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MOUSEPADS AND MEMOIRS:
LEARNING THE INTERNET AND WRITING MEMOIR AT THE PETER COOPER
VILLAGE/STUYVESANT TOWN SENIOR LOUNGE

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Prologue:

Creamed Pearl Onions

When I was a young girl, my grandmother, Helen Counihan, my father's mother, lived down the Jersey shore on Barnegat Bay in a retirement community of small ranch houses with pebbled yards. Grandpa died in 1969 and Grandma filled her days knitting afghans in crazy color combinations and playing bridge at the community club. Our family would visit her often, especially in the summer, when we piled into our green Pontiac station wagon to drive down to Grandma's from the landlocked perpetually humid confines of central Jersey. My nervous skinny father smoked endless cigarettes and listened to sports radio as he drove; my mother with her beautifully chiseled cheekbones stared out the window at the endless highway. In the back seat were three rambunctious children: my younger brother Christopher, at three years old, in the age before car seats, jumped up and down on the sticky vinyl upholstery, as my sister Adrienne and me, without seatbelts on, tickled him from either side.

On these rides, my mother would turn around, grab one of our wrists and say through gritted teeth: "Stop it right now. I need you to cooperate." My father would look through the rear view mirror at the mess of us: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Calm the hell down!" When it got to the point where my father would stop the car on the side of the road and threaten to leave us all there to be eaten alive by the Jersey Devil, we would turn quiet and sulky. Looking out the car window at the Pine Barrens landscape of sandy soil and scrubby trees, I would make up stories in my head of a girl who toiled in the cranberry bogs until we made the turn into grandma's development. When we arrived, Grandma would greet us with quick kisses—she was never a big one for displays of

affection—while we kids jumped up and down squealing with delight having finally arrived at Grandma's.

Grandma always woke up early in the morning. I remember sitting with her at her kitchen counter before the sun came up—climbing up on the swivel bar stool, and pulling my nightgown down under my feet. Making a little bunting bag out of my flannel nightie, I would spin around and around on the rickety bar stool, get dizzy, and then spin in the other direction. Grandma sat on the other side of the counter, and even at 5:30am, she dressed with an element of Nora Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*—a slash of red lipstick, leopard print polyester slacks, white blouse showing the contraption of her brassiere, and a terrycloth turban covering her fluffy white hair, the cloying scent of Arpege blending with the smoke from her Kent 100s.

Every morning we visited, Grandma got busy peeling pearl onions to cream as a side dish for our roast beef dinner twelve hours later. Not that I'd ever eat creamed pearl onions. No one liked them but Grandma. It was a nasty looking dish, with gobs of white flour roux caked over the onions. I heard my mother say that Grandma was a terrible cook: her mashed potatoes were lumpy, the gravy gooey. At the dinner table, my father would hold up the Lenox gravy boat, one of grandma's bridge tournament prizes, and tease: "Navy gravy ain't wavy." It didn't matter to me: I didn't eat anything but sandwiches of peanut butter and marshmallow fluff.

Holding each tiny onion in her left hand while expertly wielding a paring knife with the right, Grandma would peel the onion down to glossy whiteness, the tendons and blue veins on her wrinkled hands popping in and out with each motion. I watched her carefully, as I practiced making Jacob's ladder with my cat's cradle string. I felt like

such a big girl, sitting in the kitchen with Grandma before anybody else was awake, listening to her complaints and confidences as she drank her coffee and peeled those onions, pausing to take a drag on her cigarette.

“The louse is coming next week!” she’d announce. The louse was her nickname for my uncle Jerry, who we all knew to be her favorite, “and *she’s* coming of course! Oh, she really thinks she’s something! Do you think she’d ever lift a finger around here? Never!” *She* was my aunt Carol, as beautiful as Candice Bergen, who came down to Grandma’s from New York City only to lie on the beach tanning for hours on end. Little did I know then that my grandmother also complained about her other daughter-in-law, my mother, calling her “The Polack” behind her back—when my mother isn’t even Polish, but Lithuanian and Ukrainian. My mother and aunt would commiserate sometimes, Aunt Carol whispering: “Look at her; she thinks she’s Rose Kennedy,” while my grandmother squinted at them through the haze of cigarette smoke, taking a careful sip of her Manhattan.

Grandma could only see people in very distinct categories: Irish was good, although the shanty Irish were suspect and the lace-curtain no better, and all other ethnicities were derided: she’d regularly say the words Jew, Nig, Guinea, and Polack as though it were correct to identify people this way in casual conversation. This was when All in the Family was on TV, and my mom would remind us that Grandma was like Archie Bunker: “Don’t listen to Grandma with that,” she’d tell us. “It’s just the way her generation is. She doesn’t understand that what she says can hurt people’s feelings.”

“Put on the little Jew,” Grandma would tell me. This was her favorite talk show host, Stanley Siegel, out of Philadelphia. I’d turn the dial on the TV (I remember being

so little and weak I needed two hands to turn the knob) and she'd sit with a groan on a cabbage-rose pattern cushioned chair in the Florida room to watch and knit afghan squares. When she ran out of one color, Grandma would just add another, without thought of coordination. Acid green would give way to a mustard gold, then to a baby pink, next a fall-leaf orange. Sometimes she'd knit us mittens that were always so misshapen we could hardly jam our fingers into them and hats we couldn't squeeze over our little skulls. When Stanley Siegel was over, The Price is Right came on—Grandma's knitting needles clacking away in unison with her false teeth clicking in her mouth as she guessed at the price of the Amana refrigerator and the Maytag washer.

Sometimes Grandma would baby-sit her friend Mrs. McSweeney's myna bird, which would rattle the house with its squawks. I liked to stand in front of the cage, making bird noises back. "Stop shrieking!" Grandma would yell, "Come over here and make me a Metamucil cocktail." I'd have the honor of scooping out a teaspoonful of Metamucil and mixing in the water, stirring, stirring with the spoon till the powder dissolved. But the grit of the Metamucil, stir as I might, always collected at the bottom of the glass.

She'd send us outside with a paper Stop and Shop bag to do the weeding. We'd crawl around in the pebbles, pulling up soft fluffs of dandelion seeds, the sharp edges of the crabgrass. I'd get distracted by the hydrangeas, huge instant bouquets of a purple-blue hue that I could never get enough of looking at or touching. I'd rip off a hydrangea and play bridesmaid hidden away behind the willow tree in the way back, whispering to myself and my Baby Tenderlove doll, the weeding abandoned.

Grandma would call us in for an Oreo cookie snack and we'd read her National Enquirer together, looking at the shocking celebrity photos. Or we'd play card games: Kings in the Corner or Double Solitaire. Grandma didn't mind when I'd cheat, which I got maniacal giggly pleasure out of. I'd flip two cards over at a time or pull a card out from under another pile. "Oh the hell with it!" she'd say when she lost, even though she hadn't really lost since I cheated so blatantly.

At times, Grandma scared me with her various declarations. Scrutinizing me one day over the card table, she said, "You have a widow's peak. That means your husband will die before you do." She pulled her hair off her forehead: "See—I have a widow's peak and I'm a widow!" With that, I ran crying to my mother. When I turned six, Grandma told me, "You are in your seventh year," which confused me, because I was only six, not seven. Why was Grandma making me older than I was?

But I liked Grandma's edginess, her blunt way of doing and saying things, even if I knew she was wrong about people and the world. I liked to go through all her drawers, looking for evidence of my father's youth—his St. Luke's High School report card, his English composition entitled "How to Shave," his Varsity letter for baseball—and of her own youth, of which there was little. Just a couple of photos of her in 1920s flapper dresses: Grandma with a haughty look on her face, her lips bee-stung in a pout, her eyes with the Theda Bara mystery to them, Grandpa in a summertime straw hat squinting against the sunlight, with a proud arm around her waist. Digging deeper in the drawers, I'd find a few photos of Grandma with her cousin Gertie, she of the turned up nose and mischievous smile. Grandma looked cool and collected; Gert looked like she was ready for trouble.

What mattered most to me was the pleasure of being around my grandma—this old woman with whom I felt such an easy companionship. I loved being the first one awake with her, to have Grandma all to myself. In some ways, it felt as if we were on the same level. Our days were filled with play and pleasure; she with her bridge games and knitting, and me with my Baby Tenderlove and cat's cradle string.

By the time I was in high school, in 1982, Grandma lost all interest in the little that did interest her, so worried about breaking a hip that she gave up on walking completely. She stopped going to the club to play bridge, and she actually got in her car to drive down to her mailbox, a mere forty feet from her front door. All she did was smoke and knit while watching TV. When she walked, she held on first to the back of the chair, then to the kitchen counter, then reached over to grip the doorframe, inching her way to the bathroom. I would crack my girlfriends up with imitations of Grandma's half hour journey to the john, and how her teeth would clack around when she chewed on that overdone roast beef and gloppy creamed pearl onions croaking at me with her mouth full: "What do you want with designer dungarees?" By this time, my teenage years, I didn't see Grandma as anything more than an old lady. She was just a fussy nervous thing to me, always worried about falling. Of course, then, Grandma did break a hip—falling on her way to the bathroom one hot summer day and lying on the floor in her hallway until my sister found her there later that evening. So she came to live with us for a while, until my mother could no longer stand tending to her mother-in-law's every need.

Grandma moved into a nursing home within walking distance of our house. My father would visit her, bringing a thermos of Manhattans and a little plate of cheese and crackers. I'd visit, too, bringing The Star magazine and telling her what I was up to.

Grandma would say little, eventually becoming so passive that her personality drifted away. Arthritis crippled her hands to the point that she couldn't light her own cigarettes. I would light them for her, and then carefully place the cigarette in the curled up knarl of her hand, between her index and middle finger. Her eyes took on the look of a frightened child as the bones of her skull seemed to shrink inside out and her skin hung down in heavy wattle jowls on either side of her mouth. But she never once spoke of the fear she must have been feeling. Grandma seemed afraid to live and afraid to die, but die she did, in 1991 at age eighty-one.

Work and life have always drawn me back to old women, perhaps in my attempts to seek out the camaraderie I had with Grandma. During a good chunk of these eleven and a half years of graduate study, I waited tables and tended bar at a restaurant on lower Fifth Avenue that catered to the wealthy elderly women who lived in the apartment buildings nearby, making sure their grilled salmon had "no oil, no salt" on it and their martinis were "extra dry, straight up with a glass of ice on the side." I also took care of Grandma's cousin and former partner-in-crime, Gertie Purdy, visiting her in Washington Heights, cleaning her apartment and helping with her banking as she approached age ninety. Within a couple of years, Gert ended up at the same nursing home as Grandma did, so depressed at having to leave her neighborhood of eighty years that she died of sadness in 1998.

When I read Barbara Myerhoff's ethnography of elderly Jews in Venice, California in the 1970s, Number Our Days, I was inspired to reconnect with my attraction to elderly women and to study them for my dissertation. Myerhoff vividly captured her subjects, steeped in Jewish identity and the Yiddish culture of their pre-immigrant youth,

giving value to a population that was dying out. I wanted to work with a similar population of elderly, to document their culture through their relationship to literacy, with my motivation coming not only out of scholarly attention but personal interest as well.

Throughout the two and a half years of my study, I have satisfied this craving for connection with elderly women, especially with my case study participants, Mary Smith, Heidi Donskoi and Helen Cleary. When I am with them, the generational barriers are swept away. I realize having a relationship with someone two generations older than I, to whom I am not related, takes the elderly person out of the context of the entrapments of family life and into the realm of no-strings friendship.

But can we ever escape the grandmother association, the desire to seek out our first elder? Margaret Cruikshank, Barbara MacDonald and Baba Copper, feminist scholars on aging and old age in particular, suggest that we should. They point out that ascribing and expecting the grandmother role of elderly women limits and patronizes them. Cruikshank writes that the grandmother role “envisions the model of old women as passive, cheery, devoted to others and easily controlled” (146). This certainly doesn’t describe my grandma, however much she loved us. Younger women, Cruikshank, MacDonald and Copper argue, expect service and devotion from all old women, without ever offering to do for them. Copper writes: “Almost never do I sense that I am being approached by a younger woman in the spirit of acceptance, learning, or wonder” (20).

This is the spirit I’d like to believe I am bringing to my research. I want to accurately portray the ladies of the StuyTown Senior Lounge and their world, both past and present, without sentimentality, without judgment and without condescension. Ruth Ray writes that “to romanticize the older woman’s past is to ignore her present and her

future” (36). In this work, however, my hope is to merge the past with the present and future. I want to connect the past of the ladies’ life stories to the technology of the internet which they view as futuristic and through the memoir website, I want to bring their memoirs into a participatory present.

Paradoxes abound in the thinking, doing and writing of research. Even as Cruikshank, MacDonald, and Copper argue that aging is a social construction, they cannot and do not deny that decay and death are intrinsic parts of both the state and the process of becoming old. In the same vein, I argue, one cannot deny that the grandmother role is our entrée and our touchstone for relating to elderly women.

Associating elderly women with grandmothers comes out of love and is embedded in details as mundane and significant as my grandma’s infamous side dish of creamed pearl onions. From this vantage point, we can come to see elderly women as idiosyncratic individuals, each unique in the value and scope of her life.

Chapter 1

“It’s a Zoo in Here, I’m Telling You”

How does literacy change and develop at the end of the life span?

This is the research question I had in mind when I volunteered in January 2002 to teach internet skills and memoir writing to elderly members of the Peter Cooper Village/Stuyvesant Town Senior Lounge in Manhattan. As the last quarter of the twentieth century shifted into the twenty-first, we have seen a radical revision in the definition of what it is to be a literate person—from the ability to read and write in print modalities to a dynamic and complex set of reading and writing practices in technological environments, most significantly, on the internet. We have also seen a shift in literature, from the dominance of fiction to the critical and popular success of memoir—with the genre of memoir itself becoming the province of common people as much as the musings of the powerful and influential. For my dissertation, I saw an opportunity to join these two new aspects of literacy, memoir writing and using the internet, to participants’ past knowledge of their lives and print literacy—and to document, through ethnographic methods, what happens when the elderly are confronted with new literacies. Furthermore, I chose to design a website of participants’ memoirs, to further cement the relationship and to bring my research to a broader audience: <http://www.newmedialab.cuny.edu/beth> (see appendix for printed site).

It may be perceived as an odd choice for a composition and rhetoric dissertation to study the elderly, when most of the students we encounter in the classroom are either traditional age or working adults. However, the elderly, which the United States government defines as those sixty-five and older, are the fastest growing segment of American society. For the purposes of this dissertation, I define “elderly” as those seventy-five and older, working from gerontologist Bernice Neugarten’s designations of young-old (65-74), old-old (75-84) and oldest old (age 85 plus). All of the participants are over age seventy-five and self-identify as “elderly” and “old” as well.

Despite the fact that the United States is a rapidly aging country, society in general virtually ignores older Americans, except as a powerful voting bloc and as consumers of prescription drugs and other medical services. Little has changed since Robert Butler wrote Why Survive?: Being Old in America in 1975: “In America, childhood is romanticized, youth is idolized, middle age does the work, wields the power and pays the bills, and old age, its days empty of purpose, gets little or nothing for what it has done” (xii). Feminist scholar Kathleen Woodward writes: “our culture’s representations of aging are predominantly negative” (4). The aging process and the state of being old are most difficult for women, who also live longer than men. As Cruikshank observes, “old women are seen as old bodies; physical appearance encompasses their whole being” (7). “Nothing tells me that old women exist or that it is possible to be glad to be an old woman,” writes Barbara MacDonald (5). For both men and women, the experience of aging is often one of being pushed aside. “Social gerontologists often call aging a “roleless role” because no special tasks, responsibilities or leadership functions are expected of people resulting from old age” (Cruikshank 41). The elderly are a

nonentity in our national consciousness. Even in the halls of academia, with the strong influence of feminism and the postmodernist investigation of “the other,” old age, the “other” that we will all become (as long as we stay alive long enough) is, ironically, ignored, consigned to the interdisciplinary field of gerontology but rarely touched upon in other fields of study.

Why do we ignore the old? Dr. Marianne Legato, a medical researcher at Columbia University, is blunt about it: “Aging is nature’s way of preparing us for death. That’s why we hate old people” (in Merkin, 101). “Advanced old age is a trial,” admits Woodward, “It not only represents death, it is close to death and in due time will be inhabited by death” (19). Ernest Becker in The Denial of Death claims that cultural dysfunction comes not from the repression of sexuality, as Freud asserted, but from the repression of death: we refuse to acknowledge our own mortality. As long as we deny the place of death as a natural part of the life course, we will turn our backs on the elderly. Yet, with seventy-six million baby boomers fast approaching their elder years, a cultural shift in the manner in which we perceive the elderly may be forced upon us. In twenty years, there will be too many old people to ignore; it is imperative that we begin now to construct meaningful roles for the elderly.

According to the New York Times, colleges around the country are setting up programs to serve this growing population of elderly, who, when surveyed, respond that education is a top interest and priority in how to spend retirement years (Sack). The Chronicle for Higher Education speculates that “the increasing presence of senior citizens may represent a windfall of sorts for colleges and universities that are alert to the possibilities” of residential programs and a revival of humanist thinking and liberal arts

subjects (Trachtenberg). The New School for Social Research was the first to design a program to serve older students, founding the Institute for Retired Professionals in the sixties. Educators, however, have little knowledge of the elderly. In composition and rhetoric, studies of children (Graves, Brice Heath, Hass Dyson), middle school and high school students (Emig, Britton, Finders), as well as traditional-aged college students (Perl, Chiseri-Strater, Sternglass, Fox) present a developmental perspective of writing and learning, and yet no such studies of the other side of the lifespan exist. Recently, online pedagogy and learning experience among traditional age college students has also been the subject of numerous studies (Faigley, Moran, Tornow, Warschauer), and there is also an increasing interest among literary scholars in exploring memoir (Miller, Zinsser, Ker Conway, Alexander). But again, the experiences and perspectives of the elderly have not been a part of this conversation. There is much to learn from and about the elderly that will be of use not only to those setting up educational programs to serve them but also to the students we currently serve in our classrooms.

To this end, for two and a half years from January 2002 to June 2004, I conducted ethnographic research with elderly women at the Stuyvesant Town Senior Lounge, as a teacher participant/observer. I taught internet skills and memoir writing with a focus on how the elderly perceive these forms of literacy and how their facility and understanding develop. I wanted to gain an understanding of the impact these new literacies would have on their lives. How would they understand the internet and memoir writing? What challenges might be unique to the elderly in doing so?

I chose to do extended case studies, tracking the same individuals over a two and a half year period. I was inspired by Marilyn Sternglass' example in her study of City

College students' academic literacy development, Time to Know Them. "The greatest benefit that arises from (this) research," writes Sternglass, "is the opportunity to follow intellectual growth and to be able to identify the factors that contribute to it" (299).

Sternglass studied her participants for seven years; Ruth Spack, in another often-cited composition and rhetoric project, studied ESL students for three years. The two and a half years of studying the ladies, I believe, has given me sufficient time to show the nature of the ladies' developing literacies and their understanding of that process.

Old and New Literacies

Before I describe my study, it is important to clarify terms. What is "literacy" and "literacy development" and how am I defining these terms? Why choose memoir writing and the internet as components to be added to the lives of my participants? And why does my work include an online component?

At its most basic, literacy is equated with the ability to read and write. Throughout the twentieth century Americans have had to "respond to an unprecedented pace of change in the uses, forms and standards of literacy" (Brandt 2). In 1900, a measure of literacy was the ability to write one's name. By World War II, soldiers passed the Armed Force's literacy test if they read and wrote at a fifth grade level. As businesses grew and the nation moved from an agricultural economy to a manufacturing and management model, higher standards of education became necessary for the many administrative jobs that had to be filled. Higher levels of literacy contributed to a rise in social and economic status for many Americans in the fifties and sixties. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, with cable television giving Americans an ever

increasing number of stations to watch, advertising assaulting us at every turn, and the unstoppable rise of computers, the necessity for an increasing technological proficiency and media awareness required that we expand the definition of literacy.

What we are aware of today is a multiplicity of literacies: technological, media, visual. We not only “read” books, magazines and newspapers, we also read situations, films, web sites and advertisements. “Texts,” as we understand them today, are not only printed materials, but also include messages sent through cell phones. The internet, in particular, figures as both text and delivery system, seamlessly integrated in the academic, business, and social spheres of our everyday lives. Computers, then, are ubiquitous and necessary to our daily lives. As such, literacy involves negotiating, manipulating and composing in these mediums such as the internet, word-processing programs and even in programming DVD and VCR players. According to the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, these are now some of the ever-changing “skills needed for work, education, social interaction and negotiation of everyday living.” Without these skills, it is difficult to participate in the world around us. To be a literate person in 2005 means one must be as comfortable with technology as one is with print and also understand that one must constantly upgrade one’s technical skills in tandem with the rapid change in technological innovation. Literacy is a matter of “life-long learning,” as adult educators term it.

This need for life-long acquisition of literacy speaks to the term “literacy development:” not only must we see changes in the skills necessary to reading and writing in any medium but we must also have a critical understanding of those skills. Development necessarily implies change and growth, all for the betterment of the person. A transformation, a new level of consciousness occurs as literacy develops. Much of the

research in literacy development focuses on childhood (Haas Dyson, Graves, Heath). My research question: “How does literacy change and develop at the end of the life span?” implies a belief that literacy development is life-long. This assumption is supported by the literature of gerontology, which views what Lois Lamdin calls “elderlearning” as an important part of the experience of the aged. Peterson argues for an all-age inclusive view of development: “the values of study, learning and intellectual growth are not restricted exclusively to the young but have relevance to persons of every age” (in Lumsden 23).

Literacy scholar Deborah Brandt views literacy “as a resource—economic, political, intellectual, spiritual—which, like wealth or education, or trade school or social connections, is pursued for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers” (5). Social and economic factors play a role in our access to literacy, as does age: the resources of particular literacies, especially computers, are not easily available to everyone. Elderly Americans, those age seventy-five and over, today are, for the most part, not computer literate. Most retired before computers were common in offices, school and homes; they constitute the last generation of Americans to live the majority of their lives in a mainly print-based society, without a hands-on knowledge of internet literacy. They cannot appreciate the internet as a resource for communication, information, and socializing; many do not know the first thing about it.

As a teacher and researcher I saw an opportunity and felt a responsibility to document how the elderly experience the internet. Cynthia Selfe writes that it is the obligation of English teachers to use the internet as a text in teaching regardless of the demographic cohort. For many of the women who participated in the internet lessons,

their first lesson was the first time they had ever touched a computer. Their experiences and struggles as they came to terms with technology will be of value to historians who focus on the changing nature of literacy.

The internet involves the new literacy skill of online negotiation and the new genre of hypertext; memoir writing engages other characteristics of the early twenty-first century definition of literacy: consciousness in the form of self-reflection and self-awareness. In popular, academic and literary circles, self-examination has become crucial to participation in modern life. Memoir writing is taught in many college classrooms, in workshops to continuing education students, and in writing groups formed in local communities. Self-help advice books, such as William Zinsser's How to Write a Memoir, abound. A literate person in the year 2005 is willing and often eager to write the story of his or her life, to share intimate personal details in the service of coming to a better understanding of self and helping or informing others. Memoir is no longer the genre of the famous or important: now "everyone has a story to tell and everyone is willing to tell it." (Zinsser 2). The participants in my study, who have lived through major changes in the twentieth century, are no exception. They have not had an opportunity to reflect on their lives by composing texts. Doing so may be of service not only to them, but also to those who want to understand the everyday lives of women who came of age in the 1940s. While Tom Brokaw and others write about The Greatest Generation, the men who served in World War II, only a few books have been written about the women of the same generation; one book is Emily Yellin's recent Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front.

The Mousepads and Memoirs website brings this study full-circle. By having their memoirs published online, the participants will play a part in the present literacy of the internet, reaching an audience beyond the few readers of this dissertation. Readers of the memoir site can email questions or comments to the participants, introducing an element of intergenerational online communication. The web site also places the participants' memoirs in a new context, foregrounding their stories and their voices without analysis or commentary, so the memoirs stand on their own. The site is necessary to this research: it is the mark and proof of the participants' literacy development. They are able to access it themselves, to read and share the site with family and friends.

Another element of literacy and the concept of literacy development present throughout this study is Paolo Freire's assertion in Pedagogy of the Oppressed that literacy is consciousness: with mastery of skills, literacy brings a critical awareness of political and cultural power. According to Freire, literacy in and of itself is a form of power, which has the ability to transform and create change in self and others. With these new literacies of internet use and memoir writing, I will ultimately be looking for indications of transformation in the participants.

The Setting: StuyTown

Despite the fact that the participants must contend with the indignities of old age, they live in a community that wraps them cocoon-like in security and sameness, a white ethnic enclave in which they are protected and have power and respect as elders. Peter Cooper Village/Stuyvesant Town is a rental housing complex built by the insurance

company Metropolitan Life to alleviate the housing shortage during World War II. The complex is located on seventy-two acres of prime Manhattan real estate, from 14th Street to 23rd Street and from First Avenue to the FDR highway. In 1947, the first tenants, World War II veterans and their families, moved in. Officers were privileged with large apartments at Peter Cooper Village and infantry were designated to live in the smaller apartments in what is colloquially called StuyTown.

This research is set specifically in StuyTown, where the twelve story red-brick buildings are arranged in a maze of playgrounds with the Oval, a centerpiece of gardens, grass, and park benches, in the center. The apartments are simply designed and well maintained, mostly one and two bedrooms, with some three and even five bedroom apartments for large families. Most of the tenants are civil servants (police officers, firemen, teachers, nurses) or office workers for MET Life. A substantial number of StuyTown's original tenants continue to live here. It is here that they raised their families and it is from here that they have experienced the half century of history and technological innovation that has ensued.

For many middle class New Yorkers, StuyTown is a mythical place, an urban success story of a small town oasis within the dizzying energy of the metropolis. For years, obtaining an apartment in StuyTown was a matter of meeting middle income requirements and waiting one's turn on a lengthy list. Once acquired, the coveted rent-stabilized apartments were passed down from parent to child, securing affordable housing in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

During the course of my research, as the real estate market in New York City boomed, MET Life and its managing partner Insignia decided to upgrade StuyTown. The

list is permanently closed, and apartments are now renting at market rate. Whereas in 1999 the minimum income requirement for a one bedroom was \$50,000 a year and the monthly rent set at about \$1100, by December 2002, the minimum income for a one bedroom was \$80,000 and the rents started at \$2100 per month. A StuyTown marketing campaign declares, “A Park Runs Through It” with a website showing photos of daffodils blooming around the Oval. Vacated apartments are now renovated: marble is installed in the bathroom, kitchens that have had the same simple arrangement for fifty years are now installed with top of the line refrigerators—and a two bedroom apartment with only one bathroom and no doorman is labeled “luxury.”

A profound shift in the character of the place is happening: the successful experiment in affordable urban housing is over. Younger people are now renting these expensive apartments, bringing in a nouveau riche feeling. Insignia started a concierge service, for those new tenants accustomed to the perks of a full-service building. New York University is renting some of the vacant apartments for graduate student housing. Already, the feeling of competitive acquisition of upper middle-class consumer culture is bubbling around the Oval, evident in women with blown-out hair and Gucci bags, men driving through the street loops in BMW SUVs, and Caribbean and Indian nannies watching over the children in the playgrounds. Many longtime tenants are up in arms about the changes, protesting the end of the modest life of StuyTown.

However, StuyTown has never been the best of all possible worlds, as some longtime tenants like to think. According to Martin Douglas, writing in the New York Times, “Stuyvesant Town began as a deliberately segregated community.” When the project was conceived in 1943, the chair of Met Life, Frederick H. Ecker, declared that

only whites would be accepted as tenants: “Negroes and whites don’t mix. Perhaps they will in a hundred years, but not now” (in Simon 23). Even Mayor LaGuardia went along with the whites-only policy. The first black family arrived in 1950, but it wasn’t until 1960, after much community activism, documented in Arthur Simon’s 1973 book Stuyvesant Town: Pattern for Two Americas, that minorities were allowed to rent in the complex.

Today, there are still only a few minority families living in StuyTown, among them, African-Americans, Filipinos, and Hispanics. The dominant ethnicities remain the traditional white New Yorkers: Irish, Jewish, and Italian. Indeed, with twenty-one percent of the population of Irish descent, Newsday cites StuyTown as the largest population of Irish in New York City. The atmosphere of white entitlement remains thick: this Norman Rockwell enclave subscribes to an occasionally spoken but always understood code that anyone who isn’t white is inherently inferior. This attitude is reinforced by the fact that most people of color on StuyTown grounds are either the nannies of the new wealthier tenants or the home health aides of the ailing elderly original tenants. StuyTown residents entrust the care of their most vulnerable members to the people they trust the least.

There is a homogeneity among tenants that goes beyond skin color. For many years, when people reached the top of the waiting list, they were thoroughly investigated before an apartment was offered. Interviewers would come to a prospective tenant’s home to be sure the family had high standards of cleanliness and were of the proper character. Once living in StuyTown, families had many rules to follow: no walking on the grass (there were even little chains around the Oval and every patch of grass), no pets

whatsoever, no bicycle riding, only residents and their guests allowed on the property. This rule-bound lifestyle only attracted those who wanted to follow the rules. Iconoclasts and individualists did not move in. Architectural critic Lewis Mumford called StuyTown, “the housing of the police state,” because not only were the buildings uniform, but the tenants were as well (in Demas).

