friend who was deeply concerned about Mr. Kirkpatrick’s well being with regards to his ability to continue living independently in his apartment. Mr. Kirkpatrick had refused previous suggestions that he might want to consider moving elsewhere—most likely an assisted living facility—as well as urgings to get a social worker or case manager. It turned out that despite his protests, Mr. Kirkpatrick was

\textsuperscript{40}Prior to joining Gray Pride, Mark had worked for organizations focusing on LGBT politics and advocacy.
on the radar screen of several senior nonprofits in the city. A case manager at another organization, Aging with Grace, had been out to visit him but to no avail. Though Mr. Kirkpatrick technically wasn’t a client, this case manager had nonetheless taken it upon herself to check in with him periodically through home visits. Amy had also visited with Mr. Kirkpatrick. During the summer of 2009, the case manager died unexpectedly while the Gray Pride donor continued inquiring into whether any progress had been made with Mr. Kirkpatrick. Amy then undertook some joint visits with another staff member from Aging with Grace in an effort to encourage Mr. Kirkpatrick to consider receiving ongoing case management services. His refusal was persistent.

The ante was upped considerably a short while thereafter when a worried neighbor in Mr. Kirkpatrick’s building contacted Out and Old. According to the neighbor, Mr. Kirkpatrick had produced a minor kitchen hazard in his unit after leaving a pot boiling with water on his stove that she apparently had come across after smelling smoke. The neighbor was looking desperately for someone to help him out, which is how she got in touch with Out and Old. The Out and Old staff were already aware of his case and the fact that Amy was working with Mr. Kirkpatrick around trying to get him into another housing situation. So they contacted Amy directly. Amy then spoke with the neighbor over the phone in order to get a better sense of what had happened. It turns out the neighbor herself was an older woman who had been advocating on Mr. Kirkpatrick’s behalf with the building manager. The neighbor felt she was in a tricky situation herself in that she wanted to avoid
aggravating the landlord and thus put her own living situation in jeopardy. I recall how Amy related this story to me, telling me how Mr. Kirkpatrick’s landlord informed the concerned neighbor “Well, if he can’t take care of himself he shouldn’t be living here.” As Amy and I talked about the recent turn of events, it was becoming apparent that Mr. Kirkpatrick had tuned the heat up in more ways than one. Having interned previously with the Aging Services Office I brought up the specter of Adult Protective Services (APS) with Amy, which she immediately concurred could be an unfortunate possibility. Stepping into our conversation, Mark asked what APS stood for. I quickly clued him in. Legally charged to ensure seniors and dependent adults are protected from being harmed or harming themselves, APS can initiate investigations and recommend particular courses of action for those suspected of abuse, neglect or self-neglect. They essentially function as the adult equivalent of Child Protective Services. Most important, they can refer cases to the Public Guardian, the city and county office that is charged with the near total management of a person’s life, including physical, mental and financial “assessments.” APS is the last entity anyone would want in her or his life and I could clearly see the concerned expression on Mark’s face.

At this point, the overlapping lines of communication put Mr. Kirkpatrick in a care conundrum. Gray Pride was privy to the situation due to the ongoing monitoring of the situation by the donor, Amy and Mark. But Amy was not officially Mr. Kirkpatrick’s case manager and she invoked that as a way to keep herself distanced from the unfolding drama. But Amy’s reticence was only part of the puzzle. Aging
with Grace couldn’t claim responsibility for Mr. Kirkpatrick as he officially was not one of their clients—again he had refused the offer of case management services though staff continued to check-in periodically. Out and Old had gotten pulled into the situation by the neighbor and it was unclear to what extent their communication with Mr. Kirkpatrick was. It was soon discovered that there was a forth player involved—the Helping Senior Center, a multi-purpose center serving low-income and frail seniors in the city’s Tenderloin district. Mr. Kirkpatrick was receiving ongoing medical check-ups there with a physician.

Amy and Mark then agreed that checking-in with all organizational parties was the next best course of action just to make sure everyone was on the same page. The next update I heard from Amy was that the Helping Senior Center had expressed strong territorial sentiments with regards to Mr. Kirkpatrick. In their view, he was “their” client and they would take the lead on next steps. Apparently, Aging with Grace was willing to take him on as a client but the Helping Senior Center was eager to rebuff any such efforts. Amy stayed steadfast to her desire to work with Mr. Kirkpatrick’s case manager but not to take the lead in his careplan per se. Despite the Helping Senior Center’s territorialism and Mr. Kirkpatrick’s subtle protests, an opening of some sort had occurred such that a staff member from Aging with Grace became his designated case manager. My sense was that the rapport that had been slowly developing between Mr. Kirkpatrick and the Aging with Grace staff person was what brought about his begrudging acceptance of case management services. She was checking-in regularly with him and Amy was supporting her efforts in terms
of communicating with the various interested parties and looking into possible housing possibilities. Mark was the primary communicative link with the Gray Pride donor, reassuring him that the network was monitoring the situation in collaboration with the Aging with Grace case manager.

It was during a staff meeting in early November that I learned of the sudden shift in Mr. Kirkpatrick’s tale. As we were about to begin the meeting, Amy told everyone assembled that Mr. Kirkpatrick was now living at Golden Gate Towers, one of the assisted living facilities she and I had visited earlier in the year. Apparently he had gone into the hospital over the weekend at the urging of his physician at the Helping Senior Center for testing and it was determined he was unable to return safely to his home on his own. At that point, Mr. Kirkpatrick “agreed to”—or stopped protesting about—the idea of moving to another living situation and his social worker at Aging with Grace coordinated the process of getting him placed at Golden Gate Towers. All of us were caught off guard by the recent turn of events. Mr. Kirkpatrick had for so long refused the suggestion that he move that his rapid change of heart seemed especially perplexing. My sense was that the symbolic power of medical authority—the doctor’s diagnosis—may have been the final push to which he assented. Or I also imagined a narrative of lesser evils whereby “assisted living” sounded decidedly more bucolic and communitarian than “a nursing home.” But his placement at Golden Gate Towers was uncanny for other reasons. At one point during the unfolding drama, his social worker had taken him to visit another board and care facility outside of San Francisco, creating a “caring” panic for Amy and
Mark. Moving Mr. Kirkpatrick outside of the city to a facility Gray Pride had never heard of was not the outcome they wanted to communicate to the donor. The fact that Amy and I had met with the director of Golden Gate Towers and had ascertained that he was “queer-friendly” was pure serendipity. Amy had not been consulted during the definitive developments that took place over the weekend. She was simply out of the loop. True to his strategic thinking as Executive Director, Mark wanted to rehearse the email he was going to send to the Gray Pride donor telling him about Mr. Kirkpatrick. The shape of the message essentially revolved around what had taken place over the weekend and how Gray Pride could claim credit for its positive resolution. Emphasizing the visit Amy and I made with the “queer-friendly” staff at Golden Gate Towers was the key narrative detail in a quickly shifting sequence of events, privileging the proactive over and against the unruly.

There were other instances of performance anxiety in play. Numerous times during my fieldwork, it was not uncommon to hear Amy say “I’m not a social worker” or “I’m not a case manager” or “This isn’t part of my job” when confronted with difficult or emotionally heavy telephone calls. Though Amy had solid nonprofit experience it was true that she hadn’t received the credentializing certification of graduate training in social work. This was something she obviously didn’t need in order to carry out the work she was doing for the network. But as the lone staff member working on Gray Pride’s programs and nascent delivery of services to seniors, her anxious voicing of frustration served to set limits on what Mark and others could expect of her in acknowledging her limited expertise. Sometimes the
anxiety was heightened by the sibling rivalry between Out and Old and Gray Pride. In late June as we were walking back from a meeting at Aging with Grace, Amy went off for several minutes as she related another meeting that had just occurred in which an Out and Old staff member asked the group assembled who they knew that “…works in housing.” Interpreting the query as a public jab at Gray Pride, Amy then carefully explained to her (and everyone assembled) that Gray Pride did housing work. A few days later, I ran into an Out and Old staff member in the Castro. As we talked, he relayed to me in sardonic fashion how when he recently spoke with Janice Schwartz, she informed him that if Out and Old was receiving any calls related to housing, he should feel free to forward them onto Amy. He then told me that when he called Amy to check in with her, she told him “No, no, we don’t have any housing.” Here again Amy was forced to acknowledge the limits of what she and Gray Pride could provide as she lacked any additional information than what people got from the housing lists already circulating amongst service providers.  

Documentation proved to be another site of evolving praxis and contention in the office. Amy regularly documented all of her work—meetings, phone calls with seniors, informational forums and so forth—in a notebook she had on her desk. Upon my arrival, I had learned that an intake form had been recently devised in order to collect basic information on the seniors Gray Pride interfaced with. Put together by

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41 A conscientious staff member at another social services agency had taken it upon herself to compile a monthly list of affordable housing opportunities and waitlist “vacancies” that she emailed out to other social workers, case managers and nonprofit staff who requested a copy.

42 An intake form functions to provide a summarized documentation of the circumstances bringing a client to seek out services along with demographic and contact information. It is
Amy in consultation with Janice, it was further evidence of Gray Pride’s transition towards becoming another social services organization in the city alongside its advocacy, training and housing efforts. How so exactly? A notebook collects knowledge in idiosyncratic fashion according to the notetaker’s own codes and associations. I may read your notebook but not exactly understand what information I should glean from it—legible handwriting notwithstanding. A form exists in order to be read and interpreted by other actors, forming part of a larger archive of knowledge and actions. The intake form signified that an archive of participant files was in the making. Having a one page document that could be quickly scanned for background information would allow Amy (and future staff) to add notes and other documents to their individual files. As Mark saw it, anytime a senior called asking for a referral or information, it was Amy’s job to fill out an intake form for that person or to document that call somehow if a form already existed. It was a practical matter of tracking the evolution of each senior’s “needs” and connection to the network. But it was crucially connected to verifying the number of seniors the network was assisting for outside audiences as well. The Aging Services Office, which Gray Pride received some money from, required agencies they funded to count both the number of clients they served on a monthly basis and the total number of service hours.

usually filled out by a staff member the first time someone presents him or herself as a potential client. Gray Pride’s intake form went through additional iterations during my research as questions were added or refined.

43See Riles (2006) for arguments and analyses by Annelise Riles and her colleagues on the social lives of documents.
Such imperatives should have made implementing internal documentation protocols fairly straightforward. Yet Amy continued to log most of her activities in her notebook, prompting ongoing self-conscious articulations of her failure to document communication with Gray Pride seniors. These usually took the form of guilty declarations during lunch or on the way back to the office after offsite meetings. More than forgetfulness, I saw it as revealing a reticence on Amy’s part around thinking of the Gray Pride seniors as “cases” or “clients” alone. Amy invested a lot of emotional energy in her work such that the conundrums she encountered derived from identification, not indifference as Michael Herzfeld might have it (Herzfeld 1992). She had developed real rapport with the seniors that were Gray Pride’s core constituency in a way that suggested boundaries were blurred for her. I knew several instances where Amy had gone above and beyond the call of duty as it were—like when she loaned money on more than one occasion to one senior who was short on cash or in having a friendly lunch with another participant because she liked and connected with him as a person. On the less positive side it was also fairly common to hear her voice critique of the Gray Pride seniors with the same caustic bite as the network’s “competitors.” To briefly illustrate, one afternoon I made mention of Sonny, the older Latino man I had run into serendipitously on my way to the Castro, who was emailing again after experiencing recent computer problems. The mere mention of his name prompted Amy to vent about how he had recently called her five times in one day before she finally picked up the phone and spoke with him. She told me he had nonchalantly greeted her as if he hadn’t been
eagerly trying to get in touch and how he spoke enthusiastically about his participation in an intergenerational storytelling project sponsored by Out and Old. Amy wryly quipped that Sonny was enthusiastic precisely because it provided him a platform to conceitedly talk about himself and share his story with others. There was rich irony here in that Amy had recruited Sonny for that very same purpose as a member of Gray Pride’s Speaker’s Bureau.\footnote{The Gray Pride Speaker’s Bureau was made up of seniors who accompanied Amy on presentations for and trainings of service providers. They would each talk for 10 or so minutes about their life experiences as queer seniors, encouraging trainees to personalize the knowledge being offered to them through empathetic listening.} Georgina also came up in conversation and when I asked what she had been up to since I hadn’t seen her at any network events lately, Amy let loose. She talked about how she was tired of continually being deferential towards Georgina and putting extra energy into asking her to participate in Gray Pride events. Her critique continued as she related a recent conversation. A couple of weeks prior, Amy and several seniors attended a concert put on by the Gay Men’s Chorus that they had been offered tickets to thanks to the facilitator of one of the discussion groups, who was a member of the chorus. Georgina wound up not going to the concert and when she next spoke with her, Georgina told Amy that she had considered going but decided not to because the facilitator of the discussion group had given only a quick glance to the extensive photo album she brought to the group a couple of months back. I myself had leafed through Georgina’s photo album at another meeting. It was an extensive collage of photos of her life journey, from her brief stint in the military when she was still known as George to her subsequent years as a drag performer and activist around HIV/AIDS issues. Georgina was fiercely
confident about her place in history as a member of the marginalized communities that made up the city’s queer underground in the years preceding gay liberation. It would be next to impossible to not see her album as homage to herself as much as a neglected set of pre-Stonewall queer histories. Speaking in an exaggerated, haughty tone Amy mimicked Georgina’s response to what she saw as the facilitator’s snub of her album—“...but then I thought why should I support him and his event if he couldn’t support me.” She continued her complaints, voicing her frustration with Georgina’s “It’s all about you” attitude. “I’m tired of her comments about young people” she bemoaned, referencing her repeated articulations of how young people don’t know or understand “our history” and “…what we’ve been through.”

As if such heightened performances and anxiety weren’t enough, Gray Pride met a key test in the fall of 2009 similar to what Barbara Myerhoff documented as a “definitional ceremony” (Myerhoff 1980). Janice had nominated herself for a prestigious national award that included a $100,000 prize. She had actually first heard about the award through Amy who herself had learned about it from Georgina who had nominated herself based on her own work on behalf of queer and HIV/AIDS organizations. Janice was selected as a semi-finalist by the Awards Committee who, as part of their evaluation, wanted to come to San Francisco, interview her and witness her in action at Gray Pride. This offered the potential of important recognition for the network alongside additional monies as Janice had promised to

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45 Amy did not directly say “our history” and “…what we’ve been through.” I am evoking phrases I heard Georgina use repeatedly in previous meetings and conversations regarding the invisibility of seniors in the larger LGBT community.
donate the $100,000 to Gray Pride. There were two catches though. The foundation sponsoring the award intended to bring along a videographer for the interview and visit with Janice so that footage could be subsequently posted on their website in the event that she was selected as one of the awardees. The other, more significant, catch was that Janice had pulled back somewhat from Gray Pride since Mark had come on board, leaving day to day operations and programmatic activities in his and Amy’s hands. Aside from Board meetings, special events and strategic check-ins, I rarely saw her around during my time with the network. In the period leading up to the visit by the Awards Committee, there was considerable brainstorming around what Janice could “do” that would appeal to the foundation, be visually engaging and capture the spirit of Gray Pride’s work. Having Janice visit one of the monthly discussion groups for LGBT seniors was offered as one possibility. But because they tended to function like informal group therapy sessions where topics were decided in advance and participants were encouraged to share their feelings and opinions, questions of confidentiality and people’s willingness to truly open up were raised. Merely touring the future site of the Gray Pride housing complex wouldn’t work particularly well as it signified an absence, what had yet to be built. There was brief talk of having Janice host a discussion session with some Gray Pride seniors but that seemed too contrived for both Amy and Mark.

At last a compromise formation was found. A newly convened Leadership Council had been meeting on a monthly basis following a summer workshop for LGBT seniors on how to do advocacy work that Gray Pride had helped coordinate.
The group was made up of some of Gray Pride’s most dedicated seniors along with newer participants and allies who had come into the mix as a result of the workshop. It was decided that the next meeting of the Leadership Council would coincide with the visit by the Awards Committee and that Janice would attend—with videographers in tow. The day of the meeting I arrived slightly ahead of time to find wires, cables and cords strewn everywhere. The videographers were using the office where Amy and I sat as staging area for the one on one interview they were going to do with Janice. After exchanging introductory hellos with everyone, I started grabbing items to take up to the conference room several floors above us where the Leadership Council usually met. After coming back downstairs for other items, Janice came right up to me, eager to quickly and quietly talk about who the seniors were that were going to be at the meeting that morning. I briefly spoke about the summer advocacy workshop and the kinds of conversations the group had been having up to that point. I don’t doubt Janice had already conferred with Mark and Amy well in advance of our own private meeting, but in retrospect I now read her quick Q and A session with me as akin to the kind of last minute prep talk one does in advance of a press conference or debate performance. The show was about to begin.

The meeting went off without a hitch. I was unable to remember very much of Janice’s conversational contributions as I found myself trying to not be distracted by the annoying presence of videographers moving swiftly from one corner of the room to the next as if capturing footage for the Discovery Channel. What I do recall is someone who played the role of expert listener, chiming in to draw out a point but
otherwise coming off as silent partner to the whirlwind of ideas being offered up for consideration. Regardless, Janice got the award and Gray Pride an extra $100,000. Within a couple of months, the Leadership Council would cease to exist. Mark had started to question whether it was worth dedicating staff time to a group that had yet to decide on what it wanted to do exactly. Great ideas had been generated but nothing yet had crystallized into a finite action plan or campaign. My sense was Mark had imagined a group working to lobby in some version of the public sphere on behalf of LGBT seniors—and by extension Gray Pride. The group themselves genuinely wanted to help Gray Pride but was more interested in organizing activities and outings that would appeal to queer seniors. Ideas they had generated included tabling at the farmer’s market in the Castro district and coordinating discounted group outings. Amy, along with the help of a couple of seniors on the Council, had arranged for a group tour of an exhibit of Burmese art on view at the Asian Art Museum along with lunch at a nearby Burmese restaurant in early November. It was one of the most pleasurable experiences I had during my research as I glanced around the tables at lunch and saw a group of older people who had come to trust each other over many months of intimate conversation and public adventure alike. Gray Pride had much to be proud of. During the later half of fieldwork one of my duties was to schedule the monthly meetings of the Leadership Council, which Amy and I regularly attended. When it became clear that I was leaving Gray Pride at the end of January 2010, despite Amy’s heartfelt desire to convince me to stay, Mark’s instructions were
clear. We should not formally disband the Leadership Council but let it dissipate through neglect.

**Expertise in the Expanded Field**

In her famous injunction to “study up,” Laura Nader provided a vision for a critically reflexive anthropology of power, one that treated bureaucrats, experts and elites as powerful actors in asymmetric social relations (Nader 1972). In this chapter, I have offered a shift in focus, away from the sociology of roles represented in Nader’s passionate polemic towards thinking of expertise otherwise.46 Our conventional view of the expert is of someone who has amassed significant knowledge about a topic or practice in order to suggest a reasonable intervention or prediction. Gray Pride represented a kind of expertise working on multiple fronts that did not have the specialized focus we tend to associate with academics and scientists. Recall that Janice Schwartz herself was a hybrid actor, playing both therapist and LGBT aging expert, while Mark Hopkins was a novice expert, versed in queer advocacy work but strikingly untutored around aging issues and the local welfare state. I have already mentioned the network’s efforts around housing, “cultural competency” trainings and social connections for LGBT seniors. In the fall of 2010, I learned that Gray Pride, along with several other nonprofits, had been invited to join and create a national resource center on LGBT aging, funded by a major grant from the federal Administration on Aging.

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46 The ideas articulated in this chapter are indebted to the critical reviews penned by Chris Shore, Susan Wright and E. Summerson Carr. See Shore and Wright (1997) and Carr (2010).
A tall order for a staff of three. No doubt future staff, interns and ethnographers will be recruited to pick up the slack. But the entrepreneurial zeal with which they took on more than they could chew is worth lingering on. Keeping a focus on expertise in contradistinction to experts, I see Gray Pride operating at the intersections of expertise, advocacy and entrepreneurialism. A queer assemblage if you will (Ong and Collier 2005). The translocal—“global” in Janice’s mind—maneuverings represented by the national resource center may have been simply an opportunity too good to pass up. But it also signified a welfarist wanderlust not content with “helping” or “serving” aging San Franciscans alone.

