

Editors' Introductions to the Special Issue

Our stories can be enormously powerful, because they're about living, real human beings, not about theoretical descriptions in feminist literature.

Faye Wattleton, former president of Planned Parenthood of America

The voices of older women, those aged sixty-five and above, remain largely unheard in contemporary society and culture, although this is changing. The occasional advertising campaign now features famous sept- or even octogenarians, such as Jane Fonda for L'Oréal or Joan Didion for Céline. Yet, barely a week goes by without an older female actor discussing the lack of decent roles available to them, whilst there are widespread concerns about the challenges presented by an ageing population, the preponderance of whom are women. How we provide for our old age and care for the elderly are pressing and unresolved issues. They have no easy answers. We may be living longer than ever before, but what do we do with this extra time?

As the influential baby boomer generation hits sixty and seventy, attitudes towards ageing and what it means to be older are evolving, though the adjustments are slower than many would wish. As the founding editor of *History of Women in the Americas*, and now retiring from that position, I hope this special issue contributes to this shift by challenging lingering stereotypes about older women, their lives and their histories. These life stories should be heard and shared. As well as being a contributor to this collection, my research on the lives of middle-aged and older women in the United States from 1880 to 2000 has made me keenly aware of the extent to which the experiences of those in the older age bracket can provide broader insights into the past and the present. The stories presented here illuminate key themes in gender and American history over the past two centuries. Throughout these narratives, we see the importance of immigration, the significance of motherhood and the impact that health has on an individual's life. Areas of change in women's lives in the second half of the twentieth century feature here – family structure, employment and education – alongside the effects of feminism and politics. The many and varied interests and hobbies that older women pursue are another major theme across the narratives. Evident in them all is the extent to which women's lives have been and continue to be shaped by expanding opportunities and enduring limitations.

Taken together, these narratives provide a window into the lives and experiences of women in a particular slice of an age and generation cohort. They are by no means representative of the US population as a whole. Contributors to this issue are overwhelmingly white, middle-class women. Many are highly educated. A preponderance live in California's Bay Area. This reflects the personal connections of the project's creator and editor, Marge Lasky, a retired California historian, who brought these women together to share their stories electronically.

Although the narratives do not tell us about all groups of women, they provide a valuable sample of the many stories that are worth telling. They begin to highlight the diversity and multiplicity that characterises the lives of women aged over sixty-five. The contributions do not conform to standard academic discourses or present scholarly arguments. Instead, they offer a glimpse into older women's changing experiences across the twentieth and early twenty-first century United States. The individuals' diction and felicitations of style remain, allowing the reader to hear the singular

voice expressing each experience of growing older and reflection upon lives well lived. We have retained American spelling conventions to keep the submissions as close as possible to the original texts supplied.

In closing, I should like to thank my Associate Editor and research assistant, Dr. Rachel Ritchie, who has co-authored several papers and conference presentations with me. Rae has moved on to pastures new, but was an invaluable help to this journal and to the Society for the History of Women in the Americas (SHAW) in its early years. She co-convened the Gender in the Americas seminar at the Institute for Historical Research and was the impetus behind many of the early ventures of the Society.

S. Jay Kleinberg, Professor Emerita, Brunel University, London

Older now, you find holiness in anything that continues.

From "The Man Who Makes Brooms"

by Naomi Shihab Nye

What was I doing, scrambling off-trail in Sedona, Arizona, with two group leaders and six hiking buddies, engaging in actions I generally hate: pumping up slip-rock, climbing to intimidating heights, and choosing between the narrow ledge and the prickly pear? Although I never satisfactorily answered that question, each day when the scrambling ended and I was essentially intact with only a few painful thorns embedded in my legs, I was amazed at what I had accomplished.

I'm no physical wimp. I started working out before it was fashionable and, as an older woman, have traveled alone for months in developed and developing countries, hiked the Dolomites, spent days on horseback in Peru and Uruguay, and physically pushed myself in between. But somehow the Sedona experience was different, most likely because it involved activities I seek to avoid rather than embrace. It became "My Trip of Unintended Consequences," one of which was the gestation of this project.