Prior to the building of StuyTown, the neighborhood was known as the Gas House District (or Brownfields), the landscape dotted with gas holding tanks and tenements. The area was razed to make way for the complex. According to the Peter Cooper Village/Stuyvesant Town web site, “MetLife undertook a unique experiment in the history of housing development by helping families of the Gas House District find new homes. In doing so, not a single family was evicted.” However, Arthur Simon’s research indicates otherwise: almost six thousand families, many of them African-American, were displaced without any new housing options.

StuyTown’s past as the Gas House District is still present. During the course of my research, the electric company of New York City, ConEdison, issued a notice explaining how the soil would be tested for environmental pollutants—over fifty years after the building of the complex. Another unsavory environmental factor is StuyTown’s proximity to the ConEdison plant on the FDR. During the summer of 2002, when a section of the plant exploded, several StuyTown buildings had to be evacuated and fears of another September 11th rippled through the complex as fighter jets came storming overhead. I was at the Senior Lounge for the blackout of August 14, 2003: everyone’s first thought was that the ConEdison plant blew up again or was blown up by terrorists.

Despite these criticisms, Stuyvesant Town still has its charms, the main one being a quiet place where children can run around unsupervised and old people can move at their own pace, without being swept up in the rush of the city streets. Only now that the complex is upgrading and the rents have risen are the little chains gone from the borders of the pathways, and instead of grass patches, now impatiens, ferns, and other flora delight the eye. Not only can people now sit out on the grass in the Oval, but there are free concerts and activities for children. Gone are the cold metal jungle gym playgrounds; the latest in safer, more colorful playground equipment has been installed. For over fifty years, StuyTown was frozen in time—unchanged except for the growing trees—and now the complex is modernizing, for better and worse.

In her memoir of growing up in StuyTown, Eleven Stories High, children's fiction writer and Mount Holyoke professor Corrine Demas writes: "Stuyvesant Town has endured. It's like this old person who has seen the whole span of things" (ii). That was part of my interest in doing my research here—StuyTown has been an unchanging time capsule of white ethnic New Yorkness but is now swept up in a rush of gentrification and modernization. What, I wondered, do the elderly tenants who frequent the Lounge make of these changes—particularly the changes to literacy?

The Setting: The Senior Lounge

Peter Cooper Village/Stuyvesant Town provides recreational facilities and staff for children and the elderly. Around the Oval, there are daycare and after school programs and summer camp for kids, with ping pong tables, volleyball nets, and chessboards set up in the various playgrounds. The Senior Lounge, located in the

basement of 365 First Avenue, on the corner of Eighteenth Street, was opened in 1974, when what was then a storage area was converted to accommodate the Lounge. It is this place that serves as the primary setting for my research.

A large cinderblock-walled room with thin blue office carpeting, headache-inducing fluorescent lighting, and exposed pipes zig-zagging along the ceiling, the Senior Lounge has been directed by Lorraine Goldfleisch since 1988. I gained entrance to the Lounge by volunteering to teach the internet and memoir writing. Since Lorraine knows three generations of my husband's family who have lived in StuyTown since 1947, she immediately accepted me into her fold.

The main activity at the Lounge is bridge—card tables make up the central space and at any time, there are usually at least four tables of bridge games going on. The walls are lined with bookcases, organized and maintained by a volunteer. People can take books as they like; there is no lending protocol: it is more of a communal swap. The most popular shelf includes the recent paperbacks. Mary Higgins Clark, Nora Roberts, and Dean Koontz are among the popular authors.

In the corner closest to the door are four blue vinyl couches around a coffee table covered in magazines, with titles ranging from Time to Cat Fancier. The coffee urn is located in the far corner and the card tables around it are reserved for eating and socializing. In the corner nearest the entrance, are the computers, three IBM-compatible personal computers with high speed internet access. One computer is reserved for lessons, the other two are available for walk-in use; there is no printer. Lorraine tries to enforce a twenty minute rule for using the computers if others are waiting. A blackboard hangs on the wall by the computers; Lorraine writes all announcements on it. Lorraine's

desk, her command central, and an information table are between the coffee area and the computers. It is always either too hot or too cold in the Lounge: in the winter, the steam heat dries the air to a nose-numbing crisp, and in the summer, the air conditioner blasts a wind of frost. Lorraine fields complaints with good humor and also points to signs on the wall: "Don't complain about the temperature: either put a sweater on or take one off."

The Senior Lounge sponsors a number of activities. A huge television set dominates the back of the room; every Friday is movie day and that is the only time the TV is on. Every Wednesday the card tables are reconfigured for bingo, which attracts a large crowd. The first Monday of every month is the extremely popular bus trip to Atlantic City. Other days there are exercise classes, or lectures on health issues, or free screenings from Beth Israel Hospital down the block.

The vast majority of those who frequent the Senior Lounge are women in their mid-seventies to early nineties of Irish or Jewish descent. Many of them are original tenants. There are a few men who frequent the Lounge, mostly bridge players who come with their wives as well as a few widowers. Some men come into the Lounge just to sit on the couches; they are often attended by home health aides who sit with them and wait until they want to leave. In general, the men are all very frail and quiet. There are so few of them: among those eighty and older, over seventy percent are women. So it is no surprise that the Senior Lounge is a place dominated by women, who often spend all day there. At five o'clock, when the Lounge closes, the ladies typically wheel their shopping carts across First Avenue to Gristedes, to buy groceries for dinner and then each returns home to her apartment.

Almost everyone is enjoying a financially comfortable old age. The ladies who live in Peter Cooper tend to wear cashmere sweaters and art deco diamond rings on their manicured fingers. The StuyTown ladies do not have as many indicators of affluence, but they, too, have few financial worries. All of the women have prepared well for this time of life through careful investments. Many of the ladies also receive pensions, as well as Social Security, which is the sole source of income for most American elders. Most have cleaning ladies who come every week to do the housekeeping they can no longer manage. They do not have to budget to attend a Broadway play or check their balances to see if they can afford a lobster dinner. Yet thriftiness is valued—one of the activities of the Lounge is to look through sales circulars and one of the major topics of discussion is what's on sale at Gristedes or Associated supermarket this week. Extravagance is looked down upon as wasteful—there is no competitive race for acquisition. Money is seen as something to hoard, not spend. It is rare for the ladies to go shopping for the sake of shopping as so many younger women do; they only shop for something new when it is an absolute necessity.

A few women with Alzheimer's or overt eccentricities frequent the Lounge. There's the lady in a shower cap who sits alone, clipping articles as she reads the newspaper. She has a lanky elegance to her and always carries a fresh-looking Bergdorf Goodman shopping bag. There's also Norma, who always comes in like clockwork asking for coffee on the one day, Thursday, when the coffee pot is turned off early. There's Erna, who sits alone at a card table with a deck of cards, waiting for someone to sit down and play with her, as her home health aid thumbs through magazines, waiting for Erna to say she wants to leave. Sometimes Erna will sit alone for an hour or more,

shuffling the cards. Then there is Ruth, who sits on the couches, stirring up gossipy drama whenever she can.

Lorraine, with great skill and a dry no-nonsense sense of humor, keeps things under control to a certain extent, but the mood and tone are really set by the bridge players. They insist on seriousness and quiet, and speak the mysterious shorthand lingo of bridge: “Two of clubs.” “Pass.” “Two no trump.” One woman, Mona, teaches bridge several times a week and also opens and closes the Lounge on Fridays and Saturdays when Lorraine is off. Mona allows for no friskiness. She is perpetually stern and discourages any conversation or activity if it’s not about bridge.

One day before bingo, Lorraine gave me the inside word on the way the Lounge works: “See, everyone sticks to their own kind! There’s the Immaculate Conception crowd, the Epiphany crowd, there’s the synagogue crowd—God forbid any of them should sit with someone new. Every week there’s a fight over seating. It’s a zoo in here, I’m telling you.” When Isabelle Ackerman was alive, things were different. She is mythic to this place, the one person who brought peace and harmony to the Lounge. Otherwise, the bridge players, led by Mona, with their intensity and dirty looks, keep the noise level down. The limitation of the Lounge’s space is a constant source of tension. When other activities take place, Lorraine must give the bridge players ample warning that they must share the Lounge.

The Participants

Only those elderly who live in the buildings nearest the Lounge make use of it. The Senior Lounge mainly serves the active able-bodied elderly who live in the buildings

along First Ave from 16th to 20th Streets, and a few who come over from Peter Cooper. Very few make the trek from the eastern or southern edge of StuyTown, unless the weather is nice for the long walk around the Oval. In this dissertation while I will draw on the experiences of several participants (some of whom have since died or become homebound), I will set my focus on the three women who self-selected to sign waiver forms and serve as my case studies: Mary Smith, Heidi Donskoi, and Helen Cleary. I will refer to these women and their friends as “the ladies” throughout this dissertation.

Mary Smith is an original StuyTown tenant; she and her husband Barney have lived in the same apartment since 1947. Mary is eighty-seven and Barney is ninety-three: they have no children. Born in Pennsylvania to Lithuanian Catholic immigrants, Mary moved to New York when she was seventeen to be a nanny. Barney is Jewish, raised on the Lower East Side, and worked at the New York Daily News until his retirement in the early seventies. Mary worked at department stores and, for a long stretch, for a magazine distributor. They both enjoy going to Atlantic City; when Barney is feeling well, he makes the four-hour round trip bus ride up to three times a week, leaving from the newsstand across First Avenue. Mary is tiny, with gray short curls that she gets done every week—she always dresses up and wears jewelry appropriate for the season: shamrock pins at St Patrick’s Day, holly brooch for Christmas. An avid reader of mysteries and thrillers, Mary stays up all night reading and then shares her books with her friends. She frequents a number of senior clubs between 12th Street and 23rd Street: the Young at Heart Club, the Stein Center, the 22 Club, as well as bingo at the neighborhood Catholic churches.

Heidi Donskoi, age eighty-two, moved to StuyTown from the Bronx with her husband David in 1977. Both of them grew up in the Bronx, speaking Yiddish with their Russian Jewish immigrant parents and both attended City University colleges. They met and married in their late thirties; David worked as an accountant, Heidi a public school secretary. They did not have children. When their neighborhood near Yankee Stadium grew too dangerous for them, it was fortunate that their names came up on the StuyTown list. David died fifteen years ago and Heidi has many interests: volunteer work at St. Vincent's Hospital, going to the theatre with her sister and cousin who live on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, going to Atlantic City for day trips and overnight visits. She is very tiny, not even five feet tall, with big watery hazel eyes and she often wears a jaunty newsboy cap. A shy and quiet woman, Heidi keeps to herself and to her tight inner circle of family and longtime friends.

Helen Cleary is eighty and moved to StuyTown more recently, just eight years ago, after her husband's death. The daughter of Irish immigrants, she grew up in the heavily Irish Rockaway, Queens neighborhood of Belle Harbor on the Atlantic Ocean. Helen attended but did not graduate from St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn. Married during World War II, Helen and her husband raised their family in Westchester: one daughter and three sons; two doctors and two lawyers. She has six grandchildren who are all in college or graduate school. Helen actively attends several senior centers for lectures and classes and also enjoys her trips to Atlantic City. With her strawberry blonde hair, sparkly blue eyes, and a sarcastic and biting sense of humor, Helen is almost as powerful a personality as Mary. She is always beautifully dressed in cashmere sweaters with silk scarves that her children give her for Christmas and birthdays.

Mary and Helen are good friends. They meet at the Lounge to play the card game Kings in the Corner with their eclectic group of friends: Carmen, a retired nurse from Puerto Rico whose children are very wealthy and lavish her with beautiful jewelry; Zelda, who is very skinny and brittle and deadpan; and quiet, grumpy Catherine. Unlike the bridge players, when Mary and Helen and their friends play cards, they are constantly chattering and joking. Heidi is friendly with Helen and Mary, but does not have an interest in playing cards herself: "I never played cards, my friends didn't either. I don't like to be like, 'oh, you must come every Tuesday to play'—but what if I don't want to go? Then you disrupt the group." Nor does she have much interest in chatter and jokes; Heidi is a very serious woman.

Living in StuyTown within the city is ideal for the ladies. Researchers Markson and Hess observe: "the urban setting is in many ways conducive to friendship; there are more people to choose as friends, distance is minimized and the opportunities to share excursions are enhanced" (in Pearsall 67). In StuyTown, friends live in the same building, on the same floor even, or in nearby buildings. The ladies run into each other while shopping and have the time to stop and chat. Their neighbors, too, watch out for them. Once outside of the complex, on First Avenue, they can easily catch a bus or a taxi to go to the theatre or out to dinner. Everything they need—food, medical care, etc—is within walking distance. Many of the ladies use shopping carts, or "wagons" as they call them, as giant purses and as walkers as well, something to hang on to for stability as they walk.

Within the parameters of StuyTown, they move slowly, without anxiety—as do the mothers with young children in strollers also slow the foot traffic along the pathways

of the complex. But out in the streets, sometimes they are hurried along, jostled and clipped by passersby. Mary told me she avoids walking on First Avenue when the middle school children are let out for lunch and for the day: "I don't know how teachers do it—when these children come out of school, it's all bang bang bang—they're all hitting each other and the language, oh boy! I don't want to hear that language! It does make me nervous. Today I go to the Immaculate Conception for bingo and I always leave early to avoid them." Heidi also commented on how rough the streets are: "When I go see a Broadway show, I dread walking around the theatre district. I feel like I'm going to be trampled! No one has any consideration." The terrorist attacks of September 11th also add to a mood of anxiety when walking outside the complex. Mary confided: "Every time I see an airplane go by, I think it's going to swoop in and hit an office building. I really expect it to happen."

For the purposes of this study, these three women will represent the experience of learning new literacies in old age. To further understand their point of view, one must know the particulars of the ladies' generational cohort. Instead of grouping age by generations, which tend to run every twenty to twenty-five years, gerontologists prefer to group by cohorts of every five to seven years. Jill Quadagno in her textbook Aging and the Life Course: An Introduction to Social Gerontology defines a cohort as "the aggregate of individuals who experienced the same events within the same time interval" (127). A cohort is a more specific definition of a time frame and correlates to the fact that since the mid-nineteenth century, social, cultural and technological change has been happening so rapidly, that each cohort has more in common amongst its members than

the five to seven cohorts that make up a generation. Those in cohorts ahead of or behind one's own can seem to have a completely different experience of growing up in America.

The ladies, ranging in age from eighty to eighty-seven, were born between 1917 and 1924, when the average life expectancy was age fifty-four. They were children at the start of the Great Depression and high school graduates near the end of it, at a time when only forty percent of teenagers graduated high school. School curricula had a specific focus on assimilation and citizenship, teaching students to be good Americans. Teenage culture did not quite exist; most people went straight from childhood to work. Among white ethnic immigrant families, Diane Ravitch writes, "the usual school leaving age was fourteen, when many boys and girls found low-paying work in factories and shops" (242), although this was not the case at the height of the Depression, when the unemployment rate was twenty-five percent and "more students stayed in school longer because there were no jobs for young people" (Ravitch 237). As Thomas Hine explains, "the national policy was to get the young out of the workforce so more jobs would be available to family men . . . For the first time, high schools were enrolling a majority of young people of high school age" (4). Another forty percent of youth ages sixteen to twenty-four were neither in school nor working; for them, President Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps and other federal programs.

Sociologist Glen Elder in his 1974 book Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience revisited middle class whites from Oakland, California who were first studied in the 1930s for six years in school to research the "profound effects of historical change on human development." (xv). Elder conducted fifteen years of follow-up interviews and found "to an unexpected degree, these children of the Great Depression

followed a trajectory of resilience into the middle years of life. They were doing better than expected from the perspective of social origins.” (15-16). This cohort, Elder found, has an advanced sense of adaptability and coping behaviors, and a strong sense of belonging. “An enduring theme of the Depression experience is its alien nature in American life and psychology, despite recurring hard times and the millions of Americans who have known only poverty” (283). Those in the cohort of Depression children, as the ladies are, bond together over the experience of the Great Depression when almost all Americans were faced with the uncertainties of poverty.

The ladies grew up with reading and the radio as central amusements. In 1930, according to the census, fifty-six percent of Americans lived in urban areas (today it is seventy-five percent), forty percent of homes had telephones, sixty percent of homes had radios, and twenty-five percent of all women were in the workforce (as opposed to sixty percent today). World War II was the focal event of their young adulthood, living with the fear and uncertainty of war. By the time televisions were commonplace in American homes in the 1950s, the ladies were in their thirties and forties, busy with work or raising children. The remaining decades of the twentieth century also saw them occupied with work or family. It is the years of the 1930s and 1940s, arguably the most challenging decades in American history, which frame their worldview.

Not only is it important to understand the ladies as members of their particular generational cohort, but the physical facts of their old age must also be taken into account. The ladies are in various states of health, but overall they are able-bodied and independent. Still, their aged bodies and minds are constantly challenged by changes they cannot control. Old age brings with it a shortened attention span, memory

limitations, significant hearing and vision loss, slowed motor skills, and problems with one's sleep. Often, depression is a result of these limitations as well as a consequence of dealing with the mounting number of deceased friends and family.

Research Design and Methodology

I conducted this study over a two and a half year period, from January 2002 to June 2004. Internet lessons were ongoing throughout the project. Lorraine maintained the schedule and signed participants up for lessons of twenty minutes each. Lorraine gave me a kitchen timer to set for each one. I would often do lessons from 1:00 til 4:00 and then remain to help with the computers and chat for another hour until the Lounge closed at 5:00. The memoir writing workshop ran for eight weeks in the summer of 2002, meeting on Mondays from 2:00-4:00. Heidi, Mary and Helen participated in both the internet lessons and memoir workshop, among many others, and all three chose to serve as my case studies. However, Helen declined to be involved with the website with a flat "I'm not interested." Heidi and Mary continued the memoir writing to develop materials for the Mousepads and Memoirs website-- they met with me individually at the Lounge for an hour or longer over the span of a year and a half. I designed the website with assistance from the Graduate Center's New Media Lab during the Spring 2004 semester. My Queensborough Community College-CUNY students read the site and wrote emails to Heidi and Mary which I discuss in the Epilogue.

Throughout my research, I used ethnographic methods. Ethnography, the primary technique used in cultural anthropological research, has been adapted by composition and rhetoric scholars to study the culture of writing classrooms (see Bissex and Bullock,

Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein, Bishop). Composition and rhetoric researchers also use ethnography as a means to study various populations, including cultures (Fishman's Amish Literacy), class (Ogbu's The Next Generation), regionalism (Heath's Ways With Words), teacher portraits (Perl and Wilson's Through Teachers' Eyes), basic writers (Perl's "Understanding Composing"), and ESL students (Zamel's "Through Students' Eyes"). Here I am using ethnography to study a population made different by age.

Ethnographic research is characterized by the non-judgmental participant/observer role of the researcher, use of "thick description and verbatim quotations" (Fetterman), and the guiding assumption that culture is revealed in actions, words, and non-verbal communication. In classroom ethnography the researcher is not only a participant-observer, but she may also be the teacher of the class being observed, thus complicating the researcher's stance. Since I conducted this research with my own students, my stance reflects what Ruth Behar calls that of the "vulnerable observer:" I am emotionally involved rather than clinically detached. To the ladies, I have been most useful in the role as their teacher/facilitator, guiding them in their learning, but I know that I bring a double-stance here: one of teacher who instructs her students and one of researcher who attempts to learn from them.

Even though ethnographers are instructed to set aside judgments about what they are observing, it is impossible not to come to one's research without certain basic assumptions. Mine included the following: I believed that by composing life stories or memoirs, these women would come to see themselves differently. They would begin to define themselves as writers. I also assumed that they would be afraid of the computer technology, but that the development of their technological literacy would also have a

positive impact on their self-conception. I had many other assumptions about the ease with which I could conduct my study, which were confounded by the realities of old age. Not only was I a vulnerable observer, but the ladies were vulnerable subjects due to their physical frailty, their emotional burdens, their very presence as survivors in a world that ignores them.

I used the following two ethnographic methods to help me organize my roles and recognize my assumptions, as well as to document both the ladies' and my own experience: field notes and the personal journal. Writing field notes is, often, a three-step process: handwriting notes while observing/participating, then later, "filling in details and recording things that were not recorded on the spot" in a different colored ink, and lastly, turning handwritten notes into more formal text, usually on a computer (Bissex and Bullock, Spradley). Thus the observations are layered, moving from the immediate experience, to the recent past, to the reflective past. While the filling in comes from memory, the bulk of the fieldnotes is based on actual conversations and classroom discourse and represent "a verbatim record of what people say" (Spradley). According to ethnographic methods, the personal journal is where the researcher practices "the reflexivity of looking at the experience of self within the context of the research, recording both the positive (breakthroughs, insights, understandings) and the negative (fears, mistakes, confusions)" (Fetterman). In my personal journal, I took note of my responses to classroom events and to other interactions with the ladies that occurred outside of the context of the Senior Lounge.

Field notes, of course, are highly subjective because they are a product solely of what the researcher is looking for, not necessarily what is really going on. What I took

note of with the ladies were those interactions that seemed to indicate literacy development, and also the funny gossipy nature of the place. My ear was always tuned to the humor, the vividness of their language, for I was fascinated by their discourse. Other data I collected included drafts of the ladies' memoirs, the primary texts that document the ladies' writing and creative processes and their email exchanges with my students.

Ethnography demands that the researcher take a broad sweep in collecting data, but it also calls for rigorous analysis. To analyze my data, I employed the technique of writing analytic memos. In analytic memos, ethnographic researchers "record generalizations, analyses of meaning, interpretations and insights" (Spradley). They serve as a place-marker and represent the thinking that emerges after the researcher reads through the fieldnotes and the personal journal, looking for themes and patterns. Perl and Wilson in Through Teachers' Eyes refer to analytic memos as "thinking-aloud memos:" they are the first attempt of the researcher to organize a wealth of material into a few meaningful categories. Using the categories developed in the analytic memos, I then "crystallized" (Richardson) and "cooked" (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw) the data, reducing two and a half years worth of fieldnotes into a description and analysis of what happened.

I follow the criteria for truthfulness in qualitative studies established by Acker, Barry, and Esseveld: I make every effort to ensure that my participants have an active voice, my stance and perspectives are made clear and my findings reveal underlying social relationships (147). I foreground the words, both spoken and written, of the ladies, and their social roles within the culture of the Lounge. However, the narrative thread that holds this research together is the one I weave in my own voice. By doing so, I reveal my own perspectives and assumptions. Not only do I reveal myself through narrative, but the

ladies as well for “it is through narrative that people are revealed in action, learning and growing” (Bissex and Bullock). To ensure the validity of my findings, I have also done follow-up interviews and have shared my drafts with the ladies.

The Autoethnographic Element

It is a fitting irony that as I was doing my research, I became aware of aging in myself, both the sadness of loss and the sweetness of maturity as well as physical changes: the gray hairs, the wrinkle deepening between my eyes. In the space of two and a half years, I got engaged and married; both my father and my uncle died; and my mother, several friends and a few relatives had cancer scares and/or other devastating health problems. All this change, all these health issues, death—these are the things we must adjust to in our lives as we grow old. While anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff has criticized this view of aging as a “series of losses,” it is something that cannot be denied, something that we must adapt to.

So as I begin my own journey of aging and as I work with these elderly women who are from a similar background to mine, I cannot remove my voice and experiences from what follows in this dissertation: in their faces and words, I see my own life in years to come. Ruth Behar, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner argue that there is an element of autoethnography in all ethnographic writing. Even as the ethnographer attempts to balance assumptions and accurate representation, it is the self that dominates every choice made in the research. Ethnographers, H.L. Goodall argues, no longer need to employ a forced objective and academic tone, but instead should capitalize on the autoethnographic orientation by writing in the first person using literary techniques such

as dialogue, character development and vivid description. This perspective recognizes that the experience of the ethnographer within her research, or even within her own or a parallel culture has value and works alone as a study in and of itself. In addition, there has been a “shift towards viewing identification rather than difference as the key defining image of anthropological theory and practice” (Behar 28), as many ethnographers are researching populations of which they are members, as I am. Writing from this insider perspective allows for more authority and flexibility, giving a deeper perspective into the culture. Goodall calls the incorporation of autoethnographic awareness in ethnographic writing “The New Ethnography,” defining the genre as: “a creative narrative shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences” (8). This is what I am attempting in the writing of this dissertation, to maintain a balance between inquiry and personal revelation, with primary focus on the ladies and how they relate to the new literacies of the internet and memoir writing that I introduce to them.

Chapter Descriptions

In the next chapter, I will describe what happened during the eight-week memoir writing workshop I facilitated at the Senior Lounge in the summer of 2002, blending the narrative with theory and commentary. Following that is a midlogue, describing a trip to Atlantic City I took with the ladies. This interchapter serves as a fitting segue to chapter three, which relates the ladies’ experience of learning how to use the internet, since the ladies’ beloved Atlantic City slot machines are themselves computers. In chapter four, I frame their experiences using the literature of gerontology and reflect on

my own experience teaching and learning with the ladies. Lastly, the epilogue describes the Mousepads and Memoirs website, explaining what happens when the ladies communicate via email with students at Queensborough Community College-CUNY who have read their online memoirs.

Chapter Two:

“The Memoirs”

During the very hot summer of 2002, I ran an eight-week memoir workshop at the Senior Lounge. While the workshop had its moments of success, it did not proceed in the way I envisioned. Most striking, there were fundamental differences between how I perceived memoir and how the ladies thought of it. Despite the fact that the literature of gerontology maintains that reminiscing about the past is an important activity among the elderly, the ladies did not seem to think so. Their foray into memoir was more about humoring me than sharing their past lives. What follows is good intentions gone, at times, comically awry.

Before continuing, I must describe three ladies who participated in addition to Mary, Heidi and Helen. All three have since died or become housebound and the names I use for them are pseudonyms: Ruth Helman, age eighty-three; Maria Cohen, age seventy-eight; and Ann Schmidt, age eighty-four. Ruth was always dressed to the nines in blouses and skirts, hose and heels and wore a blonde wig, her eyebrows plucked to a thin pencil line. Never married, she moved into StuyTown with her sister in the 1950s and worked as an accountant for a fashion house on Seventh Avenue. Tall and elegant Maria also worked in the fashion industry as a buyer for such stores as Lord and Taylor. An original StuyTown tenant, Maria's husband died twenty years ago and she volunteered at the Senior Lounge, tending to the coffee urn. Both Ruth and Maria fell and broke their hips during the winter of 2003. No one has seen them since, and Lorraine told me Meals on Wheels and their home health aides are their only contact outside their

apartments. Ann Schmidt, a heavy-set woman with cornflower blue eyes and a longtime friend of Mary's, was virtually housebound from a broken hip and incontinence when she participated in the memoir workshop. Also an original StuyTown tenant, Ann had been a stay-at-home mother of three children. Mary encouraged her to come join us for what the ladies took to calling "The Memoirs." Note that in this text the ladies' memoirs are single spaced and in italics; transcriptions of their conversations are written in dialogue form.

Situating My Perspective on Memoir

The way I perceive memoir is informed by a number of influences, from my study of literature and composition and rhetoric to popular culture and my own interest in reading and hearing about other people's lives. This last point I share with the ladies; many told me they enjoy reading biographies and memoirs of political figures like Franklin Delano Roosevelt or movie stars like David Niven. Jill Ker Conway writes: "for the reader (of autobiography), the satisfaction comes from being allowed inside the experience of another person...the reader is able to try on the experience of another..." (6). The ladies, many of whom suffer from insomnia, spend the difficult late night hours reading about others' lives, but never had they ever thought to write the story of their own lives. I made the assumption that they would want to do so.

There is much support for that assumption. The urge to write about the self has been in existence since writing culture began, the earliest example being St. Augustine's Confessions in the year 397. St. Augustine probed the excesses of his wayward youth and reflected on his path to finding God. Often, this sort of writing is termed

autobiography, but now memoir seems to be the more accurate label. Autobiography has more to do with documenting the chronology of an entire life for historical purposes. In contrast, memoir is a looser literary form, allowing for play with time and alternative versions of one's history.

Literary critic Robert Folkenflick writes that autobiography has norms but not rules: it is a narrative about the past, written in the first person, and usually written by individuals in old age or mid-life. He argues that the modernist novel, like Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, is essentially autobiographical. William Spengemann, in Forms of Autobiography asserts the need for autobiography to have a place in literary study, that the privileging of fiction is absurd when so much of fiction has roots in the experiences of the writer. This recognition of the personal in literature has since happened. Memoir is now at the forefront in literary publishing to the extent that critic James Atlas has declared the present time to be "the age of memoir."

Since 1996, we have seen an explosion in the publication of memoir, thanks to Frank McCourt's enormous critical and popular success, Angela's Ashes. But this phenomenon can trace its roots to Holocaust memoirs such as Elie Wiesel's Night and other eye-witness accounts of Nazi atrocities; to Tom Wolfe, Ken Kesey, and George Plimpton's New Journalism of the sixties; as well as to the Confessional Poets of the same decade: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and the Beat writers such as Kerouac and Ginsberg of the decade before. In all of the aforementioned writers' work, the subjective and personal voice is foregrounded, even insisted upon.

Further, the genre of memoir is also influenced by the proliferation and destigmatizing of psychoanalysis and the ensuing pop culture morphing of therapy going

from a private disclosure between patient and therapist to the public spheres of talk shows on radio and television. There is little that is people will not speak of now; what was once private is now in the public domain. Self-examination and sharing one's experiences and feelings are now entrenched in American culture as acceptable, even necessary, behavior.

The best-selling type of memoir is the survivor or crisis memoir, in which an ordinary person writes of the physical, mental and/or family illnesses and/or struggles s/he had to overcome. Mary Karr's The Liar's Club, Lucy Grealy's Autobiography of a Face and Susanna Kaysen's Girl, Interrupted are examples of crisis memoir. Some border on the sensational, such as Kathryn Harrison's The Kiss, in which Harrison relates an affair with her own father. Others tell a horrific personal struggle, such as The Child Called It by Dave Pelzer, whose sadistic mother abused him horribly. Conway points out that these memoirs must always end happily; they are ultimately tales of human resilience and triumph—often written by relatively young people.