Which brings us to the “politics of care.” Amongst Amy, Mark and Janice I saw people who were genuinely interested in or passionate about the work they were spearheading. Amy was quite open about the concern and fondness she had for several of the seniors, evidenced by her tipsy celebration of Georgina. Her critiques of the Gray Pride seniors became equally routine. Her comments were not those one would likely hear voiced so vividly by social workers, therapists or case managers with regards to their clients. Not because these care professionals don’t ever feel frustrated with those they serve—but because the personalized articulation of such frustrations is deemed “unprofessional.” What was also telling in Amy’s case was that her consternation revolved around the perceived character flaws of several seniors with neediness and conceitedness figuring centrally. She was annoyed by what she encountered in ways similar to how one expresses disappointment with colleagues, friends, family or other intimates. Can clients disappoint or annoy the
same way friends can? Like the paradox of participant observation, the professionalized intimacy that shapes care and social service encounters has layers and filters already in place before such encounters occur. Training and education provide intellectual anchors for care providers dealing with difficult life situations. Rules, regulations and paperwork solidify the requisite do’s and don’ts—notes must be jotted down in charts, forms filled out, signatures gotten, photocopies made and so on. Office culture dictates what is permissible gossip and what is off limits. As do the scales of care in play—the cliché image of the heartless bureaucrat or salaried social worker pushing people and paperwork through the maze of the welfare state. Unlike their competitors at Out and Old, Gray Pride did not have to contend with a steady stream of seniors coming into the office, asking for services, looking for housing or perhaps just someone to talk to. The stressful bustle I witnessed was usually cyclical, punctuated by special events, trainings and grant deadlines. Their constituents could easily be kept at bay by a delayed phone call or email. Returning to the vignette I started this chapter with, I now see Amy’s profuse apologizing in a different light. I initially registered my surprise as cognitive dissonance. Why should Amy apologize to me for unprofessional behavior when I had already borne witness to ample gossip and angry exclamations? I now heard her hungover humility as heightened consciousness around the presentation of her professional self, a recognition that LGBT aging experts are more careful about how they speak of their constituents, even inside of a bar.
Mr. Kirkpatrick’s tale offered a glimpse into the predicaments of “care” Gray Pride will most definitely find itself confronting in the future. As of this writing I know that they have already expanded since my time in the field, hiring several staff versed in social work and senior services. Anthropologists and other scholars have written critically on the imagined decline of “care” in several spheres of health and welfare in the contemporary world. Arthur Kleinman has argued pointedly and poetically on behalf of recentering “care” in contemporary medicine (Kleinman 2008 and 2009; Kleinman and van der Geest 2009). While I find Kleinman’s urgings compelling in a context where “managed care” has become the dominant rationale underpinning the uneven, tiered models of coverage comprising the American healthcare system, I find myself turning to another anthropologist in making sense of what I saw unfolding at Gray Pride. In his examination of the politics of HIV/AIDS treatment in Côte-d’Ivoire, Vinh-Kim Nguyen looks at a range of therapeutics and distinctions brought to life in the encounters between NGOs and HIV positive Ivoirians (Nguyen 2010). “Care” in these circumstances requires caring about what international aid agencies want as much as helping those living with HIV/AIDS. I do not doubt the sincerity of Gray Pride’s efforts yet can’t help but wonder if caring about what others think—donors and nonprofit organizations alike—constituted its own version of “managed care.” In this regard, it’s instructive to consider Mr. Kirkpatrick’s story from another angle. Gray Pride’s expertise, anxious and multi-sited, was pursued with entrepreneurial zeal. Mr. Kirkpatrick’s care, on the other hand, was an unsolicited call to action. He and they were thrown en media res. John
Borneman movingly details how an ethics of care comes precisely from such a “thrownness,” thus requiring a refashioning of anthropological precepts and legal codes to address the quotidian realities of care in the contemporary world. He calls this “…a concern for the actual situations in which people experience the need to care and be cared for and to the political economies of their distribution” (Borneman 1997: 583). One could argue Gray Pride was trying to do its best with the circumstances it was presented with. I agree, but only partially. They were willing to be collegial as long as no one was “…trying to take the wind out of Gray Pride’s sails” as Amy put it. People like Susan Collins and organizations like Out and Old upstaged them. Seniors like Mr. Kirkpatrick forced them to have to act on claims contained within nicely designed newsletters and other communiqués. As Mark once offered over the telephone, “We are trying to create a network of care that is friendly to LGBT seniors…We’re trying to create that network and safety net.” Yet a “politics of care” worth defending would adeptly unravel expertise from anxious entrepreneurialism and competitiveness. And it would fully queer it, refusing to mistake narcissistic futuretalk and welfarist territorialism for caring solidarity.
Chapter 3 / Lifeworlds

But something else has to be done with these bits and pieces, with all the tales that are told, in order to take them beyond the point of anecdote and into history.

—Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*

Lives and Locations

In the last chapter I explored the welfarist milieu Gray Pride was maneuvering through as well as helping shape in San Francisco. Here I turn to the politics of aging from the perspectives of older residents who reflexively looked at their everyday lives through the idioms of conversation, storytelling and exchange gathered under that ethnographic endeavor known as the interview. An immediate conundrum that confronts this material concerns the critiques of typicality directed towards ethnography as a whole (“How typical are these stories and vignettes?”) and the biases of interviewing in particular (“Aren’t you privileging extroverts and those adept at expressing themselves verbally?”). Rather than dismiss these queries through a defensive turn to methodological rigor, I opt instead to argue for the kinds of knowledges opened up by turning to what I am calling lifeworlds in this chapter. I purposefully refer to lifeworlds cognizant that *life histories, life stories* or *the life course* are other phrasings scholars have adopted in undertaking research with theoretical and methodological affinities with my own (Crapanzano 1977; Mintz 1979; Bertaux 1981; Kaufman 1986; Fry 1990). During the course of fieldwork I was neither looking to collect oral histories nor undertake cohort analyses. Instead, I was interested in listening to people’s everyday perceptions about aging in San Francisco
through the narratives, anecdotes and commentary captured by the ethnographer in conversation.\textsuperscript{47}

Though anthropologists have turned time and again to narratives in their efforts to render the links between individual lives and cultural logics, it is nonetheless important to specify our epistemological claims in doing so.\textsuperscript{48} I argue four points informing my approach to lifeworlds in this chapter. The first point to make is that lifeworlds are not reducible to narratives. They are the practices of everyday life—from habits of domesticity to relationships in the public sphere to intimacies—which can be expressed through stories but always in a mediated, performative and remembered fashion.\textsuperscript{49} The second point to make is that lifeworlds are both social and psychological, meaning they are as much about cultural locations as the feelings, affects and sentiments that shape belief and action. A third point, which follows from and deepens my second point, is that lifeworlds are multiply determined. They are shaped by the present and the past, the everyday and the extraordinary, social constraints and idiosyncratic decisions. As sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow argues—

Some constructions of meaning may be more likely than others, but neither the intrapsychic nor the interpersonal past, on the one hand, nor the culturally given, on

\textsuperscript{47}Sharon Kaufman articulates the quotidian spirit of my efforts in discussing her own endeavors amongst elderly Californians in writing “I collected life stories in order to study the relationships among old age, personal reflection, and identity. I told my informants I wanted to learn about their lives in order to understand these issues better. I gathered life stories in the context of discursive conversations that dealt with everyday life, events, and concerns” (Kaufman 1986: 21-22).

\textsuperscript{48}Medical anthropologists have been especially drawn to narratives in discussing the individual transformations occasioned by illness and other life altering experiences. See Kleinman (1988), Becker (1997) and Mattingly and Garro (2000) for key examples.

\textsuperscript{49}See Myerhoff (1982) and Bauman and Briggs (1990).
the other, fully determines meaning and experience in the immediacy of the present. (Chodorow 1999: 2)

Finally, what may seem like an anthropological truism, bears repeating here as my fourth point. Lifeworlds are both singular and shared. They are singular in the irreducible uniqueness of individual lives and shared in that we are enmeshed in social relations, historical presents and identities both bequeathed to and reproduced by us.

While the above claims follow from key tenets of interpretive social science, I want to further elucidate them through consideration of an important body of feminist scholarship. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminists in the United States began interrogating the blindspots in political analyses that took the universal solidarity of women based on shared experiences of oppression for granted. The vision of a global sisterhood, though articulating a powerful internationalism, was found to be severely lacking in its inattention to the realities of inequities and privileges. In her essay “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” Adrienne Rich unpacked this universalism by pushing feminists to consider how “location” mattered (Rich 1986). For Rich, “location” referenced geographic, embodied and racialized realities that feminists ignored to the detriment of political progress. During the same moment as Rich’s essay, feminists of color were advancing an analysis of the interlocking systems of oppression that kept women of color in subordinate positions vis-à-vis the sexisms they faced in communities of color and the racisms of the feminist movement. Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Barbara Smith and others were the most vocal of critics and activists during this period (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Smith 1983; Lorde 1984;
Anzaldúa 1987). By the time the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, a significant body of activisms and analyses by women of color had reshaped feminist theory such that an “intersectional” analysis of the mutual constitution of race, class, gender, sexuality and other markers of difference was possible (hooks 1989; Trinh 1989; Crenshaw 1991; Lowe 1996; Cohen 1997; Shohat 1999; Sandoval 2000).

I turn to this rich body of work for two key reasons. First, in approaching the politics of intersectionality, feminists in the 1980s and 1990s implicitly acknowledged age as a marker of social difference but did not necessarily focus on crafting a robust critique of sexist ageism and ageist sexism. There were exceptions of course. Barbara Macdonald, along with Cynthia Rich, put forth a sustained critique of ageism in the women’s movement in their collaborative Look Me in the Eye (Macdonald 1983). Adrienne Rich made reference to her aging body—“…I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me” (Rich 1986: 215)—before moving on to other “locations” in her aforementioned essay. Audre Lorde critically named the intertwined realities of age, race, gender and class consistently in her work (Lorde 1984 and 1997). And any list of exceptions would no doubt have to include Susan Sontag’s early identification of the double binds of gendered aging and feminist foremother Betty Friedan’s musings and urgings in The Fountain of Age (Sontag 1972; Friedan 1993). I highlight these writers not to then accuse the majority of second wave feminists of ageism. Rather, I want to take the insights of feminist critique to argue that age be figured more

50 Sylvia Henneberg focuses on Rich’s renderings of age in a recent examination of her poetry. See Henneberg (2010).
centrally in analyses of the intersections of power, privilege and social location.

Second, the claim that privileges and inequities cut across categories of difference has direct bearing on the narratives that follow. As I listened carefully to the stories older San Franciscans shared with me during the course of research, I began to see how aging opened up the possibility of revisiting and rethinking the claims of intersectionality. Privileges—racial, gendered and class-based—do not hold steady across the life course as they get unevenly reworked by wrong turns, bad decisions, unexpected loses and the frailties of everyday life. The dangers of reified understandings of social locations comes from treating them as settled rather than dynamically unfolding across individual lives as much as historical time.

In what follows, I focus on the narratives of four of the dozens of older residents I was fortunate enough to dialogue with over the course of my research. These were singular, in-depth conversations, organized by the areas of interview interest I devised but prone to multiple detours and diversions (see Appendix). With one exception that I note below, these conversations were with people I had no prior acquaintanceship with, whom I had recruited from public events I attended, referrals from other interlocutors or through the research flyers I was distributing in libraries, cafés and other sites around the city. Rapport and trust had to be established *en media res* as it were. Here I ask readers to listen to these narrative enactments of
lifeworlds, conscious of them as performative and partial but nevertheless pointing to the continued relevance of the art of *ethnographic portraiture*.51

Selves and Stories

*Clifford Taylor*

I was needing more caffeine than usual the morning I met up with Clifford Taylor, the 63-year-old African American man I was meeting for the first time at a café on Polk Street, the urban artery connecting the city’s dilapidated Tenderloin and charming Russian Hill districts. Clifford had contacted me after coming across one of my research flyers in the very café we were meeting at. His slightly disheveled appearance was offset by the corporeal confidence conveyed by his solid physical build and the glasses perched evenly across his upper face. Clifford easily could have easily been mistaken for a longtime high school teacher or university professor, someone a little too engrossed in his work to care much about his sartorial presentation of self. After thanking me for treating him to coffee, we started talking about his life. Originally from Vallejo, California, just north of Oakland, Clifford had been living in San Francisco for over twenty years. He talked jokingly about the dearth of anything to do in Vallejo as the reason for his trek across the Bay. The lively arts scene was a significant draw for him and still remained a passion from the enthusiasm I gleaned when he described San Francisco as “…a world class city. This is it.” His enthusiasm for the city was not only tied to the cosmopolitan present but

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51 *Ethnographic portraiture* may evoke the romanticism of anthropological exoticism or the staged gravitas of Western painting. I have in mind something more akin to the subjects of documentary film whose extraordinariness is made ordinary and vice versa by the attentive artist.
also the historical moment of his youth. Like thousands of other young people, he was attracted to the energies collecting along Haight Street during the infamous “summer of love.” Narrating that time fondly, he told me “The ‘summer of love’ was ’67. I went into the Army in ’68. Now imagine it. From ‘summer of love’ to war. Can you imagine that? I was in the service for three years. I got out in ’71…January of ’71. And I realized that what I really wanted to do was move to San Francisco. But I couldn’t do it immediately. I had to go back to Vallejo, work at various jobs. And finally managed to get here. It was all a very…The ’60s were a wondrous time. I don’t know if we’ll every see that again. I hope we can.”

“What are the key things that stand out?” I asked.

“The belief that these people…At the time…In their 20s and so forth…I was one of them…We could change things…Haight Street was clogged with people. You couldn’t drive. You had to walk everywhere…There was…There was this thing about we could change things even as the Vietnam war was raging. There I saw a couple of soldiers walking through Haight Street in full uniform. Ran into a couple of Hell’s Angels. The energy level was high…Very high. The artwork was incredible. There was, unfortunately, bad drug trips every single day I was there. I was commuting from Vallejo to here and every single day there was a bad trip of some kind. Marijuana all over the place. It was this surreal atmosphere…That this was not really part of the city and yet it was in the city…They had the free store experimentation. The usual limits weren’t there. We can do this.” Clifford contrasted this energy to the tame theatrics of Burning Man, which he characterized as “…sort
of like a bizarre vacation spot.” Clifford’s choice of words was not entirely off the mark, as the annual art and party pilgrimage that attracted swarms of Bay Area residents was known colloquially as the playa, a Spanglish rendition of beach. “And the thing about the ‘summer of love.’ It was spontaneous. It just…It just happened. And nobody had to pay anything, you just walked up to Haight Street. I did notice that there were not as many beggars in San Francisco as there [are] now. It’s just ballooned. You might come across one or two, but now…The economy…It was a wondrous time…A wondrous time.”

Over the next hour and a half, Clifford and I talked about many facets of his life. Talkative and unapologetically opinionated, Clifford’s story continually shifted back and forth in time as he stitched together the turning points and epiphanies of an active consciousness in the making. When he got out of the Army, he realized he wanted to go to art school and wound up taking night classes at the Academy of Art while working during the day at the naval shipyard in Vallejo. After he had run out of evening classes, Clifford left his job at the shipyard and moved to San Francisco to complete his art training. “So I managed to find a place here in the Mission district, a flat I shared with four other people. Very different people…I had the GI Bill but I also worked as a security guard and living in the Mission district—even then it was a dangerous place—but here I was. So the art school. I went there for three and a half years…Drawing and painting very well. I mean technically well. Won a few prizes at galleries and so forth and art shows. But then I had to temporarily move out after completing art school. I think I moved to Fruitvale or something like that in a house.
with three other guys. And then eventually I found a job working at the Mint so finally I could move back here.”

After establishing himself in the city, leaping forward in time to the 1990s, he told me he became interested in pursuing acting and martial arts. “And I realized I was born in ’46. That would make me 50. Now what kind of a nutcase would start martial arts at 50? What kind of a nutcase would go into an acting school? Well, you’re looking at him. But I was curious, you see. I was curious and figured ‘Why not?’” The curiosity that had brought Clifford to Haight Street in 1967 pushed him onwards. Though he enjoyed painting, he was looking for something else. “’Cause I wanted…I wanted something to balance me. Painting is a solitary thing. And I’m sitting in my room—while I enjoy painting, I do it now, I’m working on a painting now—I wanted something to get me out there. ’Cause I had been in a play at Fort Mason in the ’80s. It was the Spoon River Anthology. If I had known I had acting talent…I never went there, but I figured ‘What is that like?’ So I decided to satisfy my curiosity. And just continued from there. It was easy at that point to get roles and things because I was somewhat younger…Now, it’s a little harder. Nobody is making plays about people in my age group. But that’s why I’m collaborating with these people. I figure if couldn’t find the role, I could create it.” The desire to create and inhabit roles where ones did not exist formed a central theme in Clifford’s story. When he was around 47-years-old, he did a solo performance at one of the city’s
independent theaters, adapted from a science fiction novel he had been working on that was “…about 300 pages, single-spaced pages, typed.” Realizing the novel needed revision, he contacted a local theater figure, then teaching a course that he decided to enroll in, and the two of them subsequently turned Clifford’s material into a performance piece. As Clifford explained with earnest pride, such work “…is the ultimate challenge for an actor. If you can do that successfully, you can do anything….For an actor, solo performance is the ultimate challenge…And I brought that character to life on stage for 25 minutes. Wow! This is fabulous.”

At around the same time he started acting and pursuing martial arts, Clifford was beginning to contemplate the future more. “I realized…I realized early on, I realized 20 years ago, that the economic situation would get bad as I got older. I had to get out of the job market. I found out that I could get a pension because I’d been in Vietnam. So I began working towards that. And I had the good luck to work for a group called [name of group] who helps veterans. I was there doing clerical work for them. And they helped me along. And I met the right people. And I finally got this pension and voila! I don’t have to work. I don’t have to work. I moved into one of those single room occupancy things and I got my own…Got my own…Environment. Nobody bothers me. I can afford to eat out. It’d be nice to have some more money so I could afford the coffee more.” Though there were economic downsides to leaving the working world around age 50, it allowed Clifford to craft a modest, bohemian lifeworld for himself in the city, putting him on a different path to aging. He described not working as “Wonderfully freeing. I have friends who are struggling
now to work and I don’t have to do that. I hear all this stuff about recession and unemployment and it doesn’t really affect me.”

But being an artist and retiring early were not the only ways Clifford set himself apart from others of his generation. As a lifelong bachelor, he had, in his eyes, dodged the normative demands of heterosexual coupledom others had been less lucky to avoid. It was at this point in our conversation that Clifford began talking animatedly about his romantic life while simultaneously sharing his views on the limits of marriage. After telling me of the romantic trials of the grown daughter of a longtime friend, he opined, “The women I’m meeting today—the ones in my age—are picky. They’ve got more and more picky. Why? They’ve learned how to think. They have learned how to think. After all this time…So…I have to, I have to use a different approach…I have to be a kind of a gentleman. They don’t seem to be looking for an out of control teenager. Or some guy in his 20s who drinks too much. They’ve had enough of that. I have to be, have to be a gentleman and it usually works. Life takes on a different perspective when you get 50 and 60. You learn how to take things easy. You learn how to do things in a measured pace.” Clifford’s narrative of his bachelor self conveyed a romantic knowingness cultivated from years of experience. He talked openly about going to several singles groups over the years. One was called The Harrad Community, patterned after The Harrad Experiment, a 1967 novel written by Robert Rimmer that explored the virtues of polyamorous relationships and sexuality. “Free love” in the idiom of the day. Another group, still in existence, updated the Harrad ethos decades afterwards. Clifford talked about
learning how to socialize, how “It took a lot of work. I had to work at it.” When he
got out of the military, he described himself as naïve about interacting with women.
Art school had opened him up though. “Wow! The wild parties…” he exclaimed
with cheeky remembrance. “Over a period of years, I made it…I made it a project.
And I learned how to socialize. I could walk up to three or four women at a dance
and start a conversation. But it took awhile to learn how to do that. And learn how to
dance, you know.” The learning didn’t just end on the dance floor though. The
outlets and opportunities for meeting women also changed once the internet became a
communicative staple of everyday life. “Then I started doing it online. Which saves
a lot of trouble, a lot of work. I don’t have to go here, I don’t have to go there. See,
that’s another thing. When you start getting older, you start saving yourself some
time and hassle. You do things in an easier way. Why should I run all the way to
Berkeley when I can just get on the computer? And there they are. There they are.
It’s worked. In fact, I have a date tomorrow. I’m going to the King Tut thing [art
exhibit]…A woman named Ellen. We’ll see how that works.”

Between his disarming confidence, Clifford spoke with excited, bombastic
punctuations that had a nervous energy to them. A well-read person, he shared with
me a vibrantly cranky historiography of why the United States had so many guns.
Contained in Clifford’s history lesson was a contemporary anxiousness. “That’s
another thing, I mean. You could get shot out there. That’s another thing…It is
unfortunately a dangerous time now. Because of the economy. Because of the
desperation of some people. And this increasingly emotional edge. I see it everyday.
So I have to be very wary. You could brush up against somebody and this person could take offense to it and you didn’t mean anything. I’ve seen this happen…Personally, I’m more wary. I don’t want to get into an altercation. I try to avoid that kind of thing. But, it’s getting harder to do…It’s sad, because San Francisco is a fabulous place. I’ve done a lot of sketching in parks, cafés…I’ve seen fights break out at different places. And these guys they come in, they come right into the place, panhandling! Uh man. So it’s more stressful today. I think it’s going to affect people’s health. You might see more cases of cancer. It’s sad.” He went on to tell me that he wanted to get out of the job market because he wanted his freedom and to reduce stress. Which is another reason why he chose not to get married. “I don’t believe these people who say ‘Well, getting married is good for you, it prolongs your life.’ Boloney. You are just letting yourself in for more stress with the wife and the kids. You know, 50% divorce rate.”