Shortly after returning from Sedona, I thought about writing a narrative detailing my physical, intellectual, and emotional experiences as an older woman—now in my mid-70s. After all, I certainly have led a different life than previous generations of females in my family. Discarding that project as too revelatory, I decided to collect the narratives of other women of a self-defined "certain age." I sought to clarify what they were doing as they aged and whether their lives differed dramatically from their mothers' generation. As a long-time professor of U.S. Women's History, I wanted to discover if feminism had any role in older women's choices and how educational opportunities, economics, race, and access to health care intersected and impacted women's lives as they aged.

Collecting the narratives was facilitated by people who forwarded my emailed invitation soliciting "personal narratives about how older women are doing things that their mothers' generation might never have considered," by advertising in the online journal *Persimmon Tree*, and by placing invitations in senior centers and other locales. Many of the submissions avoided generational

comparisons, but their poignancy, candor, and insights into older women's lives persuaded me to reshape my original focus and to seek as broad a readership as possible.

The authors, although mostly residents of the western United States, include U.S. citizens who reside in Israel, the United Kingdom, and Italy. The youngest at the time of compiling the sample was 56; the oldest, 99. All offer perceptions about navigating the realities of age and gender. The present selection, about a third of the total and all except two submitted in 2014, includes accounts of a late-blooming flautist learning to “plant her feet” while performing, a mid-sixties Peace Corps volunteer who remained in the Dominican Republic to teach reading, a highly accomplished octogenarian who upon writing her narrative finally “understood” her immigrant mother, a heart attack survivor who became a published novelist, and the evolution of an author who as she aged became less able to deal with the demands of novel-writing. Their experiences validate what many of us consider gospel—older women should be neither stereotyped nor ignored.

These first-person accounts demonstrate that with aging, one can live meaningfully and creatively. Several narratives, especially those comparing generations of women, confirm that differences in educational level, health care, economics, work force participation, or technology have increased the options for contemporary women. As one author concluded, “I can do the things today that my mother as an older woman couldn't, due to the following reasons: innovations in my time, having been raised in a free democratic society and hearing a different drummer.”

A striking feature is that few writers cite feminism's import in shaping their contemporary situations. Despite my invitation's allusion to uncovering how “feminism and other variables” shaped older women's lives, only a handful of the 122 submissions mention feminism. This omission is even more surprising, given that many of the authors probably participated in the second wave of feminism and that even non-participants have been profoundly affected by the dramatic shifts in sex roles and gender norms since the 1960s.

Why the oversight? Certainly, some narratives are expository and shun analysis. Others describe choices that appear to have little to do with feminism. A self-defined “pre-feminist” editor seemed relatively untouched by the feminist movement. Another writer claimed that while “[f]eminism or women's liberation helped shape my life ... it was not a defining factor in [what I chose to describe].” Perhaps the changes occasioned by second-wave feminism are so deeply ingrained that most authors never considered the connection between feminism and their present-day choices. As one author argued, “maybe at this point we just take the changes in our thinking, that feminism gave us the freedom to consider, for granted.... It was half a lifetime ago, after all!” In a similar vein, a friend observed, “It isn't necessary to identify it [feminism as causal]; it's there, atmospheric, affecting everything, blowing open the doors we ventured through.”

I will end my introduction with another endeavor inspired by the challenges on “My Trip of Unintended Consequences.” Having been divorced in the '70s and having spent many years “unpartnered,” I pushed myself to contact an old friend, someone on whom I had a “crush” many years ago. We're still “keeping company;” yet therein lies a more complex and touching story—much affected by age and health. I'll probably save that one until I'm 80!*

Enjoy the narratives. I hope they will inspire you to write your own, regardless of your gender or age, to understand that growing older enables new adventures and attitudes enhanced by the wisdom of experience and/or to regard aging, both yours and others', with compassion and sanguinity.

Marjorie Penn Lasky, Professor Emerita, Diablo Valley College

[* Ed. note: Marjorie's friend died on 9 March 2016]

Note from the Editorial Team: this issue of History of Women in the Americas is guest edited by S. J. Kleinberg and Marjorie Penn Lasky. The current editorial team thanks them for all of the work they have done to bring these women's stories alive and to a public and academic audience. As a departure from the normal practice of the Journal, and in keeping with the nature of the material, this is not a peer-reviewed issue. Spellings appear as submitted by contributors. Photographs are provided courtesy of the contributors, unless otherwise credited.