The field of Composition and Rhetoric uses memoir writing called “literacy narratives” to gain perspective on how people understand their own literacy development, especially within a social context. The most often cited literacy narratives are Lorene Cary's Black Ice, Richard Rodriguez's Hunger for Memory and Victor Villanueva's Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color which tell of the writers' experiences in relation to their status as minorities in white culture. Deborah Brandt's book Literacy in American Lives uses interviews with people from diverse backgrounds to paint a portrait of American literacy across class, race and gender lines.

There are many other forms of memoir as writers experiment with style, form and content. Irish fiction writer, Roddy Doyle, wrote his parents' memoirs Rory and Ita, which captures ordinary Irish life in the 1950s. Daniel Harris in A Memoir of No One in Particular relates mundane anecdotes of his life within the context of cultural criticism. Abe Opincar in his work of food memories, Fried Butter, uses the Proustian moment of sensory memory to guide the reader through his life.

I assumed the ladies, who had all read Angela's Ashes, would be familiar with the genre of memoir as it is today: self-revelatory accounts by people who've lived interesting lives but are not famous—and that they would be interested in writing the stories of their own lives. With these assumptions in mind, I searched for examples of writing workshops with the elderly to help guide me in developing a class for the ladies. I found role models in three studies: Barbara Myerhoff's Number Our Days, Ruth E. Ray's Beyond Nostalgia and Kenneth Koch's I Never Told Anybody.

Myerhoff ran a Living History class for nine months at the Jewish Senior Center in Venice, California in 1974. Her mostly female participants were of the generation of Heidi's parents, immigrants from Eastern Europe who, in their old age, sought to re-create the Yiddish culture (Yiddishkeit) of their youth. With their successful children scattered around the country, Myerhoff's participants gained a certain freedom: "Now they could indulge their passion for things of the past, enjoy Yiddishkeit without fear of being stigmatized as 'not American'" (9). Her experience was wildly successful and gave much satisfaction to the students. Myerhoff had to limit her class size to twenty it was so popular: "Nearly everyone at the Center wanted to be included, feeling so strongly as they did the wish to be recorded and remembered" (29). Participants took turns

speaking their memories into a microphone. "Center people," Myerhoff wrote, "like so many of the elderly, were very fond of reminiscing and storytelling, eager to be heard from, eager to relate parts of their life history" (33). Many of her participants, although they did not write for her class, kept journals and wrote poems and reflections which they often shared with others. "Storytelling was a passion of these people, absolutely central to their culture" (Myerhoff 37).

Ruth Ray observed and/or taught eight life writing groups in six locations around Detroit in the mid-1990s. Her experience ranged from an established group of retired professors to a workshop with mentally disabled elderly who lived in a group home. As in Myerhoff's study, most of Ray's participants were women, which she speculates as due to women's socially assigned role of "keeper of the family history" (12). "Their life writings," as well, "followed social scripts for race, ethnicity and class" (229). However, Ray observed that older people can take up "multiple positions" in their memoir writing. They can "assume a number of viewpoints simultaneously" (3). This she sees as wisdom in action: "the ability to see from many positions and to empathize with all of them." (4). In the groups Ray observed, she also found that the writers responded to each other only with encouragement: "what older writers want is friendship, community and acceptance" (134). Her participants valued the memoir writing groups for sharing and support and did not want to hear criticisms to "improve" their writing.

In 1976, Kenneth Koch ran a poetry workshop with elderly people in a nursing home located a mere eight blocks away from StuyTown. His participants were all very frail and completely isolated. Koch and his assistants were not only facilitators but scribes: "Almost none of our students were able to use their hands to write, either

because of muscular difficulties or blindness.” (6). Many hadn’t been beyond the doors of the home in years so that “poetry . . . would have to come from memory” (5). Koch used objects to bring back their memories of the outside world—a seashell, for example, to write a collaborative poem about the beach. Those who participated, Koch writes, “seemed to have more concentration and confidence” (53).

The literature of educational gerontology asserts that reminiscence is a vital aspect of old age. Robert Butler, in 1963, was the first to recognize what he calls the life review as an important developmental aspect of old age: “The life review is a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts.” In this way, life review (also known as reminiscence) has a therapeutic function, to resolve issues and bring closure to the past. Both Erik Erikson and Peter Coleman assert that reminiscence is important to a mentally healthy old age. Erikson writes: “one must make peace with past experiences, make meaning of them” (88). Wanda Worley’s 2001 dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in which she interviewed elderly participants in a life writing course about the meaning of writing one’s life sums up the gerontology literature thus: “the major developmental tasks in older adults are reviewing past experiences, showing greater introspection, increased reminiscence, and finding meaning” (10).

The literature of the genre of memoir, much of it advice to writers, takes the view that memoir is not merely personal writing, but is influenced by history, culture and spiritual matters. “Memoir is travel writing...the pilgrim seeking, wandering” writes Patricia Hampl, “...To write one’s life is to live it twice, and the second living is both

spiritual and historical” (37). William Zinsser adds: “A good memoir is a work of history...catches a distinctive moment in the life of both a person and a society.”

Psychologist Jerome Bruner writes in “Autobiography and Self”, “an autobiography can be read not only as a personal expression, as a narrative expressing ‘inner dynamics’ but as a cultural product as well” (39). Memoir is at once intensely personal, and embedded in history and culture. Indeed, Zinsser says it best: “Memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us” (jacket blurb). This was the line I used on the flyers I made to advertise the memoir workshop: it seemed natural to me that the ladies would be interested in writing the stories of their lives, that they would have an interest in “making sense of who they are.”

Planning the Workshop

I met with Lorraine Gutfleisch, the Senior Lounge director, several times to plan the memoir workshop. I had already been volunteering teaching the internet at the Lounge for six months before recruiting for the memoir group, so many of the ladies knew me. I was confident I could easily recruit participants. However, Lorraine was skeptical about my project: “You really want to get them to write? I can’t picture them going for that. One time, I tried to start a newsletter and they wrote things at first but then they started just clipping stuff from newspapers and handing them in. So I stopped with the newsletter. What’s the point of that?” Nonetheless, I was determined and Lorraine and I continued planning. “How should you do it, individual or small group?” she mused, “They like the individual attention—sometimes that’s all I do is listen to them, one at a time, one after the other but the idea of getting together is good too.” We

decided for a small group to meet on the couches in the Lounge, every Monday in the summer of 2002 from 2:00-4:00 for eight weeks or longer if it went well.

I had been teaching on the college level for eight years, often in evening classes full of adult students, but never had I taught a class to the elderly. My training in composition and rhetoric prepared me with a writing process/expressivist/social constructionist orientation. When I teach memoir writing at Queensborough, I assign the students chapters of memoir by David Sedaris and Esmeralda Santiago, among others, and we discuss this published work in light of the details, the setting, and the voice of the writer. The students then try their hands at writing memoir, first with free-writing exercises, and then they share their drafts in writing groups. I encourage the groups to push each other to revise, to make the work more vivid, descriptive and insightful.

With the ladies, I envisioned giving a writing prompt, the ladies would then free write, then read their writing out loud to each other for comments and discussion. I knew from reading Ruth Ray's work that the goal of the group would be sharing their writing, not critiquing it. I gathered books that might interest and inspire them as Kenneth Koch did with objects: City Play, a collection of oral history and photographs of city children at play, The Beautiful Bronx, a collection of photographs and reminiscence published by the Bronx County Historical Society, and New York Then and Now, another photography book which features two views of the same location, with a fifty year span between photos. I bought clipboards, legal pads and pens since we would be sitting on the couches to write and made a list of topics, deciding to move both thematically and chronologically: firsts, trends, events, raising a family, weekend drives, bests and worsts,

questions about the details of everyday life. I did not finalize class plans; I always need to meet the students first and get a feel for what they want to do.

The Ladies' Perspective

Recruiting for the memoir writing workshop among my internet students produced some interesting reactions: more than a few mentioned how they wished they had written down some of their parents' stories before they died. One woman told me: "I tape recorded my mother talking before she died. I'm glad I did that." It struck me that the ladies' idea of memoir was connected to death. Remembrance is a form of mourning—many of their memories were connected to people and places that no longer exist. When the elderly write memoir, there is an aspect of facing up to death again, a painful reenactment of mourning. So many of the ladies held on to the old way of thinking about memoir. To them writing a memoir is a way of writing your own obituary, despite the cultural shift to "everyone having a story to tell and everyone is telling it" (Zinsser).

Others said, "oh no, who would care to read about my life? It's not like I'm Katherine Hepburn or something." Writing memoir, to them, is something only the famous or notorious do. They could not see how their lives might matter to others. Even the suggestion that they write their stories for families was scoffed at by many: "I feel my grandchildren would be very bored—the horror of World War II and what have you, they have no interest." This reaction is typical of middle-class white people. Ray observes: "White middle-class elders are more likely to dismiss the significance of their life story with a shrug: 'I lived an average life. There's nothing special about me' (105).

This modesty seemed to be a major facet of their generation: private, self-effacing behavior is valued.

Overall, the mood at the Senior Lounge was that talking about the past is like living in the past. The ladies held the view of reminiscence as it was before Robert Butler wrote his ground-breaking article in 1963. According to Peter Coleman, discussing the past was “generally perceived as a symptom of mental deterioration and withdrawal from the outside world” (9)—again, a way of preparing for death.

I overheard gossip about one woman who always talked about how better things were in her youth. “She might as well stop living right now!” Helen said, disgusted with the complaining and longing for the past which will never come back. The ladies pressured themselves and each other to focus on the future: “It’s all so long ago,” one woman told me, “I prefer to talk about what I’m going to do tomorrow or next week or next year.” Despite the fact that the fear of Alzheimer’s, more specifically the fear of forgetting, was primary among them, many did not want to recall their memories. Many at the Lounge would agree with feminist writer Baba Copper: “like most people, I am focused on my present life, not my past. I am not some walking museum of memorabilia, either camp or quaint, to be mined by others’ curiosity” (31).

But there were a few who seemed interested in the memoir workshop, who did not view it as a threat or a bore. “I want to bring back good times,” Eva told me as she wiped up coffee splashes. “Sure, why not? Sounds like a nice way to pass the time” was Helen’s agreeable comment, said as she patted my face and pinched my cheek, “I want to help you get your Ph.D.” Helen attended a very popular Shakespeare class at the Stein Center, taught by a man named Bob Smith, whose own memoir Hamlet’s Dresser was

published in 2003. Just as the ladies called Smith's class "The Shakespeare," Helen was the one to start calling the memoir workshop "The Memoirs."

Heidi's eyes brightened up at the idea of memoir: "Oh, I have some interesting memories," she exclaimed, "I worked for the Voice of America, I worked for the Army..." But when I told her we would be writing: she said: "I can't write! When it comes to writing: bingo, I'm gone!" One lady told me: "I used to write a lot, I kept track of everything. In grammar school, the teacher told us to write a letter inviting someone to Thanksgiving dinner. I had to get up and read the darn thing! She gave me a B. But I'm not writing anymore." I asked her why not and she brushed my question away with a wave of her hand and a shrug. Most, when I asked about writing, said dismissively, "I couldn't be bothered."

Some, I noticed do "bother themselves" with correctness. Zelda, one of Mary's friends, told me: "There's a plaque over at the VA Hospital commemorating 9-11 and there's a spelling error on it. 'Hail to the Chief' spelled 'hale' like 'hale and hearty.' Can you believe it?" Zelda also got upset over misspellings in signs: "I told the Koreans at the deli -they had peppers with only one P. I'm the editor of the newsletter at the Stein Center. These errors just jump right out at me!" But was Zelda interested in writing her memoirs? "No, I'm too busy for it. Mondays I have physical therapy for my arm."

This was a challenge which I did not realize the magnitude of: how busy the ladies were, with doctor's appointments in particular. Not only were the ladies busy with visits to physical therapists, nutritionists, internists, and heart specialists, but also with attending plays and going on trips sponsored by the Stein Center, a larger senior center nearby. Wakes and funerals also took up their time; those most active in their church or

synagogue were regular attendees at death services. Ruth's home health aide told me she took Ruth to as many as four funerals a week. News of death was greeted with nonchalance and it was typical for me to observe the following: Fran got up from her bridge game and walked over to Helen, who was playing solitaire on the computer. "Did you hear Bill McNally died?" "Oh yes," Helen replied, never taking her eyes off the cards on the screen, "It's so sad for the family. But what else is new?" "Yes," sighed Fran, "One funeral after another." She went back to bridge. Death is a part of the rhythms of their daily life.

Lorraine suggested I make an announcement at bingo one sunny afternoon to publicize the memoir workshop. I arrived early to sign up for the monthly Atlantic City trip and helped Lorraine move the card tables in long rows. Ladies began arriving to stake out their seats as Lorraine set up the bingo wheel on what is usually the information table. They began fussing with their bingo cards. At one dollar per card, some ladies played a spread of five to eight cards. There was a feeling of anticipatory excitement buzzing throughout the room. Lorraine took the microphone: "Good afternoon and welcome everyone to bingo. We have a few announcements: June 24 is Atlantic City—only 2 tickets per person. We will have a Trip Down Memory Lane—a Reminiscing Class, led by Beth Counihan, English professor at City University."

Some clapped and smiled at me—"Would you believe it? She's a professor already," I heard one say. One woman glared at me and said loudly: "My niece is a professor and she doesn't advertise it." I took the microphone, a bit nervous as I explained how the class will write: I gave the example of the first kiss, which Lorraine suggested would get a reaction out of them.

“Who can remember their first kiss?” the grumpy lady yelled out.

“... Or life before cell phones and washing machines...” I ended quickly: “thank you!” The microphone was squeaking and Lorraine adjusted the little loudspeaker box.

Then Lorraine said: “Let’s sing ‘God Bless America’” which has been a Lounge tradition before bingo for many years, and I stayed standing front and center with her as everyone warbled, me too. Some sang with their eyes closed; one woman had her right hand over her heart.

The Negotiation

The first day of the memoir workshop was disjointed. I was shaking with anxiety, my stomach in a mess of nerves. Lorraine gave some advice a couple of days beforehand: “Always leave ‘em wanting more! Drop them before they drop you!” This she told me with a wicked little laugh.

But the reality of the memoir workshop called for me to revise my plans immediately. The noise of the bridge and backgammon players and those chatting while having coffee interfered with our class. Only Helen, Heidi and another woman, Lena, were willing to write. I gave the group a prompt, asking the ladies to think of memories of their grandparents or their earliest memory. The other six ladies in attendance held their clipboards, but talked instead of writing.

As Ruth Ray also found in her study of life writing groups, this prompt was a mistake. For this generation of women, whose parents immigrated to the United States, there were no grandparents. Maria said sadly, “I never knew my grandparents...my

parents left Italy and that was the end of it....I don't know if I want to do this. So many sad times. I had a happy childhood but now I think of it, my mother had it very hard. My father died when we were young and it was so hard on her."

Helen added to this: "To think about all those heartbroken mothers who never saw their children again when they left...thank God that wasn't my situation"

This sort of insight, sad as it is, is an example of what Ruth Ray observed with elderly writers: that older people can take up "multiple positions" in their memoir writing. While this may be wisdom in action, it is also sadness and regret in action as well. Immediately, the energy around the couches deflated.

Then Mary Smith came barging into the Lounge, clinging to her shopping cart, which she parked with an amount of fuss. Her friend Carmen was with her. "What's going on here?" Mary yelled, interrupting.

Helen said, "She's doing the memoirs. She's getting her Ph.D. I gotta help her!" and gave me a hug. "She's coming to Atlantic City with us!"

"Great! Oh you'll love it!" Mary and Carmen were both very enthusiastic.

Mary said, "When I first came to New York, a fellow wrote a book about me. Mary of the Anthracite. I'll find it for you." She sat down next to me, and pulled an old photograph of two glowingly good-looking people out of her handbag, "You want to know how I met Barney?"

"Would you like to write it down?" I asked her.

"Oh no! I used to have beautiful penmanship, but not no more! Now listen to this." And so I wrote as we listened:

One day I was sitting on a bench by Columbia University, waiting for my date with Lou to take me to the World's Fair. Now I was always particular about who I went on dates

with: the guy had to have money and a car. Barney drove up to me and said, "Come over here, I want to talk to you."

I said, "You want to talk to me? You have to get out of the car and come over here."

So he sat on the bench with me and said, "You look so pretty, sitting there in your blue dress." I still have the dress!

I called Lou up and told him my mother was coming to visit from Pennsylvania and I couldn't go to the World's Fair with him. I took a chance! I got in the car with Barney and went to the World's Fair. We had a wonderful time. He worked for the Daily News, he told me. He started talking about marriage, "What kind of wedding do you want?" He wanted me to meet his mother and father.

On the way home, I asked him what his last name was. He said, "Smith." I said, "See you later!" I thought that Smith was a made up name.

We have been married for sixty-two years.

Helen laughed: "The other guy is still waiting!"

I did not clearly understand the ladies outright refusal to write until a few sessions later. Most avoided writing unless it was absolutely necessary: some had too much discomfort from arthritis; others, like Mary, were embarrassed by shaky handwriting. Despite the fact that they were independent and able-bodied, writing was as out of the question for most of the ladies as it was for Kenneth Koch's nursing home participants. "I couldn't be bothered" was the usual refrain, which made me see that they carefully choose how to use their precious limited energies. Let us not forget, writing is labor. As prolific writer May Sarton wrote in her journal At Eighty-Two, "...writing takes effort and I do not have what it takes today" (139). Only Helen and Heidi had the energy and were dutiful enough to agree to write. However, when they saw that I was serving as a scribe for the other ladies, they too stopped writing. Besides, as Helen said: "It's too hot outside to write."

One participant who came only to the first class, Lena, considered herself to be a writer and took the committing of words to paper seriously, from an artist's perspective—and also with an artist's temperament. I read Lena's out loud to the group:

I remember the day that I was born. A naked light bulb hung above my head, my eyes hurt and I shut them. Angelina my aunt had delivered me, in a darkened room. Mother next to me lay still, her eyes closed, her face white against her white pillowcase. She cried: "She was so long in coming...Take her away from me...Take her away from me."

I was three years old when all came into focus...My brother Dino was born.

Everyone paid attention, but there was no reaction. Helen rolled her eyes.

Lena was re-reading her writing and dramatically ripped it up into little pieces: "It's no good! I can't get the right feeling to it! It's too noisy in here! I cannot concentrate." She left.

"Well, how do you like that?" Ruth said, "She has some nerve."

After Lena was gone, Helen said to me, "Can you believe that? She remembers the day she was born? What kind of nonsense is that?"

Maria said crisply: "You remember what people tell you! That's what you remember!"

This was the only mention made throughout the whole workshop about the function and meaning of memory. Ruth Ray cites research by psychologists Edwards and Middleton that concurs with Maria's comment that our self-concept and memory are developed based on what others tell us. Maria and I began to discuss this point but we were cut off by Mary.

"Come on, Helen, we're going to play cards now." Carmen was already sitting at the table, waiting with a deck of cards in hand. Helen left. "See ya next week, kiddo," she said.

What was negotiated, or rather forced upon me, if I were to run a successful memoir group, was an oral history arrangement with much conversation. Oral history is an interview technique used by historians with applications in sociology, linguistics and other fields to serve as “sources of new knowledge about the past and as new interpretive perspectives on it” (Shopes 3). Joanna Bornat observes that oral history and reminiscence/memoir “occupy more common ground than might previously have been considered” (35). Both are collaborative, in that the speaker/author and the scribe/recorder/interviewer build the story together, through their interaction.

The ladies spoke their stories to me and to a couple of other participants, while the others chatted. I wrote their memoirs down, and then later typed them up, for the ladies to read and then to have the opportunity to revise during the next meeting. Sometimes we had whole group conversations, but for the most part, the ladies took turns dictating their memoirs to me and a small audience.

Indeed, my experience doing memoir with the ladies of the Senior Lounge was nothing like Barbara Myerhoff’s engaged and demanding participants and only similar to one of Ruth Ray’s groups. With the irregular attendance, people coming and going during the group, the refusal to write, and side conversations, my experience with the middle-class financially-secure white ladies of the StuyTown Senior Lounge was the same as Ray’s with a group of poor mentally-disabled minority elderly who lived in a group home in Detroit. Yet, even if the workshop was not the collaborative writing experience I had hoped it would be, as Ray also observed, “learning and growth did occur...subtly, gradually and in small degrees” (237).

Content and Inspiration of Ladies' Memoirs

Jill Ker Conway and Ruth Ray both observe that life writing tends to follow prescribed scripts—what we remember and the way we write it down is not only socially constructed but also dictated to us by cultural expectations based on class, race and gender. The standard male narrative, both Ray and Conway assert, is the search for identity and meaning. For women, the dominant narrative is that of the quest for a husband.

The ladies demonstrated this. The memoirs they dictated to me were divided into three categories: childhood, young adulthood focusing on dating, and marriage. After marriage, it was as if their memories ceased.

Ray and Myerhoff both found in their studies a strong religious dimension to their participants' memoirs: "many older adults' life stories have religious or spiritual overtones" (Ray 115). That was not the case with the Senior Lounge ladies. While most of the ladies were members of churches or synagogues, their worldview was secular. Never did they reflect on their lives in relation to their religious beliefs or speak of God as a presence in their lives.

Childhood

Robert Folkenflick observes that the strongest of all autobiographical conventions is the "telling of one's first memories" (16). Here is what Helen wrote of hers, ending on a poignant note:

My first recollection is a trip to Ireland when I was four or five years old: I met my grandmother for the first time—I have a memory of starting school there and living on a farm for the first time. Everything was so different and all the new found relatives were very kind to us. I started school in Ireland and learned the Gaelic language. I can still make the Sign of the Cross in Gaelic.

My mother went over with 2 girls and came back with 3. On the ship over, she thought she just had a stomach ache! Back in New York, we lived in the Bronx first.

My next memories are of the beach—when we moved out to Long Island, Belle Harbor. It was a good carefree life near the beach. We went to church at St Francis de Sale. We ended up with four girls—they're gone; I'm the last. I was the first, now I'm the last.

I read her work out loud to the group and questioned Helen for more detail, which she gave, and I added to the draft. “We were treated like visitors, of course.” Helen said, “I hated to eat eggs and I remember my grandmother saying to me: “That little chicken you liked over there laid that egg!” Not all the ladies could hear us, as they were engaged in little side conversations.

Lorraine came over to our group and yelled, “Pay attention to each other!” The ladies ignored her.

Heidi too had completed writing her first memory. I read hers out loud to the group:

I was about 5-6 years old and my father had a little tailor shop in the West Bronx. I didn't realize it at the time but I guess my father was color blind. He asked me to sew the buttons on the various customers' suits, etc. He couldn't see the color of the thread. I guess he didn't like my sewing too much because as my sister and I grew older my father did all the sewing. To this day, I can't sew a stitch. Father made all our clothes—for my mother, my sister and me.

We had 3 rooms for the 4 of us—the couch in the living room—that was Sybil and my bed! The rent was \$35 a month but we couldn't afford that. So we moved to another part of the Bronx where it was cheaper.

We had another relative who was even poorer than we. She didn't have anything to eat many times. She was a distant cousin—she didn't work, the husband did. A lot of women wouldn't work even when they were poor. She used to come to our house and my mother would give her what she could.

When I was finished reading, Heidi covered her eyes for a moment: “When I think about it, it was so long ago. It doesn't feel like it was my life.” Some of the other

ladies said the same—it was difficult for them to recognize themselves as children; their childhood was so far removed from their experiences now.

Mary's childhood memories came out of her scattershot in brief declarations that jumped around in time and subjects. She never showed any sadness but always spoke with great energy:

My mother had me when she was only fifteen; we were always more like sisters. My father died in the influenza epidemic, my second father was burned in the coal mines—they wrapped him up like a mummy.

I used to climb up in a tree with a pile of books and spend all day up there reading. I loved Anne of Green Gables and all the Wizard of Oz books.

My grandmother made her own wine—dandelion wine with elderberries. My grandfather made moonshine and my mother made beer. This was Prohibition time, so if you wanted to drink, you had to make it yourself!

Other childhood memories, of music and movies, pointed to differences in age cohorts. Memories of roller-skating, in particular, led to disagreements. Maria, at age seventy-eight, was one of the youngest in the group:

We used to roller skate to the library. My older brother would go to meet the girls! I would go to meet the boys! We had a whole gang on roller skates all over Bushwick Avenue. But then before we'd come home from the library, we'd say, "Mama will kill us if we don't come home with a book!" So we'd just take out any old book.

Upon hearing that, Heidi, Helen and Mary all commented: "There were no roller skates when I was a kid." "Besides," Heidi added, "we were so poor, we never could have afforded them anyway."

Young Adulthood

Ruth Ray cites cognitive psychologist Joseph Fitzgerald in "determining the existence of a "reminiscence bump" ...with the majority of memories clustered around the ages of fifteen to twenty-five and more than half of an older adult's vivid memories

occurring before the age of thirty" (112). This, Fitzgerald attributes to the fact that those years "center on self-definition and identity formation" (112). The majority of the ladies' memoirs focused on those years, with particular emphasis on their dating experiences. While they did share some memories of high school and work, it seemed that their identities at that time were wrapped up in their attractiveness to young men. The memoir group took on a more playful tone as the ladies recalled their carefree single girl days.

Heidi, with her self-deprecating humor, shared this story, which was greeted with laughter and an enthusiastic discussion of egg creams and lime rickies:

My friend Barbara and I one time went on a blind double date. Her cousin would always make them for us. The fellows came for us and we were both very tiny and they were both very tall, at least 6 feet and it didn't look right. We were riding along in their car and they came to a corner candy store and the fellows said, "We'd like to go in and have a soda." We said, "We do too." So we went in and we got malteds and they said they had to go to the bathroom. So we waited, we drank our malteds. We look up about fifteen minutes later—they hadn't come back. Turns out, they sneaked out the back. And so Barbara and I had to walk home in our heels over ice!

Helen, perhaps in a spirit of back-stabbing competition added:

Across the street from where we lived in Belle Harbor were Greeks. Six apartments in that house. Those girls couldn't go out unless they were engaged. They'd look at my sisters and I all dolled up, with all these fellows, going out on all these dates. I'd see them looking out the window.

Remember when they used to have a spare tire on the back of the car and you'd write something on it? Well, this fellow (and he did not end up to be my husband) wrote my name, "Helen" he wrote on the tire.

Not to be outdone, Ruth recounted:

My sister and I would go up to a resort in the Catskills. During the day, we'd play tennis and at night, we'd go to dances. I'd wear strapless dresses. I had a magnificent figure. I never had to light a cigarette, never had to open a door; there was always a handsome young man to do it for me. The conversation was always witty and intellectual. We had wonderful times then.

It is no surprise that the memories that pleased them most to recall are from the days when they were young, beautiful and desirable. This was probably the time in their lives they felt most powerful, affirming Baba Copper, Margaret Cruikshank and Margaret Gullette's observation that every woman is socialized to believe that her value lies in her youth.

Social and Visual Construction of their Memoir

Much of what the ladies shared of their memories was influenced by the group and by me as well. Since I was planning my wedding at the time of the memoir workshop, the ladies would always ask about my wedding plans, how I got along with my in-laws and other personal domestic questions. After questioning me, they would then always relate their own romance narrative, like Ann's:

I got married in three days time!

I was working in insurance and we had been engaged for a couple of years. But then the Army took him on Valentine's Day 1944. Eddie came back from basic training and called me from downstairs on Wednesday—he was home before they were going to ship him out to England.

So we went to Orchard Beach for the day and I said, "Let's get married."

My mother worked so all the Czech ladies in the neighborhood told me, "Annie, don't worry, we'll make a wedding for you."

We got our blood tests taken. On Thursday, my girlfriend and I went to Franklin Loger—I got my wedding gown right off the rack!

On Saturday, we got married at Cohn's Park on Roosevelt Avenue. It was about half a city block big with a dance hall. We had cold cuts and a cake. About sixty people came, all by word of mouth!

Those ladies who married all met and married their husbands during World War II. Heidi was an exception to this; she was single until her late thirties. During the war,

Heidi told me, "I was having too much fun to get married!" She attended USO dances and flirted with the sailors and soldiers. Others, like Maria, married very young:

I was a receptionist and this man comes in, he's from the Chicago office. They kept him waiting because he was going to succeed the man leaving, the boss. He looked so sad and lonely sitting there waiting. So I asked him to lunch, I said, "We'll go dutch."

He asked, "What's Dutch?" He was from Indiana; he didn't know anything.

I told him, "You pay for your lunch, I'll pay for mine."

Everyday, we went to eat someplace different.

I told the girls in the office, "Lay off him—he's mine!"

When my mother found out that I was going to marry a Jewish man, she crossed herself: "Mama mia!" she said, "Why are you doing this?" She was worried that what was happening with the Jews in Europe would happen here but I, a fearless girl of seventeen, said: "If he dies, I will die with him!"

He converted for me; really for my mother. "Mama," he said to her, "I am doing this for you, for the family." She said to me, "Where did you find this wonderful man?"

When Maria re-read this story after I had typed it up, her face grew sad and she said: "For forty-six years, I was his wife. My husband was the love of my life."

Helen, listening in, exclaimed, "Oh that's good! Add that in, Beth! That's a good line."