As Clifford’s thoughts kept tumbling out, the conversational focus continually shifted, from guns in America to the city’s “emotional edge” to panhandling in public spaces to stress to cancer to work to married life. “I’m a thinker. Too many people aren’t” he summed up pointedly. Against this rational self was juxtaposed a world comprised of people—especially women—beholden to their emotions. “Now I’ve had all this experience…I can look back on this. I’m glad I didn’t end up in a situation I didn’t want. That’s because I thought.” He talked about how he could’ve gotten married several times, but resisted, coming up with excuses such as his youth but attributing his real reluctance to the unexamined investment in marriage on the
part of the women he was involved with. “This woman doesn’t know who she is. All she wants to do is get married…And women get married for security reasons. I’ve noticed this. But I figured ‘Wait a minute. It is not my job to be somebody else’s security.’” Security here is a multivalent term for Clifford, both economic and emotional. But intimacy was and remained important to him. “I’ve had some very deep relationships, some very passionate ones. I mean, I could probably write a book on dating and relationships if I wanted to.”

When I asked Clifford where his keen sense of the pitfalls of conventional married life came from, he spoke of his own family. His mother and father were from New Orleans and had married across racial lines. Utilizing a language of phenotypes and generational racial categories, he described his mother as “Hispanic” and his father as “much darker” than him. Their marriage was not a very happy one from the way he spoke of it. Clifford was the oldest of three children and the only son in the family. He had one sister who, in his words, had “…gone through three men. She has terrible taste in men.” Another sister also had several men in her life. “I don’t know how many men she’s been through…Last I heard she had three kids. They’re probably grown now. All they wanted to do was to get married and have kids—right out of high school which means they didn’t know what they were doing.” Clifford talked about witnessing his parents’ marriage disintegrate slowly over time, forcing himself to ask “Is this what I want?” and emphatically replying, “No, I don’t want this.” The unhappiness of married life he was privy to growing up, he saw repeated again and again in other phases of adult life. It was at this point that Clifford returned
again to the thinking self he prided himself on being. He talked about being able to look at something objectively and in a detached way and the need for people to cultivate this sensibility more, especially around emotional situations. The dangers of people regretting decisions years later were all too apparent to him. “I value freedom” he proudly opined. But women try to change men. “They try to control you.” Coupledom threatened freedom according to Clifford, a freedom not worth giving up even in the face of real or potential aloneness. “Can’t people enjoy their own company?” he earnestly asked before going on to criticize those—singling out women again—who talked about being afraid of being alone. “I am not afraid of being alone” he offered before referencing the things he could do like work on a painting or go to a museum.

That strong sense of self amidst aloneness had deep biographical anchorings. As Clifford’s narrative continued, he made reference to living in a housing project as a teenager. Though he had spoken already about growing up in Vallejo, this was the first mention of his family’s socioeconomic situation. He talked about the periodic outbursts of violence that resulted in someone getting shot but quickly shifted into comparative mode. “I mean, it’s nothing like today. Today it’s much worse. Much worse! But for that time, it was grim.” He became an avid reader, diving into the novels of Isaac Asimov, Kurt Vonnegut and other science fiction writers. He was pejoratively called “Professor” in junior high school “Because I had a much better vocabulary, like 15 going on 38.” He spoke humorously about getting into trouble when he was a little kid, breaking into a concession stand for candy and stealing
apricots from a neighbor’s tree. But after getting caught stealing in a store, he decided “That’s it. No more. My cousins went on to bigger and worse things and ended up in prison. Oh yeah…One of them’s dead now. The other one, I think he’s out but he’s got a wife and kid…I keep out of the way of the law, you know, really. Even today I’m kind of wary because I could get in trouble by accident. So I’m very careful, you know. But I’m able to make better decisions and maybe to take things easy…I don’t fuss over…I’m not as impatient…When I was in my 20s I was at a bank in Vallejo trying to get an account started and I’m fidgeting like this and this woman who probably was in her 50s [said to me] ‘Well, you’re too young to be impatient.’ She kept telling me this. Well, that’s how people are at that age. They’re impatient. Because they don’t know any better. Now, I take things easy. I do things…I treasure my leisurely pace. I treasure my privacy. And I treasure my freedom. I’ve earned it.”

**Ruth Rouse**

I had been informally acquainted with Ruth Rouse for several months before she and I sat down for conversation late one September afternoon. Like Irene Langley, the older woman whose interviewee unease I recounted in Chapter 1, Ruth too lived at Pacific Manor, the senior housing complex I was spending time at towards the end of my research. A tall, 85-year-old, White woman, always fashionably attired, often with lightly tinted sunglasses, Ruth announced her presence whenever she walked into a room. She seemed terribly busy whenever we crossed paths, giving off the impression that much of her social life was occupied by
friendships and activities out in the public sphere. I had actually first met her at an educational forum that catered to seniors whereupon I learned she was an avid photographer. I had been meaning to meet with Ruth for months and eventually found time to sit down with her at a nearby café.

If Irene’s affable personality made her appealing as a potential interviewee, Ruth’s sardonic, bordering on unpleasant, sensibility seemed an especially worthy undertaking. She was an adhoc participant of a weekly discussion group I facilitated, occasionally joining the conversations but more often than not, sitting on the outer edge of our talking circle before getting up and leaving whenever the conversation ceased being of further interest—which was often. I could tell from her body language and tone of voice, revealed often enough through blank stares or bored countenance, she found our discussions too trite and unfocused for her liking. Owing to her blasé yet worldly presentation of self, I had anticipated a series of punchy exchanges as her sarcastic view of the world and her fellow residents revealed key details about life at Pacific Manor that were otherwise not available to me. I was not prepared for the lengthy narrative of life transitions that occupied the majority of our conversation that afternoon.

When I asked her what had brought her to the Bay Area originally, her story began unfurling. Ruth was born and raised in Los Angeles where she had lived a majority of her adult life. Ruth’s father had bought a house in 1924 and gone to New York to marry her mother, whom he had met during a trip she had made to the West Coast to visit her aunt. “As I like to say, I was made on the train. But better than that,
I was made in Mexico,” she told me. When I asked her if that was where her parents had honeymooned, her story opened up further. She described her father as a very social person, a cosmopolitan ladies man of sorts. During the period of Prohibition, southern Californians used to go down to Tijuana to drink legally. When Ruth’s father and his family drove to Tijuana for one of their drinking weekends, they stopped somewhere that had postcards and someone suggested he send one to that “pretty girl from New York” who had returned home at that point. And so he did, her parents’ courtship beginning from there. “That’s why I say I was made in Mexico. I’m gonna cry. It’s sentimental,” she intoned with heartfelt affect as she started tearing up right then and there. We were barely five minutes into our conversation and Ruth had already challenged my perceptions of her tough as nails persona.

In trying to answer what had brought her to San Francisco initially I learned that Ruth’s love affair with the city was decades in the making. She had met her husband at a very young age when they were both 17. They had remained in communication during the Second World War and in 1944, when his troop ship docked in San Francisco, he invited Ruth and her mother to come up and meet him. Ruth was enamored with the city and afterwards was able to steal away from her parents in order to take another trip to SF with some of her girlfriends. “And it was wild…For one thing, the door had opened. The Pandora’s box had opened. I could never go back…To being the so-called ‘innocent.’” Relaying a recent encounter with a gentleman she knew from a Shakespeare reading group, Ruth reflected on the seeming contradiction of her worldliness and innocence. “That just shows you that I
still have an innocence. There’s still something of the innocent in me. I’m a worldly woman…My husband, when he met me and we became very well acquainted…We started when we were 17-years-old. He later said…He said ‘You’re the most sophisticated woman I’ve ever met.’ Now this is when I was 18 or 19-years-old.”

Returning to my initial query about how she got to San Francisco, she said, “So, let’s see. So then…I never got here. I got here on a couple of other occasions but it was always something else.” Trying to speed up the story on my behalf, Ruth pondered her next narrative turn, foregrounding the frailties of communication in old age.

“She then turned to a recent conversation she had had with a younger friend of hers about the 1960s and feminism, referencing Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique*. “I recently read a paragraph and put it on my Facebook of Betty Friedan’s and that was women…That there was something wrong. I had discovered it I would say about 1955 and we’d bought our first house. And it was there’s something wrong. And Friedan said it and in beautiful prose.” Ruth talked about the myth of gendered sacrifice that Friedan had exposed, recalling the familial and cultural messaging of the era. “Your job is to take care of your husband, your house and your children. Nothing else.” When I asked Ruth to further spell out what she discovered exactly, she said “I was lonesome. And there was no one to talk to. And all I had…We were up on a hill. I had no car. My husband…We had started with two cars. And he wound up…And he was gone all day and finally sometimes at night. He was in the engineering and aerospace industry, making the products that finally
helped put the man on the moon. But I’ve learned that word too...The expression is...I’ve learned it from this series called *Mad Men*...My husband is known as ‘emotionally unaccessible.’”

In her attempts to mitigate the stifling demands of married life in southern California, Ruth undertook several varieties of escape. “I wanted...I wanted to get out. I wanted to come north. I knew that. And I managed to get a year in Santa Cruz. And then my parents were going crazy because...My mother in particular it turned out couldn’t even tell her parents that he and I weren’t living together. All this is social structure of the past. It may still exist somewhere.” She wound up opening a studio in South Pasadena where she sold things that she was making—decorative objects, handicrafts and items with “ethnic design” motifs as she told me later on. Her husband lost his job and she had had three children in the space of five years, thus necessitating her finding a way to make money. But the studio also functioned as an escape hatch while the burgeoning politics of everyday life in the 1960s called out to Ruth. “I was part of the sexual revolution. Married, but nevertheless part of it, mentally and politically. So I was somewhat of a hippie, married to a Republican in South Pasadena. And I opened a studio to get out of my house. My father came to live with us after my mother died. And I was going nuts. I didn’t get married to have my dad live with me...To live with my dad.” Life at home and the demands of upper-middle-class modernity were taxing but her business grew and flourished. Eventually Ruth had to close the studio for a year because she had temporarily lost her sight due to cataracts.
In spite of the difficulties she encountered, Ruth remained steadfast in her commitment to her family, particularly the educational and career trajectories of her two sons. After finishing their undergraduate degrees, both of her sons decided to move to Sebastopol, California, a city about 50 miles north of San Francisco. Ruth would fly up on Fridays from Los Angeles to visit because she missed them and it was apparent that neither of them intended to “come home.” Since one of her sons had made the decision to apply to Sonoma State University to continue his education, Ruth proposed an idea to him. Saying it was silly for him to rent a place and for her to fly up and sleep on somebody’s floor or a girlfriend’s couch, she suggested that he find a duplex building that she could buy. He would be able to live in one half of it and they could rent the other half out. Thus began Ruth’s real estate ventures, which culminated in not buying the duplex she had imagined but building a house on a vacant lot in Sebastopol instead. It was literally a labor of love, bringing Ruth and her two sons together as collaborative partners in designing and building the house. Ruth held ultimate sway as financier and chief architect of sorts, signing off on all plans and blueprints. “I built the house entirely for cash. That’s how well I was doing. Not my husband’s money. Mine.”

Ruth had reached a crossroads following the building of the house. “I was tired and I know now the big word is depression. And the business was more than I could handle. I don’t know what else to call it. I don’t know what else was going on except I was unbalanced. I had been looking for somebody to sell it to for a long time. Which I know now was a big mistake. I could still be living like that. But
anyway, I finally found someone. I didn’t find her. We were at a bind. And she
found me. And she had no money, she was 24-years-old and she wanted to buy my
store, ’cause she saw what was happening. A very profitable, busy place and
interesting. Always interesting. I’m the alternative. Fashion. Ethnic design. And,
well, I sold it. I sold it in 1986…To this young woman. Who had no money. I had
to sign a loan at the Bank of America for her to borrow $5,000 as startup [capital].
She did sign a contract. I sold it for $250,000, which seemed like a pretty good sum
of money at the time.” Her son was no longer living in the house in Sebastopol as he
had moved to Oregon to go to graduate school, so she decided to move in. She was
eager to get out of Los Angeles, referring to getting sick often because of the smog.
She bought a new car and some items to furnish the house and just left. Her husband
decided to not come along. “My husband wouldn’t come along. He’d always gone
along with everything” she told me. Ruth spoke of wandering around the hills,
driving to Napa and going out to the ocean. They sounded like picturesque scenes
offering a welcome relief from the stress of life in Los Angeles. Not necessarily so it
turned out. “And I realized there was nothing there…I’m a city girl. But I didn’t
know all those things. This is what I’m going to say now. I’ve discovered myself
over…Intensely over the last ten years. It’s a big discovery. Things I’ve never
looked at before. Or analyzed.”

After Ruth’s husband had finally gotten a decent “package” from the company
he worked for—whether retirement or severance was unclear—her children
persuaded him to move to Sebastopol. Ruth had helped pay off their home mortgage
in South Pasadena, enabling their adult daughter to move in. After her first year in Sebastopol, Ruth started looking for a place to live in San Francisco. When they wound up selling the house in South Pasadena, between the money she and her husband had, Ruth imagined being able to buy “…something, you know, really comfortable and sweet and my style.” The narrative turn Ruth had been alluding to here and there finally was rendered with exasperated recognition. Her husband kept all of the money that had come out of escrow. “He’s been planning something for a long, long time. I know that now. And, by the way, I still love him. No matter what. It was my first. And only [love]” she told me as tears welled up again. Composing herself again, Ruth forged on with her story. She had become active in one of the Unitarian parishes in northern California and had brought her husband into the fold, hoping he would get exposed to “a different point of view” through the men in the church. At the same time, Ruth’s desire to spend more time in SF continued as she became a member of one of the city’s museums and regularly booked hotel rooms during hers and her husband’s sojourns in the city. Like the previous epiphany that had brought her to Sebastopol, Ruth said to herself “This is nuts. Why don’t I find a small apartment?” So she and her husband went looking together for a place she could stay in while visiting the city. She discovered that Pacific Manor was accepting applications and submitted one. After receiving a phone call from the manager of the complex, she drove down to look at a couple of units he was showing and wound up writing a deposit check on the spot when she looked out onto a gorgeous view of the city, complete with blue sky and white clouds, from the seventh floor unit that
became her apartment. Ruth had finally arrived. “But I finally made it—to the city. My first city of all is Paris. And this is as close as you can get to being in Paris, where everyone speaks English. Almost everyone speaks English.” Reconnecting to her fond memories of her father, she told me that his family was living in San Francisco during the terrible earthquake and fires that razed the city in 1906. They were forced to evacuate as a result. “And I’ve always had that feeling for San Francisco. And I love earthquakes. I grew up with earthquakes in L.A. But most of all, I want the city. I want everything that the city is. Including the noise. But the city has a lot of health…Advantages to healthcare. UC Medical Center, which I’m attached to. And it’s just vivacious. Breaks my heart that I can’t do what I once did. Physically I can’t do it anymore.”

Her arrival was not what she had entirely imagined though. While her husband became more actively involved with the Unitarians, drawing on his engineering background in helping them build a new church, he had gotten romantically involved with another woman in the congregation. Ruth kept driving back and forth between SF and the North Bay, doing the weekly shopping, yet still keeping her mailing address in Sebastopol. “This [Pacific Manor] was a temporary place. I expected him to come along. But…Two and a half years ago, now I’m losing track of that too, a woman nailed him. Got him. You know, heard of sex, drugs and rock and roll. Sex is always first. And I can use some phrases, what she…”

“What she is.”
“And what she does. In fact, she’s been married at least twice that I know. And the second one left her with some money and a house.”

“Had you known her socially?” I asked.

“No. Oh no. No. No. She joined the Unitarian Church a year prior to nailing my husband. She was hunting. She’s not a Unitarian. But anyway, she found it. He was hungry. He was hungry for—number one—he’d been searching for what I’d been looking for for a long time down here and that is called assisted living. Or, you know, these places that…Senior complex[es] that have all the facility and meals if you want it and perpetual care. And he had found one. They still send him advertising. Which, of course, I rejected because I didn’t want to live up there. That was mainly the thing…So anyway, sex, drugs and rock and roll, you know. Viagra is the drug of choice. Cialis now.” The commuting back and forth eventually stopped as Ruth wound up sleeping “fulltime” in San Francisco. “It’s okay. Adultery doesn’t count anymore unless you’re a politician. But see, we’re still married. And…and that brings you up until about where I am.”

She spoke about how her digital camera saved her life during this incredibly difficult period. “’Cause I really and truly have no friends. I have people I talk to on the phone. I have people [through] email that I contact with. My family is my children now. And my husband is…So it’s the camera that I…I no longer have the physical ability to do the handwork I once did…I can’t take the lids off of things. So it’s the camera. And I do some remarkable things with it. And there is appreciation for what I do.” Ruth spoke with pride about a series of stills that the editor of a
weekly newsletter had complimented her on. She described him as a “very, very gay man” which prompted her to reflect on being an outsider in queer San Francisco.

“It’s too much of gay world here for me. It’s hard to be heterosexual. It is. Especially a woman of my age. But you know. I’m 85. Passing for 75. I thought maybe I’d find an attractive man. I don’t want a young man, like some of these old fools. And the ones that dye their hair. But there is no substitute for my husband. We started when we were 17. And it was intense.”

Ruth’s story was indeed intense. In the latter half of our conversation I found myself asking her the impossible question “What’s good about getting older?” It was the kind of query someone merely listening and conversing would have avoided but which the anthropologist could not help but ask as he mentally surveyed the queries he had gotten so used to asking others. With brutal honesty, she said “Nothing. Absolutely nothing is good about it. Except my good fortune to have been able to keep my wits. I’ve slowed down as you see. The little synapses aren’t connecting so I can’t tell you the next line or refer back to what I said. I see…I see all kinds of little things happening to me. But it’s essential for me to…So the good part is I’ve been able to keep my wit. I’m still able to drive my car. I’m still able to communicate. I’m able to fathom the world…The computer world.” Ruth told me there was a Unitarian creed she tried to live by, as she flipped through one of the congregation’s newsletters she had with her, eager to share its exact wording with me. “There’s one that I emphasize very much. ‘To seek the truth in freedom and to help one another.’ And I do try to be helpful. I try with some of the people in the building, but they
don’t want it. They don’t want me. That’s all I feel.” She shared an anecdote with me about a fellow resident who made the coffee every morning in the lounge at Pacific Manor where seniors watch television, go through their mail, borrow books from the library and otherwise socialize. Ruth talked about how she was chatting with this gentleman about the book she was returning, admiring the author’s talents, and how she noticed he was visibly not paying attention to her. So she called him out on it.

“I get that quite a bit. So, it’s not them. It’s me…I don’t know the word for it…I know. I don’t fit in there. I don’t fit in.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because I’m too different. I’m just too different. I’m upper-middle-class for one. They don’t know that. They aren’t very many people who have an IQ and an interest in anything. They talk about baseball scores. I like to say it this way—Tiger Woods’s cock, you know….And Sandra [another resident], the people that she wants…Translators [to] come in for all those people in the building that don’t read English and don’t read the sign to close the garbage door. That’s important to them. It’s not to me. It is that somebody on my floor left a bag of garbage and stunk up the hall. I don’t fit in. I don’t have to either. But it’s lonely.”

**Dorothy Chang**

If Clifford’s and Ruth’s tales pivoted around the dramatically unanticipated, in Dorothy Chang’s narrative I heard how aging could offer up opportunities to reflect on the dramaturgy of everyday life. An 88-year-old Chinese American woman,
Dorothy and I chatted briefly on the telephone a few days before she agreed to meet with me at her apartment. This was our first in person encounter. Entering the lobby of a multistory building near Japantown, I immediately took note of the extensive security apparatus that monitored the traffic of people in and out the building. A security guard seated near the front of the lobby called up to Dorothy who relayed she was on her way down. The lobby’s acoustics sounded like those of an echo chamber, made audible by the loud knocking that reverberated as people walked in and out. Closed circuit television monitors captured the movements of bodies for the guard’s alternately watchful and distracted gaze. I imagined the building’s management extolling the virtues of on site security to potential residents during tours. After a few minutes passed, Dorothy appeared and suggested we sit down on the couch facing the lobby’s front entrance and chat there. A plump woman with well coiffed gray hair and a warm smile, Dorothy’s confident gait and communicative style could have convinced anyone she was at least a decade younger than 88. I started off telling her about the impetus for my research and asked my first question before she decided to stop me right then and there. “Let me say this. I feel comfortable enough I can invite you up to my cube. The only thing is I’m cluttered. But you know, all the old people are cluttered.” Thus began our conversation that afternoon.

Once inside her building’s elevator, Dorothy mentioned a woman she knew who complained of having to haul her groceries up to the fourth floor using the stairs and how, by comparison, she felt “kinda lucky.” Months afterwards I too would ponder the burden of carrying laundry and groceries up to my own third floor
apartment in a different set of life situations. San Francisco’s charming amalgamation of early and late 20th century architecture belied the predicaments of living in older buildings constructed in a world before the Americans with Disabilities Act. Walking down the hallway towards her unit, she told me “I came here to babysit about twenty years ago, never went back. Actually I’m from Washington, DC.” Dorothy’s two daughters were living in San Francisco at the time. As we entered her apartment she apologized again, evoking the figure of the elderly packrat. “I can’t throw anything away,” she declared. Several months before I had gone to visit a 65-year-old woman who had piles of papers and other objects strewn everywhere about her apartment. Walking gingerly through her space, making idle chitchat, I was amazed that a chair could be provided for the curious ethnographer in such domestic disarray. Even the most empathetic of social workers would have jotted notes attesting to “compulsive hoarding” in this woman’s case file. Dorothy’s apartment was nowhere near this state of affairs. Her clutter was comparatively charming. Piles stacked against the wall. Boxes of things. Assemblages of trinkets and smaller items she felt compelled to hold onto. Following our interview, right as I was making my way to her door, she gave me an embroidered pillow that had little frames around the edges with the months of the year and a central image of a red, New England-style house and the phrase “Bless Our Home.” I got the sense that gifting something to a polite stranger was better than throwing it away in Dorothy’s way of thinking.

Dorothy guesstimated she had been living in San Francisco the past twenty years as the child she used to babysit had graduated from college while another one
was in high school. She talked of how she downgraded, getting rid of “big things” like furniture and books before moving out to California. I asked her if she had been to the West Coast prior to her move. “I came out here early in the 1940s. I went to University of California until the war ended and everybody rushed home. And I rushed home to get married.” When I asked her to compare her impressions of northern California in the 1940s versus when she moved out here twenty years ago, our conversation started gaining momentum. “Well, when I first came, I went to UC and I was young and happy-go-lucky. And they had a streetcar here that you hopped on and it took you right to the…Almost to the campus in Berkeley. I didn’t have any worries. I just enjoyed myself. It was very light. And I stayed in a boarding house for women on Bush Street or somewhere. And then I had an auntie out here that wanted to take me out to the suburban side. And I had the feeling she wanted to match me up with some farmer. But, later on in life, I wish I had gone out there. Maybe I would have married a rancher and be[came] wealthy. And so, when the war ended, I went back home. And I got married and had five children. And then, in the meantime, I had to work. And I worked all my married life. I worked for [the] State Department. And it was a comfortable job. I enjoyed it. But I suffered for being a woman. They didn’t pay us as much. And I often got instead of getting a raise, I got ‘You ought to pay us for working.’ I guess I’m sort of a…More happy person than, you know…So they wanted me to pay them to work. But anyway.”

“So that was then when there was a lot more discrimination against women in the workforce?”
“And out here I think there was discrimination against Asians. And I remember Asians couldn’t buy property. [The] U.S. was very prejudiced. ’Cause I remember knowing some Asian men that couldn’t bring their wives. It was an inhuman kind of ruling.”

“Did you connect with the local Asian community that was here?”

“Yes. Back East I stayed mostly with that Asian group. And I only knew Chinese and Japanese. I was very limited. And, you know, in our schools unless you seek it, your geography and your history is limited. But when I came out here I saw Asians from all over the world. Although I worked for [the] State Department, I had visitors from different Asian countries visit Washington, you know. I worked for an educational training program. But I never realized that there were so many ’til I come out here. They all speak different languages.”


“Everything. Korean. And what is it? Cambodians. Thais. And I think when I came out here twenty years ago, it had already softened. The war had been over. And people talked more about being humane. But I’m still disappointed, because we’re all divided by religion. And religion’s supposed to be a good thing. But it divides everybody.”

Thus began a series of recollections for Dorothy that prompted her to consider the present as much as the past, aided by the inquiring ethnographer. Dorothy’s reflexive musings were voiced between moments of quiet pause wherein it appeared she might fall asleep before another query or comment brought her back from that
precipice. Another anthropologist might have curtailed conversation so as not to wear her or his informant out. But I reasoned that Dorothy’s pauses and punctuated nodding off were as much a part of our conversation as its biographical contents. If Clifford’s embrace of aging was in giving him permission to slow down, being 88 slowed Dorothy’s alert self down irrespective of her wishes. I therefore ask readers to keep in mind these numerous stops as absent presences within the communicative exchanges I render below.

When she spoke of religion dividing people, she compared it to the infighting in contemporary American politics. But she also keenly situated her critique as being shaped by age. “And I think as you get older, you think of the good of the all. The integrity of people. And I don’t find that in people anymore. Or maybe it wasn’t there and I didn’t know it.” I asked her if there were other things that struck her about San Francisco after returning in her 60s and she again referenced her decision to stay on the West Coast after taking on her new role as grandmother. Shortly thereafter she started to look for places to live “away from the family.” She told me that “Here everybody wants to be independent,” referencing the hegemony of the nuclear family in idealized form if not always in practice. Though real estate at that time was more reasonable than in Washington, DC, she decided against buying a home or condominium. Plus, she added, there would have been extra fees associated with a condo. Dorothy’s apartment building seemed to offer reasonable space for a single woman combined with the amenities of centralized, onsite maintenance. “It’s a high price I paid for freedom. Freedom from responsibility. I don’t have to call the
plumber. I don’t have to call the electrician. I selected a type of life that would suit me.” As Dorothy and I continued talking I found myself thinking that the freedom she spoke of had resonances beyond who would fix her shower if it stopped working.

She went on to tell me that she had looked at several housing options, mostly condos, before deciding on her current unit. Dorothy had never rented before in her life and briefly shared how she contemplated buying a condo just across the street but decided against it because she was afraid of getting off the bus and walking through “that dark street” at night to get to her building. When I asked her what she liked best about the city, Dorothy talked of the weather and the fresh, inexpensive produce available. She also reflected fondly on a single parents group, made up of widowers and divorcees, that she used to belong to and how they would travel on the weekends to Petaluma and other local destinations. But, she acknowledged, they were younger then and gas was cheaper. Eventually both the trips and the group subsided. An extended learning group, similar to one readers will encounter in the next chapter, wound up capturing Dorothy’s attention and affection over the past decade. “I’ve just devoted my life to that” she summed up.

When I asked her what she didn’t like about San Francisco she told me “Well, I don’t like the killing. I don’t like to hear other people being killed.” It was unclear if she was speaking of urban violence, because she went on to talk about war and Christianity and her disappointed realization that both Christians and Americans do indeed start wars. I echoed her thoughts, waxing philosophic on the troubling things going on in the world before Dorothy declared “And then I’m getting old and
grumpy. ’Cause I feel like a lot of people take up issues, and they’re for this and they’re for that. But it’s all verbalizing. They’re not really doing anything. They’re just talking about it. If you really feel strongly about something I really feel you should do something about it. Well, I don’t want people to top talking though.”

I concurred that translating words into action in order to make things better was something many of us struggled with.

“But I never felt that I was old until last couple of years. And I felt I was…Suddenly I woke up and I said ‘I’m old!’ You know, after all these years, I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Is that how it occurred? It just hit you one day?”

“Yeah, it was about either a year or two ago and I when I start[ed] enjoying bingo parties…‘Oh, that’s for old people’ and how I’m really enjoying it.”

“So that was the moment it hit you.”

“And then I made a resolution not to tell my age anymore. ’Cause I hadn’t thought about my age, but a couple of years ago we talked about it. I guess somebody passed away and then we all talked about it. But I think one shouldn’t think of your age and try to live it. And if you keep repeating it, you’re trying to live it. I think my principles are to be as strong and as healthy and independent as you can be. But sometimes it’s not that easy.”

Dorothy and I went on to talk about the advantages and challenges of getting older. Like my conversations with Clifford and Ruth, she mentioned experiences and opinions as they came to her, expressing them in ad hoc fashion. Yet her narrative
differed in that it wasn’t guided by a bombastic or dramatic telos. Managing the quotidian responsibilities of everyday life was more than enough challenge. When I asked again about the good things about getting older, she told me she could think about more negatives before saying “As you get older you can do what you damn well please without having to worry about it. You know, sometimes, you’re polite and you don’t want to do what you want to do. And when you’re old and grumpy, you’re just old and grumpy. You can do it. If you don’t want to do it, just don’t do it. I think the greatest thing for me is to take possession of my life.”

“And do you feel like that’s something you’ve been able to do before getting older?”

“No. No. I always had to what’s convenient for everybody or best for everybody. Because I raised five children too.”

“Yeah. That’s a lot of responsibility.”

“And then I guess another good thing is I have time to think about myself. To learn about myself. ’Cause usually when you live, you’re so busy doing what you have to do you don’t have time to think about yourself. And to know who you are. See, I know I’m a 9 to 5 person. I have to keep busy 9 to 5. ’Cause I’ve been working all my life and I’m used to it. And if I don’t I get very depressed. And then I feel depression is something that I bring on myself. I mean…Sometimes it’s chemically…But then if I don’t fight it, I sink into it. So I try not to sink into it. I try to divert myself…As much as you can.”
Settled in the intimate familiarity of her cluttered apartment, I found myself listening to the details of a life turned into material for reflection. Stories as accumulated “stuff.” The bric-a-brac of everyday life. In asking Dorothy about other discoveries she had come to about herself, I had posed an existential question. In turn, her responses focused more on the transformations and losses she noticed in her everyday milieu. She spoke about losing connections with people due to the Christmas card list she had neglected over the years. She mentioned regret around not telling her children the things “you think they should know” and spoke of how her apprehensiveness around driving convinced her to give away her convertible a year ago. Grumpiness, the confusing narrative sequencing of contemporary films, the physical challenges of getting on and off the city’s buses were all fodder for Dorothy’s speculative musings on life at 88. Yet in surveying the everyday, she did wind up circling back to the existential.

“I think when you’re younger you don’t realize how alone you can be when you’re old. You’re really…”

“Alone? How so?”

“Well, you live alone. And people don’t always remember you. And you don’t have the energy to go 50/50 to make a life for yourself. And there’s…I don’t know where people disappear to. Where were people when I was young? I don’t know…You know, I never felt this way when I was young. Where’s other people? Or that I felt alone. But by the same token as I felt alone, I can’t stand anybody with me either. Like, you know, coming from back East I would say ‘Oh, come on out and
visit.’ They would come and they could sleep on the couch. And I love them and think they’re wonderful people. But to spend all day and all evening with them is just too much. It’s like somebody said don’t wish for something, when you get it, you’ll be disappointed.” Dorothy spoke wryly of the contradiction of treasuring and disliking being alone in old age. I asked her when she had started to notice that aloneness more. “I think after the last couple of years. After I turned 87. I don’t know why 87 is the marker…Then I had friends that died. And that leaves a toll on you. They’re not related to you but it leaves a mark on you. I belong to a senior group. I think there were eight or nine of us. Now there’s only three of us left. And I think I’ve belonged to that group for about 10…15 years. They’ve got more people in. But of the original people, there’s only three of us. And I think somehow we don’t have a philosophy…We’re so excited about birth, but we don’t have a philosophy for dying.”

“Do you feel like you’ve been able to come up with one?”

“Well…No, not really. Well…No, not really. I guess in the sense we have to…You have to let nature take its course. I mean, fruits don’t live and flowers don’t live forever. All of nature doesn’t live forever. Even though they have hundred-year-old trees…Even sometimes those die. And anyway, we spend a lot of time trying to prolong the life of everything. And I think maybe that’s wrong. Maybe we’re supposed to die and other things are supposed to come. I mean I never found the answer to eternity or where things began.”
“Yeah. No. I mean, I think it’s a question we all grapple with in different ways.”

“When you’re old you have more time to think about it though,” she quickly retorted with a hearty laugh that shattered her apartment’s intimate quiet as well as my focused attention at that very moment.

The aloneness Dorothy spoke poignantly about was not entirely thrust upon her as an injustice of elderly isolation. As she mentioned, she often found it difficult to be around people even if she had extended an invitation to visit. Neither was her aloneness absolute. During her first few years back in San Francisco, she had actively sought out activities and services for seniors in the city, attending the different lunch programs hosted by local nonprofit organizations. Like various people I had spoken to, Dorothy developed a robust knowledge of which programs served the better meals and coordinated her urban travel itinerary accordingly. She found herself simultaneously in the role of participant and volunteer, helping out with a couple of organizations during those initial years. I commented on her adeptness at learning the local aging services landscape to which she replied, “I was inquisitive about everything. I think that’s what keeps me alive.” Though the groups had changed, her desire to be involved with some version of the public sphere remained. Near the end of our conversation, she mentioned another organization she intended to start volunteering with again. It would be easy to see Dorothy’s story as one of a triumphant, vibrant aging—the poster version of a gerontological vision once referred
to as “activity theory.”\textsuperscript{52} But her lifeworld was also gradually shrinking, evidenced as much by her neglected Christmas card list as the scale of the city without her car to traverse it. She made mention of an exercise class out at the mall near San Francisco State University. Trying to remember the name of the mall, I incorrectly called it the Serramonte Mall, which in turn prompted Dorothy to ponder aloud. “Gee, I used to drive down Serramonte. Now I feel like it’s a foreign country.”

\textit{Elliot Butler}

When I first heard Elliott Butler’s voice on the telephone I was struck by its deep cadences and affected enunciation, like someone who had been training with a vocal coach for years. We had agreed to meet up at his apartment at 6:00PM on a Wednesday evening but when I called his unit from the downstairs intercom there was no answer. Catching Elliott on his cellphone, he apologized profusely for having forgotten our meeting and told me he would call me the minute he got home and settled in. A better ethnographer would have recognized Elliott’s real desire to be interviewed and made the trek back to his apartment later that evening. But I wanted to relax after returning to my place and avoid letting any of my own annoyed affects complicate the rapport I was hoping to build in conversation with him. So we

\textsuperscript{52}“Activity theory” was one of the two reigning paradigms of American gerontology in the 1960s. The other paradigm, “disengagement theory,” postulated a mutual, Parsonian withdrawal of the aging person and society from one another. According to Robert J. Havighurst, activity theory suggested instead that “…older people are the same as middle-aged with essentially the same psychological and social needs…The older person who ages optimally is the person who stays active and who manages to resist the shrinkage of his social world. He maintains the activities of middle age as long as possible, and then finds substitutes for work when he is forced to retire and substitutes for friends and loved ones whom he loses by death” (Havighurst 1968: 20).
rescheduled for the following week and when I found myself again at the downstairs entrance to his building, Elliott answered the intercom and buzzed me in.

Once inside his studio apartment, I took a seat opposite Elliott on a wooden chair while he reclined comfortably across from me on an easy chair. Elliott had found me through an ongoing notice that was published in one of the two local gay newspapers in circulation during my research. Though he was dressed casually for lounging at home, his cropped hair and bulky physical stature nonetheless gave off the impression of someone who could easily be identified with the “daddy” moniker in gay male argot.\(^5\) I began by asking Elliott how long he had lived in San Francisco and if he wasn’t a native what had brought him originally to the city. He talked about how he had started coming to San Francisco in 1977. He was working on his doctoral degree in education at one of the local universities, flying up on the weekends for classes from Los Angeles. When I asked Elliott what had appealed to him about the program he was enrolled in, he told me, with blunt honesty, that he didn’t know what he was doing. “I had come out of a love relationship and needed something to distract me,” he offered. He was already driving an hour each way for work and decided that he couldn’t add on further commuting to school so opted instead to drive to the airport in Burbank, get on a plane and “…have a whole different experience.”

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\(^5\)The kinship term “daddy” is a complex signifier within North American gay male milieus. It names one of two (or more) actors in a sexualized intergenerational relationship, the complement to the younger “son.” It refers to the dominant subject position performed within specific kinds of queer sexual play gathered under the labels of “sadomasochism” and “bondage and discipline” (or “BDSM” for short). It also refers to the playful fantasies embodied in the aforementioned roles, irrespective of the actual age or sexual tastes of the “daddy” involved. Finally, “daddy” has come to serve as an all-encompassing label for any older, physically fit, sexual active gay man. It is in this last sense that I read Elliott’s initial presentation of self.
As I listened to Elliott talk, it became clear that he wasn’t simply in search of
distraction. He had, in his eyes, hit a glass ceiling at his workplace. “All the Black
people were getting promoted. Whites weren’t getting promoted.” There was
bitterness in Elliott’s articulation of an elite racism whereby African Americans
without proper credentials were getting promoted at work. I then asked him what life
was like in San Francisco during those early days. “In the 70s?...It was wild...Well,
[it was a] burst of freedom having come out of the restrictive 50s and restrictive 60s.
A whole burst of freedom. You know, very, very exciting.” He spoke about how he
regularly used to check into a bathhouse in the city’s South of Market district, drop
acid, “carry on” and then fly back to Los Angeles the next day. Elliott voiced his
view that the quality of life was better in San Francisco. “…it was perfect. Perfect”
he intoned with an emphatic lilt in his voice.

I then asked him what he thought had changed most about the city since the
1970s. “Well, the whole gay culture has changed dramatically. Dramatically. The
leather scene has dried up totally...There used to be a whole string of leather bars on
Folsom Street. Bathhouses have closed and that was one of the reasons I moved up
here.” He narrated the distinction between the bathhouses in Los Angeles and those
in San Francisco, noting how in southern California everyone had to stand in line for
twenty minutes, show three picture IDs to get in and lift up their shirts for physical
inspection before being let in. “Which resulted in all these very perfect people...Ken
dolls. Perfect. Perfect. It became tedious actually. Lack of variety” he told me.
“Then the AIDS crisis hit and that changed the whole thing totally. And the culture
has changed.” Elliott hit on an interesting observation with his reference to “culture.” He talked about how he started going to a gym in 1966 in New York City and how he had to take two trains to get there from Brooklyn and three trains back, mirroring the arduousness of his later commuting to and from work in Los Angeles. “Hardly anybody worked out then. Now these gyms are just packed. Gay guys are not going for cocktails after work. They’re hanging out in gyms.” Elliott mused out loud about the changing self-image of the gay male subject over the decades, tracing a transition away from the “clone look” which was dominant in the Castro during the 1970s and 1980s. Gay men now were no longer looking for publicly displayed masculinity through the earlier iconography of flannel shirts, moustaches and leather jackets. “It’s more of an internal thing. People feel more confident. At least at an illusion level.” He also offered that though he didn’t know if drugs were being used at the same rate as they were in the past, he had a sense that they were “rougner now,” citing the predominance of crystal methamphetamine in many corners of the gay male community. “You can’t get LSD anymore. So it’s changed in that nature. And the internet has made a difference” which prompted Elliott and I to talk about the shifting nature of casual sex amongst gay men in the present. He spoke openly about how his sex life had “…come back with a vengeance with the internet.” For him this was a positive development as it meant he didn’t have to force himself to go out to bars, which he didn’t much care for.

But there was also a sense that other things had changed with the passing of time. It was at this point that Elliott remembered aloud with vivid fondness the
worlds of “bike runs” men in the leather community used to organize. “This is another thing that died out with time” he told me. These were gatherings of gay men who shared a twin love of leather and motorcycles who came together for weekend long excursions all around the West Coast. Some versions of these gatherings were quite large as when Elliott told me organizers used to rent out Seaman’s Hall from the California Men’s Motorcycle Club and a thousand people would show up. Elliott told me he would pack his sleeping bag into his car, drive up to the run site and put his tent up. Over 200 men would show up for the weekend. The organizers prepared all of the meals and men were constantly socializing during breakfast, lunch and dinner. There was also an open bar as alcohol flowed freely throughout the weekend. Listening to Elliott reminisce, I realized that these motorcycle runs were homosocial as much as homosexual. I thought of archival footage I had seen of young men working for the Civilian Conservation Corps or in basic training during World War II. For all the hypermasculine semiotics on display, a spirit of camp governed these weekends as well. A stage was set up where cabaret and drag performances would

Looking for historical evidence to buttress this part of Elliott’s story was a case study in the conundrums of oral history work. Exact correspondence between the names of organizations and places he fondly remembered proved to be elusive. I note that here in order to point out the complex, uneven connections between history and memory. The former Seamen’s Club, located near the city’s eastern waterfront at the Embarcadero, is the closest I could find to what Elliott referred to as “Seaman’s Hall.” The Embarcadero YMCA was located here, a key site for exercising and cruising amongst gay men in the leather community. I could find no listing for a California Men’s Motorcycle Club, but noted the existence of the San Francisco Motorcycle Club, the second oldest in the United States. Neither could I find any archived connection between the San Francisco Motorcycle Club and the Seaman’s Club or YMCA. Considering the generational loss of many who could narrate the local genealogies linking motorcycles, leather and gay men, I should not be surprised that the history of the present Elliott narrated for me could not be perfectly patched together. I refer readers to Gayle Rubin’s work on the San Francisco leather scene for further historical and ethnographic anchorings. See Rubin (1997).
take place and the drag queens who served as Saturday night’s entertainment were a regular part of the circuit of these runs—a queer version of vaudeville or the USO. “They put on some damn good shows…[that were]…absolutely hilarious and witty.”

For all of their ribald energy, Elliott emphasized the social versus the sexual nature of these weekends. He told me how he met a roommate he lived with for 24 years at one of these runs, wryly adding how neither he nor his roommate had a motorcycle. “They were great social events. And everybody was up there to have a good time. I wasn’t up there to screw around because the shower facilities were limited. And I don’t like taking public showers…Oh, I met a lot of good friends out of that. Most of them have since died, but…It didn’t attract younger people and they died off.”

Death was already on the conversational table. Yet, out of my own curiosity, I found myself asking Elliott more questions about sex and the gay community in the 1970s. Like my conversation with Clifford, I learned Elliott was more than willing to talk about intimacy and sexuality. Whereas in other interviews I was agnostic about how much time we spent discussing the past, here I found myself purposefully asking Elliott more follow-up queries about his early years in San Francisco. In retrospect I now see that as much as I was eager to avoid doing a folkloric study of “gay aging,” my own subjectivity and desire to know more about an important period of gay social life influenced the contours of our exchange. Anthropologists have been right to note that our own subject positions shape the production of ethnographic knowledge (Rabinow 1977; Dumont 1978; Ruby 1982; Behar and Gordon 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996; Davies and Spencer 2010). I listened to Elliott openly talk about the
convergence of drugs, public sex and gay male sociality in the San Francisco of the 1970s and 1980s. In a sense, he was giving me a vivid detailing of the ribald abandon mythologized in both history and the gay imaginary. Prior to graduate school, I worked for an HIV/AIDS organization in San Francisco and had heard snippets of wild stories courtesy of the older HIV positive gay men I worked with. But never had I deliberately inquired into the devilish details as it were.