That was the only time that revision was done with a writerly sense of improving the piece and the suggestion came not from the writer, but a listener. Otherwise, conscious revision took the form of correcting grammar, dates, or changing words. Heidi always read over her memoirs, murmuring as she read, "It's 'if I were...' not 'if I was' there... You don't mind if I correct it? I get a funny feeling when I read incorrect grammar. Everyone is so informal. I think that's sad. It's killing the language." Occasionally, Heidi would want me to cut something she considered too personal or

controversial. In a story about her time living in Washington D.C. during World War II while working for the Voice of America, she told me to cut the following:

When I moved to Washington, I'd lived a sheltered life before...everybody drinking and having girlfriends on the side—and I thought to myself, “these are our politicians?!” They all do the same thing and they only get caught when there's some jealousy involved.

Unconscious revision took place with the re-telling of the same story. Ruth, for example, told me a story several times which was the only memoir that did not fit into the typical categories. She related a memory from her middle age:

One thing that I did that was very smart, I did a lot of traveling. Fourteen trips I went on—7 in the United States and 7 in Europe. I was on a 31 day trip in 1970, going through all of Europe by ship with my sister. We went first to Norway, through the Kiel Canal, then to Belgium, through to Southampton England. It was a Norwegian ship and they were very nice to us, particularly the Jewish people. I was standing at the edge of the ship and I saw something bobbing on the water up and down, not knowing an officer was behind me and saw it too. He called it in. There we were, mid-Atlantic—they stopped the ship, made a complete turn and dropped anchor. With no protection whatsoever, four of them jumped into the water. They had just their uniforms on and jumped in, right in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. They pulled it in, put it on the front of the ship on the lower deck. It was a tender, a boat from the SS Tralfager. A little boat. They called the Coast Guard. It was a big mystery.

This little story, told to me five or six times, evolved from the first telling. The image of the little boat, floating empty at sea, reminded me of Ruth herself, a difficult personality who made her own loneliness. The untended tender was a metaphor for Ruth's own life.

Group Dynamics

The group itself created the momentum for “The Memoirs.” My role was that of listener and scribe; I would move from small group to small group, inscribing their stories one at a time. Heidi would take control often, bringing the whole group together and guiding the conversation, which would jump around, as many of the ladies had

trouble hearing each other. I observed that their memories and stories of the past were brought on by a number of social factors. Sometimes their memories would come out of a comparison of today with the past, as in this conversation:

Heidi: Listen, you ladies remember when you had to buy butter from a big vat?

Ann: Milk out of cans—we'd use a big dipper.

Helen: Pickles from the pickle man for a penny or two.

Heidi: The knife sharpener—remember, he'd come by in a horse and buggy.

Out of nowhere, Maria said: When you walk the street today, there's no shortage of bellybuttons.

Helen: With rings on 'em! Bells on 'em!

Heidi: We used to wear gloves, a hat, and shoes to match.

Ann: You'd never think of going outside without stockings on, no matter what the weather.

Helen: Only sailors had tattoos.

Mary: Nowadays, I've never seen so many tattoos.

Ruth: I remember dating someone who said it's better for women to keep a little bit of mystery—

Heidi: That was years ago—

Maria: With cell phones, everybody's walking with a crooked neck!

Heidi: We had a party line, when we first got a phone. My mother had a heart condition and when we'd call the doctor, somebody was always on the line.

Their memories were also inspired by photographs. Heidi was compelled by her nostalgia for the lost Bronx while looking at the photographs in The Beautiful Bronx:

Heidi: I can't get over that book

Helen, laughing: Oh, she's Miss Bronx!

Heidi: It makes me sad! It's all gone! Look at the Paradise---

Helen: Go to the Paradise, then go to Krum's for a soda—they didn't have to spend three hundred dollars to take you out! That was the big date! And we had a good time—it wasn't your place or mine, you know—You see, there were people who got married that didn't try before you buy!

Mary, who was thumbing through Cat Fancier magazine: That's why we all got married at twenty!

Helen: Sometimes, you'd get to the point where you'd discuss it and say, "When we get married..." It was a given you'd wait---

But then they censored themselves. Just as Ruth Ray found, the norms for the group did not allow for talk of sexuality.

All of Mary's memories came exclusively from photographs. Every class she attended, Mary would bring a pile of photos in a zip lock bag and dominate the group: "This is my grandfather in Lithuania! He was one hundred and six when this was taken! And this is my mother with her third husband! This is a piece of hair from my first haircut! I saved it all these years!" The blonde curl was in a tiny plastic box, with a pink ribbon all crushed up.

Ruth was annoyed. "Who wants to see her pictures from bubbe-yenta's time?" The other ladies ignored Ruth as Mary got up to show the photos to Lorraine, who was swamped with ladies at her desk. Mary deliberately stepped on Ruth's foot. "Say, what's the big idea?!" exclaimed Ruth.

While some of the other ladies, including Helen, would bring in personal photos to share and tell the story of the photo, for Heidi, looking at personal photos was too upsetting: “You know, even now, my husband gone fourteen years—sometimes I get into such a blue mood, I just sit and feel sad. You never lose it. It took quite a while to clean out his stuff. I couldn’t look at any photos for years after he died—besides the framed ones we always had out. I still don’t want to look at the photos; it’s too much.” The visual image in some ways is more powerful than words or memories—they serve as immediate evidence of that which no longer exists.

Negative Social Dynamics

The main deterrent for making the memoir workshop work was the social dynamics of the Senior Lounge, which in general, discouraged rather than encouraged a harmonious collaborative learning experience. One day Lorraine and I had a chat after a particularly cantankerous gathering of “The Memoirs.” “This place is a fucking zoo,” Lorraine confided, “excuse my language.” I asked why Maria and Ruth didn’t come over and join us on the couches. “Mary and Helen don’t like Maria and Ruth, that’s why. It’s always this way—this one doesn’t like that one, that one can’t stand this one. Everyone’s got a complaint about this, that, or the other. It’s hard to make anything work here; don’t feel bad about it.”

“So,” she continued, “The memoir thing-- that will be it—this summer? I mean, are you going to continue in the Fall?”

“No,” I replied, “We’ll end in August.”

Lorraine, with her ten years' experience directing the Lounge was glad to hear it: "That's good! Drop them before they drop you! And always keep 'em wanting more. Don't let them take you for granted! They'll be sorry when you stop doing this and then they'll ask for you. That's the way to do it!"

The ladies' divisiveness made running the memoir workshop difficult. They seemed to fight over me. At one point, Ruth called me over to her and said: "I don't like to pin medals on myself but I'm from a better class than most of these people. I mean, you can tell from my appearance; I don't have to brag. I don't wear pants—only when I go to the country. And I'd never be caught dead out of the house in a housedress." This was a direct hit at Mary, who wore a flowered housedress in the July heat. Helen and Mary whispered to me about Ruth: "We call her Miss America. You know, they won't let her into the Cooper Diner. She yells at the waiters!" Barbara Myerhoff also experienced this behavior with her subjects and concluded that it came out of their frustration with being ignored by the outside world. But for my ladies, it seemed that familiarity breeds contempt—they have all been living in such close proximity, most of them, for over fifty years.

The bridge players had a patronizing attitude towards the memoir workshop attendees. After one memoir class, in which Erna with Alzheimer's joined us, repeating every word someone said, Mona, the boss of the bridge players, called me over. She was like the Godfather, sitting on her folding chair throne with her associates around her: "I want to tell you you're doing a wonderful job. You handle it very well. It seems like a wonderful experience for them."

Another of her cronies told me, “Oh, my sister is taking a creative writing class in Queens. Now she would never go into a senior center, but one day she did and they had a creative writing class going and she wrote some memories and she loves it.”

I suggested to this woman she join us. “Oh, no, Mondays we play bridge.”

Mona dismissed me: Well, you’re doing wonders for them.” To Mona, *them* were the rejects of the Senior Lounge, Ruth and Maria in particular, people who were marginalized in the Senior Lounge society.

True, Ruth had a way about her that was dazzlingly anti-social. It seemed that Maria, as well, dug her own social grave. Lorraine told me: “When Maria’s husband died, she was one of the girls. But then she got a boyfriend and she ignored them. Now he’s dead a few years, but they won’t take her back in.” Ruth, however, was a certified curmudgeon. Almost every contribution she made to discussion had an argumentative or offensive quality to it. During one memoir workshop discussion, Ruth managed to offend everyone on several topics:

Ruth: In the past, you had to have a quota—the worst are the Mexicans. Now I’m not prejudiced but you see them parading around by Bellevue with bellies out to here and no man in sight! And what’s going on in Israel! Those horrible Palestinians!

Helen: Oh no, you have that wrong! It’s the Israelis —the Palestinians are the victims.

Mary: Listen, no religion and no politics! That’s a rule!

Maria, who hadn’t heard this exchange: When you went to the beauty parlor, they’d use water combs; they’d make finger waves.

Heidi nodded: The style was the finger waves.

Ruth: I don't remember going to the beauty parlor and getting water combs—we used rollers in Boro Park.

Old neighborhood rivalries were an ongoing theme. Heidi tried to make a connection with other participants through her love of the Bronx. “Oh, we never bothered with people from the Bronx,” said Maria to Heidi. Heidi sighed and smiled: “Queens picks on the Bronx, the Bronx picks on Brooklyn and Manhattan picks on the Lower East Side.” Even fifty years living in the same neighborhood of StuyTown did not stop the ladies from identifying with their childhood neighborhoods.

Dropped

For the last memoir workshop meeting, I brought in pastries from the famous Italian bakery Veniero's to see what memories a bite of éclair or cannoli evoked in the ladies—Marcel Proust's madeleine experience, New York style. Ladies I had never seen before helped themselves. Heidi and Ruth nibbled on pignoli nut cakes. Mary got into a verbal scuffle with a lady gorging on a cream puff: “Either sit down or move along!” Mary told her. Then Mary grabbed a couple of pastries herself as she said to me, “I have to get that book for you! Mary of the Anthracite! I think Carmen has it!” I was about to tell Mary I found the book in the Library of Congress card catalogue but her back was to me. She took off to go play cards at a table where Helen and Carmen were sitting, Carmen shuffling the cards for a game of Kings in the Corner.

Lorraine came over to me, looking concerned. “I don't understand what happened. They were looking forward to the memoirs. It was all they could talk about yesterday. Why are they playing cards?”

I didn't say it to Lorraine and she didn't say it to me but we both knew what happened: They dropped me before I dropped them.

Midlogue:

“You Gotta Play Heavy to Win Big”

Toward the completion of the eight week memoir workshop, I accompanied the ladies on the highlight of their month, the Senior Lounge sponsored trip to Atlantic City. Mary had been talking about it for weeks, delighted that I was joining them. A gambling enthusiast for many years, she and Barney even rented a studio apartment to have as a second home in Las Vegas in the sixties and seventies. Helen rolled her eyes over Atlantic City: “I only go because it’s something to do,” she confided in me when Mary couldn’t hear her. Heidi was more reserved, almost embarrassed: “I’m never foolish with my money. I only bring twenty, thirty dollars,” she told me.

Junkets to Atlantic City are very popular with the elderly throughout the New York metropolitan area; Foxwoods in Connecticut is another destination and the Cuyahoga Nation has recently opened a video casino in the Catskills. What is this attraction to casinos and gambling for the elderly? Living in a nearly all-female celibate environment, perhaps the ladies channel sexual energy into the excitement and unpredictability of gambling. Perhaps also, because they are habitually so careful with their money, monitoring spending on every purchase, Atlantic City offers them the opportunity to revel in the behavior of irresponsible spending. But there is always hope that the risk will be rewarded tenfold with a jackpot win and that hope is a very powerful and real possibility for everyone. Lady Luck does not discriminate, although she usually takes more than she gives.

On the day of the trip, we met in front of the Lounge at 8:00 am; already the sun was beating down and the air was thick with humidity. Ladies were waiting outside and

inside the Lounge, dressed in bright summer clothes, each carrying a sweater for the air conditioning. Heidi walked right by me; I held out my hand to her. "Forgive me, I'm still asleep" she said. I saw Mary, who was nearly jumping out of her skin with joy: "You're playing bingo on the bus with us!" she declared.

The bus arrived and there was a rush to it. Mary yelled, "Come on, get on! Where's Beth? Are you coming? Be sure to get your bingo card!" Heidi gave me a plaintive look and said, "Look for me when we get off."

My seating assignment was in the mid-back, next to the window. In the past, the policy was open seating, Heidi told me earlier, but then there were fights: "One time, when my husband was alive, we went on a trip with the Lounge and I couldn't believe the yelling and screaming—all over where to sit. We looked at each other and said, oh no, we don't want any part of this. But when I found out they started with the assigned seating, I came back." The woman next to me, Florence, was a younger senior, recently retired, who raised her son as a single divorced parent in StuyTown. She told me she loves to go to Atlantic City any chance she gets.

One woman was passing around the bingo cards, charging one dollar for each. "Are you going to play bingo?" she asked me. I nodded yes. She looked at my field notebook open on my lap. "Very good! I see you're writing your memoirs too."

The bingo caller got on the microphone: "Just shout out when you have bingo!" Florence next to me was playing three cards; I had one.

They way I remember playing bingo in grade school was that bingo is five in a row and at one point, it seemed to me as if I had bingo, but I didn't want to shout it out

for fear of being wrong. I didn't want to draw attention to myself. But still, the bingo caller had called out five minutes worth of numbers and no one had shouted bingo yet.

"Bingo!!" It was my seatmate, Florence. I looked at her cards and saw she had one whole card marked: at the Senior Lounge, that's what bingo is. I was relieved I didn't shout out bingo in front of all fifty bingo enthusiasts on the bus when all I had was a row marked.

The game of bingo made its way to the United States from Europe, and was first played at a carnival in Atlanta in 1929. Then the game was called "beano" because the markers were dried beans, but when New York toy salesman Edward Lowe was watching a "beano" game at play, he heard a player call out "bingo" by mistake—and renamed the game. Lowe began to market bingo, conferring with a mathematician to create more number combinations on the cards. In the early 1930s, a Catholic priest in Pennsylvania approached Lowe with the idea of using bingo as a means to raise parish funds. By 1934, there were ten thousand weekly bingo games in the United States. Since then, bingo remains a way for places of worship to raise money and is a mainstay among the elderly.

Julie Winstone, a psychology researcher at the University of Southampton, England studied elderly bingo players in 2002 and found that playing bingo helps to keep the brain active (in Ezard). Bingo players scored higher than non-players on tests of mental speed, ability to scan for information, memory and concentration. Some of the bingo players at the Lounge's games play up to six cards at a time, meaning that when the numbers are called out, the player searches for the number on all six cards, which have about forty numbers on each. This is an impressive skill at any age.

The bingo caller made an announcement: "No shouting at the driver, now. If we are stuck in traffic, don't say anything!"

Florence asked me about myself: "What took you so long to get married? When are you going to have a baby?" I was glad when she moved to sit in the empty seat behind us, next to a woman she already knew. They chatted about their own and their friends' health issues and treatments as they played bingo: chemotherapy and radiation and gall bladder operations and this doctor and that medication. They seemed to be playing a "can you top this" game with medical stories, vying for the title of the one who had lived through the most gruesome and painful treatment.

With bingo over, the caller moved on to the next activity: "Marge brought a tape of Irish humor, carried all the way from Ireland!" We listened. One joke stood out: "One fellow says to another: 'I didn't make love to my wife before I was married—did you?'" and the other fellow says: "I don't know—what's her maiden name?" Helen later told me that same joke three times in one day!

The tiny toothless African-American woman, Dolly, who took care of Greta, the Lounge's bingo treasurer, was sitting in the back of the bus, with Greta up front in the very first seat. Earlier, there was a ruckus getting Greta on the bus in her wheelchair; maneuvering is never easy for the wheelchair-bound. Dolly now rose from her seat to check on Greta, walking to the front of the bus. The bingo caller yelled into the microphone: "Don't walk! Don't walk! Please don't walk in the bus because we cannot be liable... What, I have to speak another language?—Please don't walk in the bus because you know it is dangerous." Meanwhile, Dolly ignored her and kept walking, her head looking down at her feet until she got to Greta.

As we entered Atlantic City, we drove by many vacant lots and boarded-up stores. The bus pulled into the parking lot of the Showboat Casino and we had to wait for the casino representative to get on to welcome us and give us our promotional refund envelopes. The ladies were all anxious to disembark: "What's the problem here? I want my envelope!" Each envelope contained a ten dollar bill and two singles.

Heidi waited for me when I got off the bus—and we first went to a little slot machine room near the bus parking lot. I put the ten into a "Triple Double Diamond" slot machine and lost it all in five minutes. Then we went into the main casino, to the nickel machines. Heidi won a bit and wanted to cash out but the machine wouldn't let her. She was connected to the machine by her Showboat card, worn on a cord around her wrist. The card earns points for gifts like a Showboat beach towel or baseball cap. We needed to find an attendant to open the machine, which seemed to take forever. Heidi told me not to wait but to meet her later in the café. Relieved to escape the scene of Heidi's bondage to the nickel slot machine, I found my way out of the Showboat Casino looking for food.

I wandered the boardwalk, as dreary as the town itself if not more so, and staggered in the steamy musty heat back to the freezing air conditioned blasts of the Showboat. I tried to find Heidi or Mary or Helen, Zelda, Carmen, any of them...but I didn't see any familiar faces, or even any faces that looked like an individual human person. In the maze of the casino, I could not differentiate one from the other. It was row upon row of old ladies looking exactly alike: gray heads parked in front of slot machines, blazingly loud dings and rings blending into a frenzied jackpot energetic hum of seduction.

I noticed elderly Chinese men and women wandering the boardwalk and casino. The New York Times reports that many take the buses from Chinatown, keep the bus refund money, bring their own lunches, and enjoy a nearly free day out of the city. The ladies could not understand this behavior at all. Mary said to me, "I seen the Chinamen, they lurk around, watch us play. What the hell is the point in coming to Atlantic City if you're not going to give it a shot?"

I, too, got caught up in the spell. I fed a twenty dollar bill into a Triple Double Diamond Deluxe machine and not long after I won eighty quarters. Then I lost it all. I left that machine and searched for another to play. My eyes were drawn to the diamond machines; I could not pull myself away. I chose a Double Diamond machine close to the aisle—I put another ten into it, thinking "I'll hit it soon!" I won twenty quarters on my first spin. I envisioned the casino security guards looking at the cameras, deciding to target me to win because I would be a nice and appreciative winner. I won a total of sixty quarters on the ten and fed a five into the machine. I could feel myself getting closer to being the big jackpot winner!

It is the nature of a casino to suck all humanity right up and in. I couldn't see anything but the spinning wheels in front of my eyes and where they paused and landed. I couldn't think of anything but the next spin and what it might bring—always the hope, always the futile faith that the next one could be the big winner for me! I had no drive except to win, to feed these machines money, despite knowing that I was going to lose.

And I did. I lost one hundred and fifteen dollars of my own money plus the twelve from the bus ride. But I decided to admit to only losing eighty. No one else gives specifics, except for how much they won!

According to Gary Rivlin writing in the New York Times magazine, gambling, particularly slots, is the number one form of adult entertainment in the country, taking in over thirty billion dollars in 2003, with pornography and the movie business far-behind at second and third. Slot machines today are no longer mechanized one arm bandits. They are computers; the spinning wheels are an illusion. There is no need to pull a lever, just press a button. Each cycle is timed for six seconds, slow enough to build anticipation yet fast enough to eat through your money. A twenty dollar bill is typically timed to last fifteen to twenty minutes, with many small pay-outs holding the player's attention until the bill is depleted. By means of the players' interest and hope piqued, another ten or twenty is inserted. With interactive touch screens, video clips, celebrity voices like Dick Clark and Robin Leach cheering the player on, and an average of four hundred "sound events" per machine, "the deeper a player gets into the game, the quicker and louder the music," commanding the player's full attention (Rivlin).

Nancy Petry, professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut Medical School says, "the slot machine is brilliantly designed from a behavioral psychology perspective" (in Rivlin). Played in isolation, unlike craps, blackjack or roulette, the slot machine player does not have any social pressure to stop when all seems lost. Instead, the machine feeds out small payoffs intermittently, conditioning the player to continue pressing the "spin reels" button. The video features of sound, lights, and movement stimulate the brain into thinking that the next spin of the wheel will hit the jackpot. So I am not alone in my delusion that I had a good chance to be the big winner.

I stumbled into Heidi around 3:30, after I exhausted nearly all my funds. We hit the nickel machines together: Hollywood Squares, Crazy Fruits, The Price is Right.

Heidi was playing two machines at once but was attached to only one by her Showboat card. I watched her play for a bit: “Oh my, oh my, so close,” she murmured, “I’ll just put another five dollar bill in; that should be enough.” Bored, I stifled a yawn, but then a quarter slot diamond machine that I hadn’t noticed before, the Double Triple Diamond Ultra Deluxe, lured me back and I lost another twenty dollars within ten minutes.

Heidi hit big with the nickels and cashed out—she was now twenty dollars ahead. She carried her bucket of nickels over to the change window with such pride and grace, as if this was what she was born to do.

We had coffee and pound cake together and Heidi told me: “I used to come with a friend, an Irish lady who lived in my building. I was the one who found her dead, did I tell you that? She was dead on the floor—it was diabetes, I didn’t even know. Nobody knew. Supposedly, she didn’t even know. Every time I come here, I really miss her. We were great friends and we really enjoyed our time here together.” Heidi paused, looking sad.

With a half hour left until we had to board the bus, we went back to the nickel machines for one last shot. I inserted a five in a nickel poker machine, which was what I should have been doing all along, because at least I was able to make choices, discard and draw, have some control over my hand—plus it took more time. More time to play equals less money lost! With the slots, every quick spin of the wheel, one can go through twenty dollars on a quarter machine in no time flat. It’s a dead end pleasure, playing the slot machines. I beat myself up over this fact, thinking: “I never want to do this again! This has been a horrible gambling ordeal for me! I’m one hundred and fifteen dollars poorer, maybe even more: I don’t know what happened to all of my cash!”

Heidi and I made our way to the bus. I ran into Mary in the bathroom, all full of her crazy energy—and of course, Helen, Carmen, and Zelda were with her. Helen winked, pinched and elbowed me: “How did you do, kiddo?” Mary, covered in Mardi Gras beads, put a bunch over my head. She had loads of them weighing down the pockets of her housedress, as well as five and ten dollar bills stuffed in there, the green edges peeking out.

There in the bathroom, Mary told me: “I always win! Tell her Carmen—“

Carmen, on cue, said with a laugh, “She always wins!”

Mary went on, enthusing, “I hit a jackpot and it was playing “California here we come!” Then I treated Helen and Carmen to ice cream at the buffet—right, girls?!”

While waiting to get on the bus, I sat on a bench with Mary and Barney. He didn’t have any beads on, but he was smiling. They were holding hands, as they’ve done for sixty-some odd years.

“Barney, what do you play?” I asked him.

“I roll dice,” he replied in his deep croaky voice.

“That’s what he plays,” confirmed Mary, her Mardi Gras beads shaking, “He’s been playing for eighty years, since he was thirteen. I played the nickel Surprise Party! That has the touch screen, you win more prizes! I was up by four hundred nickels! Then when you lose, it comes up “Party Pooper”!

Gary Rivlin writes that Frank Fahrenkopf, the head of the American Gaming Association, misses the days when blackjack, craps and roulette were the big money earners in casinos. Fahrenkopf views the “transition from table games to slots as symptomatic of the dumbing-down of American life.” Craps is a complex game; even

blackjack and roulette have their share of skill as a factor in winning. Barney has been shooting craps for eighty years and every game is different; he can use logic and tactical skills developed over all those years. But with slot machines, there is no learning curve, just put your money in the machine and press the button. Six seconds later you have your results, then you repeat—again and again and again—a mind-numbing ricochet of repetition. When Rivlin asked an elderly man what the appeal is of slot machines over table games, he was told: “You don’t have to think.”

Perhaps there is nothing wrong with that. The ladies seemed to have a lot on their minds; worries about health and family seemed to predominate. Helen, in particular, told me she always worries about her children and grandchildren: “You want to hear something? My son and daughter-in-law always call every night at the same time. But they didn’t call last night and I worried all night, and called my son at the office this morning. He’s always in early but he wasn’t there at 7:30 and I got so worried, I was out of my mind. Then he called at 8:15, saying they were out late last night. And I was thinking to myself, what’s wrong with me? What am I so worried about? When my kids were in college, when they got their own places, started their own families—I never worried like this. You can make yourself sick with worry, you know that?”

But here in Atlantic City, when we met up in the ladies room, Helen was relaxed and laughing. “I lose myself when I’m here,” she said, “and that’s a good thing,” giving me an extra squeeze and pinch on the arm for good measure, “Time goes by so quickly!”

Rivlin writes of the gamblers he observed playing slot machines: “It wasn’t pleasure I saw on their faces but determination.” This was the same experience for me: not only myself but everyone I observed was staring at the machines with knitted brows,

as if willing them to pay out. They were determined to leave this place with more money than they brought; that was the goal and the hope of being in Atlantic City.

Social scientist Felicia Campbell, writing in *The Futurist* in 1976 sees gambling as a fundamental human activity, fulfilling the need for risk-taking, danger, change, the unknown: "Through gambling," she writes, "many individuals can become more actively involved in life. Others can obtain needed psychological release from tension and drudgery." Campbell views gambling as an opportunity for the elderly to participate in the world: "what the elderly look for is what most gamblers seek: involvement in 'the action.' Involvement is crucial to their sense of well being in a society which seems to exclude them from the action of living." Gambling, she argues, is an escape from the loneliness and boredom of old age. Hope and Havir report in the *Journal of Aging Studies* that amongst elders in the 80-84 age group, the number one self-reported reason for gambling is "something to do." Number two is for the fun and social aspects; three is a tie between the food and winning. They conclude that elders are gambling for "non-problematic reasons with little risk of addiction."

This sort of participation "in the action" and escape from loneliness was not available to my grandmother during her active elder years. Even though she lived down the Jersey shore, not far from Atlantic City, the casinos did not open until 1978, when Grandma was limiting her activities. In 1988, President Reagan signed the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, which allowed for Native Americans to operate casinos on tribal land and in 1991, riverboat gambling on the Mississippi and the Missouri rivers were legalized. By 1996, casino gambling was legal in twenty-five states. In a span of twenty years, the number of states with casino gambling went from one (Nevada) to twenty-five.

States receive revenue from casinos and lotteries, much of it used to fund education and social programs. With the proliferation of casinos using marketing tactics aimed at the elderly---oxygen tanks, handicapped access blackjack tables, discounts on prescription drugs, coupons for the buffet---Atlantic City reported that sixty-five percent of casino revenue in 1997 came from those gamblers age sixty-five and older.

This gambling boom amongst the elderly of the past thirty years seems to correlate with the proliferation of Americans taking financial risks in other ways, through excessive shopping and amassing credit card debt. The ladies participate in consumer culture by feeding ten and twenty dollar bills into the slot machines. Most claimed to keep their gambling under strict control, but Mary later confided in me that some, including her husband, were reckless: "You know, Barney is bad in Atlantic City. Last year, he spent almost ten thousand dollars down there; I saw the withdrawals on the bank statement. I gave him sixty-four hundred dollars for our anniversary, one hundred dollars for every year and you know what he did it with it? It's already gone! Zelda, she brings four hundred dollars with her. She says you gotta play heavy to win big. Carmen too, she plays until she's broke and I lend her a few dollars for coffee and a danish."

At 6:00, the bus pulled out of the casino. Everyone was quiet and then the bingo caller announced that for the next two hours, we would be watching a video of The Best of Lawrence Welk, a television show with a twenty-seven year run, from 1955 to 1982. Swing was the music of the ladies' youth; Welk's "champagne music," the sound of their midlife. We watched the Lennon sisters, harmonizing on "Down by the Old Mill Stream" and then an accordion rendition of "Roll Out the Barrel." Some sang along to "They'll be Some Changes Made." When the entire Lawrence Welk musical family

came on stage for “America the Beautiful,” everyone sang along as the bus motored north into the sunset on the Garden State Parkway.

When I talked to Mary a couple of days later on the phone she said, “I’m so exhausted! I’m still tired from Atlantic City. It takes so much out of you. I’m standing for six hours playing those stupid machines. I’m never tired while I’m there or on the bus home—it takes a while to sink in.” The weariness only comes when Mary is back home, back to the usual routine. A recent Yale University study conducted by epidemiologist Rani Desai found that “recreational gamblers 65 and older reported being in better health than their peers who don’t gamble.” Desai postulated that the social aspects of gambling impact positively on health. I would add to that not only is it the social aspects, but the excitement aspect as well that keeps elders feeling and being healthier. As Mary told me, “Look at Barney, ninety-seven years old and going to Atlantic City three times a week. He always feels great when he’s there, even when he’s not winning.”

It’s ironic how these “stupid machines” that seduce Mary into thinking that her eighty-seven year old legs can withstand hours of standing are themselves computers. Mary, Helen, and Heidi each claimed to be terrified of the computer: “What if I break it?” “I’m afraid to touch it” “It’s so complicated”, they have cried to me, their eyes large with fear. Yet, wrapped in a different suit of clothes as slot machines, computers are their source of all that is risky and exciting. It is the computer that makes for fun memories of their trips to Atlantic City. Without it, their sole opportunity for gambling excitement would be Immaculate Conception Church’s bingo hall, located in a dingy basement across 14th Street—a mere shopping cart-assisted stroll across one of the StuyTown borders. Instead, the flash, the action, the five dollar all-you-can-eat buffet,

the excitement of Atlantic City---all this is available to them thanks to computer technology in the guise of a slot machine.

Chapter Three:

“Is This What They Call the Internet?”