“Yeah, the baths were great in the 70s…South of the Slot I always reserved New Year’s Eve. I had the same room every other Saturday. I had it on the second floor, right by the window, right by the street—in case there was a fire I could jump out. Okay, this was not a nice place. And on New Year’s Eve they would have a lovely buffet. And they would serve acid punch. Wow! Was that place flying! And a couple of the baths would serve acid punch on New Year’s Eve. One guy I know now who’s a retired lawyer, one of his jobs was [as] the towel boy for one of the baths…And his job on New Year’s Eve was to guard the acid punch to make sure that other people were not throwing in other kinds of drugs…It was friendly. People were out to have a good time and enjoy it.”

Elliott and I found ourselves moving towards the inevitable dénouement of the story he was tracing for me. “It seemed to be a lot more social at that time. There was no internet. So, a lot more social activity going on” is how he put it. He talked about noticing how there weren’t as many social organizations or bar floats that were part of the annual Gay Pride Parade like there used to be. “The bar business has really died off.” When I asked him when he thought the bar business had started
experiencing its challenges, Elliott then transitioned back to talking about himself.

“Well, when the AIDS crisis hit, I stopped having sex. I paid for it once a year…Just so I could control what was happening and then not get emotionally attached in any way.” He spoke about how he didn’t want to go the whole year without having sex and how a lot of people felt that way. They just stopped going to bars and cutting down their number of sexual partners. “It was a difficult period to live through because everyone was dying left and right. Of course, I’m only alive because I was very good at figuring out trials…I knew how to read research proposals. And I knew that I was lying my way into trial after trial, forging documents, forging doctor’s signatures. ’Cause I knew statistically, you got statistical controls that [are] people who aren’t given the right information. So I felt no compunction about doing that. I’d be in three trials at once. But luckily I was able to pick out the right ones.” In describing the tumult he was experiencing during this period Elliott drew a striking parallel to a famous sequence in D.W. Griffith’s film *Way Down East* (1920) where actress Lillian Gish perilously jumps from ice floe to ice floe to avoid going over a waterfall. “And that’s the way I felt. One trial after another trial. So only 5% of us [that] were infected at that time made it though.”

As Elliott revisited the lethal legacies of the AIDS epidemic, the apathy of the medical establishment was mirrored by a sense of hopelessness amongst those infected. “At that point, it was a death sentence. So from ’85 on, I really got into it…So I survived and a lot of others didn’t. They just threw up their hands.” Elliott spoke about one friend who was deathly afraid of needles and reticent to seek out any
potential treatments. “A lot of guys just gave up passively. Whatever reason. They just gave up. And...‘I’ll do what my doctor tells me.’ You do what your doctor tells you, you’re going to wind up dead.” He told me how his own roommate at the time, who worked for the health maintenance organization Kaiser Permanente and was his ophthalmologist, was telling others that Elliott wasn’t going to live very long. “You were just written off by Kaiser and a lot of guys just bought into that. They didn’t...They didn’t fight. Whatever reason...Which has left an effect now because there are few guys around my age range. And I worked out at the gyms regularly here in the 70s and 80s. And I hardly see anyone around from that era. The ones with the buffest, the greatest bodies were the first to go...Now men my age are very, very, very rare. There were a lot of us in the 70s and 80s. A lot of us. It’s kind of an odd feeling being a survivor. There are few people to talk to, to relate to us.”

“Sure. Who can share...Who can share and kind of remember...Remember a lot of the...A lot of the struggles and benchmarks.”

“And also it’s having very carefully laid out a whole groundwork of support system and friends. And then have them all die, you know. Let’s say [it’s] a challenge. Challenge.”

Fleshing out the hysteria of that moment, Elliott talked further about the landscape of support groups that sprung up during the early years of the epidemic and how he stayed away from most of them due to his questioning of the role of “passive victim.” He had subsequently gotten certification as an HIV/AIDS and drug counselor but had to abandon pursuing work in either of those domains due to the
internal politicking he witnessed and his own sense of discrimination as a White person. He spoke about how he had to do fieldwork for the drug counseling certificate and got “jacked around” by someone in the Sheriff’s Department who kept stringing him along for several months as he tried to get his requisite number of internship hours fulfilled. When he finally switched to another program, the African American supervisor there, whom Elliott referred to as a “Black bastard,” wouldn’t sign the paperwork attesting to the hours he had done. So he forged his supervisor’s signature. “It’s a racial thing. Keep this field for Black people. No White people” he added with crisp paranoia.

When I asked Elliott what he liked best about living in San Francisco, I heard him survey the places that were important to him. The gym. The opera. The symphony. He told me that there were more “foreign movie houses” in San Francisco than New York City, a fact I probably would have taken at face value had Elliott not driven the point home in telling me that he had once counted and compared the number of theaters in both cities. He described San Francisco as a “…richer, more sophisticated” city than New York. “There’s a concentration of very literate and intelligent people here.” San Francisco’s scale also had advantages in Elliott’s eyes. “It’s small enough that I keep on running into people I know…So it has a nice feel to it.” In listening again to Elliott speak of the city’s urban intimacy months afterwards, I noticed its contrast with an earlier gay valorization of the city’s
anonymity as it facilitated the kinds of sexual exchange we had earlier discussed. In another instance of irony, Elliott proudly spoke of the fact that he had bypassed the typical health conundrums associated with aging—problems with diabetes, blood pressure and cholesterol—due to having worked out his entire adult life. “Yeah, I’m not getting these things. And I’m still able to go out and have a good time. And even contemplate taking country western dancing, which people my age would not be doing!” When I asked him how old he was again, not realizing I actually hadn’t asked his age, Elliott told me he was 67.

Sensing my next query, Elliott preempted my asking it. “What don’t I like?” His voice trailed off before a long silence audibly filled his studio.

“Mostly friends. It’s just not that easy to make friends as it was when I was younger. People are set in their ways and are not that interested in making connections. I got lazy for a number of years. I lived on Russian Hill [with] two roommates who were highly social. And loads of people coming in the house, so I kind of relied on them. One died and the other one went crazy.”

“Oh no. I’m sorry to hear that,” I offered.

“It happens. So that whole relying on other people to bring social life to me means I’ve got to suddenly go out [and] be the one…For me, it was what the French call “le troisième age.” “The third age.” Life is divided into three different periods.

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Well, I started the third age. A new way of going about it. But I did have to start seeing a psychiatrist in August. Because everything in my life had turned upside down. And there was not the support system that I had built up carefully over the years…People had died. Went crazy. Were getting…Literally went crazy. And were just getting too old. Loss of memory. Forgetting to show up at things. We’d agree to meet at a movie and they’d show up at the wrong movie theater. So I had to start all over again. So I got a good shrink. I see him about two or three times a month. Just had to make that transition. And not sit home. I’m very comfortable sitting at home, reading and watching DVDs but I got to get out. I had to make an effort and not allow myself to take the easy way out. This building has worked out pretty well. As you can see, it’s 62 or over…I’m getting to know people here…It’s nice to go out in the elevator in the morning and see people.”

Elliott had been living in a senior apartment complex, managed by a local nonprofit organization, for a little over a year when I interviewed him at the start of 2010. He was clearly still new to the community of fellow residents he was surrounded by. Later on, as we were winding up our conversation, he talked about being surprised by how many other gay men there were in the building, an ad hoc gayborhood in the making. Elliott was pursuing his “third age” with as much gusto as he could muster. We returned again to sexuality, this time on his own initiation. “I thought when I turned 50 it was over. Thank God I I’m not going to have to share my bed with anybody else and put up with them all night. I thought it was over at 50. It’s not. It just got better and better. Got better and better. So that was a surprise.
And I’m still kind of thrilled by the surprise.” I listened to him talk about his recent spate of liaisons with both older and younger men as he jokingly asked me if I had met any similar “dirty old men” in my ethnographic encounters. We were wrapping up on a lively note as Elliott rattled on with the libidinal bravado of many gay men I had met over the years. Amidst his cheeky chatter, I recalled how Elliott had circled back to an earlier theme in our conversation. “And of course, as I said earlier, the men in my age range are very limited. And a lot of them are walking wounded. They’ve survived—but at a price, you know.”

**Narratives and Knowledges**

In taking readers through these four lifeworlds, the twin dangers of holism and decontextualization inevitably haunt the edges of these framings. At the start of this chapter, I offered a revisiting of feminist intersectionality as one way to guide a reading of what I have presented. I argued that doing so allows us to see how the certitudes attached to our analyses of race, class and gender prove to be unstable once we, like Dorothy, try to make sense of the confusing narrative trajectories of aging. For Clifford Taylor, growing up a mixed race African American amidst unhappily married parents and life in a Vallejo housing project, he could have easily followed a path familiar to his family and sociologists alike. Prison. Bad relationships. Death. In fact, as he reiterated again and again, bad relationships were themselves a kind of prison, the ultimate squashing of freedom and possibility. The 1967 “summer of love” first planted the seeds of possibility, interrupted by his tour of duty in Vietnam and subsequently reclaimed when he finally moved to San Francisco. Clifford’s
discovery of his self—through acting, dating, martial arts and painting—put him in tune with generations of migrants to San Francisco who had come to reinvent themselves. For years he had been cultivating an active, bohemian lifeworld and space for himself, represented by his single room situated near the city’s rough-hewn Tenderloin district. As he told me, “I treasure my privacy. And I treasure my freedom. I’ve earned it.” Many would read Clifford’s freedom as rather limited. Though managing to get by, he was economically constrained after leaving the working world in his 50s. His peace of mind was also undercut by the anxiety he expressed about the edgy, repressed violence he saw simmering out on the city’s streets. And then, of course, women could be counted on for trying to limit his freedom. I first read his running commentary on women as a kind of banal sexism, punctuated with bombastic cadences, but mostly an exasperated set of musings on “the sexes.” I now think of Clifford’s editorializing on women’s irrationality as projection—an Othering of his own anxieties and fears around growing up and growing old.

For Ruth Rouse, there was nothing good about getting older. The disjuncture between her present situation at age 85 and her middle-class, middle-aged life trajectory was pronounced. Like Clifford, the 1960s too offered something of a point of departure, away from the confines and loneliness of playing wife and mother in suburban California. She had developed a critique of the nuclear family form early on, allying herself with feminism and “the sexual revolution.” Her thriving business gave her economic independence during a period when women entrepreneurs were a
rarity in American society. The house in Sebastopol stood as testament to her success. As she told me, “I built the house entirely for cash. That’s how well I was doing. Not my husband’s money. Mine.” Yet Ruth’s fierce independence existed alongside her unwavering devotion to the men in her life. Not just her louse of a husband but also her sons. She talked with doting detail of the period she spent flying north to visit her two boys, their work on the house in Sebastopol, their educational pursuits and career paths. Ruth shared a cheeky rapport with her sons, akin to Radcliffe-Brown’s famous gloss on intergenerational joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1940). For Ruth, aging was narrated as loss. The separation from her husband offered up a dramatic turn of events. But her husband’s infidelity was only part of a larger picture. Ruth also spoke of the loss of her physical abilities vis-à-vis the artisan handiwork that had made her into a successful businesswoman. And her entitled, middle-class sense of self had also taken a significant beating. Life in a fixed income senior housing complex where people ignored her in conversation or concerned themselves with “…Tiger Woods’s cock...” was not the San Francisco she had pined for all those many years.

Reflecting with introspective wit, Dorothy Chang read aging through the lens of the everyday. Becoming a grandmother had precipitated a set of transitions that brought her back to San Francisco where she went in search of community in multiple

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56 Her vivid vignettes about her sons spoke volumes about her love and support of their own lifeworlds in the making. At one point, she shared with me how one of her sons, whom she added was “very good looking,” had gotten a vasectomy when he was younger and told Ruth “I’m going to sleep with every woman in the world” at his first graduation celebration. I was thus taken aback towards the later half of our conversation when she mentioned, almost in passing, her daughter who quickly disappeared again from focus.
ways. From what I gleaned in our conversation, having her family nearby and a busy calendar of activities sustained Dorothy throughout her 60s and 70s. But it was turning 88 that had the effect of making her cognizant of being old. As she told me, “But I never felt that I was old until last couple of years…Suddenly I woke up and I said ‘I’m old!’ You know, after all these years, I hadn’t thought about it.” More than excited epiphany, I listened to Dorothy trace her shifting lifeworld through the quotidian. Social groups disbanded. Her grandchildren graduated. She sold her car. Her Christmas card list fell by the wayside. People died. It would be easy to follow her lead and leave it at that. Yet listening again to Dorothy’s tale, one could hear someone navigating the momentous social changes of the 1940s and 1950s. World War II. Life in Asian American California. The new international diplomatic order represented by the U.S. State Department. On the job discrimination amidst life as a working professional and mother. Her disarming laughter brought me back to Clifford’s bombastic ramblings and I later realized I was in the presence of what bell hooks has called “talking back,” a way of resistance lodged in wordplay and ordinary survival tactics (hooks 1989).

Aging into his late 60s as a HIV positive person in and of itself was a bold act of survival for Elliott Butler. Part of the generation of gay men hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic, Elliott had fought for his life yet lost the vibrant community that brought together gay men through the social worlds of motorcycles, leather, recreational drug use and public sex. His graduate education had given him the tools to decipher the languages of study protocols and experimental clinical trials. Many of
his friends and peers were not so lucky. During our conversation, he made repeated references to how the leather scene had “dried up.” AIDS had claimed his cohort while politicoeconomic changes transformed San Francisco’s working class and underground geographies into more profitable real estate (Rubin 1997; Hartman 2002). Like Ruth, Elliott’s middle-class Whiteness created expectations that were repeatedly dashed. His bitter racism towards African Americans, whom he felt blocked his career advancement, was loud and clear. There was an equally audible contentedness with life that I heard as well. The ordinary pleasures of going to the gym, watching a movie and getting to know people at the housing complex he lived in were all apparent. Even Elliott’s ongoing desire for sex surprised him. In his bravado I could detect the voice of someone crafting continuity between his ribald past and homebody present.

Indeed, I heard a battle weary contentment in these and other narratives people shared with me. Recall that Ruth managed to talk with pride about her digital photography and the appreciation she received for her talents and “vision.” Life does go on amidst transitions, adventures and losses of all varieties. In this regard, I believe I stumbled onto what many anthropologists of aging discover—“perspective” vis-à-vis the past and one’s own life. Joan Scott famously cautioned against treating experience as a sovereign space of authenticity (Scott 1991). Others (too numerous to cite) have echoed similar worries. Here I have argued for the necessity of revisiting the claims of feminist intersectionality in taking account of the privileges and frailties of later life. Call it a politics of perspective in homage to the work of Rich and her
fellow interlocutors. In the United States, narratives of redemption and triumph occupy a unique place in American structures of feeling—what Lauren Berlant has continued to unpack in her work (see Chapter 1). I do not believe that what I was privy to in my conversations with older San Franciscans necessarily required the kind of schizophrenic self-actualization Berlant deconstructs. Perspective does not demand mastery of experience though it certainly is one way I heard people narrate their stories. Perspective is the view from somewhere, whether nostalgic or narcissistic, motivated or meandering, fearless or frail. Amongst my informants, aging marked the constellation of circumstances that sutured lifeworlds and frailties together in unexpected ways. Perspective opened up a space for agency.

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57 Most notably, of course, Donna Haraway. See Haraway (1991) for her discussion of “perspective” in feminist scientific praxis.
Chapter 4 / Community

Adult children are not community.

—80-year-old interviewee

We’re here to help each other through this thing, whatever it is.

—Mark Vonnegut

Potluckering

Anyone looking for the ideal vision of community might draw inspiration from The Senior Class potlucks. A social gathering of people affiliated with one of the extended learning programs in the city, the tasty food, good wine and interesting conversation always made the trek up the steep hills to Eleanor and Nathaniel Davis’s house worthwhile. Situated in a charming, tree-lined residential quarter, Eleanor and Nathaniel’s abode provided a lovely setting for the amiable socializing I encountered over the course of many Friday evenings. An edible patchwork of salads, meats, desserts and assorted finger food turned the Davis’s kitchen table into a minor feast while people circulated casually along their quintessentially lengthy San Francisco hallway. People gravitated towards conversational interests freely. Movies. Music. Travel. Work. Hardly the vision of curmudgeonly complaining younger people often associated with the old. I recall one evening where upon arriving at the Davis’s place, I rang the doorbell and could see some of the regular attendees talking through an opening in the thin shade covering the front door’s glass window. After waiting a few seconds, I took the carefree conviviality as my clue to join the party and opened the door to enter right as Eleanor was coming down the hallway. She chided me for
ringing the doorbell but still deciding to walk in nonetheless. I immediately offered an obligatory “I’m sorry” but Eleanor saw right through it. Though sweetly delivered, Eleanor’s scolding suggested an important critique of anthropological praxis. You wait to get let in and if you happen to be privy to something interesting unfolding, let yourself in. The ethnographer as party crasher.

But conviviality can sometimes blind one to other kinds of dynamics in play, especially in a society like the United States where friendliness is valued as social glue holding relationships and communities together. In the several potlucks I attended, rarely—if ever—did I see Fran Brown pop by. There were other people I never saw at Nathaniel and Eleanor’s place, but Fran’s absence seems especially present to me now many months after leaving “the field.” I will return to Fran Brown later in this chapter. Here I set myself the goal of examining the possibilities and conundrums of elderly community making in the present. I do so through an examination of the myriad ways that one group of seniors, The Senior Class, were coming together to learn, share and reflect on aging from intellectual and individual perspectives. One of the ongoing questions their work presented for me was the particular vision of “community” coming into formation amongst them. I had thought about the meaning of community of course at Gray Pride and in individual conversations, but I was struck particularly with what was happening at The Senior Class because the contours of community was precisely what was up for debate. I return at the end of this chapter to some key themes I have explored throughout this dissertation.
Imagining Community

Community is one of the most slippery terms in the English language, connoting a range of ideas and investments in place, group identity and milieu. In his taxonomy of the historical origins of modernity’s privileged keywords, Raymond Williams lays out several understandings attached to the word—

(i) the commons or common people, as distinguished from those of rank (14th-17th centuries);
(ii) a state or organized society, in its later uses relatively small (14th century onwards);
(iii) the people of a district (18th century onwards);
(iv) the quality of holding something in common, as in community of interests, community of goods (16th century onwards);
(v) a sense of common identity and characteristics (16th century onwards)\(^{58}\)

Williams further argues that from the 17th century on, there was a distinction, becoming especially important from the 19th century onwards,

…in which community was felt to be more immediate than SOCIETY…an attempt to distinguish the body of direct relationships from the organized establishment of realm or state. From…[the 19th century on]…the sense of immediacy or locality was strongly developed in the context of larger and more complex industrial societies. Community was the word normally chosen for experiments in an alternative kind of group-living. (Williams 1976: 65-66; emphases in original)

Readers will have recognized a similarly wide range of meanings attached to community based on the work of Gray Pride and the stories I shared in the preceding chapter. “Community” is an important keyword in the United States precisely because of the desires many Americans have for collective connection in a society where individuality is inordinately valued. Of course as any anthropologist will tell you, the United States is home to a host of groups, networks, associations, faiths and

\(^{58}\)Adapted from Williams (1976: 65). Williams’s entries for each word were dense unpackings organized according to the semiotics of the encyclopedia. Direct quotation proves difficult without some modification for textual clarity and flow.
intimate ties that belie the pervasive mythology of “the self-made man.” Indeed, this is what Alexis de Tocqueville found so interesting about the country during his travels in North America in the 19th century (de Tocqueville 2003). A key reason I believe community continues to resonate for many Americans is that it holds out the promise of narrating a different understanding of the country from conventional idealizations and denunciations of narcissistic, entrepreneurial selves working for their own individual self-satisfaction (Lasch 1979; Bellah et al. 1985; Newfield 1996).

Important though such visions are, I want to tackle the question of community from a different vantage point, letting my elderly collaborators take the lead. Anthropologists have conventionally approached “community” as the locus of ethnographic fieldwork (Clifford 1997a). Amongst scholars studying aging, the “community study” is a rich tradition in the anthropology of later life (Byrne 1974; Hochschild 1978; Myerhoff 1978; Keith 1982; Vesperi 1985; Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989; Kinoshita and Kiefer 1993; Freidenberg 2000; Thang 2001). In this chapter I explore the dynamics whereby the contours of community are up for grabs, not settled in advance. This requires paying attention to what Hayden White has called “the content of the form” (White 1987), taking the very process of imagining and building community as object of ethnographic investigation. In the following sections, I illustrate how The Senior Class came to embody a situated set of elderly experiments in aging together.

Schoolwork
Founded in 2003, under the auspices of a collaboration between a foundation supporting educational initiatives for older adults and an extended learning program at a local college, The Senior Class offered an interesting hybrid of intellectual salon and structured university curricula. A public-private partnership, The Senior Class received an initial $100,000 grant with the understanding that if the partnership proved successful, the foundation would consider renewing the grant and providing an initial endowment of a million dollars. By the time I arrived on the ethnographic scene, they had successfully passed this benchmark and were utilizing endowment money to support their classes and activities. Yet, there was clear recognition that the endowment was not limitless and that The Senior Class would have to actively and continually recruit new members in order to be viable in the long run.

Unlike extension campuses that offer training in fields of “marketable” value, the courses at The Senior Class were not geared towards the symbolic capital of a certificate or degree. There was no teleological sequence of classes to follow and one could take as many as one liked during a given period. Homework was never assigned and no grades, credits or transcripts were ever recorded or issued. The Senior Class did, however, organize itself according to the semiotics of an academic institution in other regards. Instructors were referred to collectively as faculty. Courses took place in the college’s state-of-the-art classroom facilities. The year was divided up according to fall, winter, spring and summer sessions. And in most other respects, The Senior Class took advantage of the resources of their host college, holding meetings in classrooms, working with college staff and so forth. I have
already mentioned the potlucks that made my work so ethnographically enjoyable.
But I was not the only one working at these events. A regular feature of the potlucks came towards the end of the evening, when guests would gather in the Davis’s living room to welcome new members, talk about upcoming events and provide key updates. It was a cozy kind of organizing and anyone who happened to walk in on us might mistake everyone’s alert relaxedness for the sort of after dinner conversation adults had in the movies. Recruitment figured as an important and ongoing issue. Though their endowment gave them a base of financial support and they had a dedicated core constituency, the need to keep recruiting new members so as to remain financially solvent in the coming years was key. Although these shoptalk sessions were brief, the fact that they were broached within a context of a potluck party underscored an important tenet of the community building I was witnessing—everyone was responsible for helping widen the circle of membership. The input of new attendees would often be solicited during these check-ins, especially around the kinds of programs, classes and events that might draw larger crowds. And membership had its own price, in a literal sense. Courses ranged from $95 to $160 each and even if all you wanted to do was attend the lectures and special discussion groups, a basic $50 membership fee was due.

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59 Annual expenses included the salaries of a full-time Director and individual instructors, advertising monies, funds for strategic planning and fundraising efforts.
60 This point was emphasized repeatedly during a “community meeting” in April 2010 when several people talked about “thinking big” around bringing in new members so as to be able to receive another $1 million grant from their philanthropic foundation for reaching the 1,000 member benchmark. As of that meeting, the current membership was hovering at around 400.
I first heard about The Senior Class through Sophia Laurentz, the person who figured in one of my vignettes in the Introduction. They were one of the official cosponsors of the film festival on aging she had coordinated in early 2009. Intrigued by their name, I subsequently contacted Stuart Ferguson and Nancy Peterson, the two coordinators for the lecture series I wound up regularly attending during my fieldwork. In an email exchange, both Stuart and Nancy expressed interest in learning more about my work, which is one reason why I think they were open to having me come to one of their lectures early on in my research. It was a pleasant afternoon in early February 2009 as I wound my way through the maze of pristine corridors in the building where The Senior Class regularly met. The hallways and classrooms were all brand new, an aesthetic landscape of white, gray and sleek surfaces, as this wing of the campus had been built very recently. At the registration table, I stood in line, seeing if there was a sign-in list I need to put my name on before entering. Just as I was about to go into the classroom, the woman at the table pointed out “Hey…you’re quite young for this meeting,” to which I offered a joking retort of “Thanks for pointing that out and making me stick out even more…” before moving inside. The room was arranged in typical classroom fashion, rows of tables and chairs facing a podium, with whiteboard filling up the wall space in front. After claiming a seat in the third row, I went looking for Nancy Peterson. I approached a man and a woman near the front and asked if they could direct me to her, at which point the women shot out her hand and identified herself as Nancy. We shook hands and she suggested we walk towards the rear of the room and talk further. I gave her
one of my UC Santa Cruz business cards and she told me that she would introduce me
to a couple of people. Nancy maneuvered through the space like the hostess at a
party, busily checking-in on everything around her, but not relaxed enough to enjoy
the event herself. She mentioned that she and Stuart Ferguson, her co-coordinator,
were moving soon, pointing towards another layer of busyness in her life. Only later
would I ascertain whether Stuart was her life partner or officemate. We then walked
back towards the front again at which point she introduced me to Liz Cohen, a
member of the group I would see regularly during my first few months.

“This is Jason, he’s a Sociology…I mean Anthropology student…” correcting
her minor misstep, which she repeated when she later introduced me to the guest
lecturer.

When Liz asked me what school I went to and I told her UC Santa Cruz, she
immediately blurted out, “Santa Cruz…Are you crazy? You must be crazy.”

Knowing that she meant the commute I replied, “No, I’m just an urbanite.”

Nancy then took me to meet Jacqueline Cartwright, the guest speaker, and I
sat down shortly thereafter. As Jacqueline stood in front of the room, beautiful black
and white still photos from her recent book, a large coffee table title focused on the
stories of older women, were being projected behind her. Jacqueline was a thin,
fashionably attired, African American woman whose short stature barely peeked over
the podium she stood at. In addition to writing and giving public lectures, she was a
style consultant who had spent most of her professional life in the fashion industry.
Her charismatic personality easily filled the room while the glasses perched on the
outer edge of her nose lent her a professorial aura. Much of her talk, entitled “Visible and Vibrant: Reframing Ideas of Age and Identity for the 21st Century,” drew upon the rhetorical style of religious and self-help movements, where participants are encouraged to discard old beliefs and practices unsuitable for the present. Early on, she talked about how she preferred the phrase “growing in age” as opposed to many of the other preferred ways of referencing the later part of the life course in the United States. She related a vignette in which the take home message was not “…to think yourself into illness,” making mention of the distinctions between chronological, biological and psychological age. She also spoke pointedly about the words she preferred to describe aging—“vibrant,” “energetic” and “wise” being key ones. At periodic points, Jacqueline made reference to Deepak Chopra, the popular self-help spokesperson and drew upon his attention to the relations between mind and body in staying well.

Later on in her presentation, Jacqueline had a two-page worksheet distributed to the participants and asked everyone to take a look at it. It was a list of discussion questions, with space for writing and reflecting on each one—

What are some of your personal beliefs, family myths and ideas about age?
What are some of the media messages or societal beliefs that affect how you feel about growing older?
What is your feeling or response when you are shopping or using other services and you are ignored, treated or addressed like you are invisible because of your age? What is the effect on your feelings of well being and vitality?
How words affect our feelings. Growing into age instead of growing old.

She then instructed us all to fill out our response to the first question and pair up with someone to share our responses. It was the kind of directed group exercise I hated
done in school, but luckily Vivian was seated next to me, making the questionnaire a bit less obnoxious. Though we had just met, I picked up on her talkative personality right away and knew she would be someone worth dialoguing with that afternoon. After another several minutes, Jacqueline then asked the audience to focus their attention on an older woman, later revealed to be one of her clients, seated at the front of the room. In a moment typical of makeover segments on daytime television talk shows, Jacqueline asked us to take note of the clothes her client was wearing and then asked her to leave the room twice so that she could reappear before us in different outfits. The exercise fit in well with Jacqueline’s messaging around images, self-presentation and aging and was meant to give us a visual illustration of her philosophical tenets. During the adhoc fashion show, Vivian made a point of leaning over to me and telling me that she thought people were stupid for paying outrageous sums of money on clothes and how she always shopped at Goodwill and other secondhand clothing stores. At another point, she jutted her thumb out deliberately to show me a tiny tattoo of a chili pepper etched on the fingernail side, joking with me and subtly undermining the speaker’s pedagogical authority in a gesture reminiscent of junior high classroom antics. Winding up her presentation, Jacqueline referenced the dangers of giving into self-fulfilling prophecies as we age, citing how less than two percent of the population winds up with Alzheimer’s disease. She then closed with another articulation of one of her central themes, stating that “We are a visual society” and “Presentation is a conversation.”
If all I had witnessed that afternoon was yet another instance of self-help discourse, I would probably have chalked The Senior Class up to an ethnographic dead end not worth pursuing much further. I learned that several people were meeting for a post-lecture group discussion, so I decided to stick around after grabbing lunch downstairs. Little did I know what I was in store for. Upon coming back and joining the circle of chairs that had been assembled, I was introduced by Liz Cohen and immediately queried after I offered a brief outline of my project.

“Not to put you on the spot…What got you interested in looking at older people?” Liz asked.

I talk about how I initially started following then President Bush’s efforts to privatize Social Security in the aftermath of his 2004 reelection and how it seemed a horrible idea and how that started to get me thinking about aging in American society. I then also touched on how watching people in my immediate family deal with aging was another impetus, but didn’t delve much further beyond that.

A woman sitting across from me then asked “And how are you going to narrow your focus?”

I then said, “That’s a good question. I should have had some of you on my dissertation committee,” which encouraged laughter amongst the group. I mentioned that I was interested in looking at people who were already meeting and connecting with each other to talk about aging and that I was just diving in to see what was out there, but that time and logistical constraints would no doubt require me to narrow my focus. I then talked about how following standard protocols in discussion groups and
ethnography, that our conversations would stay confidential and that I wouldn’t identify anyone in talking about what I might witness or participate in. I realized as the words were rolling off my tongue that I was offering a jumbled description of the guarantee of anthropological anonymity.

One of the participants cut through my awkward phrasing to get to the heart of the matter. “What you’re saying is that you are going to share what people say, you’re just not going to identify anyone.”

“Yes,” I replied with relieved affirmation, which seemed okay to everyone in the circle.

That afternoon I listened to a lively conversation, touching on a range of topics including invisibility in public space, the recent economic downturn and cinematic depictions of old age amongst others. I was ethnographically hooked. In the months that followed, I regularly kept showing up at lectures, special events and potlucks. The Senior Class members were dynamically self-organized, taking leadership positions around curricula, lecture planning, membership recruitment and other key matters. In one sense, it was the classic vision of shared governance that had guided the modern American university. In another sense, it harkened back to the educational experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, where students pushed for the reshaping of the curricula to respond to their interests and desires alongside the development of extended and distance learning programs like The Open University in
Britain. Drawing on James Clifford’s analyses of the work of museums as sites of cultural encounter, I came to approach The Senior Class’s varied activities as “contact zones” (Clifford 1997b). Such encounters are never settled in advance, as Clifford pointedly argues—

Within broad limits, a museum can accommodate different systems of accumulation and circulation, secrecy and communication, aesthetic, spiritual, and economic value. How its ‘public’ or ‘community’ is defined, what individual, group, vision, or ideology it celebrates…all these are negotiable. (217-218)

The lecture series brought educators, writers, experts and entrepreneurs to a room of active and engaged seniors on a monthly basis. Though I had heard talk of the dangers of inviting speakers eager to sell something, it was hard to dismiss the impression that people were definitely looking for new clients or customers amongst my aging collaborators.

In May 2009, I found myself sitting in a circle of chairs amidst an insurance representative, a CEO of a private transportation company, a geriatric care manager and a group of seniors following a lecture given by a well-regarded gerontology professor. More than mere interested attendees, I listened to each of our guests take

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61 In California, a wave of student-initiated strikes brought about the first Ethnic Studies programs at San Francisco State University and UC Berkeley in the late 1960s, while Women’s Studies programs began appearing across campuses in the United States throughout the 1970s. The Open University was founded by Royal Charter in 1969 with the goal of providing access to courses and degrees on a part-time or distant basis through its main campus and regional centers.

62 Geriatric care managers are welfare entrepreneurs working as private, fee-for-service care consultants. According to the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers website, “A Geriatric Care Manager is a health and human services specialist who helps families who are caring for older relatives. The Geriatric Care Manager is trained and experienced in any of several fields related to care management, including, but not limited to nursing, gerontology, social work, or psychology, with a specialized focus on issues relating to aging and elder care.”
up conversational space that afternoon. The CEO referenced how his company offered outings for elderly clients to destinations like the California Academy of Sciences and the de Young Museum, both located in the city’s vast Golden Gate Park. For $50 seniors got transportation to the designated locale and back as well as the price of admission. Yet it was only a short while later that we all learned the regular fee was $70 an hour, which the CEO justified with the logic that “…any service is going to cost something.” He went on to boast about how his company’s services provided often the only opportunity for people to get out during the month, referencing the importance of social and recreational activities for elderly health.

Sharply distinguishing herself from the gerontologist’s earlier presentation, the geriatric care manager emphatically stated, “I don’t deal with theory, I deal with clients.” Specializing in the geriatric landscape of San Francisco, she warned of the dangers of conflicts of interest and false advertising amongst service providers. Like the CEO, she emphasized the exchange value of her and her colleagues’ work in stating “You’re paying for the information.” The insurance company representative started off with a personal vignette about her mother’s challenges around moving to Arizona after a lifetime in San Francisco before transitioning from personal narrative to sales pitch, as the topic of long-term care insurance got woven into her narrative. This prompted Liz Cohen to positively share how long-term care insurance paid for

(http://www.caremanager.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=76). Notice the terms of address here. A family member is the presumed person who would hire a geriatric care manager, not the aging client. Similarly, whereas the mandate of many social and healthcare workers is to assist older adults in leading functional, independent lives, the focus of the geriatric care manager is to help “…families who are caring for older relatives.”

177
all the care her mother received during a crucial period of her later life before another
senior asked what would happen if the representative’s company ever went out of
business. The sales representative tried to dodge the question by offering that her
company had been around since 1845 and how bankruptcy probably wouldn’t
happen, eliciting immediate moans of incredulous doubt amongst the group, including
Joyce Kaufman who muttered how plenty of businesses that had been around for over
a hundred years were closing down. Again, the insurance representative kept trying
to assuage people’s doubts while Liz tried to helped her out in referencing her
mother’s care situation. It was not long before the representative finally buckled. In
defense of her firm she kept evoking the stability of its name brand. When finally
answering the heretical question before her, she offered a generic, de-branded reply.
“In response to your question, it’s like any kind of insurance. If a company were to
go out of business, there would be no payouts of funds.”

While the potluck demonstrated one kind of community formation, here the
potlatch would be a more appropriate rendering of the symbolic capital that got
generously distributed and accrued by our three guests. Seniors of course ably
refused the gift as it were.63 In many instances, a rolling of the eyes or a pithy
deconstruction of someone at one of the potlucks would suffice to take the wind out
of their entrepreneurial sails. As I was soon to find out, though, the friendly sociality

63 I vividly recall the time Vivian got up in the middle of a presentation by a self-help
spokesperson and walked out the minute a picture of an eagle appeared on his slide
presentation with the title “The Eagle Does Not Struggle Against the Wind” and the speaker
asked us all “What are you resisting in your life right now?”
of the potlucks and the public encounters staged by the lecture series formed only part of the picture.

**Aging Allies**

After several months of fieldwork at The Senior Class, I had become comfortably familiarized with the rhythms of lectures, potlucks and special events. In late May 2009 Stuart Ferguson sent out an email that wound up significantly shaping the ethnographic “data” I found myself collecting. The email was an announcement regarding a meeting of a special interest group called the Allies in Aging Study Group. Attached to his email was a two-page statement of purpose—

**Mission**

Our mission is to create and maintain community; to facilitate living well as we age; to offer, give, and receive help; to nurture our capacities to support each other; and to help our members lead richer, fuller lives.

**Goals**

1. To provide help to members in need
2. To broaden the circle of people to do things with
3. To share skills that members have and are willing to share
4. To enhance the ability of members to pursue interests and expand their knowledge
5. To create a community in which the members not only obtain assistance for their own needs but also realize for themselves the benefits of providing help to others

**Providing Help**

The Allies in Aging constitutes itself as a network of friends and acquaintances who are willing and able to assist each other—in particular, to carry out tasks and provide social support to help us age in place, and to support a primary caregiver such as a family member or friend.

**Kinds of Help**

Among the kinds of help that might be provided are:
1. Driving someone to medical appointments, stores and events
2. Social visits: keeping company, reading, watching movies together, playing games, going for walks, helping a member avoid loneliness, isolation, and their debilitating effects
3. Shopping, bringing in or sharing food
4. Helping arrange for services or repairs and dealing with service providers
5. Providing respite for a primary caregiver
6. Helping with light maintenance and clean-up

It is important not to promise too much and important not to take on tasks we are not really able and willing to do. Members do not need to provide every kind of service, nor do we guarantee that we will meet the needs of every member. We will not provide nursing care.

**Coordination and Provision of Services**

One or more members of the community agree to coordinate services to a member in need.

When a need arises:

- A coordinator contacts members to provide needed services.
- Members may decline without prejudice or notification to the person in need.
- The coordinator attempts to coordinate assistance to meet greatest need and avoid duplication of times and services, and to make effective use of members’ services.

**Membership**

Our choice to create this community is a potent force in itself. Nevertheless, some things we want to provide to each other are difficult to do at a distance. Therefore, we recognize that we need to extend our individual caring communities to include one or more neighbors.

Members provide their names, addresses, telephone numbers, and email addresses to each other; and information about the kinds of things they are willing to do.

A document such as this one obviously showed the depth of the conversations that had been taking place before my ethnographic appearance. Yet rather than a set of plans to implement, it merely articulated a set of possibilities that were far from settled. At my first meeting, I learned that the study group had been meeting since September 2008 and that they had been researching a host of community models for
support in later life, including co-housing, assisted living communities and the “village” model. Most everyone sitting in the room was a regular participant in The Senior Class, though at this meeting I was intrigued by the presence of the geriatric care manager mentioned above, whom I had never seen at any event prior to the previous month’s lecture. I learned that a local gerontologist had spoken to the group and offered some advice as to how to go about organizing. Over the course of two hours, I listened to a range of opinions, desires and concerns as to how the Allies in Aging might proceed in the coming months.

Fred Olson posed an interestingly open-ended query with “Do I have to make a choice?” A large gentleman whose public presentation of self was always slightly disheveled, like a graduate student or hung over salesman, Fred’s contributions were consistently honest and heartfelt.

An older woman offered that it was “…scary just being out there by yourself” while another senior, evoking Williams’s genealogy, asked the larger question of

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64 “Co-housing” can take a variety of forms, from an updated version of the commune ethos—either imagined as literal co-residence or separate dwellings on shared parcels—to the planned communities that are intentionally designed, built and landscaped to encourage collective interactions and shared responsibilities. Think neighborhood coop meets Levittown, New Jersey or Sun City, Arizona. “Assisted living” refers to congregate living facilities that recognize the hybrid life situations many seniors confront whereby everyday autonomy may require some form of “assistance” or “care.” This can include any and everything from help running errands to meal preparation to bathing and so forth. These tend to be privately run facilities catering to middle-class and upper-middle-class seniors. The “‘village’ model” gets its name from Boston’s Beacon Hill Village, which is a networked, neighborhood-focused version of assisted living. Older adults living in their own homes or apartments pay annual membership fees that allow them to access services such as home repair, computer assistance or transportation that are coordinated on their behalf by paid “village” staff. Social and cultural events are organized as well. See http://www.beaconhillvillage.org for more information.
what definition of community was being proposed by the Allies in Aging. Was it place or activity-based? Without borders?

Bob Boyd, a tall, lanky gentleman with a youthful face that peeked through his white beard and mustache, argued that the group was especially pertinent in light of the current conjunction of budget cuts and economic crisis.

Eleanor Davi’s, the hostess who chided me in my opening vignette, wanted to make a clear distinction between “caring” and being part of “a caring community.” She talked about members helping out with things like shopping or offering intellectual companionship so that “Everybody feels comfortable in their own area of volunteering.”

The conversation was now cooking as speakers kept throwing their thoughts into the collective stew. Fred brought up how questions of trust were central to these nascent imaginings of care and support as he stated with poignant clarity “We’re forging new ground.”

Nancy brought up how asking for help was not automatic, to which Margot Auerbach, a professor of philosophy in her mid-70s, added neither was receiving help.

Frances Brown, an older woman and former business owner, spoke emphatically about keeping one’s brain alive and how merely attending to one’s physical needs was not enough.

Another older gentleman spoke about the importance of socialization.
Myra Kaplan, Director of The Senior Class, articulated the need to break patterns and habits of not asking for help from your neighbors and community.

Bob then talked about learning what help you needed and how you had to learn to articulate specifically what kind of help you were after.

After someone chimed in that time was of the essence, Amanda Keating, a core Allies in Aging participant, poetically spoke about the importance of imaging “a broader vocabulary,” shifting away from “need” to “want.”

As the meeting was drawing to a close, Gwen Reed, the geriatric care manager, voiced strong reservations about the ability of participants to take on the kinds of tasks people were imagining in the absence of paid care workers. Right then and there Eleanor and Stuart both jumped in. Eleanor talked about how they were a group of volunteers who were declaring themselves “…to be a community for each other” while Stuart offered that though “the village” model operated as a nonprofit entity, it was essentially a concierge service and commercial enterprise. “This isn’t a commercial venture,” he offered with succinct passion. Repeating what Bob had earlier said, Stuart suggested that one goal for the Allies in Aging was to teach caregivers how to ask for help when they needed it. “It’s okay to want a community to help you.” And on that note, the meeting came to a lively close.