Although the ladies dropped me at the last session of the memoir workshop, they were eager participants during the internet lessons. Their eagerness put me in a position of power that I did not have while leading the memoir workshop: I possessed the mysterious technical knowledge that they desired. During “The Memoirs,” they had the knowledge I desired, the stories of their lives, but most of the ladies at the Lounge had little interest in parting with it. However, before and during internet lessons, rather than being fickle with their attention, they stroked my ego with praise, gave me gifts of note cards, picture frames and candy--anything to keep me there at the computers, guiding them on the internet. “Oh, you don’t know how good this feels!” a lady named Gilda told me after her lesson, “This is so new and exciting and you my dear, you are my guide to this world. You’re a wonderful, splendid young woman!” Every Thursday, departing until the following week, I “always left them wanting more,” as Lorraine had advised me to do with the memoir workshop.

The Senior Lounge has three computers with high-speed internet connection. One is dedicated to lessons; the other two are free for use. Lorraine maintains a twenty minute time limit on using the computers if others are waiting. One-on-one internet lessons were ongoing for the two and a half year span of the project. Mary, Helen, and Heidi all participated each in her own unique way. However, the three ladies who were active in the memoir workshop, Maria, Ruth, and Ann did not. Ann was too ill (she died a few months after the memoir workshop ended); Maria was too busy tending to the coffee pot before breaking her hip and becoming homebound; and Ruth told me, “That

machine doesn't interest me in the least." All in all, I taught about fifty elders how to use the internet, most of them women, but every session, I'd teach at least one man and occasionally, a married couple.

Since the internet became widely available, circa 1995, various efforts have been made to bring computer knowledge to the elderly. Seniornet was founded in 1996 by Mary Furlong to create community and training opportunities for those fifty-five and over. Seniornet has centers around the country where seniors can learn how to use the internet. The Seniornet website itself features online book groups, health discussion groups and other features of interest to older Americans. In 1998 Microsoft funded senior training and developed a senior-oriented web site that is now defunct. Other efforts are more locally based, such as Generations Online, an organization in Philadelphia whose mission is to teach elders how to use the internet. Studies in the journals The Gerontologist and Educational Gerontology all conclude that technology, particularly the internet, fosters greater independence for the elderly: improving communication and access to services and information as well as maintaining health and financial records (Segrist; Kantner; Kubeck et al). Technology, it is argued, has provided a new way for the old to overcome barriers that now cause isolation.

Most of these studies are clinical in nature and focus on the question of whether elderly people are able to learn to use the internet. For example, in a study published in Educational Gerontology, Robert Morrell, Assistant Director of Gerontology at the University of Georgia and his colleagues compared young-old (60-74) and old-old (75+) participants learning how to use Eldercom, an electronic billboard system. Participants received three days of lessons, first using simple, then more complex and detailed

instructions, and also took cognitive tests. The experimenters videotaped the sessions, observing and recording patterns of error: “performance errors, motor control problems and number of experimenter interventions.” At the end of the third day, participants were “tested on how well they remembered to perform procedures immediately after training and again one week later.” As can be expected, Morell et al found that “the old-old made more performance and motor control errors, required more assistance and took longer to complete the training session than the young-old adults.”

In other research published in the Internet Journal of Health, Robert Campbell and James Wabb used “semi-structured interviews and surveys” to “investigate the impact of training the elderly to use the internet in order to become more active in their health care.” Twenty-eight participants, ages 65+, first received ten hours of instruction in a computer classroom setting over the course of five weeks. Most had used a computer before this experience and two thirds had a college degree or better. After the training, participants filled out a questionnaire which asked about their experiences learning to locate health information on the internet and eight of the participants were also interviewed. Confidence levels in their ability to find health information on the internet rose from fifty-one percent of participants before instruction to seventy percent afterwards. One participant, the only one quoted, likened the internet to 800 numbers—but even easier and with more control than calling an information number. Campbell and Wabb predict that as the baby boom population ages, they will take a very active and informed role in their own health care, thanks to their familiarity with internet searches.

Only a few studies use qualitative means of gathering data. Kerry Kay Osbourne’s 1997 dissertation at the University of Southern California’s department of

Communications, On Golden Cyberpond: Training America's Elderly to use Electronic Mail used ethnographic methods to determine "the facilitators and inhibitors to the successful training of elderly individuals with no prior computing experience to use email" (v). For five months, Osbourne and a team of trainers took field notes as they observed sixty-one participants, ages 68-95 learn how to use Eudora Light software email with both their guidance and printed instructions. While Osbourne's study is lacking a clear portrait of the participants and offers no specifics about them other than their ages, it nonetheless looked to determine if the elderly can use email without assistance. This goal was realized by only two of the participants: a woman who had faraway family to email and a man who was in search of romance. By the end of the study, both had bought their own computers.

In another qualitative study published in Educational Gerontology, Michael Hite and Jeremy Lipschultz collected anecdotal descriptions of senior participants' experiences with the internet. They asked participants open-ended questions as they observed them using the internet. Email was the most popular online activity and Hite and Lipschultz noted that participants "regard the internet as a functional replacement for the library rather than mass media" (69). Overall, participants were distrustful of internet news sites. Many also struggled with web navigation and "were easily stalled by simple problems" (70). However, as with Osbourne's dissertation, there is no sense of the background and setting of the participants. In this way, both Osbourne and Hite and Lipschultz maintain a clinical tone despite their ethnographic methods.

Regardless of the attention paid to elders online through studies and outreach efforts, today, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, only twenty-two

percent of those over the age of sixty-five go online. Cheryl Russell in the marketing magazine American Demographics writes, “most Americans who do not own a computer simply do not want one” and these people are mostly older, in their fifties plus: “Never before has a medium so sharply divided the population along generational lines.” The internet is one of the few instances where “cultural capital” is passed not from the old to the young, but vice versa and this puts the old in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable position. Margaret Cruikshank observes: “In a technological society, in which information becomes obsolete rapidly, the wisdom role of the old all but disappears” (44).

The Pew Internet and American Life Project cites family as “the biggest factor pushing older Americans towards the internet.” However, I found in my research that this was not the case with the ladies. While their families wanted them to know how to use the internet, family members were not willing to take the time to teach them. I once overheard two of the bridge players discussing this. One said: “The kids can do everything on these computers; it’s amazing. I’m waiting for my grandson to come over and show me a few things on my computer.” The other replied, “Well, you might be waiting all year.” When family members did take the time to teach the ladies, they lacked the patience to understand what novices their parents or grandparents are. Lena, the memoirist who abandoned the memoir workshop told me: “My son and my grandchildren are constantly on my back—why don’t you learn the internet?! But when they show me, they just click click click!” Another woman told me of disastrous lessons at a family gathering: “My son, my daughter, my niece, my grandson-- all four at once were trying to teach me last Thanksgiving. You ever have four people yelling at you at once?” These are clear examples of when the good intentions of family ricochet against

the reality of relationships. Friction and frustration were the inevitable result. As a neutral party, as their teacher and memoir workshop leader, the ladies had an easier time relating to me. They did not know me in any other capacity.

I was not the only internet teacher at the Senior Lounge. Lorraine maintained a stable of volunteers, including one man, David, who lost his information technology job after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. He was a favorite of all the ladies. They would show up for lessons with David dressed with girlish care and giggle through the lesson. I would get jealous watching him work with them, seeing how happy and delighted they were with the attentions of a young man. David stopped volunteering to begin a new career selling long-term care insurance, hired in part because of his experience teaching the elderly women at the Lounge. He then solicited his former students to buy the long-term care insurance; they listened to his explanations seriously, since many know (and dread) that the last phase of their lives may be spent in a nursing home. Another volunteer was a twelve year old boy, who quit after a couple of weeks, telling Lorraine, "I can't do it. I'm under too much stress," which kept the ladies laughing for weeks: "A stressed out little boy! How do you like that?!"

Lorraine scheduled the internet lessons at twenty-five minute intervals to accommodate as many people as possible. The free lessons at the Lounge were very popular, spreading by word of mouth and reaching even the farthest corners of StuyTown. The complex newsletter, In the Loop, even featured an article about the internet lessons at the Lounge. Lorraine told me, "The phone is ringing off the hook. Some of these people, there's no pleasing them. When I tell them the lessons are for twenty-five minutes, they say, 'How can you learn in that short a time?' It's always something with these people."

But studies have shown the StuyTown complainers to be correct. Brett Jones and Ute Bayen in their study “Teaching Older Adults to Use Computers” published in Educational Gerontology in 1998, describe the cognitive challenges that the elderly have in learning. Their working memory, the “system for the short term storage and simultaneous processing of information,” has slowed so that every lesson is almost like the first. However, Jones and Bayen also note that elders’ attentional capacity lessens; the attention span becomes shorter and more erratic as one ages. They also found that “sensory deficits, failure to inhibit task-irrelevant information, and difficulty drawing implicit references” were features of challenges elder adults face with learning computers (88). So Lorraine’s enforced short duration of the internet lessons contributed to the ladies’ already present difficulties with learning.

The factors that facilitated learning, Osbourne found in her dissertation research, were “high motivation (and) frequent practice...The participants who progressed the most were also those who were most tolerant of their own mistakes and unanticipated events, such as technical problems or administrative errors” (54). The factors that inhibited learning were “short term memory limitations, physical constraints and lack of repetition” (v). “Instructions were routinely forgotten before they could be carried out” by those participants who struggled with short term memory issues (50). Many of her participants suffered vision and hearing loss as well as psycho-motor skill difficulties which limited the scope of their learning.

The Senior Lounge ladies were no different. There were many factors that inhibited their learning, both physical and cognitive. Many could not fathom the logic of the steps to take, nor could they consistently remember from lesson to lesson what they

had learned before. Their hearing aids echoed my words back into my ear and even with a large font size, they often could not read the screen without putting their faces inches away from it. They squeezed the mouse tightly, their fingers pressing both the right and left buttons, resulting in advertisement screens covering their desired site or a mistaken click on the X in the upper right hand corner wiping the screen clear, baffling them and stoking their fears of the machine itself. Almost every session was a laborious lesson in patience for both me and the participant.

Situating My Knowledge

Just as with the memoir workshop, there was a fundamental clash between how I understood the internet and the ladies' notion of it. Of course, I was aware of this disparity in technological knowledge but experiencing it in practice was another matter. Like the ladies, I have spent the majority of my life without computers and the internet. I did not use the internet until I was thirty; I have only eight years of experience with it. But being fifty years younger than the ladies gave me many advantages. I could easily understand the sense and flow of the process of internet navigation, searching and evaluating the value and validity of various sites. Starting in the early 1990s, I used a word processor, then a borrowed laptop for word processing; therefore using the mouse and the logic of computer organization were not foreign to me. I quickly realized the benefits of email and the ease and speed of looking up information on the internet for scholarly use and practical purposes. It did not take long for the internet to be indispensable to my life.

As I understand it, the internet has changed our relationship to literacy through the innovations of hypertext, multimedia, email, chat and bulletin boards, and the ease and speed of retrieving information. With these new forms of communication, there is a “growing realization that writing, reading and technology are not distinct phenomena” (Snyder xxi). The internet makes for an interactive literacy with great reach across distance and time.

Hypertext, the linking of related web pages to web sites, has introduced a non-linear element to reading. Nicholas Burbules observes how printed texts are selective and exclusive—a book is limited by its cover---but online texts are inclusive, with an infinite possibility of links. The reader “makes connections within and across texts” (Burbules 105). In this way, “hypertext has neither a center nor an end” (Snyder 127) and the practice of “surfing” best describes reading online: the reader takes charge of the direction of the text by clicking from link to link.

The online communications of email, chat and bulletin boards are immediate and intimate yet since these methods can be easily stored, copied and retrieved, audience is expanded to possibilities not known in postal mail. Moran and Hawisher observe that email, chat, and bulletin boards encourage a style of writing that has the “spontaneity and informality of speech.” Indeed, Laura Gurak writes: “What we used to separate into speech and writing is now blending together” (2).

Gunter Kress argues that internet multimedia, in which images, sounds, and even movement are integrated with written language, has created a “tectonic shift” in literacy (56). Now visuals are used not only for illustration, but as an integral part of the text and sound and movement, largely unavailable to us in print, are also vital to online texts.

“The ‘look of the page’ is now not a matter only for a specialized group of producers; it is a general concern” (Kress 56). With some training, anyone can make a web site and multimedia is an essential component of the genre of the web site. Todd Taylor and Irene Ward predict that soon in schools “we will be teaching an increasingly fluid multimedia literacy” (13).

With the speed and ease of information retrieval, Fred Hofstetter writes, the internet allows learners to “explore, discover, reflect and construct knowledge” (22). However, other scholars are wary of Hofstetter’s optimism. David Shenk argues that we suffer from an information overload and “technoangst—the anxiety caused by too much information and too many demands on our attention” (86). Johnson-Eilola declares that “we experience things not at depth but only on the surface” (185). Rather than lament the convenience of internet information, the American Council on Education contends that the features of the “information age mindset” are evolutionary rather than devolutionary. With the internet, one now learns through discovery and trial and error rather than logic.

The internet also makes for a more open society. Newsweek asserts: “the internet is built on both a philosophy and infrastructure of openness and free communication.” It has a confessional aspect to it that is right in step with the popularity of printed memoirs, but ever-changing. A blog, an online diary/journal, is like a memoir, but one that records a person’s current life. Blogs are very popular and have a certain confessional element. Bloggers write the most intimate details of their lives and thoughts which are read by any number of anonymous faceless readers.

This paradigm shift in literacy is still in its infancy. Selfe and Hawisher in their collection of ethnographic interviews Literate Lives in the Information Age observe that

internet access is still limited for many Americans due to social, economic, ethnic/racial, and age factors. Until there is easy access to the internet for all Americans, we cannot be sure of its impact and influence on literacy—and yet we know that the internet is significant and necessary to the definition of literacy in the twenty-first century.

The Ladies' Perceptions of the Internet

What the ladies know about the internet, they know from television, radio and the newspaper, as well as from anecdotal conversations. As one woman said to me, “I just want to see what it is—I hear this yahoo all the time on TV—everything is mentioned in computers.” According to the Center for Media Literacy, older adults watch more television than any other age group. However, my participants talked about television very rarely: their lives seemed to be more in tune with print and aural information and entertainment. They spoke most often of listening to the radio and of books, newspapers and magazines they read. What they have heard of the internet from their sources is that it is “wonderful—you can find everything there” but that the internet is also the province of “fornographers” (as Mary called them) and “perverts after little girls.” There was also the issue of identity theft that concerned them, one that is plastered all over the news.

The computer seemed like a mysterious magical machine to them; they were afraid to touch it, afraid of all the buttons. The ladies were very anxious when they sat down in front of the computer for the first time. Their years of acquired knowledge and experience had not prepared them for the new experience of the internet. They came to the technology, their minds a *tabula rasa*, feeling vulnerable because they were

unfamiliar with what role they should be take and what might happen. This exchange between Mary and Carmen illustrates that anxiety:

Carmen: I think with this technology, the computers, we are headed for trouble.

Mary: Armageddon!

Carmen: Like everything is going to turn inside out and blow up. I really believe that, I do—

Mary: Sure, you don't know what to trust any more.

Tobey Dicter, the director of Generations Online, a Philadelphia non-profit promoter of internet use among the elderly, says, "This is a generation that takes things very seriously...the first thing they worry about is that they'll break the machine" (in Hefer). It was also the second, third and fourth thing the ladies worried about. They thought of the computer as a delicate object and themselves as bulls in a china shop, stumbling towards destruction.

In their lives, the ladies had known the technologies of the telegraph, the telephone, radio, and television. But they were either retired or had never worked in offices by the time computers became common in the workplace. It was only the desire to keep in step with the times that gave the ladies the courage to sign up for internet lessons.

The Negotiation

Just as with the memoir class, while teaching the internet, I had to negotiate between what I knew and understood the internet to be and the ladies' limited understanding of it. It was necessary for me to put myself in their shoes, to empathize

with their bafflement and anxiety, in order to guide them very slowly and patiently through the basic processes. No steps could ever be repeated often enough. They were in need of constant guidance and support. The experience was both exciting and exhausting for both the ladies and me. Following are descriptions of Heidi's, Mary's and Helen's internet lessons which I hope illustrate their challenges and accomplishments in learning how to use the internet.

Heidi Donskoi's Lessons: Developing the Touch

"I feel so left out, like an orphan," Heidi said to me as she hesitantly sat down before the computer for her first lesson. "Everybody is using the computer and I know nothing. But I'm afraid of it; I'm afraid I'll break the machine."

Just as she was the most engaged "student" in the memoir workshop, Heidi was my star pupil with the internet lessons. In fact, Heidi was the most consistent, taking a lesson with me every Thursday for the full two and a half years of my research. Only occasionally did she miss a lesson for a doctor's appointment or a visit to Atlantic City. Lorraine always scheduled Heidi last, so that she ended up with an hour-long lesson, as I stayed working with her long after the bell signaling the end of the lesson rang. But every time we sat down at the computer, it was as if it were the first time for Heidi. She could not remember the steps to take to get online and do searches even though she had me write the directions on a notepad so she would never go on the internet alone.

Within a few lessons, we quickly developed a pattern in which Heidi would first look up the weather and her horoscope, then movies, then we would search for health, books or Broadway shows:

“Horoscope first. Let’s see if my walls are going to cave in” said Heidi as she clung to the mouse, squinting at the screen, looking for the arrow, “Little mouse, where are you? Squeak for me so I can see you!”

She found it. “OK, now where do I go? Ai ai ai...Do you think I will ever learn this?” We were on yahoo and I pointed to where the word “horoscope” was. Heidi gave the mouse two clicks and nothing happened.

“First move the mouse on top of the word, and then just give it one click,” I reminded her.

“Two clicks, one click...oh my...oh my...how can I remember?”

She clicked once, too hard: “A little softer,” I told her, “just a light little click.”

“I have to develop the touch. I had to develop the touch with the ATM. That wasn’t so easy. OK,” said Heidi with relief, “we got through with that. Now where’s my Leo?” Heidi found the Leo icon and clicked on it, moved her face closer to the screen and read: “A visitor?! Not that I know of...ai ai ai.” She looked at the screen as if she was expecting more: “Is that it?”

“Do you want to read the next day?” I asked.

“How would I do that?”

“Click on ‘next day.’”

Heidi did so and read: “Love in the air?! Nah, there’s nobody around, nobody to write me a love poem...ai ai ai.” She sighed heavily. “You think I’ll ever remember this? Never! I don’t know what’s with me: I have something against this thing.”

Next we visited the New York Times site. It took several minutes to get there as Heidi squeezed the mouse at inopportune moments and the screen jumped to an

advertisement. "How did that happen?" To save time, I took over, typing in the Times' web address in the address line. Heidi peered at the screen: "There's nothing here that strikes me. What do you want to watch?"

Then an article caught her eye, about a horrible child abuse/murder case in Newark, where two little boys who lived in a basement were found dead, starved to death. "Oh my, Oh my," Heidi murmured as she reads: "It's always the blacks on welfare. They have no idea how to treat their children....ai, ai, ai... Oh, isn't this horrible! Oh, I can't read any more. Let's change the channel." Many of my internet "victims" as we (Lorraine, the ladies and I) took to calling the students made a similar analogy to the television, thinking of "watching," rather than reading websites and changing the "channel" rather than the web site address since the monitor looks much like a television set.

I suggested Heidi try chat, and I guided her into a 60+ chat room, the oldest age cohort we could find on Yahoo. We had first gone to Seniornet, but Heidi did not want to fill out the online form to sign up. "Oh no, I don't want my information in the machine." At first in the chat room, she only lurked as the messages popped up one after the other on the screen. "You know, this is like teletype," Heidi said, "I worked during the war for the Army for the department that would order the food for the boys in camps on the East Coast. I'd type my message, say, request 200 pounds of potatoes from a supplier or what have you and then it would ring and they would answer." This was an accurate analogy for Heidi to make. Kathleen Tyner writes that the telegraph brought changes similar to the internet: speed and ability to reach across wide distances for romance opportunities and news coverage like never before.

Heidi typed: "Hello from New York. How's the weather out your way?"

A woman from England answered. Then a message from Jim: "Hi from NYC"

They exchanged where they live. "I'm a widower from the Upper East Side," wrote Jim.

Heidi wrote: "I live in lower Manhattan. It is rather an interesting neighborhood." We laughed when he wrote back with how tall he is and what he likes to do—See," I said to Heidi, "It's a lot of singles flirting."

"So long for now, Jim. I'm new to this stuff" typed Heidi. "I don't want to bother with that," she told me, "I'm not looking for romance."

Several months later, Heidi was poking through the lending library books that line the walls of the Lounge. She came over to me with a book, The Deep End of the Ocean. "I wonder if I should read this." I suggested we look up reviews and customer comments on Amazon.com, the site where she bought a Yiddish/English dictionary for her sister in Brooklyn a few lessons before.

Heidi situated herself nervously in front of the computer. She wears her house keys on a cord around her wrist and they jangled against the table. "Oh my...oh my..."she said of the keyboard, "it's a different feel this keyboard...it's so sensitive. It's like with the electric typewriter, just a slight touch and it would go. Just breathe on it and it would go! Ai...ai...ai..."

After much fussing, she was on the site for Amazon.com. Heidi placed her fingers in position on the keyboard to type the title of the book: "What's happening? This is a whole different keyboard...it's a different keyboard than the typewriter..oh oh ai

ai ai. Oh God, what is it with me today? From week to week, I forget what I'm doing. I'm running around all the time..."

Heidi always had great anxiety over the keyboard, which confounded me since she was a secretary for forty-five years. Jones and Bayen also found that the keyboard was a trouble spot for their learners: "older adults may make inappropriate typewriter analogies that hinder their learning." Osbourne observed: "the complexity of the keyboard annoyed some seniors, who were bothered by the 'excess' keys" (64).

Heidi's hands were in position on the keyboard but she hesitated to move her fingers: "How do you make a capital with this?"

"With shift," I pointed to the key.

"Oh, I'm used to it on the other side"

"It's on both sides, just like the typewriter."

"Oh, but this keyboard is so different...I don't know what I'm pressing..."

Finally, Heidi was able to look up The Deep End of the Ocean on Amazon.com. She clicked on the title and scrolled down to read the reviews and comments, without any assistance from me: "Oh, I think I better leave it behind here. I don't want to read about kidnapped children. I have enough sadness in my life."

Six months after this, Heidi brought a health newsletter she received in the mail and wanted to see a website she read about: nyaging.org. Once on the site, Heidi was clicking around with great ease.

"You really know what you're doing!" I exclaimed.

“No I don’t, I get too nervous! Then I look at all those health things and I get more nervous!..ai ai ai....Let’s see about osteoporosis. It’s so tiny! I can hardly read this! This is crazy—this is information for seniors. They should know we can’t see!”

While Heidi was reading, I got up to go to the ladies’ room, and when I returned, Heidi was on the Yahoo Health site, reading about cholesterol, doing just fine. I watched her wondering if her claims to need me next to her in order to be on the internet were learned helplessness. Was it all a ruse, just to spend time with me? Or did working with me make her more nervous about the computer than if she were left alone? Osbourne observes: “it is arguable that enjoyment of the social interaction with the trainers resulted in an exaggerated dependency, which paradoxically inhibited progress” (80). Heidi would only get online with my assistance. Never in the two and a half years of the study did she ever attempt it alone, although I do believe she had the skills to do so. Her anxiety, a feature throughout her life, always got in the way. Yet she soldiered on, with me by her side.

Heidi said during one lesson of the computer: “Sure, it’s fast. What’s the hurry? They’re not getting anywhere any faster than anybody else. Where are we going? What are we getting ourselves into? A war that’s never going to end...The computer is what’s making everybody rush. Not that I’m against new inventions, but it’s too many things too soon. First it was the VCR, then the DVD, now it’s the EVD...”

Helen was playing solitaire at the next computer and listening in: “What’s the EVD?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Heidi mumbled and her eyes were wide with fear and confusion. “You know, I feel it’s more of a chore to read on the computer than a pleasure. I prefer a novel to the computer. But that’s what I’m used to doing.”

Mary Smith’s “Lessons:”

“Come On Kiddo, Find Those Books for Me”

Mary Smith never took a formal internet lesson. She always said, “Barney wants me to learn! He says we can get special deals to Atlantic City! One of these days, I’m going to sign up with Lorraine for a lesson with you, dear.” But she never did. Once, I asked Barney about taking internet lessons himself: “When I retired thirty years ago, they were just starting with the computer. So I have no interest.” I asked what he is interested in: “I like sports.” I told him the internet is brimming with sports information. Barney scoffed, “I’ll read it in the papers.”

Mary did learn how to play solitaire over the internet and she learned very quickly in one demonstration that lasted no more than a few minutes. “So I just click this thing and keep it down and roll the thing to bring the card where I want it” was how she summed up our solitaire lesson and that was all there was to it. Playing solitaire in the late afternoon became part of her usual routine. Mary usually stopped off at the Lounge on her way back from bingo at Immaculate Conception or Epiphany Churches around 4:00 most days to play solitaire on the computer and review the days’ events with her friends until the Lounge closed at 5:00. She would walk into the Lounge, pushing her shopping cart, and bellow, “Where’s my gang?” Then she would sit herself in front of a free computer and play solitaire.

Sometimes, when my list of “victims” was finished, and I was still working with Heidi, Mary would ask me to buy books for her. She did not want to try to use the computer herself. “I never had to type; I don’t know how,” she told me, “I worked in the office on a contometer—I did figures. I didn’t type. We’d send all the magazines to the stands.” I tried to explain that there is more to using the computer than typing, but Mary brushed me off saying, “Come on, kiddo, find those books for me.” Mary was standing next to me while I sat in a chair, but she is so tiny we were at eye level.

From her purse, Mary produced a folded up page from the Sunday New York Times Book Review, an ad for the Mystery Book of the Month Club. “I always buy hardcovers!” she exclaimed, “Let me show you why.” Mary rummaged through her shopping cart, pulled out a P.D. James book and opened it. “See, I can’t read between the cracks! You know, with a paperback, the binding gets broken if you open the book all the way. And I have to open it flat; otherwise I can’t read those words by the binding. So that’s why I say I can’t read between the cracks! It always gets a big laugh!” We looked up different titles she had circled in the advertisement: “When is the next James Patterson coming out? Can I order it ahead?” Her eyes quickly scanned as I scrolled down the list of books. “No, not that James Patterson. I don’t read his stuff.” A Depends undergarment ad flashed onto the screen: “How do you like that? How does the computer know an old lady is on it? They sure are smart!”

We ordered her one hundred and fifty dollars worth of mysteries and thrillers. “Look at that, I get the free shipping!” she enthused, “Barney’s going to pay for these! He didn’t know what to get me for our anniversary—it’s our sixty-third, so you can imagine he’s running out of ideas!-- so I said, ‘Beth’s going to order me some books

from the computer, that can be my gift' Oh," she said, rummaging through her shopping cart, "Here's some candy for you. Barney said, 'give these to Beth.' He's very thoughtful like that."

From time to time, when Barney had yet another melanoma removed and Mary needed to stay nearby, she liked to hang around while I was giving internet lessons. One day she jammed her shopping cart in the Lounge door, the pink rhinestone angel pin on her shoulder sparkling: "I came for you! I brought the cheesecake!" A slice of cheesecake was on a beautiful china plate, decorated with blue and white flowers. "I'm giving you my dessert plates! They're from Denmark! Georg Jensen carries them! Bit by bit, I'm giving everything away!" She gave me an old Saks Fifth Avenue box with the plates inside, wrapped in paper towels.

Weeks after that, on another day at the Lounge, Mary interrupted my lesson: "Do you like machos [sic]? Carmen's daughter works at a Mexican restaurant and she gave us these machos to go."

"Thank you," I said and took some chips while my internet student glared at Mary.

Mary zipped away, then returned with a glass of water for me, "Here's something to wash down the machos. They have good beer there too, Mexican beer. What do you call it, Borona? I should have brought you a beer!" She laughed merrily. Of course, my internet student was annoyed.

Mary sat before a free computer and double clicked on the solitaire icon. "Everybody comes in and sees me on solitaire and they say, 'You must be some kind of expert!' And I say, 'Oh yeah, sure!'"

Carmen came by, and watched Mary play solitaire, hanging over her shoulder: “Red ten on black jack. Black nine on red ten.” Mary leaned forward in the chair, squinting at the screen. When she had trouble getting the mouse to move on screen, she pushed the keyboard aside and slid the mouse along the tabletop, sometimes moving it behind the monitor.

“Oh ho ho!” said Mary, “I have it made.”

They gossiped about the bingo players at Immaculate Conception, which I strained to hear, as I focused on my lesson. Within a few moves, Mary finished the game. The cards on the screen made a swirling pattern. “Look,” chortled Mary, “they rejoice!”

Helen Cleary’s Lessons:

“The Fastest Half Hour of the Day”

Helen took lessons sporadically, only ten lessons over the course of two and a half years. She told me she has a home computer, a hand-me-up from one of her grandchildren: “I turn it on, I turn it off, I don’t do anything else with it. I know I have AOL, my son did it for me. Sometimes he helps me with it. But he’s always in a hurry; I understand—he’s busy. Everybody’s busy.” Her bright blue eyes twinkled as she spoke though her voice had a tone of frustration. “It’s just when you know nothing that everybody seems like a whiz kid.” Helen, though, *was* a whiz kid on the computer compared to the other ladies. She was a quick learner and was able to retain much of what she learned from lesson to lesson, intermittent as they were.

During our first lesson, I assisted Helen in retrieving her email on the Lounge computers through AOL. Her eyes darted around, taking in the steps, her lips pursed in

concentration. Occasionally she whispered to herself, repeating my instructions. “Just one gentle click. Now enter my screen name. Now press tab. Now type in my password.” I helped her email her other son who lives in North Carolina. She typed: “I sent you an email last week. Why didn’t you call me to let me know you got it? PLEASE call me.” She said to me, “Maybe that’s a big mistake to put please in capitals but I’m going to keep it that way!”