Confronting such a critical cacophony of voices left me feeling excited and exhausted. Reflecting on these matters well after the fact, I see how prescient a commentator Williams was in tracing the myriad meanings attached to community. Though Gray Pride was also actively working to build community, I now better
understand why the work of the Allies in Aging struck me so forcefully. Gray Pride saw the challenges of community formation as mostly external—homophobias, insensitivities, lack of familiarity with LGBT aging issues—whereas the Allies in Aging took seriously community as that which is forged, to borrow from the title of a book honoring the work of Stuart Hall (Gilroy, Grossberg and McRobbie 2000), without guarantees. Here the frailties were a germane and conscious component of the group’s deliberations, acknowledged as internal and integral to the nascent community coming into formation. Though the statement of purpose synthesized their thinking up to that point, in the months that followed I rarely heard anyone calling for its implementation, revision or abandonment. In a sense, the study group itself functioned as a series of extended editorial meetings as seniors brought resources, issues and concerns to the table. In addition to newspaper articles, journal essays and online resources, stories functioned as a crucial set of resources people became more and more comfortable sharing as time went on.

At one of the Allies in Aging meetings during the second half of my fieldwork, Margot Auerbach reviewed her experiences following a 2009 car accident that left her recovering at home for several weeks. Her children were instrumental in reorganizing her house so that she could go about very simple daily tasks, including bringing in a small refrigerator for food and hot plate to facilitate cooking. Previously she had shared with us how her children and students had helped shepherd

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65 Stuart had identified the productive work of storytelling at one of the potlucks when he pulled me aside to share with me how he had witnessed the therapeutic and perspective-altering work that stories had amongst his aging allies.
her from home to the university she taught at and back again during the semester she was wobbling around on crutches. Because Margot was still actively teaching and advising students at the prime age of 75, the thought of her missing out on her academic commitments due to physical limits was not something she would have reveled in as a Parsonian view of “the sick role” might argue (Parsons 1951).

Margot’s narrative was offered in the spirit of a triumphant vision of kinship—biological and extended, children and students—coming to the rescue. Though Margot acknowledged her good fortune in having family and friends around, she had also suffered another loss that I believe eclipsed her temporary immobility. Early on during fieldwork, at one of discussions in the round following one of the lectures, I listened to Margot poignantly and obliquely speak about the deep feelings of loss she was still experiencing and her difficulty in moving on in this one unnamed sphere of her life. Afterwards, she and I struck up a brief conversation in which she asked me how I had come to The Senior Class. After telling her that Stuart and Nancy had brought me into the fold, Margot briefly shared her own story. She and Stuart Ferguson had been married for several years, both professors at the same university, until they had both started coming to The Senior Class together a couple of years ago. During this time, Stuart had met Nancy Peterson, then just another member, and subsequently left Margot for her. My eyes widened with alert attention as I listened carefully. Apparently this was not Stuart’s first encounter with extramarital romance, as I learned that afternoon he had left other women in his life for new loves. “He’s a romantic…” was how she characterized his wandering eye, trying to generously
situate his behavior in relation to a track record she acknowledged she was familiar with when they married. The car accident that had left Margot temporarily disabled several months later served as a reminder of the frailties of living alone.

Loss was a feature of other stories as well. Frances Brown offered an extended version of her tale at another meeting. She talked about wanting to move out of her current living situation to one where there are more opportunities for social interaction. In recent years Fran had experienced a series of significant life transitions. She had retired from her business and as a result had lost contact with people she used to socialize with via her work networks. She referred to herself as someone who’s lived by herself most of her adult life in San Francisco before segueing to talk about a gentleman friend of hers in the East Bay whom she used to spend time with. From the way she spoke about him it’s clear they had a romantically-inflected friendship by which I mean an affectionate relationship they may have recognized alternately as “romance,” “companionship” or “intimacy.” About a year ago, this friend of hers started experiencing health-related difficulties and subsequently died. Fran spoke openly about the lack of social interaction she was experiencing as “…making me a bit crazy.” Acknowledging the weight of her story, and registering what many of us were thinking, Stuart turned to her and said “You’ve gone through a lot this past year.”

But there were limits and boundaries that got articulated as well. Joyce Kaufman, an older woman I had met at my first lecture, came up against one such boundary. She and her husband Marty were part of the core group of seniors I would
see at both The Senior Class and the Allies in Aging. An independent, confident person, who had recently completed a graduate degree in Women’s Studies, Joyce was the official spokesperson in most matters concerning herself and Marty. During several of the initial meetings I attended, co-housing was an ongoing topic of interest for her. She and Marty lived in San Mateo County, located south of San Francisco and part of the greater Bay Area. They were eager to move out of their current building complex to somewhere that was more communitarian—or at least closer to San Francisco, public transportation and amongst people they could regularly socialize with. I never got a chance to ask Joyce why she and Marty preferred co-housing to the spectrum of retirement communities out there, in part because I didn’t want to pour salt into an already tender wound. Stuart regularly interrupted or tried to steer the conversation away from co-housing whenever Joyce wanted to talk about it. Though the Allies in Aging had studied co-housing at one juncture, there was little interest in pursuing it amongst the core group, a point Stuart repeated whenever he addressed Joyce. Her final effort to not let the idea of co-housing disappear completely from the realm of possibility resulted in her inviting people who were interested in talking further to meet up after one of the Allies in Aging sessions. It was a classic instance of democratic consensus politics, not the radical refusal of the splinter group walking away from the table for good. An invitation to consider co-housing, akin to potluck at the Davis’s home. But the party ended much too early for Joyce’s liking. Within a couple of months co-housing had faded away from collective consciousness. Joyce and Marty did wind up moving, but to a
condominium complex in San Mateo. The quest for community continued, evidenced by Joyce’s query to us—months afterwards—as to how she should go about making connections with her new neighbors.

**Liminality**

Joyce’s desires and disappointments stuck with me. Hers and Marty’s vision of community were flexible enough such that their continued presence at The Senior Class/Allies in Aging made the ongoing trek up to San Francisco itself a commitment to *communitas* in the making. And everyone was willing to gather them into the fold. Such was not the case with Frances Brown. Fran, as everyone called her, was a lanky, well-dressed, White woman whom I guessed to be in her mid or late 70s. Though I saw her regularly, she was a difficult figure for many of the people I knew owing chiefly to her significant hearing challenges. At every lecture she attended, it was common for her to ask the guest to raise their voice or for the sound to get amplified in the room’s speaker system. Surely no one could begrudge her for asking for these accommodations. But Fran’s communicative style broke the frames of polite exchange so valued in liberal, middle-class modernity. Her requests were usually curt and loud, brashly delivered no doubt because she was frustrated and wanted to genuinely hear people. Once when I was at Sophia Laurentz’s apartment, she, without warning, said to me “Want to hear my impression of Fran Brown? ‘Speak up! I can’t hear you! Can someone turn the microphone louder?!’” as she laughed heartily and I nervously smiled along trying to conceal my shock at the impromptu impersonation I had just witnessed. To complicate the situation further, it
was not uncommon for Fran to arrive several minutes late to an event, quickly rushing in and grabbing whatever seat was available. At one Allies in Aging meeting, Eleanor, after one of Fran’s acoustic demands, chastised her for showing up late, telling Fran that it was her responsibility to show up early and make sure the tables and chairs were configured properly so that she could hear everyone. It was a tense, uncomfortable moment for everyone. Thankfully, Nancy got up out of her chair and exchanged seats with Fran. Stuart mentioned checking in with Myra Kaplan, Director of The Senior Class, to see if the tables and chairs could get arranged ahead of time prior to our meetings. Whenever we met in one of the classrooms designed for lectures, Stuart and whoever else arrived early had to put them together to form a rectangle we could all sit around. Eleanor was adamant though. As I was putting my things together, getting ready to leave, I overheard her tell Stuart that it wasn’t his responsibility to make special spatial arrangements ahead of time. Stuart quickly delivered a verbal cue to Eleanor informing her that here was not the place to talk about it and they could continue once they were out of earshot of everyone. Especially the anthropologist. Thankfully Fran had already left.

Fran really rubbed people the wrong way and I tried my best to hide my perplexed reaction whenever I encountered the bad faith she engendered in others.66

66 “Bad faith” is Jean-Paul Sartre’s critique of the rationalized inauthenticity—that here I would call pettiness—that prevails amongst modern subjects. In *The Logic of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu takes Sartre to task for his analytic rendering of a dynamic, individualized consciousness as that which shapes social action—“…refusing to recognize anything resembling durable dispositions or probable eventualities, Sartre makes each action a kind of antecedent-less confrontation between the subject and the world” (Bourdieu 1990: 42). Others may dismiss Sartre’s existentialism as a kind of essentialism, in line with the Marxist denunciation of “false consciousness.” I prefer to read Sartre’s obsessions with authenticity
Hearing was only part of her problems. Like the Kaufmans, she was looking for a new kind of living arrangement that would offer better opportunities for socializing amongst her age peers. Stuart and others had suggested possible dwelling scenarios to research, but from what I could tell she had ruled them out or never followed up. I soon realized that like the request to accommodate her hearing difficulties, the more the request got repeated, the more people were unable to hear her. Consternation set in. Fran’s desires became circular complaints, preventing the group from moving on to other matters. Phenomenologists, psychoanalysts and feminists have written extensively on “the gaze” and relationships of looking as key to how subjects come into being fully or as split selves (Sartre 1956; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Fanon 1967; Lacan 1977; de Lauretis 1984; Rose 1986; Silverman 1996).67 In her tribute to her late father, Donna Haraway reminds us of the desire for recognition that accompanies the gaze—

Consider ‘regard’ and ‘respect’ a bit longer. I am drawn by the tones of this kind of active looking at/regard (both as verb, respecere, and as respectus) that I sought and experienced with and from my father. The specific relationality in this kind of regard holds my attention: to have regard to, to see differently, to esteem, to look back, to hold in regard, to hold in seeing, to be touched by another’s regard, to heed, to take care of. This kind of regard aims to release and be released in oxymoronic, necessary, autonomy-in-relation…The ethical regard that I am trying to speak and write can be experienced across many sorts of species differences. The lovely part is that we can only know by looking, and looking back. Respecere. (Haraway 2006: 146-147)

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Thinking further about Fran Brown, I wonder if there is a need to augment our visual
and visualized scenarios of recognition. Might the ability to be heard be equally
important in how we come to imagine ourselves part of a community? I think the
answer is loud and clear, especially in a context where to not be heard resonates with
the frailties I have discussed throughout this dissertation.

But Fran’s Otherness was not absolute. On a early February afternoon in
2010 the Allies in Aging Study Group was winding down another of its meetings
when Joyce asked about Fran and whether anyone had seen her lately. Ruth Aldrich
mentioned that she had come to the meeting of another organization she was involved
with just a few days earlier. Fred talked about how he had run into Fran at the library
in the Marina district and also, unexpectedly, at the Presidio. The snowball started
gathering speed as I listened further. He then offered that they talked a little and that
because he knew Fran he didn’t mind the fact that she often didn’t say goodbye or
exit conversation in a socially accepted fashion. Ruth told us that Fran arrived late to
the meeting and demanded that the speakers use the microphone properly, adding that
she found it particularly bad form considering Fran was a new face and other
members didn’t know her very well. Ruth then shared how her embarrassment made
her want to disassociate herself from Fran as she slumped down in her chair and
covered her eyes in humorous fashion to emphasize her point. At the reception
afterwards, Fran was nowhere to be found.

Over the next several minutes, people chimed in with various takes on what
Fran’s life challenges were. The desire to find community was expressed by a few
people. Margot spoke of her hearing difficulties, mentioning how she asked Fran about her hearing aid when she herself was looking for one. Apparently the one Fran had was tucked carefully inside her ear and Margot shared how her doctor told her those weren’t very effective in contrast to ones placed near the outer ear. Mention was also made of Fran’s wish to move out of her current apartment as Stuart talked about how in the past he had telephoned her, offering suggestions and information, but that he hadn’t checked-in with Fran outside of meetings in awhile. Another member wondered out loud since Stuart was the coordinator for the Allies in Aging if he wouldn’t mind giving her a call. Somewhere amidst this buzz of opinions flowing back and forth it was revealed that Ruth and Gwen Reed recently paid a visit to Fran. It was at this point that Gwen shared her unhappiness with the tenor of the discussion taking place. She told us all that she was not going to share what took place during hers and Ruth’s visit and that she felt very uncomfortable talking about another Allies in Aging member who was not in the room. Continuing, Gwen bluntly called it gossip. She went on to say that if anyone wanted to find out how Fran was doing they should call her individually rather than participate in collective rumination. Gwen repeated these points several times amidst the ensuing back and forth. Needless to say not everyone agreed with her. I was tempted to chime in with my disagreement but wisely deferred to my older interlocutors instead. Margot sprung in first, followed by a string of comments about the value of staying connected to one another.
Whether coded as gossip or concern, Fran Brown’s variously demanding and vulnerable presentation of self had started to set in motion a set of queries that would occupy the Allies in Aging during my remaining months of fieldwork. Amanda Keating asked a version of it at the following months’ meeting. “How do we want to keep track of another?” A slow shift was starting to occur. They were starting to entertain questions one does not conventionally associate with a study group—or at least the kind of study group I was familiar with from the sphere of secular education. At the April 2010 meeting, Amanda started pushing the envelope further, asking, “How do we want to care for each other?” and “To what extent do we want to be a caring community?”

Margot offered that there was a continuum of positions amongst those at The Senior Class, musing on both the fluidity and immediacy of aging. “It’s the unpredictability [that shapes everything]” she told us.

Joyce talked about the need to define what a caring community is.

Eileen Walzer, a regular attendee, immediately shot back that there was a danger in starting off with a definition, an abstraction around what form a “caring community” would take. “I don’t necessarily think of you all as my caring community.”

Gwen mentioned confidentiality as a key issue to consider.

A short while thereafter Margot talked about the challenges of deviating from habitual behavior. “We are an island,” she said, referencing the cultural logics of individualism that reign in American society.
Several minutes later Gwen mentioned the ambiguity surrounding when to intervene and the importance of setting limits. She talked about wanting to help but not “…getting sucked in one hundred percent.” This prompted her to tell us about a play entitled Vigil that she saw recently, chronicling the familial tensions between a nephew and his dying aunt with uncanny, gallows humor.

Stuart asked, in a metacommunicative vein, “How do we ask—can we ask—for help?”

Eileen talked about the model of another organization she was affiliated with, where there was a coordinator who was in charge of a file card index system and was the key contact for members.

Kate Hirsch, another regular attendee, talked about her desire to start a caring community in her own neighborhood.

Another Allies in Aging member talked about the hills of San Francisco being a real problem when you get older.

Amanda circled back to her opening queries. “What are people willing to share?” she asked.

Eleanor, with her clear, emphatic articulation tried to slow down the conversation a bit. She openly talked about not having “needs” right now and how she was unable to project out into the future.

Eileen echoed Eleanor’s hesitancy from a different vantage point. She openly talked about wanting different things from different people and groups in her life. “Sometimes information is all I’m looking for.”
As the meeting was winding down, the group talked about sending out regular meeting reminder emails, the larger conversation about staying connected still on everyone’s mind. Stuart reminded us of one more model we had learned of, courtesy of a periodic Allies in Aging attendee. She and a few other people had created “a silent check-up” on the internet. Creating a yahoo user group, they all had to register some sort of greeting every day and took rotating turns being the point person for making sure everyone “signed in”—or “typed in” more accurately. Emergency contacts had been shared amongst them all so that there were others to contact on behalf of anyone who wasn’t checking-in online. At meeting’s close, Gwen gave out her telephone number again. Though she was donning her professional role as geriatric care manager, sharing her work number, I could not help but think she too wanted to stay plugged in for other reasons. As someone in her mid-60s to mid-70s, Gwen’s ongoing presence at the Allies in Aging showed her to be someone who was doing more than merely procuring clients, which was my initial reading of her. Coming to meeting after meeting after meeting wherein discussion and action were always provisional, never fully crystallizing into “to do lists,” was not the most efficient way to sell your services. Either Gwen was incredibly shrewd, the aging entrepreneur par excellence, waiting for the perfect moment when all the discussion about alternate “models” would start to sound too utopian or too overwhelming and she could come to the rescue. Or her audible silence about any partner or spouse in her life along with her occasional references to the challenges of attending to her late
father’s affairs revealed a commitment to the Allies in Aging that was more than professional.

Communitas

By the time the Allies in Aging met again, a significant shift in emphasis was slowly taking shape, from study group to “community,” in all its ambiguities and multiple meanings. It was at the start of this meeting that Amanda spoke briefly and handed out what she referred to as “the survey,” comprised of a slip of paper that read as follows—

The Allies in Aging Study Group has met monthly now for about two years. In studying aging and its challenges, many of us have come to care about one another and, whether consciously or not, we are becoming a community.

Because we think we are more than a class or an interest group, we become concerned when a member who has been attending regularly does not show up. If you are comfortable with the community notion of the Allies in Aging, please complete and return this questionnaire. Also note, you’re not obliged to give us any information or even to let us know when you can’t attend meetings, if you feel more comfortable not sharing that information.

A half sheet of paper with the following printed on it was also handed out—

Options for staying in touch

I live alone and…
Have someone who checks on me regularly. Contact info for that person is:
I check in with another/others regularly. Contact info is: _____________
Have no one who checks in on me.

Please indicate your concern for me by
Calling my contact(s) if you don’t hear from them or me for over ___ weeks;
Calling me at _____________ if you don’t hear from me for over ___ weeks;
Don’t call me; I or my contact(s) will contact you.

I live with another/others and…
Contact info for those others is: ________________

Please indicate your concern for me by
People started filling out the “survey” and as I sat there quietly I thought about the leap of faith that was taking place. The “survey” represented both a culmination and a beginning for the group. A culmination of months of discussion, conversation and “talking back” around aging as well as a new declaration of principles to guide conversation from then on out. “Because we think we are more than a class or an interest group, we become concerned when a member who has been attending regularly does not show up” and “In studying aging and its challenges, many of us have come to care about one another and, whether consciously or not, we are becoming a community.” After people completed their sheets and handed them back to Amanda the meeting proceeded. I cannot remember there being any especially lively, terse or notable exchanges. So struck was I by Amanda’s language and the quiet filling out of the surveys that I neglected to take any fieldnotes during the meeting or afterwards. In retrospect, I believe I felt I was witnessing an affective space opening up or a ritualized ceremony taking place. I felt myself caught in one of Kathleen Stewart’s circuits or stills (Stewart 2007). There was something prescient and precious in the air that notetaking would disrupt. Or typing would dilute. In short, I had ethnographer’s block.

In his analyses of liminality and communitas, Victor Turner (1995) offered a revisiting of themes he explored in his earlier work on Ndembu ritual (1967). For
Turner, drawing on van Gennep’s work, liminality names a crucial “in-between” space accompanying any significant set of transitions or rites of passage. “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1995: 95).

Communitas is Turner’s description of the possibilities that emerge in liminal phases for a kind of egalitarian solidarity—

We are presented, in such rites, with a ‘moment in and out of time,’ and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties. (96)

Barbara Myerhoff famously drew on Turner’s arguments in her own ethnography of aging amongst elderly Jews living in Venice, California in the 1970s (Myerhoff 1980). Though I am wary of too easily appropriating Turner’s and Myerhoff’s arguments to describe what I encountered at the Allies in Aging, I still find myself drawn to their rich analyses. The liminal nature of the work they were pursuing—organized yet “unofficial,”68 scholastic yet social, San Francisco-based yet translocal—made for a lively mix of attitudes and activities. Such liminality was not entirely unheard of in the contemporary United States, as anyone familiar with life in

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68 Back in May 2009, Stuart distributed a letter of invitation at one of The Senior Class meetings for the Allies in Aging Study Group. Towards the end of the letter was a brief note that I believe Myra Kaplan asked him to put on it. “Please note: The Allies in Aging Study Group is a The Senior Class Interest Group. The Allies in Aging itself, though it is taking form following on discussions in the Study Group, is not sponsored by The Senior Class.” Even at that point, right when I first started attending their meetings, Stuart and others were imagining a transition away from a study group to something else. The caveat was a kind of watered down legalese meant to protect The Senior Class, as an organization, from any liability. Hence their hybrid identity. Officially sponsored as a study group, meeting regularly at the college and having an identity on The Senior Class website, but not sanctioned in either their liminality or communitas.
and around any college campus could tell you. My informants may very well have been revisiting or continuing forms of sociality gleaned from other spheres or life experiences. Joyce suggested as much when she said at my last meeting “The Senior Class is our secular church.”

Communitas is one name for that space I saw opening up when Amanda asked her fellow allies in aging to commit to one another. Of course, I do not know how many of the twelve or so amongst us checked the “Don’t call me” option or quietly tucked away their slips for further deliberation or recycling. In one sense, the answer to that question may be less important than Amanda’s observation that “…many of us have come to care about one another and, whether consciously or not, we are becoming a community.” Or the noshing, drinking and chatting that made potlucking at the Davis’s so enjoyable. Or that the Allies in Aging continued to meet, month after month, the road ahead for them and aging America unmapped.

These were elective affinities though, close to the “community of interests” Williams tells us dates from the 16th century. Like many other communities in the United States, the vision was one of openness, the reality one of self-selection. White, middle-class members made up most of the “community” in both The Senior Class and Allies in Aging. Being affiliated with the college’s extended learning campus, located along several major public transportation lines, helped to draw people from around the city. But not everyone imagines or has the resources to
imagine spending their later years sitting in a college classroom. The lack of class and ethnic diversity was present—not without reflexivity, but present nonetheless.\textsuperscript{69}

Communitas and community may be easier to discern in those small-scale milieu beloved by anthropologists and de Tocquevillian commentators. In this regard, I am probably guilty as charged. In an important volume that came out of a series of seminars, Gerald Creed warns of the dangers of imbuing community with romanticized renderings in a world ruled by “…the notion’s imbrication with capitalist accumulation and state governance” (Creed 2006: 36). Creed goes on to deconstruct the false promises and premises that community has offered social critics and scientists throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. An important intervention, one in concert with Turner’s interest in anti-structure \textit{and} structure.\textsuperscript{70} There is a real danger in treating community as always and unambiguously “good” or removing from analysis projects that evoke its egalitarian name. Fran Brown’s story should stand as instance of those “mixed feelings” that accompany any uncharted, collective enterprise.

\textsuperscript{69}Several times while in the field, I was told by Joyce and others how non-representative a group of seniors they were and asked if I was working with other groups as well. These friendly goadings were illustrative of their liberal, reflexive sensibilities. The younger ethnographer had better not assume that the cultural dynamics of aging in contemporary San Francisco could be gleaned from their particular standpoints. The feminist writers I discussed in Chapter 3 would all agree.

\textsuperscript{70}For him, communitas was not the end point, the final closing of the parentheses, but rather part of an ongoing oscillation with structure, discipline, oppression and, I would add, expertise. “There is a dialectic here, for the immediacy of communitas gives way to the mediacy of structure, while, in \textit{rites des passage}, men are released from structure into communitas only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of communitas. What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic…Maximization of communitas provokes maximization of structure, which in its turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed communitas” (Turner 1995: 129).
Both Otherized and sympathized with, Fran’s frailty testified to the present-futures that made all of my informants liminal in one way or another.

The more I thought about Fran as well as the failures to cohere around a central vision or project for the Allies in Aging, the more I realized that the work of community building was lodged in these instabilities from the start. In her analysis of the uneven geopolitics of global connection, Anna Tsing provocatively considers what collaboration means across locales and knowledge practices (2005). According to Tsing—

Collaboration is not a simple sharing of information. There is no reason to assume that collaborators share common goals. In transnational collaborations, overlapping but discrepant forms of cosmopolitanism may inform contributors, allowing them to converse—but across difference…Collaborations create new interests and identities, but not to everyone’s benefit. (13; emphasis in original)

While anthropologists are trained to study both consensus and dissent, powerful imaginaries surrounding community still privilege rendering it as deep cohesion.

With Tsing in mind, let me venture the following argument. The communitarian projects and desires I have discussed in this dissertation reveal the frailties at the heart of community building, whether carried out by nonprofit welfare workers or ordinary actors. This is not to doom community to the dustbin of failed utopias. It is a way to suggest, though, that aging forces us to face the contradictions belied by normative liberal investments in the universal good of community in the United States. Instead of allowing our desires for an imagined unity to then quickly dissolve into disillusion, we would do better to entertain the possibility that we have always been frail. Such a perspective might open up the possibility of solidarities beyond the family forms,
medical interventions and welfarist assemblages that currently limit the horizon of permissible ways of caring in the present.

**Home is Where the Heart is**

Though I was left pondering the communitarian space I believed was opening up in Amanda’s slips of paper, it was not long before the Allies in Aging confronted its first test case. Amanda sent out an email the day after our August 2010 meeting that read as follows—

Dear Caring Folks,

Since Fran was absent from our group yesterday, I called her as she had previously requested (Options for Keeping in Touch) to check up on her. Her answering machine directed me to call her son, John, in Seattle from whom I learned that Fran had had a stroke on 7/25, was in the hospital for a week and is now in a rehab center in Pacifica. John reported that she was much improved over the past 2 weeks, that she was practicing walking, but that “there is some dementia,” that her voice is changed and that her spirits are “not very good.”

I e-mailed Gwen earlier this afternoon and she has since spoken to John helping him decide to move Fran up to Seattle. In the meantime Fran would appreciate a visit and/or a card to her.

I’m sorry to be the bearer of s/bad tidings, but know you would want to know. Please inform the rest of us if you plan to visit so we might arrange a carpool.

Best to you all,

Amanda

Two days after Amanda sent her email, I sent another one, along with my cellphone number, letting everyone know that I was planning to drive down to Pacifica that afternoon if anyone wanted to come along for the visit. Hearing from no one, I made the drive down the coast by myself. Fran’s room was on the third floor of the skilled nursing facility. After exiting the elevator, I wound my way around the corner, past staff and visitors coming and going, where I found Fran’s empty bed. She was
receiving physical therapy just then and rather than sit and wait in her room, I decided to walk around a bit outside.

The nursing facility was located behind a suburban shopping center. A totem-like sign proclaiming “Seaside Shopping” looked like it was erected in the 1970s while a nostalgic harkening back to the old West was clearly on display through the log cabin façades connecting the string of stores that formed the complex. There was hardly anyone around, making it feel especially desolate on this particular Friday afternoon. I walked around the complex and adjacent streets a few times, taking in the geographies that felt like they had been slammed together. Pacific Ocean. Suburbia. The old West. I spotted a quirky café but wasn’t feeling the need to caffeinate right then and there so decided to make my way back indoors. Taking note of the facility’s space a bit more, I saw a series of clean, carpeted hallways with framed pictures on the wall that tried to evoke a certain homelike feel. Only later did it occur to me that there might be a sizeable portion of the patient population for whom this facility was indeed home. When I returned to Fran’s room, she was still not there. It then dawned on me that having a visitor right after she had undergone physical therapy might be the last thing she had energy for. So I decided to leave and return again in a few days.

Almost three weeks passed and I still had not returned to check-in on Fran. Amanda sent out another email informing us all that Fran’s son had moved her to another facility in Daly City while he settled his mother’s affairs. “He closed her apartment last week, and plans to move her up to the Seattle area as soon as he can
find a suitable place” she informed us. The next day I drove out to Daly City. This care facility looked literally like it had been dropped into a suburban neighborhood by helicopter. It decidedly had less to offer aesthetically compared with the Pacifica facility and from the exterior looked like many of those temporary trailer classrooms that eventually became permanent fixtures in the landscape of my own southern California high school. Thankfully Fran was around when I arrived. Her daughter Carla was there, visiting from Georgia, with Joy, a family friend. I wound up accompanying them on a stroll around the neighborhood, helping guide Fran’s wheelchair through the residential enclave we found ourselves in. The specter of dementia that Fran’s son had referred to was visibly present. But, in all honesty, I had silently suspected as much in my many months of hanging out at The Senior Class. One of the reasons I think Fran upset so many was that she represented a frail future that haunted her peers.

Following our tour of Daly City via wheelchair, I joined Carla, Joy and Fran in the patio of the care facility for lunch where the four of us broke bread that afternoon. After lunch, we moved to the main lounge where other residents sat, talked or watched television. This was not the horrific image of the nursing home but neither was it the upscale, hotel-inspired vision of “assisted living” that was slowly becoming the dominant model of later life care for those who could afford it. There was a languid energy inside the main lounge as staff shuttered in and out while residents stared at the large TV set or sat amongst each other around the central table there. One gentleman, an older Latino man, didn’t particularly strike me as feeble.
His speech was lucid and aside from sitting in a wheelchair—which all the residents had to apparently—there was nothing to noticeably mark him as frail. Sensing the opening provided by a sympathetic outsider like myself, I listened to the subtle critiques he made of staff and the family that had put him there.

After some time listening and talking with other residents, Carla decided to take Fran back to her room. As she was wheeled back to the central corridor, past the main desk where staff sat, Fran became adamant about identifying everyone immediately in her vicinity and their relations to her. It was a display of raw power as she stubbornly prevented Carla from pushing her wheelchair forward. Fran queried us all as to our names and relations with her while Carla tried desperately to get her mother to stop. Someone had given Fran a pen so she could write on a napkin she had with her. Somehow the napkin winded up in my possession. I could not make out any of genealogies Fran had scribbled down aside from one—

Estrellieta
Joy Irene

Jason
Luis
Carla my daughter

Back in Fran’s room the world looked much smaller than even the sidewalks of quiet Daly City. A single bed. A bureau with cards prominently displayed on top. A window. Another door leading to the bathroom. And not much else. I stayed a little while longer chatting it up with Fran, Carla and Joy before my own card was added to the pile of well wishes. I had hoped to pay Fran another visit before she was moved
to Seattle but even then I sensed this would be our last face-to-face encounter.

Thinking back now, I wished I had brought flowers or some other item instead of the card I gave Fran. It was the epitome of bad faith. I wrote on behalf of everyone at The Senior Class and referenced Seattle like it was a new, adventurous chapter in her life.

Before the end of the year, after only a couple of months in Seattle, Carla sent out an email to me and a few others informing us that Fran had been moved yet again to another facility—much more in the hotel order of things. Her new home had about one hundred residents, a bistro, a gym and even animals to interact with. Months afterwards I belatedly sent an email to the rest of the Allies in Aging, updating them on Fran’s new living situation and forwarding Carla’s email, which included the website of the Seattle “community” she was in. Nancy sent me a reply email. “How wonderful. It sounds like Frances is getting what she wanted—a lively place with lots of activities, a coffee shop, and I assume, an attractive setting.”
Conclusion

The future, in short, will not simply be the present writ large.

—W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790*

As I got on the elevator this morning a woman got on at the floor below.

She looked blankly at me. I knew that look. Vague, not quite centered, somewhere else. I wondered where she was off to alone.

At first floor, she gazed vacantly around. “Where do you get off?” I asked conversationally.

“I don’t know. Should I? Do you?” “I’m seeing a friend, going out to a meeting, Why not ask the receptionist to call your floor?”

She moved slowly toward the office, whispered something to the receptionist, turned toward me.

The receptionist smiled, in that way they have. “We know her well. She tells me you’re the one who doesn’t know where you’re going!”

—Janet Carncross Chandler, “You’ll Never Know Who You’ll Meet”

Titles

I finally got around to reading it. Gwen had recommended the book during one of the Allies in Aging Study Group meetings. I took note of it on a slip of paper and added it to the piles of other slips comprised of phone numbers, article titles and leads to follow up on that covered my desk throughout fieldwork and writing. Philip Roth’s 2006 novel *Everyman* chronicles the self-inflicted wounds of a man aging into the final chapter of his life (Roth 2006). The protagonist’s sons are distanced from
him due to his prior infidelity towards their mother. His daughter Phoebe is the person he is closest to in his life. He covets the life of his younger brother Howie who has been blessed with good health matched by an equally good moral character. And he himself is holed up in a retirement village, having fled Manhattan for the Jersey Shore following the 9/11 attacks where he spends his time painting and contemplating his own mortality. The title is a triple entendre. Everyman as in everyone, a gesture towards the universal. But also everyman as in the everyday person, the average American turned into a tragic figure by illness and age. And finally a vision of wounded masculinity and a deflated ego forced to recognize that the pleasures of the flesh mean little when the body betrays in old age. Every man’s fears. I contemplate recommending the book to Ruth Rouse and promise myself I’ll send her an email within the next week or so.

Titles are often agonized over by authors. I was lucky. Stuart had given me the first inklings of this ethnography’s title near the later half of my fieldwork. I had shown up at yet another study group sponsored by The Senior Class just curious to see what it was about. In the minutes before the meeting began, someone took note of my continued presence amongst The Senior Class participants. Stuart remarked that I continued coming because I found them all amusing. It was a slight dig at the ethnographer, requiring me to voice an emphatic denial. My research at that juncture was incredibly interesting and lively while the collective worldings going on from my point of view were actually quite serious. A few moments passed before Stuart turned to me, playing off the title of a famous Beatles song, and said “But will you
still love us *when you’re 64*?!” as he chuckled loudly at his own joke. If I had any
inclinations towards projections of quaintness onto my informants, Stuart certainly
would have shattered them right then and there. Revisiting the song well after
Stuart’s joking jab, I noticed the deliberate absence of the word “love” in Lennon and
McCartney’s lyrics. A telling slip on Stuart’s part? Maybe. More likely a
recognition that the patient, purposefully hanging out of ethnography must be
motivated by something akin to love.

**Village Ethnography**

Throughout this dissertation, I have given readers an inside look at the making
of community across a range of publics and privates—a queer nonprofit, seniors
contemplating new kinds of affective accountability towards one another and ordinary
actors making the best of the frail present. In her rich ethnography of queer kinship
in 1980s San Francisco, Kath Weston suggested that new kinds of symbols,
communitarian attachments and technologies were redefining family for her
informants. Near the end of her tale, she argued—

> When cast in narrative form, the shift from the identification of gayness with the
renunciation of kinship (no family) to a correspondence between gay identity and a
particular type of family (families we choose) presents a kind of collective coming-
out story: a tale of lesbians and gay men moving out of isolation and into kinship.
(Weston 1991: 212)

Though Weston’s analyses resonate with my own ethnographic encounters, I cannot
help but see a differing set of worldlings in contemporary San Francisco as older
residents contemplate the possibility that families—“biological” and “chosen” alike—
may not be able to fully carry the burdens of aging America on their shoulders. As
Elliott Butler, Dorothy Chang and Fran Brown all reminded me, the “weness” of community could disappear subtly or suddenly.

At the same time, we must remember that the ethnographer never merely records the making of community. S/he becomes intimately involved in its trials and tribulations along the way. Hortense Powdermaker captured something of the dynamics in play in the title of her 1966 book *Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist* (Powdermaker 1966). As anthropologists we remain committed to the quixotic quest to straddle those dual roles in our desires to understand something about social life we couldn’t from the safety of either “subjective” or “objective” points of view.

This past weekend I saw Amy again, after a far too long hiatus, as her larger community of friends, acquaintances, colleagues and I celebrated her 40th birthday. Drinks and good food were flowing all through the evening. I was reminded of a former roommate of mine, a queer Thai man working on his MBA degree, who had once contrasted the vision of city life he knew in Bangkok with that of San Francisco. Paul wryly called SF “…a gay village.” Not far from what Gray Pride was hoping to build in the coming years. Amy’s party revealed how deeply implicated I was in Paul’s sardonic quip. As I chatted it up with new and familiar faces that evening, I was reminded that as much as my friendship with Amy had facilitated the gathering of ethnographic knowledge it also had its own distinct pleasures. Her bon vivant spirit was infectious and as I walked towards the BART station from her apartment I found myself pondering the quotidian joys of community in San Francisco. Over the
past year and a half of writing my dissertation I had discovered an essential paradox of all creative praxis. You have to shut out the world in order to reengage with it. This “shutting out” is never absolute of course and can easily ignore the gendered and socioeconomic privileges that facilitate the creation of “a room of one’s own” as Virginia Woolf once imagined (Woolf 1929). In the hub of sociality of Amy’s birthday I was reminded of the vibrant necessity of community making in vivo. As much as my work with Gray Pride had captured my ethnographic imagination it also unexpectedly had facilitated reconnecting with old friends and colleagues. I regularly ran into one of the people I had worked with on a community advisory body back in the late 1990s at the annual Gray Pride fundraisers and other events the network sponsored around town. Another old co-worker and friend was actually the victim of some of the worst dishing offered up by Mark and Amy. And yet another old friend followed my time in the field and interned with the organization for a year while working on his graduate degree in social work. Seeing this later friend at Amy’s party was an utterly pleasant surprise. We had been part of a tight circle of friends in the late 1990s and early 2000s that was now much more frail. People had moved away. I had started graduate school. And this friend had lost his longtime partner to AIDS. I offer these autoethnographic musings not to end on the bittersweet, an all too easy synthesis of sentiments. I still stand by what I have described and argued in the preceding pages regarding the bad faiths and ambivalent affects my informants regularly trafficked in. I do so rather to underscore how “community” points towards
the attachments that make life worth living even as they reveal the frailties we wish were not there.

Throughout this dissertation, I have shown how aging exacerbates the conundrums around autonomy and interdependence that Americans continue to grapple with both individually and collectively. I suggested in the Introduction that “aging” may do similar work that “sex” did in Foucault’s unpacking of modernity, collecting dispersed anxieties and institutional forms into new norms and desires. Though tempted by such a move, I cannot replicate Foucault’s ambitious analytics here. Instead, by offering a focus on frailties, I have argued for the need to pay close attention to the disjunctured and ephemeral sociocultural forms that make growing older in the contemporary United States fraught with uneven distributions of “care”—as well as a prime site for a politics of the possible.71 What would such a politics look like? I cannot say for sure, though I caught a glimpse of it in two places.

The first place was in the recent past, courtesy of Margaret Mead. It came from an essay she wrote in 1970 titled “Cultural Contexts of Aging.” Mead would have been 67 or 68 when she wrote that piece, having established a prolific career as the most famous English-speaking anthropologist and a regular commentator on emerging cultural dynamics in the contemporary world. At essay’s end, Mead argued—

The world has changed, is changing, and will change, and those who have changed most are the older people. They are the best living example of change.

71Echoing Cohen’s politics of care in Chapter 2 and the politics of perspective I analyzed in Chapter 3.
All this is going to require a tremendous amount of imagination in the way we structure the relationship of older people to the community. We will have to sort out those who are ready for retirement at an early age because of the vicissitudes of their lives and who need only protection and cherishing and care. We can’t do very much more for them now, because in the past we weren’t able to do very much or didn’t try to. Yet, we must do this without building a picture of aging in the future that is going to include any of these things. Instead, we must develop a picture for the future in which we will have the sort of community, the sort of housing, the sort of educational assistance in which people never finish school, in which we never put husky sixty-five-year-old people into ghettos, and in which we are able to use almost all the grandparent generation and many of the great-grandparent generation in building a society that is flexible enough to be continually self-renewing—continually able to change. (Mead 1972b: 148-149)

It was classic Mead, her own feisty version of futuretalk. Indeed, Janice Schwartz might have wholeheartedly agreed with Mead’s urgings. Their rhetorical investments in the future were similarly aligned. Yet, contra Janice, Mead’s emphasis on change never settled for a final consensus or teleological triumph. In this regard, I believe Mead would have found common philosophical ground with Isabelle Stengers (see Chapter 1). She keenly saw that erecting age-segregated utopias would not resolve the problems of the present. Building a future for the elderly was insufficient. Remaking the reigning roles and rules of American society so that young and old alike age could imagine, build and fully collaborate in the unfurling future was what was required in her view.

The second place I encountered it was when I snapped the following photograph in the summer of 2009 during a protest bringing attention to the human costs of California’s budget cuts.

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72 See also Mead (1972a).
A rally had been organized in front of the Bank of America building located just a few feet away from where tourists regularly line up to ride the cable cars that signify “San Francisco” for so many around the world. A coalition of groups and organizations had come together under the banner of “budget justice.” Bank of America was targeted as one of the dozens of corporate entities that had flourished through investment strategies and lending practices that were chiefly seen as responsible for the economic crisis that hit the country in the fall of 2008. People were holding up signs that read “INVEST IN US”—a call to action playing with the multiple meanings of “value” and “investment.” Amy and I were just finishing a training session around how to do advocacy work with a group of seniors who would eventually form the Gray Pride Leadership Council. Someone had mentioned the
rally at the training and brought flyers to distribute. As we encountered the crowd, I decided to join the rally while Amy continued on to the Gray Pride office by way of public transit. Before we parted company, I told her I would join her back in the office in a short while. I never made it. After some spirited chanting and sloganeering, the crowd surged away from the bank onto Market Street, the city’s main artery, and marched up to City Hall for a final round of speeches. As we walked away from the bank, I turned around to get a glimpse of the crowd and snapped the above photo amongst others. Photographs—like ethnographies—powerfully distill thus making them prone to distortion. But they beckon us nonetheless, like the posters I encountered on Clement Street many months after finishing fieldwork. All I can offer by way of a reading of this particular photograph is to say that for me it sutures together the three keywords of this dissertation’s title. Publics. Aging. Community. The frailties are still visible, of course, as the urgent “NOW” in this gentleman’s sign attests to. I cannot offer a roadmap to where a politics of the possible will lead though I will venture that senior San Francisco and aging America might teach us all to be less afraid as we take our first frail steps forward.
Appendix / Interview Questions

The following interview questions represent the areas of conversational ground covered in the approximately 90 in-depth interviews I conducted over the course of fieldwork. Questions 1, 9, 10, 12 and 13 were introduced at differing points during research. Though age was an obvious focus of this study, and something I consciously listened for, it dawned on me midway through research that I would have to actively ask interviewees how old they were if said information was not casually mentioned. The list below represents the final roster of queries I developed. Conversations, of course, were more expansive, robust and rhizomatic than the list below can fully convey.

1) How old are you?

2) How long have you lived in San Francisco?

3) If you’re not a native, what brought you originally to the Bay Area?

4) What do you like best about living in San Francisco?

5) What are some of the challenges?

6) What’s changed most about the city since you’ve been here?

7) What’s great about getting older? And the downsides?

8) What’s the biggest misperception—or misperceptions—people have about aging/getting old?

9) What’s your current living situation (i.e. SRO unit, apartment, house, assisted living facility)? If you could change anything about it, what would it be?

10) Do you think being a woman/man OR gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender OR Asian/Black/Jewish/Native American/etc. shapes what’s it like to grow older?

11) Are you things you think about when you think of the future?

12) What activities/groups/networks are you currently involved with?

13) Do you have a typical day? What’s it like?

14) Do you have friends or acquaintances you’d be willing to refer me to? Or places/groups/networks you think I should check out?
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