Helen opened another email from a friend—it was a chain letter, some sentimental thing about a little boy and a fireman. She read it and said to me, “Clara doesn’t know I only have twenty-five minutes! We talk on the phone all the time so I told her, please! Stop! Chain letters were very popular in the Depression, if you don’t do this or that, then you’re going to have bad luck. I always threw them away. Why waste the postage sending them out?” Then she clicked to read an email from a daughter-in-law and it was another chain letter, this one about God’s love: “Oh please,” she exclaimed with disgust, “I mean, enough is enough! How do I get rid of this thing?”

Once Helen signed up for a lesson but did not show, and the next time I saw her, she whispered to me: “Bleeding ulcer.” She grasped my arm. “I had three transfusions.” Helen showed me the bruises on her arm, tapping it three times, in her nervous jittery way. “I was three days in and three days out. Don’t tell anybody.” She patted my arm and gave it a pinch, darting her head around to see if anyone heard.

Helen was often at the computers, playing solitaire. “I like it,” she told me, “It helps to pass the time.” Often she and Mary played solitaire while chatting, never looking at each other but at the cards on the screen as they gossiped.

But when Helen took a lesson all she wanted to do was retrieve her email. "I can't be bothered with anything else." It frustrated her that she found the log in process to email so complicated: "I tried the other day here by myself and I couldn't get in!"

During one typical lesson, I watched her go through the steps, which she did without a problem. Helen read her email with ease and yelled over to one of the bridge players, "Gloria, I got your email!"

Gloria got up from her game to come over and look at it on the screen, "Oh, great! You got my email!"

"Yes," I said with some weariness, "that's how it goes. You send it, she gets it."

Helen's daughter-in-law, the same one who sent the "God is love" chain email sent a link to enter Home and Garden Network's "Win-a-Dream-House-in-Florida" contest. I guided Helen in opening up the link and we checked out the interactive house tour: "The summer kitchen! I don't even cook in my own kitchen, what do I need a summer kitchen for?" she grumbled, "Why did she send this to me? I don't want to live in Florida."

Then Helen clicked on the rules of the contest and read about how much the tax would be on the property. "You know, when you read the fine print, you see that there's nothing to win here. This house would be a burden. Look at that one point four million dollar house, who can afford the upkeep?" Helen grimaced and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly. "You have to be shrewd. Always two steps ahead of everybody else and then you'll be all right."

Our time was up. "That's the fastest half hour of the day!" Helen exclaimed. She took my face in her hands and gave it a squeeze and a pat. "You're a sweet kid!"

Social Dynamics: Both Positive and Negative

Lorraine left early on Thursdays when I gave internet lessons in the afternoon so I would visit with her in the mornings. One day, she looked exhausted: "It's a fucking zoo in here," she said, her usual complaint, "They are fighting over the computers and I don't know, something's wrong with that one and they're supposed to send someone over from the office to fix it."

I witnessed these fights myself; sometimes I was in the middle of them. When Mary and Helen came to the Lounge to play solitaire, they did not want to wait for the computers. They would grow impatient quickly, trying to intimidate other ladies to leave.

Mary said loudly, "Each is supposed to be on for half an hour."

"If they're not more considerate, they need to sign in," Helen griped.

"They don't give a damn about anyone else, that's all there is to it!"

Once, Helen confronted one woman, who was often on the computers, obsessively checking her email. "You have been on for a long time now!"

"That's not true; I just got here!" she retorted.

"No, what's fair is fair! You spend half the day here; God only knows what the hell you're doing!" Mary was standing behind Helen, ready to chime in. The woman left in a huff.

"Come on," Helen said to Mary, "Let's play solitaire."

Another time, while I was giving lessons, I fell behind in the schedule. Doris, one of the bridge players came to me for her lesson, but I was not ready for her and asked her

to wait. But one of Doris' bridge-playing friends protested: "It's not fair! Each one is scheduled for a certain time! They should keep to the schedule. People have places to go. I am very upset about this! I will *so* make a fuss!" Her voice rose in volume. My student, who happened to be Heidi, stayed put. We tried to ignore the bridge lady but the complaining continued: "The other one should have to leave. It's Doris' turn. Who does that dame think she is..." she said, referring to Heidi, who slumped nervously in her chair.

Finally, Mona, the head bridge player who is in charge of the Lounge when Lorraine is not in, grabbed her walker and shuffled over to get into the mix. I asked Mona to make the call what to do. She decided that Doris should have her lesson and so Heidi put on her coat and left.

Lorraine called me at home a day later to clear up the matter. She told me that I was in charge when giving internet lessons, and I should tell them that just as a doctor's office can run behind schedule, so could I. "They're real ball busters," Lorraine said, "Don't let them push you around."

Heidi stayed wary of the bridge ladies, who, of course, did not approve of the occasional chattering and mayhem from the computers. When we visited a site about klezmer music and clicked on a music sample, Heidi could not enjoy listening to it. Nervous from the glares of the bridge players, she whispered, "I guess we'd better go before they throw us out."

But sometimes the internet contributed to lively conversation when the usually shy and retiring Heidi laughed along with Mary and Helen as they played solitaire and

chatted. During one of Heidi's internet lessons, I guided her to People.com to look at celebrity photos and this funny exchange resulted:

Heidi: Cher! Oh, look at her! Oh, she's horrible!

Mary leaned over to look at Heidi's computer screen: What are you, sailing or coasting or whatever they call it?

"Surfing!" I said.

Heidi: Look at Jane Fonda!

Mary: I don't like her!

Heidi: Why?

Mary: Because she went to Hanoi, in that war.

Helen: She wouldn't have gone if she knew you weren't going to like her anymore!

Heidi: Oh, look at this dress on Jennifer Lopez!

Mary: It's down to her pippet!

"What's the pippet?" I asked.

Mary and Heidi laughed: The bellybutton.

Heidi asked Mary: How do you know that?

Mary: Oh, I have a lot of junk in my head!

"Is that Yiddish?" I asked.

Heidi: Yes, but we say poopet—Litvak Jews say poopet.

The woman who always came into the Lounge looking for coffee after the coffee machine was closed up hovered over us. "You win any money on this thing?"

Mary said, "No! We're just playing solitaire!"

Heidi was clicking her way through the celebrity photos: Oh why do they dress so awful?

Mary: It's for attention! They all want attention!

Helen: I want attention and I'm not getting it

Mary: That's because you're not showing your pippet!

Mona yelled from her bridge table, "Ladies, finish up because I'm tired and ready to lock up!" She mumbled to the bridge players, "Can you believe they're looking at dresses?!"

Helen shrugged her shoulders. "You heard what the big shot said." She gave me a pat and a pinch on the arm.

Mary giggled, "OK, OK, she wants us out of here."

Memoir Stimulated by the Internet

The internet allowed me to continue "The Memoirs" with Mary and Heidi. Heidi, in particular, enjoyed the web site forgotten-ny.com, lovingly maintained by a fellow by the name of Kevin Walsh who documents old signs, cobblestone streets and many other details of bygone New York. During one lesson, she clicked with confidence on "Movie Theatres in the Bronx" and began a reverie while looking at the images:

"Oh, the Luxor—we used to go there all the time. Oh my God! Look at that, 170th Street and Sheridan —ai ai ai! I used to live on 165 Street, oh it was beautiful. Oh the Ascot—they used to show foreign films all the time. Oh this was such a lovely place. This was an all Jewish area."

Helen was playing solitaire and teased Heidi, saying, “What are you doing, your thesis on the Bronx? This one, that’s all she cares about is the Bronx.”

Heidi ignored Helen and continued: “Oh, the Paradise, this is what I was waiting for. They had bird cages with live birds. The ceiling looked like the sky with clouds in the day and stars at night. It was the most beautiful place! You can’t imagine...”

I guided Heidi to the Bronx Historical Society web site and she read an article about the architecture of Bronx apartments. This stimulated a long-buried memory for her: “We used to have apartments that had a dryer up on the ceiling of the kitchen—clotheslines in rows on the ceiling with a little pulley so you could pull it down and get your clothes up there.” She drew a little picture of it in my notebook.

One day, Mary told me about Barney’s boss at the Daily News, Joseph Medill Patterson. “I’m sure he’s on the computer there.” I did a search for his name, and indeed, a photo of Captain Patterson is on the Arlington National Cemetery web site. “That’s him! That’s him! Look, Helen! Such a handsome, generous man. His chauffeur gave us a ride to our wedding. He had a house on the Hudson and we went to parties with all the stars there—the mayor, the governor, even Loretta Young was there. I saw John Garfield, Marilyn Monroe. Hedda Hopper was there and I wanted to ask for Monroe’s autograph but Hopper told me to come back later. He gave Barney raise after raise after raise. One week Captain Patterson gave him a raise and then the next, the other boss gave him another raise! Patterson said, ‘Oh the hell with it, let’s give Barney another raise!’ They all loved Barney.”

Mona glared over at us from her bridge game. “OK, everybody—I’ve had it! Clear out! Beth, get away from that computer!”

I saluted Mona and accompanied Mary and her shopping cart across First Avenue to Adriatic Restaurant. We each had a slice of pizza and Mary continued to tell me about Captain Patterson.

Chapter 4:

Everybody Gets to Do Whatever She Wants to Do

While I discussed the physical changes of aging in chapter one, and have illustrated in the subsequent chapters what it is to be an elderly white middle-class StuyTown woman learning memoir writing and the internet, still I cannot speak for “the other.” There is no way I can know what it is to be old. It is a mystery: the tail end of the aging journey.

In chapter one I merely touched on the field of gerontology because I wanted to foreground the ladies themselves; now at the end, I will discuss in depth the many facets of aging and old age. Anthropologists Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon discuss “border crossings” when doing ethnographic research, but for me it’s been a catapult across the decades. Despite how much my ethnographer’s eye focused on the learning the ladies experienced and their relationship to literacy as a positive force in their lives, I could not ignore the great unknown that the ladies will face sooner rather than later: death. Kathleen Woodward writes with blunt force: “Advanced old age is a trial. It not only represents death, it is close to death and in due time, will be inhabited by death” (19).

During the course of my research, I witnessed the ladies in bereavement and experienced their fragility and vulnerability: Heidi’s brother-in-law died, Helen’s favorite cousin died. Debilitation and death also struck Senior Lounge regulars I knew. Mary’s friend Zelda got pneumonia and died within a week. Another fixture at the Lounge, Otto, who would sit on the couches all day long, died of a heart attack at the Polish coffee shop Christine’s—his head fell into his mushroom barley soup. Gloria’s husband Fred, an avid bridge player, had a stroke and died. It was one thing for the

ladies to mourn all over again for those dead relatives and friends in their memoirs; it was another for them and me to experience the deaths of several of their friends during the course of my research.

“You remember Ann, don’t you? Ann Schmidt?” Mary asked me one day while she was playing solitaire on the internet.

“Yes,” I replied, “How is she?”

“She died! They buried her last week. Oh, she was miserable—she couldn’t do anything anymore. She was so unhappy.”

I gave Mary my condolences, awkwardly. The news of Ann’s death was a shock to me, even though I knew her for only a brief time. I thought of her bright blue eyes, her ankles swollen to the size of my thighs and how I helped her maneuver her walker home, to the apartment building across the way from the Lounge. I took comfort that the memoir group at least had given her some pleasure.

“You know,” Mary went on, “it used to be the five of us: me, Catherine, Carmen, Ann and Helen—but Catherine, she’s had it, she don’t go out no more, Ann has passed, Helen says she’s going to a retirement home. So now it’s just going to be me and Carmen. You know, Barney used to call us the Big Five. We did everything together; it was so much fun.”

As Mary told me about the demise of the Big Five, her wrinkles sat heavily on her face. Not long after this conversation, her best friend Carmen had a stroke. Carmen was away from the Lounge for weeks and weeks, busy with speech and physical therapy. When she returned, Carmen was moody and nervous, covering her half-paralyzed mouth with her hand when she talked.

Heidi, Mary and Helen are all survivors, as Myerhoff called the participants in her study. They have survived into old age, losing many loved ones along the way. Both Helen and Mary are the last alive of their siblings. Their husbands are dead. Heidi and Mary are the last speakers of their home languages: Yiddish and Lithuanian. Myerhoff quotes psychologist Robert J. Lifton, who studied Holocaust survivors: "Any experience of survival—whether of large disaster or intimate personal loss...involves a journey to the edge of the world of the living" (25). The ladies have made the return trip many times.

When my father died, they gave me a lot of comfort. It was familiar territory for them but the first crushing death in my life, other than my grandparents. Helen put her hands over mine and gave them a squeeze: "In time you will deal with the loss," she said, her face serious. But Heidi spoke more frankly, "You never really get over it. Your life becomes a little sadder. What I wouldn't give to have my husband here with me now."

Mary has been to the edge of the living with many friends and family, but to her extreme good fortune, her husband Barney is well. Still, thoughts of death are not far from her mind: "That August before September 11th, I was on the Atlantic City trip with the Lounge and you know how you used to see the Twin Towers from New Jersey, after going through the Lincoln Tunnel? I remember looking at the Twin Towers, thinking that would be the last time I'd see them. I was thinking that maybe I was going to die soon; I just had a feeling about it. And I still can't get over it that they're gone and I'm still here."

Longevity can be a mixed blessing. At age sixty-four, May Sarton wrote, "Old age can be a very rich time, and it is surely always an adventurous stage in growth,

requiring immense courage and spirit.” (in Pearsall 229). Almost twenty years later, after a debilitating stroke, she was interviewed by the University of New England medical school about old age and wrote of the experience, “this left me free to tell how awful it is and I was happy to do it” (At Eighty-Two 341). Sarton was deeply depressed at her physical limitations and discomforts: “Of course I do not want to die, although death seems to be the only solution to my problem at present....I seem to be totally absorbed now in my body and what it is doing and this is miserable” (333).

For a satisfying old age, good health is a must. The ladies are able to enjoy their leisure time and freedom because they are well. Once illness or disability strikes, their time and bodies are no longer their own but belong to a never-ending stream of long waits for doctor’s appointments and tests. Cruikshank observes that “the old with serious health problems gain status by having them...A sentence that begins with ‘my doctor says’ is a status marker...It links the old person to culturally valued workers and institutions. It announces participation in an important world” (37). However at the Senior Lounge, whose members pride themselves on their nonchalant love of activity and freedom, such talk is frowned upon. Ladies with health issues withdraw from the Lounge rather than talk about their health problems. It is important to the ladies to maintain a façade of good health. Those that allow themselves to talk about health issues soon seem to become their problems, to be identified and pitied as “the one with breast cancer” or “the one with diabetes.” The ladies prefer to suffer in silence, whether it is their physical health that concerns them or their mental health. The fear of Alzheimer’s alone is very strong, enough to create its own anxiety.

The Fruit of Old Age: Leisure

Yet what fascinates me about the ladies and also makes me envious of them is their abundance of leisure time. It is this factor that makes old age, as Baba Copper wrote, “a time of adventure.” As long as they stay healthy, their time is their own. They play bingo, take day trips to Atlantic City, do volunteer work, go to the theatre, attend classes in everything from line dancing to mosaics, and read novels. They have strong friendships with other women; most of their husbands died years ago and they exist in an all-female world filled with chatting, gossip, and teasing. Having been retired from work for fifteen to twenty years and having long passed through the “social judgment” phase of aging in which women despair at how they are judged for the physical changes that aging brings (Sontag), the ladies of the Senior Lounge have adapted to the freedom and pleasure that comes with ample free time coupled with financial security and good health.

Their lives, when they are not taken up by health concerns, are completely without particular responsibilities. Mary, Helen and Heidi’s parents lived long lives and they have had many role models for this time of life. For the most part, their social network is embedded in their own age group. Margaret Cruikshank writes that “old women face restrictive and distorting stereotypes of grandmother, hag or spinster (138). But that is only from outsiders. Amongst themselves, although there are deeply set cliques of friends, these stereotypes do not exist. They are still “girls” even though they do not shy from the label “old.”

With that designation comes the right to do whatever they want to do, when and how they want to. While athletic activities are no longer feasible for them, many social activities are. As Mary told one of my students in an email, “When I wake up in the

morning, it all depends on what I want to do. Maybe I'll go to bingo at Immaculate Conception or maybe I'll go to the Stein Center for a movie. Sometimes I go to lunch with my friend Carmen to a Mexican restaurant where her granddaughter works and we have machos [sic] and beer."

Mary's description gives us a clear illustration of what leisure is. Leisure is defined by Winnifrith and Barret in The Philosophy of Leisure as "the goal of human life—life lived to its fullest" (9-11) which means something different to each person. James Murphy describes the various conditions of leisure: at its heart is freedom – freedom from producing income and the free use of one's time; therefore, leisure is a marker of class status; it is also anti-utilitarian. Leisure is an end in itself and like art is characterized by self-expression and self-fulfilling satisfaction. The field of Leisure Studies examines leisure in all its forms, amongst all age groups and populations—everything from tourism to sports and recreation. Activity seems to be inherent in ideas about leisure although leisure also implies the freedom to do absolutely nothing but relax.

Cruikshank posits that leisure as it is understood to be for elderly Americans has social control, rather than freedom, as its main characteristic. What she calls "prescribed busyness" is what society expects from people of all ages, including the old. We all must profess to keeping busy. Heidi and Helen feel the pressure to be and appear busy: they constantly make comments about how busy they are, how filled up their schedules are with activities. "I've been so busy, with the volunteer work at St. Vincent's, the Shakespeare class; I'm never in the apartment alone..." Helen told me. Heidi would often complain, "I never know when I'm coming or going these days; I'm so busy."

Perhaps this busyness masks loneliness or a fear of being alone with one's thoughts—certainly, it seems to help alleviate their anxieties.

Mary, however, embraces what Cruikshank calls “contented idleness” (164). Mary does not feel the need to “keep busy” by doing socially sanctioned activities—she does whatever she wants. Her whole life has been leisurely: while she worked at various jobs, Mary often took long vacations, visiting friends for months at a time. Her childless marriage to Barney could be characterized as a true friendship and partnership. They have always done almost whatever they have wanted to do, individually and as a couple, without guilt or need to explain themselves. They are perfectly comfortable in their skins, feeling no social pressure to stay active and yet they do because that is what they enjoy.

Mary and Barney are examples of what psychologist Suzanne Ouellette calls “personality hardiness:” they have always had control over their own lives, were committed to their work and continue to be committed to social activities and relationships. Mary and Barney seem to view stress as a challenge rather than a threat, another aspect of “personality hardiness.” They have adapted to their advanced old age while seeming to have stayed the same as they’ve always been: full of laughter, good times, and generosity. Cruickshank observes: “the growth inducing possibilities of contented idleness disappearing from childhood and unattainable by most workers will increasingly be found only among the old” (164). But many old people may not know what/how to do with it because they are so used to the pressure to keep “busy.”

Cruikshank suggests that spirituality should be explored as an option to busyness. “A good antidote to the busy ethic is an awareness of spiritual values” from organized religion to private practice to “inner awareness of meaning that transcends the ordinary”

(Cruikshank 165) The ladies, however, are secular and pragmatic. Exploring and expressing spirituality are not interests of theirs. Heidi identifies as Jewish but only observes the major holidays. Mary and Helen both are Catholic and attend Mass regularly but their faith is not a topic of conversation for them. Their observances seem to be more a matter of superstition and routine. When she thought she lost her house keys, Helen said, "I'm praying to Saint Anthony to find them" and she would never miss Mass on a Sunday. But exploring the role faith has in her life is unthinkable to Helen.

Training in carefree pleasure may be a better bet for elders to break out of the pressure to be busy, especially for elderly women, who have been care-givers all their lives. Some women may have to learn how to have fun. May Sarton wrote: "A good thing about being eighty-one is that I can say that I do not want to do something and simply not do it instead of feeling I must show I can do it. It no longer matters" (63). When elders realize that they no longer have the societal pressures of conformity and competition on them, true relaxation and enjoyment of leisure can happen.

The ladies' leisure and good health are outcomes of their good fortune. Cruikshank points out, "Although personal responsibility undeniably plays some role, being white and middle-class are powerful predictors of the late life health and well being of Americans" (3). Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Sunstein in Fieldworking, their guide to classroom ethnographies, write that there are two positions from which we observe people in action: the fixed positions of race, age, gender, etc--those factors which cannot be changed-- and the subjective positions of self-representation and choice. There are the fixed positions that we are born into: gender, race/ethnicity, class, generational cohort and the ones that become fixed as we age: our physical and mental

health, our geographical location. As we age, there is less that we can control of our situations. Mary, Helen and Heidi are lucky that their lives have been such that they are in an ideal position in their old age.

The ladies are all solidly middle class and have no financial worries. They experienced the American Dream of their parents immigrating, working hard and seeing their children rise above their own class. Their skin color and ethnic communities ensured that they would have the education and the opportunities for advancement. Heidi grew up working-class, but thanks to a secure job with the New York City Board of Education and careful savings, she rose to the middle class. Helen's children have furthered the American Dream by rising above their mother—they are either doctors or lawyers, with upper middle class salaries and lifestyles. The ladies have a deep sense of white entitlement, embedded in StuyTown culture, which ensures that their needs are met. They are not shy about standing up for themselves; they expect to get what they want.

Their gender also helps to guarantee a positive experience of old age. With the biological fact that women live longer than men, the years that women outlive their husbands give them the opportunity to express themselves as individuals, rather than as a unit. As Cruikshank writes, "old women don't have to defer, serve or attend to men" (19). Helen and Heidi are both widows and Helen often commented on the freedom of widowhood: "You know something? I raised three boys plus my husband and all that TV—baseball, football, basketball. When they had it on, you'd think they'd gone deaf. It was like nothing else existed except the sports on the TV. I don't miss that at all!" Their freedom from caring for and catering to men contrasts sharply with Mary's situation. Despite the fact that Mary and Barney's marriage has allowed for much independence,

when Barney is getting treated for melanoma, Mary is limited in her activities. "The other girls are going here and there but I have to be around for Barney. He's taking a nap now. This new treatment is making him tired," she told me one summer's day while playing solitaire over the internet.

Theories of Aging

Each one of the ladies, although she has already gone through the process of aging to the point where she is undeniably old, is still aging, still must adjust to changes in her life. The theories of aging shed light on their challenging situation. The activity theory (Lemon, Bengston and Peterson) states that those who keep busy age best, exemplifying the "prescribed busyness" that Cruikshank laments. Busyness fulfills our social needs, which, along with our psychological needs, remain the same throughout life, despite the many losses of aging. Continuity theory (Atchley) holds that we are all essentially the same throughout our lives and that "the old make adaptive choices in an effort to preserve ties with their own past experiences" (Kart and Kinney 216). Familiar life-long patterns are preserved as much as possible. Cummings and Henry's theory of disengagement posits that we withdraw from the world as we age in preparation for death. Old age is a "mutual withdrawal" between the elderly person and the social system (Kart and Kinney 215). This process of disengagement, Cummings claimed, is both inevitable and universal. Erikson's developmental theory takes the more hopeful view that we continue to grow and develop throughout the life span. In old age, we reconcile with the past and are thus prepared for death. The ladies exemplify the activity, continuity and

developmental theories all at once—and only when their health becomes such that they cannot go out of the house any more are they then forced to disengage.

How people should experience old age is the subject of several approaches to aging. Cruikshank advocates for what she calls “comfortable aging” rather than models of productive aging (Morrow-Howell et al) or successful aging (Rowe and Kahn) which both stress elders’ potential for social and economic contributions to society.

Comfortable aging, instead, is a more personal approach, looking at aging and the state of old age as a time for leisure and personal growth in which the aged pay attention and live in the present moment with an emphasis on pleasure. The ladies, for the most part, are aging comfortably. They do not lament their loss of status in the greater social structure; they have created their own society centered on the Senior Lounge and their friends and activities, including learning activities, which give them pleasure.

Lifelong Learning: Elderlearning and Educational Gerontology

An abundance of leisure time offers ample opportunity for what educators call “lifelong learning.” Learning does not stop at high school or college graduation, but continues throughout one’s life, in many forms and activities from classes to everyday experience. For the ladies, learning is a leisure activity for which they have the time, the interest and the need—these ladies are very practical as well. They saw quite clearly the benefits of reading health information or the weather report online: information on demand and easy to retrieve once one knows what to do. Perhaps that’s why the memoir workshop was not a success. Examining the self and learning about oneself is not something the ladies perceive as practical. However, they did learn about each others’

lives as well as reflect on their own. One of the main avenues of learning—reading—has been entrenched in their lives and so too has a strong relationship to learning. Despite the fact that their involvement in formal education ended at the high school senior or college freshman level, the ladies have a high level of print literacy that has been developed throughout their lives and they have always held learning in high regard. Their involvement in learning activities creates opportunities for social interaction, which may be the most important aspect of lifelong learning—its ability to relieve loneliness and boredom.

As with everything else, the basic circumstances of the ladies' lives support learning activities. In their book Elderlearning, Lois Lamdin and Mary Fugate write “the influence of factors like age, health, income, and previous education predispose someone towards further learning” (ix). Working from the developmental theory of aging, they argue that today with more and more people living healthily into their eighties, there is opportunity for “continued intellectual growth and development over a longer time span than ever before envisioned” (2). This is critical for “the health and well being of older men and women” (37). Lamdin and Fugate assert: “The linear life plan, in which education is clustered in the first two decades of life, no longer makes sense; education is needed through the lifespan to help us accommodate changes in the nature of our work, navigate passages from one stage of development to another, accommodate new personal and professional situations and respond to the challenge of successful aging” (60).

The literature of educational gerontology supports Lamdin and Fugate. Malcolm Knowles asserts that the mission of education throughout life is to give learners the “competence to engage in lifelong self-directed learning.” Late life learning is not only

self-directed but as David Peterson observes, it should also be self-paced, adjusted for individual differences. Harry Moody emphasizes that educators need to “find ways to use the students’ own life experience to enhance the learning process . . . We will need to pay the closest attention to how older people use their life experience in the learning process in order to build on the strengths of experience in old age” (in Sherron and Lumden, 29). Moody advocates for a shift in American culture from a limited view of human possibility to a culture of lifespan development in which “memories and lessons of the past are not forgotten and where hope for a common future is transmitted to the next generation” (260).

Educational gerontology also links learning to creativity. Eduard Lindeman, defining adult education in 1926, wrote that it “presumes that the creative spark will be kept alive throughout life” (55). Dean Keith Simonton enumerates the elements of creativity: divergent thinking, tolerance for ambiguity, and openness to experience (in Cole et al). These factors also predispose someone to further learning. The ladies, however, do not view creativity as a part of their lives, now or in the past. They take a modest view of their abilities and talents. However, with an awareness of their creativity, older people can recover “their identity as culture bearers and culture creators” (Moody 259).

Lamdin and Fugate created the “Elderlearning Survey” which was distributed across the country to various Elderhostel, community, and college-sponsored programs. The results indicated that the primary reason why elders seek out learning activities is the joy of learning itself. The second reason is that they want to meet new people. Most preferred to learn through reading and taking classes. But Lamdin and Fugate do not

limit their concept of elderlearning to organized activities; they divide the possibilities into self-directed and formal learning.

The ladies frequently experienced two types of self-directed learning: playing cards and reading. While I often watched them play cards and played with them several times, I rarely saw them reading. Sometimes they would read magazines on the couches or look through the books on the shelves while waiting for lessons with me, but most of what I know of the ladies' reading was self-reported. Books were a frequent topic of conversation and they were eager to discuss the novels they read.

Playing Kings in the Corner:

One summertime day, Mary shoved her wagon to open the Senior Lounge door and called out, "Where's my gang?" Soon Helen arrived and the rest trickled in to play the card game Kings in the Corner. I joined them. Half the time, they were talking about someone they label "she" and the "she" seemed to shift to different people from time to time:

Carmen put a red ten on a black jack and said, "She complain she want to lose weight."

"Yes, but she always eats my cheesecake! That's about five hundred calories right there!" Mary added, putting down the black nine and red eight.

"Yes, and she no take a little piece; she take a big piece" said Carmen as Catherine scrutinized the cards, then knocked the table, indicating that she was done with her move.

They quibbled over this perceived greediness until Helen said, “Where were we? Who’s turn is it?” and they laughed as they retraced the previous moves.

Mona, the head bridge player, made a disapproving face at the noise from her perch a few tables away. “Those bridge players,” Helen scoffed, “Always so serious. What do they say?—lighten up!”

“You tell ‘em, that’s the way!” Mary got up to go to the ladies’ room. When she was out of earshot, which didn’t take long, Helen said of Mary, “God love her, but she can talk.”

When Mary returned, she continued the banter, until with a black two on a red three and a red eight on a black nine, she won the game. Carmen marveled, “She always talking and still she’s always winning!”

Card games like Kings in the Corner are games of skill and those skills can constantly be developed and built upon. So while the ladies chat and gossip, there is also the challenge of developing a strategy and the strong competitive desire to win. Mary, invariably, wins. Although she is the oldest, Mary uses her chattiness as a tactic to make everyone think she isn’t paying attention until she lays out all her cards and wins the game. She’s been playing cards for a very long time, over seventy years, almost as long as Barney has been shooting craps.

Reading

The ladies tell me they find relief from the social whirl of the Lounge and the routines of their day in the quiet of the evening at home alone in their apartments, reading

novels and magazines. As long as their eyesight remains strong, reading soothes their nerves, quiets their minds and gives them opportunity for private reflection.

During one internet lesson, Heidi told me: "I feel terrible. The library was a mess today—no good books on the shelves. I must have a book to read. I read all night—all night long; I don't sleep much. After my husband died, at first I couldn't sleep at all, so I'd read. Now I'm up all night reading. One Danielle Steele book I reserved, the librarian said to me, "You know you're number seven hundred and fifty-two" and I said, "I'm in no hurry." When I feel low, I drown myself in my reading. Right now I'm reading Maeve Binchy. Circle of Friends. I'm reading till three in the morning."

Reading is a necessity for Heidi's well being.

I help Mary order books on Amazon whenever she runs out of titles to read. She orders five or six books at a time. "I spend a lot of money on books. I read a book a week or more! That's my vice. Atlantic City; that's my pleasure! Now I have to go home and finish that book I don't like."

"Do you always finish every book you start?" I asked.

"Sure! I have to find out who the murderer is!"

Helen makes lists of the characters in novels to help her memory. "I write it in the inside cover so if I see a name I don't recall, I can check the list." I used to see her sitting out on the benches on the Oval, reading in a spot of sunshine. She is never without a book in hand.

Although the National Endowment for the Arts study Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America, found that only thirty-six percent of those over the age of seventy-five had read a novel in the past year, this is not the case for the ladies of the

Senior Lounge. Reading, as long as their eyesight holds, is embedded in their everyday lives. All of the ladies who frequent the Lounge go through the bookcases to find new books and bring in ones they have finished. Reading has been a major leisure activity for them since childhood—it has been a comfort and a constant—while at the same time, reinforcing the skills of critical thinking and contemplation that they have been developing throughout their lives.

My Experience with the Ladies/Their Experience of Me

The learning activities I introduced to the ladies, memoir writing and the internet, were examples of formal learning. The internet lessons were set up by appointment and were individual, making for a scheduled organized activity. The memoir workshop also was scheduled for a particular time and day every week and the activities were meant to build upon each other week to week.

The ladies' choice to participate in these two formal learning activities had as much to do with me, the teacher, as it did with their interest in the activities. Heidi, Mary and Helen, who self-selected to participate as my case studies, did so for three reasons. At first, they were interested in me and my project because either I am or I look like, as Lorraine the Lounge director put it, "their own kind." I am Lithuanian, like Mary is, on my mother's side, and Irish, as Helen is, on my father's side—and Catholic which they both are. However, I am often taken for Italian or Jewish. Upon meeting for the first time, Heidi scrutinized my face: "Are you Jewish? . . . No? Oh, you look Jewish to

me.” White ethnic differences, which due to intermarriage mean little to my generation, are still important to them and serve as markers of identification.

Drawn first to my ethnicity, the ladies then were interested in how to learn to use the internet, so that they could keep up with the changing world, and they attended the memoir workshop to share their memories with each other and with me. Ruth Ray observes of memoirists: “Some have suggested that older women gravitate toward life story writing because it is part of their socially assigned role as “keeper of the family history” (12)—but the most active participants in “The Memoirs:” Mary, Heidi, Florence, Eva—are without children, without family. Perhaps they found in me an audience that had been lacking for them otherwise.

The ladies also wanted to help me with my research, which was generous of them and yet sometimes patronizing. Helen only participated in a minimal way, enough to help me but not enough to be truly engaged. She, who has the large family, had little interest in getting her life story down on paper but was one of the few who would write. Her internet lessons were likewise sporadic and essentially disinterested, although she learned quickly and was able to retain much of the “tricks” of the internet.

In some ways, the ladies as students resembled aspects of me as a student. Often, like Heidi, I was a model student, engaged, ready and willing to be led. But I also have a lot of Mary’s chatterbox tendencies and occasionally Helen’s drudgingly dutiful passive/aggressive style. So, I believe, besides the ethnic identification, the ladies may see aspects of themselves in me, as I see aspects of my personality in them. Perhaps Heidi connects to my seriousness, Mary to my extroversion, Helen to my shrewdness. Sometimes it was difficult to keep my ethnographer’s lens focused on their literacy

development because I would rather experience them as whole people. Frankly, I just wanted to be one of the girls and allow those generational barriers to slip away.

It is difficult to come up with definitive conclusions about the ladies' experience of literacy development. From Erikson, Lamdin and Fugate's perspective, people can and do develop throughout the life span. But at the end of the life span, we must change our assumptions about what development is. My research supports Angie Williams and John Nussbaum's assertion in their book Intergenerational Communication Across the Lifespan that late life development is "multidirectional....with both gains and losses, dependent on contextual factors with a great deal of individual variability" (68). Every internet lesson was completely new and different from the one before and yet the same, with repetition of the most basic maneuvers occurring over and over again. The cognitive changes of aging made for learning that did not follow a clear trajectory but leaped, meandered and sometimes stalled. The memoir class was likewise free-form, with fits and starts.

The ladies' brand of literacy is the old literacy of print—reading novels in the privacy of their own apartments. Their reading is a solitary, private, imaginative act. The memoir group and internet teaching brought an additional element of sociality to these new experiences of literacy. With the Internet, the combination of text and images made for a more social form of literacy. The ladies used the internet as a conversation piece, to provide subject matter and to frame their talk. As has been illustrated throughout, much of their conversation was about other people. Psychologist Robin Dunbar in his book Gossip, Grooming and the Evolution of Language writes that "around two thirds of all conversation is taken up with matters of social import" (4). While the

word gossip has a nasty ring to it, Ralph Rosnow reminds us “if people aren’t talking about people, it’s a signal that something is wrong, that we feel socially alienated or indifferent” (87). Looking at celebrity gossip on the internet brought Heidi together with Helen and Mary, for better or worse. It’s perhaps the New York City edginess that attracted me to Helen and Mary’s discourse style, while although Heidi is a native New Yorker, she was often shocked and appalled by their bluntness.

Lorraine, the Lounge director, developed a teaching style that is derived from this New York toughness and from seeing the ladies as hopeless gossips and busybodies. She advocated for what I will call a Show Biz theory of pedagogy, an approach to keep learners stimulated and “always wanting more.” All of Lorraine’s hard-hitting advice to me: “Drop them before they drop you! You gotta be tough with them, don’t let them push you around” makes for a pedagogy that is combative, teasing and sarcastic, much as the ladies are with each other. Bob Smith, who teaches the wildly successful Shakespeare class at the nearby Stein Center, also uses an alternately flirty and insulting style of Show Biz pedagogy to keep the ladies interested and stimulated. I could not do it, though. Much as I would have liked to, my personality is not consistently quick-witted enough to take on that persona with this population. I am too in awe of old ladies. I found, instead, that I developed a pedagogy that was indulgent of the ladies’ every whim with two central aspects to it: everybody gets to do whatever she wants to do and one can never have enough patience.

Everybody Gets to Do Whatever She Wants to Do

Much of the literature of composition and rhetoric advocates certain pedagogies, writing process or critical pedagogy for example, whereas what I have found working

with the ladies is that I cannot hold to any one ideology. I must be open and constantly reinvent my working relationship with them. With the memoir writing, I found myself acting more as a facilitator, which is what Lamdin and Fugate suggest the elderlearning teacher to be, setting things in motion and letting them go where they go. Most of the ladies did not want to write: they wanted to talk, so I did the writing—acting as their scribe. Revision would take place when I would type up what they talk/wrote and then give them the printed page—revision also took place unconsciously, when they would repeat the same story weeks later, and I would add in changes. Some wandered between my memoir workshop and a card game, some would pick fights about which is better, the Bronx or Brooklyn, some talked loudly to no one in particular—and swirling around at times haplessly in this mess was me. I could have no specific learning expectations or goals; I allowed myself to be pushed around. I realized the memoir group would only work if everybody did whatever she wanted to do. It was the same with the internet lessons—while I had the knowledge, the lesson went the way the student wanted and not the way I wanted. I followed their lead.

There's no more following the herd, no more taking orders for the ladies. May Sarton observed "in old age, we have greater freedom than ever before to be our true selves....People do not become less, but more themselves as they grow old." (in Pearsall 230) The troubles with cliques and in-fighting in the memoir workshop probably come out of that. Each of the ladies is through with being sweet and accommodating---each wants to make sure she gets her fair deal.

The ladies take continuity theory and stand it on its head: instead of adapting to changing circumstances, they adapted the new literacies of memoir writing and the

internet into their already held worldview. They changed the literacy rather than the literacy changing them. They related to the computer as if it were a television set and both Mary and Helen mostly use it for playing solitaire—a game that is as familiar to them as breathing. Their memoirs fit into their already culturally-sanctioned style of relating humor and good times. Only Heidi attempted to approach these new forms of literacy from a perspective unfamiliar to her.

One Can Never Have Enough Patience

Not only did I abdicate authority in the formal learning setting, but I had to muster more patience than I ever had before, more so for the internet lessons than the memoir group. My experience of patience came out of an understanding that the lack of practice, access and support made the ladies' learning process very arduous. With the internet lessons, many of the ladies, like Heidi, would only use the computer during a lesson with me. Heidi would never practice on her own and there was no one else to help her online. That was why each lesson resembled the first—even after two and a half years. Learning the internet was a major challenge for Heidi: "It's the age!" she replied when I asked why she was so fearful of the computer, "Years ago, I wasn't afraid to learn. Now it's the machines. First I was afraid of the machine itself, so I had to get over that. Now I'm afraid of doing something that will break it. But I love it! It's not easy, but it's very interesting."

Patience is compassion—in which one can empathize on a deep level with "the other." M.J. Ryan writes that it is "a combination of motivation (wanting to), awareness (paying attention to our inner landscape) and cultivation (practicing)" (7). But it's not

easy. As St. Augustine observed, patience must be exercised in both mind and body.

While explaining something for the four hundredth time to the same person, I would have to check myself. Sometimes I would feel the energy drain out of my body with boredom; other times I would feel an annoyance so intense that my eyes and teeth would ache. I found that my yoga practice helped me develop my patience, both with the ladies and myself. The guidance of Hatha Yoga—accept where you are today, do not compete with the self or anyone else, work at the edge of ease and effort—I applied these concepts to the ladies and this helped me to remain calm while working with them. They noticed and appreciated this. “I must say, I envy your patience,” Helen said to me one day after she eavesdropped on two hours’ worth of my internet lessons while playing online solitaire.

Patience may be a virtue, but not much is written about it, especially in terms of pedagogy. Although religions offer models of patience-- the Buddha and Job, for example--educators do not address it directly and merely assume that it is an essential factor in teaching. While I thought in chapter one what I was looking for was Freirean transformation of the ladies, now I see that what I’ve taken from Freire instead is his inclusion of patience in liberatory pedagogy. To “live the plenitude of the praxis” is to exercise love, humility, tolerance and patience in one’s teaching. This takes constant vigilance and awareness, easier said than done.

What the Future Holds

When the baby boomers become elderly, in another twenty years or so, and even more so when my “slacker” generation becomes old in another forty years or so, many predict that old age will be a very different experience from what it is now. Peter Laslett

in A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age describes a new model for the baby boomer generation, for which the ladies serve as a role model of sorts. The third age is retirement, which since it can now last for as long as thirty years, will be “a time of fulfillment through activities that give men and women both pleasure and a sense of their own worth” (32). The fourth age will be brief: illness, frailty, and dependence, followed by death in quick order. One’s life will be long and satisfying. The process of illness and death will be swift, rather than a series of debilitating illnesses which many elderly now experience.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Joseph Coughlin asserts “unlike its predecessors, this next generation of older adults (the baby boomers) grew up with constant improvements of technology and services” (in Russell). Russell in American Demographics observes “In the long run, the technological divide will shrink as Boomers replace older generations in the fifty-plus age group. They will insist on an active, productive, technology-assisted old age.” Kathleen Kelly, executive director of Family Caregiver Alliance, an online support group, says “we’re starting to see a new model of online social services that helps keep loved ones at home and out of institutions” such as online food ordering and delivery, pharmacy online ordering and delivery, setting up reminders on the computer to take medication, paying bills online as well as online chats and support groups. (in Setton). Coughlin founded Agelab, a partnership between industry, the university, and the community, to engineer innovative approaches and technologies to help older adults remain engaged members of society and predicts “gerontechnology will be huge” (in Fox).

Already, gerontechnological innovations are attracting the elderly. Oatfield Estates, an assisted living home in Oregon, opened in 2000 and is the country's first wired rest home. "Living spaces are outfitted with touchscreen-equipped PCs for surfing the Web, monitoring vital signs, and recalling names (tap a photo and up pops a personal profile). Computers are connected via Ethernet and everything from lighting dimmers to ceiling fans can be remote-controlled" (Fox). General Electric is developing a networked wireless motion detector called Home Assurance for caregivers of independent-living elderly to keep tabs on their charges and Intel Corporation also is developing a device to detect "environmental, behavioral and biological data ... signals from the device would prompt radio or television-issued reminders to eat, drink or take medication" (Fox).

Not only will technology be a vital aspect of elder's lives in the future, but it is predicted that memoir will also become more prominent and accepted as an activity. Howard McClusky, a founder of the field of educational gerontology, developed the concept of a "community of generations." "It is based on the assumption that, although separated by time and experience, each generation nevertheless has a common stake with other generations in relating the wholeness of the life-span of which it is a part" (72). Self revelation and examination has long been a socially acceptable part of Baby Boomers' lives. They will not have the private and modest attitude of the Senior Lounge ladies. Margaret Cruikshank posits "a social role for the old might be found in storytelling, reminiscence and life review" (47). This activity would join the generations together and hopefully create more attention and compassion for those near the end of the life span. James Birren predicts that in the near future: "Older people will be freely

mixing work, leisure, education, and personal growth, without regard for age, in new ways we can scarcely imagine today” (26).

The End

I stopped by the Lounge to visit with Lorraine six months after ending my study and she gave me an update: “The poetry on Fridays is doing okay, although now the teacher wants to start charging them for the lessons, and we’re starting a current events on Mondays—but you know, this one wants to do that, that one wants to do something else, the other one wants to do something completely different. It’s not easy with these people.” Lorraine often would make comments like this, as if to assure me that my troubles with the memoir workshop were the norm. Despite the success of the internet teaching, I still could not shake the mess of the memoir workshop. Every teacher wants every class to be a success.

As I was getting ready to leave, I smiled a hello to Hilda, who spends her days sitting on the couch reading or looking off into space, rarely talking to others.

“Didn’t you used to teach something here?” She asked me.

“The internet?”

“No, it was something else...we sat on the couches and talked...”

“The memoirs?” I recalled that Hilda did join us one meeting.

“Oh yes, that. I liked that.” She smiled, “Will you do it again?”

At least I left Hilda wanting more!

Epilogue:

“It’s My Life on the Machine!”

The Mousepads and Memoirs website (<http://www.newmedialab.cuny.edu/beth; see appendix>) was made from material collected during the memoir workshop and from individual meetings with Mary and Heidi. Andre Pitagna, the web developer at the Graduate Center’s New Media Lab, did the technical and design work as I watched over his shoulder. During the Spring of 2004, Andre and I spent every Thursday working on the site. We followed Hillary Browne’s guidelines for “Accessibility and Usability of Information Technology by the Elderly” using large font, a simple layout, and clear navigation buttons so that the ladies could easily access the site themselves. All the photos in Mary’s memoirs are her own, but Heidi refused any personal images on the site. To illustrate her memoirs, I combed the photo archives of the Old York Library at the Graduate Center with the assistance of curator Madelyn Kent. The New York Daily News generously allowed me to use photos free of charge and I also used images from other sites, all with permission.

While Andre and I were making the site, I showed its progress online to the ladies whenever I saw them at the Lounge. Mary scoffed that Heidi would not allow personal photos: “You really need the pictures! This is different from a book.”

“How so?” I asked.

“It’s on a TV, for goodness sakes!” She peered at the computer screen, at her memoirs. “It’s so nice to see it! You know, you can talk about your life, but it’s better to look at it! You see your whole life before your eyes! It’s all there for you to see---“

I had given Mary a printed copy of her site a few weeks before this conversation and she asked for another one because “My neighbor took it! She told me, ‘It’s so wonderful and we have so many questions!’ I told her, ‘Oh, you always want to look at my pictures, now you can read about it!’”

At the beginning of April, I showed both Heidi and Mary the near-completed Mousepads and Memoirs site. All I had to do was add their photos to the home page; but I was at a loss at how to represent Heidi when she didn’t want any photographs on the site. So I took a photo of her hand on the mouse but first, she held her hands up like a scrubbed surgeon for several minutes: “A photographer told me once to hold the hands up, so the blood moves into the veins and they won’t look so wrinkly,” she explained. Mary was wondering what photo to give me for the home page, until Carmen said, “Don’t use a picture from now, but from when you look good!” Mary then gave me a ten-year-old photo of her and Barney. “Don’t put a date on it,” Mary told me, “Let people think it’s us now.”

Also on the home page, I added an email address for readers to write questions and comments to Mary and Heidi. I explained to both ladies how people would be able to email them. Neither one, in two years of internet lessons, had been interested in email before this. I wrote down the email address for Heidi. “So they can dial this number and call me?” she asked. “No,” I explained, “they’ll write to you.”

Finally, the Mousepads and Memoirs site was complete and I said to Heidi one day before a lesson, “I have to show you the web site! It’s all done.”

Her eyes were huge; she hesitated to sit down in front of the computer. “What do you mean? I still don’t understand.”

As Mary played solitaire with Helen over her shoulder at one of the other computers, Heidi read her own memoirs: “Oh, my! Oh, my goodness! Look at all this!.....mmmm! Makes me feel nostalgic! Oh, I think this is good!”

Heidi clicked on Mary’s name to read her memoirs: “Oh, this is gorgeous! What beautiful pictures! This is funny! Mary, it sounds just like you.”

Mary chortled, “It is me! It’s my life on the machine!”

Helen moved from Mary to read over Heidi’s shoulder, “Mary, you remember so much!”

“Oh, I can remember much more,” laughed Mary, “but I’m not telling it all!”

I was happy to see them so delighted with the memoir web site. Heidi, however, had some criticisms of the images I selected to illustrate her memoirs. She hated the photo of the couple in the car illustrating the story of how she met her husband: “Those two are much older than we were at the time. Plus, you’d never wear a hat in the car—absolutely not!” Heidi also pointed out some errors: “It’s *whom*, not *who* there. It’s grammar you know. Grammar is important.”

Connecting the Ladies to My Students

During the Spring 2004 semester, I used class time at Queensborough Community College for my students to read the ladies’ online memoirs and email Heidi and/or Mary with questions and comments. The College is located in Bayside, an affluent section of Queens, near the Nassau County border. Founded in 1959, Queensborough was built on the grounds of what was a once golf course. The college space has quickly become crowded with buildings, but there are plenty of trees to lounge under and a traditional

quad to hang out on. Queensborough is known for its excellent liberal arts programs, as well as nursing, art, and new innovative programs like massage therapy.

The students at Queensborough are the most diverse in City University, as they live in the most diverse location in the United States. To attest to that, there is no dominant ethnicity at the College. Queensborough is almost evenly divided up among whites of Greek, Irish, Italian descent; American, African and Caribbean blacks; Chinese, Korean, and Filipino Asians; Hispanics from Colombia, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic; and another fifth who identify as “other” including students from Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran. Most Queensborough students are children of immigrants or immigrants themselves. They are also from diverse economic backgrounds: some Queensborough students are on full financial aid and cannot afford to buy their books, even with the aid of book stipend money; other students drive to campus in their own BMW SUVs. Most students work—younger ones work part-time jobs at Old Navy or Duane Reade drug stores; the many evening adult students work full-time in hospitals and offices.

I have been teaching full-time in the English department at Queensborough since Fall 2001 and my affectionate nickname for the College is “The Crazy Q.” I never know what is going to happen in the classroom: just as diverse as the student body is economically, ethnically, age-wise—so are they diverse in their attention to their coursework and in their academic preparedness. Many students are overloaded with work and family responsibilities and have difficulty managing their time to concentrate on their studies. Some students have their education as their sole focus and are fully engaged in all aspects of the College, both academic and social. There truly is no typical

Queensborough student, which makes the College an exciting place in which to teach and learn.

I was curious to see how the ladies, who represent the old white ethnic New York, and my students, who represent the new New York of immigrants from the Caribbean, Asia and South America, would connect. During class time, my students used College laptops to get on the Mousepads and Memoirs site. I introduced the site, giving the historical context of the memoirs. Yet many did not read it in terms of history.

Students could not keep quiet as they read—"Oh my God! She got beat with a shovel?" exclaimed Latisha as she read about Heidi's attack by Irish kids who thought she was cursing when she spoke Yiddish. "What? What?" asked Ohelisha, spinning around in her seat. They read together on Latisha's screen. In my freshman comp class, the students were in a particularly frisky mood and no one was reading, only skimming, looking at the photos and shouting out questions to me about how the ladies live now: "Do they live on their own?" "Does anyone help them out?" "Do they use walkers?" "Where are their families?" "How much do they gamble in Atlantic City?" Some students spoke of relatives or neighbors: "My aunt, she's 85 years old and she won't let anybody help her clean her apartment and it's so dirty but she thinks it's clean." One male student asked: "Where's the men?" which led us into a discussion of differences in how men and women age. Overall, the students seemed more interested in the ladies' lives today than in their memoirs. But some read quietly, absorbed in the stories of the past.

Every Thursday afternoon, when I saw the ladies for internet lessons, I helped Mary and Heidi access and answer their emails. Of the fifty-five students who read the

Mousepads and Memoirs site, twelve emailed the ladies with questions ranging from: “What was it like to live during World War II?” to “What would you say is the biggest change in your lifetime?” One student from Bangladesh wrote: “I read all information about you and found similarity with me and you...When I came here I had many problem with English.” For three Thursdays, I sat with Heidi and helped her answer the email from my students. Heidi was both excited and mortified to receive email. Mary came only on one Thursday—she was busy taking Barney to the VA Hospital one day and the other she was in Atlantic City. Heidi read each email and then typed a thoughtful reply, with technical assistance from me. Mary dictated her responses to me quickly; she never typed when she worked and does not know the keyboard. Of the twelve students who emailed the ladies, most did not answer their replies. Only two, Myriam Roche and Amelie Knight, developed a pen pal relationship with Heidi, much to Heidi’s delight. “I had a pen pal from Texas in high school,” Heidi told me. “I used to run to the mailbox to get her letters. But this is so much easier and faster!”

Amelie was a student in my evening Advanced Prose Writing class who lived in the Dominican Republic until she was eleven. Now twenty-three years old, she works full-time as a customer service representative in Long Island. She was very quiet and shy in class but always dutiful and cooperative. At the beginning of the semester, her writing was flat and seemed rushed, but as she grew more involved with her writing group, Amelie seemed to take herself more seriously as a writer and began to pay more attention to revising and deepening her work. By semester’s end, she was one of the stronger writers in the class.

The other student who developed an email relationship with Heidi and Mary, was Myriam, a thirty-one year old woman who immigrated to New York from Puerto Rico when she was twelve. She is a full-time student, mother to a four year old girl, and at the time, a mother-to-be. Laid off from her nursing assistant job at a local hospital, Myriam was taking courses in the pre-nursing sequence at Queensborough, in hopes of being accepted to the College's highly competitive nursing program, which has since happened. She was a stellar student in my Introduction to Literature class, who was always prepared and always wrote thorough and thoughtful papers. Myriam served as a role model to other students in the class who thought they hated literature, but then were inspired by her contributions to class discussion to make their own.

Both Amelie and Myriam experienced the opportunity to travel—not any physical distance, but within cultures and generations. Reading the Mousepads and Memoirs site and emailing the ladies expanded their knowledge of the world, not only how it is at present, but how it was and what lies in store for them.

Results of the Email Interaction

Each Email, Each Site Visit is More Memoir

Each email response Mary dictated or Heidi wrote added more to their memoirs—each resulted in taking their memoirs into deeper and more detailed territory, as though revision was happening without their realizing it. Writing in response to Amelie, Heidi told her that she went to the theatre to see Sly Fox and moved from the here and now to the past with graceful fluidity: “When I went to Broadway yesterday, I could hardly walk through the streets. I remember years ago when I’d go walking, there were hardly any

people in the streets. There was a policeman on every street corner helping the children cross the street. We'd stop and chat with the policeman and sometimes give him a banana or an apple."

Sometimes, Heidi censored herself. She wrote back to Myriam, who described herself as a nursing major: "When I was young, I took a dental hygienist course—passed it and was called for the job. However, when I came for the interview, I heard a patient yelling that the dentist was hurting him. I immediately went home." Reading over the email before pressing send, Heidi told me more: "Oh, it was really bad. The fellow was yelling, 'Somebody help me! I'm in terrible pain!' But I won't tell her that." Heidi felt that this detail might discourage Myriam from pursuing a nursing career.

Each session looking again at the site also inspired more memories. While looking at her site with her girlfriends teasing her about how handsome Barney is, Mary told me: "I used to get mad at his mother. She'd butter his bread! Oh, she babied Barney! She'd cut his steak up into little pieces for him. I had to put a stop to that." A few pages further into the site and Mary reminisced some more: "We rented a studio in Vegas. I'd stay there a couple of months at a time sometimes. I knew a girl in the building on dope! Another girl, downstairs, she'd take fellows home from the bus station..."

The site also made for a deeper bond between Heidi and Mary, albeit a cantankerous one. Heidi mentioned again how men and women would not wear hats in the car. Mary, however, refuted that: "Oh sure! Everybody had hats! All the time! Hats, gloves, purses—they all had to match. I used to get my hats and Best and Company—Lily Dache hats." Mary also had a bit of scorn for Heidi for using a

pseudonym and archived photos: “That’s just silly! Why hide who you are at this stage in the game?”

Mary also had an understanding of the Mousepads and Memoirs site as a full and complete testament of her life. In between jokes, she told me seriously and thoughtfully, “I want to add something....I forgot to mention my friend in California and it’s very important. I used to go every summer to visit her---Billie Axel and her husband was Mike. I’d stay there for a month sometimes! They’d pick me up at the airport and say, ‘Where do you want to go?’ ‘Tijuana!’ I’d say. Barney would mail me the Daily News every day, out to California, and I’d read it on their porch.” It struck me that she associated the web site with the permanence of print.

Email Produced Better Writing on the Student End

I noticed that the email relationship with Heidi made Amelie a better writer. We had been reading and working on the writing of ethnography in class, and I was disappointed with the lack of specificity and evocative detail in her ethnography of Dave Matthews Band fans. This was the case with a fair number of the students in the class work. Frustrated, I asked the class, “What do I want to see in your writing?” Amelie was the first to answer: “details, specifics, vivid language.” “Well then let’s see you do it!” I told them.

I saw Amelie do just that in her emails to Heidi, pushing her email writing voice to be more literary: “In the summertime, I like to go late at night and just sit on the beach and enjoy the big, bright moon. I take my blanket and cuddle up with the sand; I let the

wind play with my hair. I can smell the salty, moist beach scent all through the next day.” That was some of the best writing she did all semester!

Her experience emailing Heidi also brought out a more philosophical side to Amelie that I hadn’t seen in her writing for class. Amelie was interested in why Heidi chose a pseudonym, “I guess it’s like making a new identity, a new way of being herself” she mused to me in class. Amelie, then, decided as well that she’d like to use a pseudonym: “Don’t we all at some point in our lives wonder what it would be like to be someone else? I feel like, although I know it’s not so, if I have a different name, a different everything...I might be different. Accepted more, loved more, taken seriously more often.” This shows development on Amelie’s part: focusing imaginative energy and reflecting on the self are aspects of a writerly identity.

Awareness of Audience

Amelie’s vivid writing for Heidi showed that she wished to impress her audience of one. When I asked Amelie in an email why she engaged in a pen pal relationship with Heidi, she wrote: “I have a thing for the elderly. Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents in the Dominican Republic. I used to follow my grandpa to the bathroom while my grandma was busy preparing treats. She used to make a guava jam that was to die for. It was as sweet as the hands that prepared it...I incessantly search for a mother figure. My mother and I don’t have a relationship at all...I know it’s just email, but there is someone on the other end reading and writing back to ME . . . Emailing Heidi gives me a sense of acceptance into her generation and makes me feel like I can be a part of it.”

This, I thought, was a lovely thing to say—the young usually expect everyone to want to be a part of their generation, and here was Amelie saying the opposite. Here too, we see Amelie’s longing for a mother/grandmother figure. Having left the Dominican Republic at a young age, she was cut off from her grandmother—much as Heidi herself did not grow up with both sets of grandparents. Myriam, as well, wrote to me when I asked why she’s been emailing the ladies: : “I grew up very close to my own grandparents until we moved to New York in 1987 from Puerto Rico....I’ll remember their teachings forever...” The immigration experience, we often forget, is one of dislocation and disassociation not only from one’s country, but also from one’s family and heritage. This desire for connection brought out the best in Amelie’s writing and made her care about her audience in a way that no writing for college classes can. It also speaks back to the grandmother association---as I originally sought out the ladies to reconnect with a grandmother figure, so did Amelie and Myriam.

Heidi, as she wrote to Amelie, worried about what to say, how to connect to Amelie: “ I have to think of what to tell these kids...I don’t know what I do that will interest them. It’s been so long since I was a kid. I saw Sly Fox the other day, I’ll tell her that....it was very good. But they don’t have the money to go to the theatre.” As it turned out, Amelie and Heidi did have the theatre as a common interest and emailed back and forth about plays they have seen and would like to see. Sometimes, though, Heidi read a patronizing attitude in some emails. Myriam wrote to Heidi: “I was so amazed with your story...the fact that you moved out on your own during those times in our history is amazing.” Reading that, Heidi exclaimed: “times in our history...she thinks I’m old as Methuselah.”

Heidi always crafted her emails with much thought and deliberation, carefully proofreading before hitting send. Mary barked out her email dictation to me, and when I would read her message back to her, she'd yell, "That's fine! Just send it off!" Her more casual attitude towards email communication is similar to the students'. Heidi was shocked to read one student's email to her: "Oh what horrible spelling and where's her punctuation?" I explained how students write very quickly on email and its informal nature allows for errors to be overlooked by the reader. "I tell you, no one knows grammar anymore," grumbled Heidi. Correctness and accuracy are the most important aspects of writing to Heidi; she cannot fathom communication without them.

Mary was aware of one kind of audience outside of my students that her site might appeal to: predatory men. From the news on television and in the newspapers, she had the impression that the Internet is prowling with pedophiles. She was a little worried about them seeing photos of her when young: "I just have to watch out for those men! Those men who go after girls. Thank God they know my age."

To which Carmen said, "Maybe some one will write you the email and say, 'Come over and have a little swingy-dingy.'"

"Oh no, that's out!" Mary declared, "I'm not supplying any Viagra."

Helen chimed in: "It's BYOV—bring your own Viagra!"

The Ladies' Online Skills are Finally Truly Developing

After over two years of internet lessons with the ladies, finally, I saw them remembering from week to week what they were doing online. This was because there was a clear need for them to have the skills. Mary, who before would only use the

internet for playing solitaire, enjoyed reading through her memoir website, sharing it with friends, easily navigating the “next page” button, scrolling down as she read, then clicking on “next page.” Heidi, who before would only look up the weather and the news online, enjoyed reading and answering the emails from my students.

For most of her time taking internet lessons, Heidi was nervous about typing on the computer, despite having been a secretary for fifty years. Every time the text would wrap around to the next line, she would pause in confusion: “I can’t get used to that. I keep looking to hit the return key and then it jumps down when I least expect it.” But I found that when I turned away from giving her my full attention to chat with Mary, Heidi did fine writing emails on her own (although sometimes, instead of hitting the shift key to capitalize a letter, she would hit the Windows key and the screen would go blank). Her confidence took over; Heidi came to the understanding that the technology is just a delivery system, based on old system that she is more than familiar with: the manual typewriter. “I retired in 1988, just before my husband died. There were no computers in the schools. Just two years before, we got the electric typewriter, but I always preferred to use the manual. I still have one at home.” But she eventually became more open to the computer. “It’s getting easier for me,” Heidi admitted, after writing and sending an email to Myriam without any assistance from me. After always asking me, “Do you think I’ll ever learn this?” Heidi began saying, “It isn’t so bad.”

Conclusion: The Experience of Literacy at the End of the Lifespan

The desire to learn something new best comes out of need, I realize. As obvious as that sounds, now that I saw that the ladies have a need for the internet—the need to

have the ability to access and read both their memoir website and the email responses to it—their desire to learn how to use it has been stimulated. Comfort and mastery with a new skill, however, comes only with practice, which the ladies do not get enough of. They only use the computers once a week with my assistance, still frightened that they may break if used on their own. But now that there is more of a need, the curiosity to see who has emailed them and what they had to say, they now have the desire to go on the internet; perhaps that desire might compel them to practice on their own. The ladies benefited from this intergenerational contact in ways that bring them to, as my mother wrote to them in an email, “living in the future right now.”

For the ladies, these new literacies of memoir writing and using the internet have been tacked on to their already established print literacy rather than integrated into it. Despite their strong relationship to reading, they would not see themselves as writers. They also could not see the internet as an extension of print; in their worldview the internet is associated with television, a visual/aural medium. It was unrealistic of me to assume that they would be transformed by learning new ways of self-expression and communication. Instead, they view memoir writing and the internet as activities that enhance their social lives—they were not seeking transformation but to enrich their already satisfying lives. Once Heidi and Mary saw that the internet is a mode that not only enhanced their social lives within the parameters of the Senior Lounge but also connected them to people they wouldn't know otherwise, they began to feel more comfortable and confident with it.

The ladies' online memoirs have been reaching an audience I didn't expect. My mother-in-law Myra LaJoie connected with the poverty of Heidi's childhood, “This is the

life of my aunts..." she said. Gladys DiBuccio, the evening secretary at Queensborough, who is eighty years old and was born and raised in the Bronx, especially related to Heidi's memoir: "It's remarkable," she said to me one evening when I set her up to read the site, "It's like I'm living my whole life on there. I was crying as I was reading." There's nothing else on the internet that speaks to Gladys like this.

The Very End

While visiting with the ladies one day, I asked them about being old and what it feels like, an impossible question to answer since I will only know for sure when I myself am old—and a question I never dared to ask my own grandmother.

Mary answered without thinking about it, "I don't feel like I'm a different person from when I was young, except that we're slower. Barney and I don't have the car anymore and we both can't walk very far. Carmen used to say Barney would drive me to the bathroom if I asked him to."

Heidi said thoughtfully, "I know I'm old but still I'm always surprised when everyone jumps up to give me their seats on the bus. I forget how I look to other people."

"We look like raisins; that's how we look!" Helen reminded her, "I get lonely at night but other than that, it's not so bad being old. We have our fun."

Mary patted my hand: "Enjoy it, kid! Enjoy every part of life! That's the only way to get through it."

Appendix

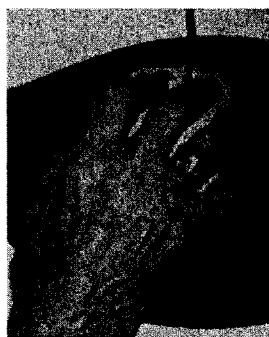
The Mousepads and Memoirs Web Site

<http://www.newmedialab.cuny.edu/beth>

Produced with the support of the CUNY New Media Lab

mousepads & memoirs

Welcome to the memoirs of **Heidi Donskoi** and **Mary Smith**, written with **Beth Counihan**, a PhD candidate in English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. This site is a facet of Beth's dissertation project, in which she observed literacy development amongst women who frequent the Peter Cooper Village-Stuyvesant Town Senior Lounge in Manhattan. Both Heidi and Mary have been learning how to use the internet, and also participated in a memoir writing workshop, the results of which you can read here.



Heidi Donskoi (a pseudonym) was born in 1921 in the Bronx, to Russian Jewish immigrants. She attended Hunter College in the Bronx, now Lehman College, and during World War II, worked for the Voice of America radio station. After her marriage, she worked as an elementary school secretary. Heidi and her husband David moved to Stuyvesant Town in 1977, where she still resides. An avid theatergoer, Heidi enjoys an occasional visit to Atlantic City and also does volunteer work. Heidi uses the Internet

to read book and theatre reviews, to check on the weather and see what's playing at the movies. *All images illustrating Heidi's memoirs are archival pictures; she did not want personal photos on the site.*

Mary Smith was born in 1916 to Lithuanian Catholics in Pennsylvania's anthracite coal region, where she lived until she was 17 and moved to New York City. Married since 1941 to Barney, she and Barney are original Stuyvesant Town tenants, having moved there in 1947. Mary worked as a magazine distributor and enjoys a life of travel, day trips to Atlantic City, and socializing with her many friends. Mary plays solitaire on the Internet, and also buys books online. *All images illustrating Mary's memoirs are her own.*



Do you have a question or comment for either **Mary** or **Heidi**?
Email them at **heidiandmary@yahoo.com** and you will be answered!

Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs



Courtesy New York Daily News

I was always very shy...

Always I looked very sad as a kid, very sad. I have these big eyes that still make me look sad. But I was always worrying about something—I was that kind of kid.

School was very difficult, I was always so nervous — always worrying: "What if I came late? What if I didn't get a good mark?" Every day I'd get sick before school. I threw up every single morning—the teachers were getting tired of it. They suggested I stay home—you know in those days, they didn't have the nurse or counseling---I had school anxiety disorder! I stayed home the whole year of third grade. That whole year is a blank. I know I was happy not to go to school; that much I remember!

I went to Walton High School, which was all girls. I never really liked my high school, in thinking about it.

I was never in a clique somehow. I met my closest friend Barbara on the trolley car. She says, "I saw a skinny thing with big eyes staring up at me who said hello." But I don't remember it. That was our third term at Walton High School and we've been friends all these years.

When my husband died, I became more outgoing. I had to fend for myself, I had to become a little pushy.

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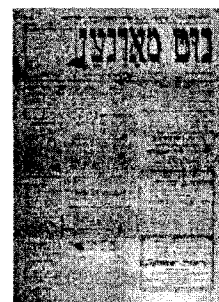
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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

Yiddish is my first language.

When I first started school, I didn't speak English, only Yiddish. My teacher was Irish with blond hair and blue eyes—her eyes hypnotized me, I'll never forget it! I had never seen such eyes! And she put me right in front of her because she knew I didn't understand anything. We lived in the North Bronx then and all our neighbors were Irish and that's how I acquired the bump on my nose—the kids thought I was cursing and they hit me with a snow shovel. It's funny—I think I am the same height now as I was then—maybe getting hit with a shovel startled me and so I stopped growing.

My parents read the Yiddish paper, *The Forward*, and the different newspapers in English—*The Mirror*, *The Daily News*—my father didn't read *The Times*, naturally; it was too difficult. There were so many newspapers. Also the radio--WEVD would have Yiddish programs. My mother would listen to them all the time. I had a relative who'd read the Yiddish paper *The Freiheit*. He'd come over to argue politics with my mother as he'd read his paper. He'd drink a glass of tea, eat a bite of apple, then take a nibble of a sugar cube—this is how he'd relax as he read the paper.



Courtesy
McGill U. Library

With my husband, we always spoke English even though he knew Yiddish, better than I. You know, Yiddish had different pronunciations depending on where you were from. We are Litvak Jews, so for bread, we say "brate" but the Galitziana Jews say "broit"

But I've lost so much of it.

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

"No more jumping rope for you"

When I was about 10 years old, I'd go outside every day after school and play in a little vacant lot that was near our apartment house. We all played there. I used to go there and collect different pieces of glass, and little stones, pink and blue. When I think of that, I feel so good. I felt so cheerful doing that.

We used to play marbles—we'd play with immies, little marbles in all different colors, beautiful colors. We'd get a shoebox and cut a hole in it and try to hit the immies into the shoebox. We'd have two teams—one team would have the blue marbles and one would have the red. And we'd take turns and see who could shoot the most marbles into the little hole in the shoebox. We also played jacks, I used to love that. Those were our favorite games.



Courtesy of The Museum of The City of New York

I jumped rope an awful lot, I was very good at double dutch—then I caught a cold or something and I was so skinny that the doctor said, "No more jumping rope for you." In those days, they didn't believe in exercise.

I used to take cod liver oil and then they came out with the chocolate flavor and I'd take that. Oh, I thought it was delicious. I'd take all kinds of medicines, but my sister couldn't take them. Oh, my mother would yell, my father would yell, we'd all try to get her to take the medicine.

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

When it got very hot in the summer. . .

We didn't know about air conditioning so we didn't feel anything different--it's not like we had anything to compare it to. We'd sit on the fire escape, fanning ourselves. When stores started to have air conditioning, we'd go in and stand there. The barber shops were the first to get it: they'd have signs saying "come in, we're air cooled."



Courtesy of New York Daily News

When it got very hot in the summer, we went to Orchard Beach, squishing in like sardines. We had to take several buses to get there. Each bus was a nickel. To save a nickel, we'd walk the length of one bus ride and on the way home, we'd do the same thing, even though we were tired and sunburned. By the time we got there, we were ready to drop, and when we left, we were as red as lobsters.

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

That was how these poor men made their living.

We had the ice man and the milk man and the knife sharpener, who would come around with a horse and wagon. The ice man would come lugging a big chunk of ice. If someone lived on the fifth floor, he'd put it on his back and lug it up the flights. Or he'd put it in the dumbwaiter, if the building had a dumbwaiter. You'd leave a piece of paper out for the milkman, tick off one milk and two cheeses, and he'd leave it there at your door in the morning. We also had a man coming around selling fish off a truck--can you imagine? There was the "I cash clothes" guy. He'd yell that down the street. He'd buy our old clothes and sell them.



A HORSE-DRAWN LAUNDRY WAGON awaits the return of the delivery at 138th Street near Broukner Boulevard in 1948.

Gift of the author of the book "The Bronx Historical Society"

Courtesy of The Bronx Historical Society

Men used to come around singing in the building courtyards. They'd sing songs in Jewish and Italian and we'd stick our heads out the window, listening to them, and then throw down a little bit of paper wrapped around some pennies. Most couldn't sing so well, but we'd still give them pennies. That was how these poor men made their living.

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

Brownsville! Who would want to live there?

We'd eat potato soup five days out of seven, with carrots and celery. My father would make a coat for the Irish butcher and in exchange, we'd get some steak or some lamb chops. Otherwise, we couldn't afford to eat meat.



Courtesy of When Brooklyn Was the World: 1920-1957

When my father's mother came from Russia, she went to live with his sister in Brownsville, Brooklyn so we used to visit every other week. They had a house made of stucco. They shared it with other relatives and every three years, the families would switch floors—one lived on the first floor for a while and then the other.

Their home was always filled with people. By the time we got to Brooklyn, we were all exhausted. My father went into one bedroom and promptly went to sleep. My mother went into the other bedroom and slept. They worked six days a week: my father a tailor, my mother a housewife. Sunday was their only day off.

My sister, my cousins, and I all sat in the kitchen. The smell of the delicious food kept us there, waiting to eat. Just my two aunts cooked and they made typically Jewish food: matzoh ball soup, chopped liver, chicken, pot roast, roasted potatoes. They made tsimmes too: a combination of prunes and sweet potatoes. Some people put lima beans in it. Oh, and gefilte fish!

We used to make fun of Brooklyn just because we lived in the Bronx. I don't know why, it's so silly but we used to say to our cousins, "Brownsville! Who would want to live there." We'd make fun of the Brooklyn accent—they'd say "derlies" in stead of "doilies." Long Island used to be the countryside to us.

We'd also go to Brownsville for Chanukah every year. It was quite lively, everybody was alive then and it would be nothing to see 40 people there. They'd give us Chanukah gelt, the candy money. It's a happy holiday, one of our few happy ones.

We never had the money for a camera. If someone was taking photos, it was a big deal!

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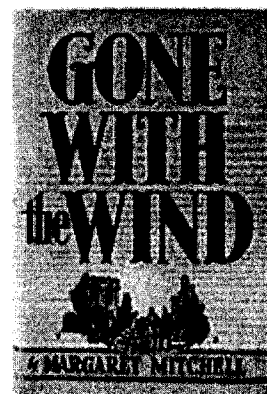
Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

I've always loved to read.

When I was really young, I liked the book *Heidi*. Also *Anne of Green Gables*, *Rebecca Of Sunnybrook Farm*, *Little Men*, *Little Women*, all of the *Bobbsey Twins*—you name it! I used to run to the library. In my day, all the kids read a lot. In those days, you didn't hear that nobody knew how to read. We all came from a foreign background, we all had to learn English in school and yet we all read. I spoke to my sister in English before she started school so she'd know it too.

My father borrowed *Gone with the Wind* from a friend and he had to get it back by a certain time. So I locked myself in the bathroom and read and read and my mother yelled in Jewish, "Go to bed!"

One time, when I was in high school, as I was reading a book maybe it was *Forever Amber*, I was so wrapped up in it. It was a very hot day and I was in the process of taking off my stockings but I was reading as I did it and then I heard "Fire, Fire!" from outside. I smelled smoke and heard the engines. I lost myself! I lost my cool: I yelled to my mother, "Ma, there's a fire—hurry!" and I ran out of the apartment, leaving my mother and sister behind. I only thought to take my book and stocking—I ran out of the building with one stocking on, carrying the other one and my book. My mother yelled, "Where are you going?" Turns out the fire was in the building behind us.



Courtesy
All GWTW Collectibles

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

I hated those business classes...



*Courtesy of
When Brooklyn Was the World: 1920-1957*

I went to Hunter in the Bronx for a year in the daytime and then at night. I didn't really like it. I had to take statistical math—I hate math to this day! I didn't like taking Shakespeare at all—I couldn't wait for the term to end! I wanted to be a French teacher but the advisor said I was too short and too thin; I'd never pass the physical exam to be a teacher. I was advised to take some business courses and I hated it so I left. I hated those business classes and yet I stayed in business all my life one way or another—I always worked in an office. So maybe the advisor was right about me.

My husband Dave went to City College down on 23 Street, before it became Baruch. He studied accounting and education. He really wanted to be a high school history teacher. But when he came out of the Army, he had a slight hearing defect and the Board of Ed was very strict about that, so he got a temporary job as an accountant. When he went for the interview, he had been in uniform for four years; he didn't even have any civilian clothes. Thirty-five years later, he retired from the accounting firm.

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

We lived from day to day.

I remember getting my first "little" job after high school, before I started college at Hunter—the salary was all of \$6. But, of course, at that time my expenses were very low. I ate at Horn and Hardart restaurant for 25 cents:



New York Woman Magazine 1936

Three vegetables 15
1 cup of coffee 5
1 cake 5
newspaper 2
subway 10
total 37 cents

I worked in a collections house, doing clerical work, in Manhattan at 165 John Street. At that time, we all wore matching gloves, hat and purse to work. Our newspaper was wrapped in a plastic bag so that the ink wouldn't come off on our clothes.

Of this salary, I saved \$2 for myself and gave my mother \$2 for the household. You can see we weren't very rich. Of all the money we made between my father, sister and I, my mother sent \$2 home to her mother—who she never saw again after she left Russia—and my father sent \$2 home to his family in Russia too.

My parents were always discussing the lack of money—they were always deciding which bills had to be paid first and which could wait—the gas bill, the electric, the rent. We would move a lot, according to where my father's tailor shop was. It was very hard on my parents. At one point, my mother had to hock her wedding ring. I went with her to the pawn shop.

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

A Year in Washington, DC, "despite the guilt"

I got a secretarial job with the Voice of America, the radio station behind the Iron Curtain, up on 57 Street. But then the Voice of America moved to Washington, DC in 1944 and so I went with them. I shared an apartment with two girls, one Italian, one Jewish. Norma, the Italian girl, was very social and a marvelous cook. She'd have evening parties—I met all different people from all over the world. I'd have a date with an Indian guy, a Pakistani, a Hungarian.



*Courtesy of the Library of Congress,
Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection*

When we were looking for an apartment, first I went looking only with the Jewish girl. They had a women sitting in the lobby of the building—a sort of concierge/renting agent. She was very nice to us and told us there were plenty of apartments available. She told us to fill out a paper and down at the bottom it asked "religion." I put "Hebrew" and then she says, "oh, I have to look at another thing..." and then she says, "Oh, we don't have

anything." So I knew what she was doing. So I told Norma the Italian girl to go fill out the paper. Of course, she got the apartment! When we were moving in, the lady looked at me and asked, "What are you doing here?" I said, "We got the apartment." And that was it.

When I decided to go to Washington, one day, my two aunts came to visit. So many people didn't have phones then, you'd just show up. They sat down at the kitchen table, and one aunt, very stern, with the big bosom in a corset, said, "So you mean you're going to leave papa and go?" When she said that, despite the guilt, my stubborn side came out and that made me go!

But it wasn't done! What I did was unusual.

After a year in Washington, my father got sick and needed surgery so I had to

leave. My roommates sent me off to the grocery store and I couldn't find my way back—and this was after I lived there for a year. I had to call them and they had to give me directions. When I came back, surprise! Oh what a fun party that was!

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

We didn't feel the need to get married...

Barbara and I joined the USO and we used to go dancing certain days. When the fellas came in from port, we'd serve coffee. We didn't feel the need to get married—we were having fun. It seems during the war that either girls got married very young, or they enjoyed themselves in the USO and got married afterwards. There were so many sailors, a lot of handsome sailors!

I'd wear gorgeous shoes, with big high heels. My hair was coal black and very straight and my skin was always very white. Oh did we have fun!



Courtesy of The USS Wisconsin Association

Forget it—sleep with the guys—we didn't sleep with the guys. I'm sure people did—but as a general rule, the fellow didn't think on the third date he was going to strike gold. They're always going to try—but they never got anywhere!

Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

We'd go to dances.

It was a very different kind of life for young people then to now. The way we met fellows was different. We didn't go to bars. We'd go to dances. In the newspaper, there would be ads "Singles Dances age 25-35" Saturday night was dance night—you'd meet at a dance. And don't forget, during that time, girls did not live away from home. Very few did. For one, we didn't have the money—and it wasn't the thing to do. When I moved to Washington to work for the Voice of America, it was a big deal.



Courtesy of The New York Daily News

We would always go on dates in the evening. At 8:00, the fellow would ring the bell. We'd go to a movie, maybe at Loew's Paradise Theatre and then ice cream after, a banana split at Krums on the Concourse and 188 Street or Addie Valens, another ice cream parlor on 161 Street near Jerome Avenue. Loew's Paradise was beautiful, with birdcages in the lobby and the ceiling painted like the sky with stars. Sometimes we'd go see a foreign film at the Ascot, on the Concourse and 183rd Street.

We went to Brighton Beach Bay 2—that was the dating beach. We'd go there on Saturday afternoons. The neighborhood

had all these little bungalows and the ladies who lived in them would charge us fifty cents each to take a shower—an outdoor shower we'd take in our bathing suits—and then we could change in a little room. I always came home like a lobster.

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

"I have something to tell you"

I knew my husband Dave from our neighborhood near Yankee Stadium and we'd see each other around but we didn't get together until one time, driving up to the Catskills with my girlfriends, we heard somebody whistling, and it was Dave and his friend in the car next to us. So we enjoyed each others' company and within a few months, we were engaged.



New York Woman Magazine 1936

One day, he said, "I have something to tell you," and then he pulled the ring out of the box.

My husband was stationed in Hawaii with the Army in World War II and he wasn't able to tell anyone where he was. His aunt liked to knit and she'd send him sweaters—to Hawaii! She sent him such a heavy sweater—that real heavy wool. I still have one of the sweaters.

Dave had lived alone for many years, so he knew how to cook a little. He could make a steak, but he couldn't pull a meal together. When he washed the dishes, it was a riot. he just let the hot water drip on each dish. I'd tell him, "You have to scrub it." He'd say, "Oh, no, the water will clean it." So I always ended up doing the dishes.

The entire way of socializing years ago was different. We'd have friends come over around eight o'clock on a Saturday night and we'd serve bagels and lox and we'd all talk til one in the morning. Around 50 St and 8 Ave was a skating rink, very well known, very popular. My husband had black skates and I had

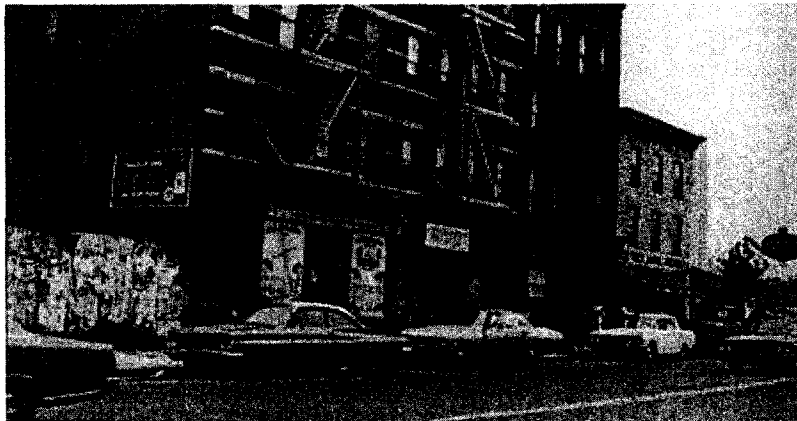
white skates and when we moved to StuyTown, we left our skates with the super's kids in the Bronx. We knew we weren't going to go skating anymore.

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Heidi Donskoi mousepads & memoirs

Why we had to move out of the Bronx

We were on tenant patrol—oh, it was awful. We all had to get out. The super's son came from Puerto Rico and hooked up his phone to a lady on the top floor. She got her bill with all these calls to Puerto Rico —and she was a Jewish lady. She never called Puerto Rico a day in her life.



Courtesy of The Bronx Historical Society

Then a prostitute moved into the front apartment. She got a red velvet lamp with black balls hanging down and one my neighbors said, "oh what a nice lamp." She'd tie her kid to the top of the stairs while she did her business. Eventually, social services took the child away. One time she invited me in, she said, "Oh, would you like to see what my boyfriend did?" She had all these mirrors on the ceiling and the smell of incense real heavy, heady—it smelled like sex. I tell you, it was enlightening!

So I said to my husband, it's time to get out. The last straw was when one of the upstairs neighbors was pushed out of his window. He was gay, and one of his callers pushed him out the window. He was nude and landed on an air conditioner.

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Mary Smith

mousepads
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I grew up in Pennsylvania coal country. My maiden name is Tauter; my family is from Lithuania. My mother was only fifteen when she had me. I called my mother "Scarlett O'Hara"--she got married three times and had five or six boyfriends. I was very very little when my father died--all I remember is his funeral, when they had the horse and carriage carrying his coffin.

I came to New York to be a nanny for a family that lived up by Columbia University. When I first came to New York, a friend of mine, a fellow but not a boyfriend, wrote a book about me: *Mary of*

the Anthracite.

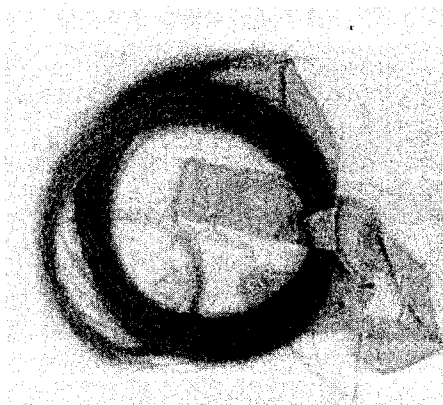
When I was a girl, my grandmother killed her own chickens and ducks and she drained the blood out and made blood soup. "Yuki," they called it. She boiled the blood with prunes and a little vinegar. I used to love it!

We'd make potato baloney. You mix grated potatoes, onion, and lard and stuff it into sausage casings. We ate a lot of potatoes and a lot of pork. Pork chops! Sauerkraut! Ham, cabbage and potatoes—that was a big meal!

My grandmother made her own wine—dandelion wine with elderberries. My grandfather made moonshine and my mother made beer. This was Prohibition time, so if you wanted to drink, you had to make it yourself!

We'd go to Midnight Mass and then go home and eat "kuchi" for Christmas Eve. No meat! We'd have herring and sauerkraut and prunes and chick peas and boiled potatoes. You leave a plate on the table for Santa Claus, but really it was meant for the Lord.

This is a piece of hair from my first haircut. I have the braid. I saved it all these years.

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Mary Smith**mousepads
& memoirs**

I went to high school in Grand Rapids, Michigan—Saints Peter and Paul, a Lithuanian church school. All of my schooling was in Lithuanian, but we learned English too.

My mother and her husband separated, so she moved us to Grand Rapids. Oh, I loved it there! I had the best time, the best friends. I was the lead in the school play. All I can remember is my mother had white wicker furniture on her front porch and we used it onstage in the play. I played Scrooge in the Christmas Carol!



I bought a pink chiffon dress with black polka dots on it for graduation. It was beautiful. Then the Sister made the announcement—all white. So I got a white dress.

Then my mother moved us back to Pennsylvania. Shortly after, I moved to New York. There was nothing in the patch! I wanted to come to New York because I saw it in the movies!

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Mary Smith

mousepads
& memoirs



I bought that dress in Bonwit Teller. I saw this dress in a magazine and bought it off the rack!

My mother always said I looked like Lana Turner.

My first few years in New York, I was like a tourist! I went everywhere! I wanted to see everything at once—the Statue of Liberty, the museums, Bendel's, Sak's—I loved it all! I still do!

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Mary Smith

mousepads & memoirs

One day in 1939 I was sitting on a bench by Columbia, waiting for my date with Lou to take me to the World's Fair. I was very particular when I went on dates. I made sure the guy had a car and money!

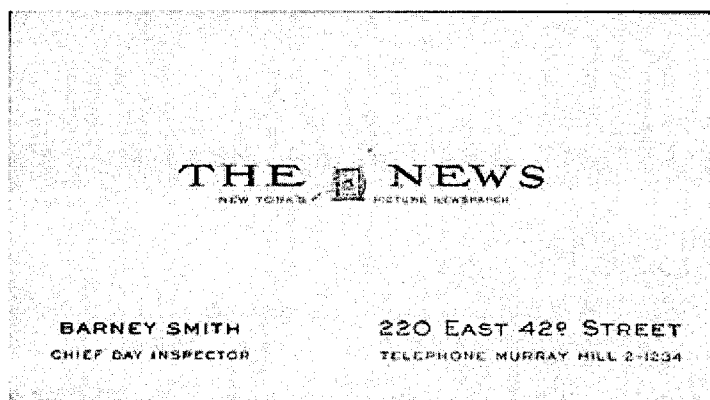
While I was waiting for Lou to pick me up, Barney drove up to me and said, "Come over here, I want to talk to you."

I said, "You want to talk to me? You have to get out of the car and come over here."

So he sat on the bench with me and said, "You look so pretty, sitting there in your blue dress." I still have the dress!

I called Lou up and told him my mother was coming to visit from Pennsylvania and I couldn't go to the World's Fair with him.

I took a chance! I got in the car with Barney and went to the World's Fair. We had a wonderful time. He worked for *The Daily News*, he told me. He started talking about marriage, "What kind of wedding do you want?" He wanted me to meet his mother and father.



On the way home, I asked him what his last name was. He said, "Smith."

I said, "See you later!" I thought that Smith was a made up name.

Mary Smith *mousepads & memoirs*

We have been married for 63 years.

If you want to stay married, just go half and half with everything. If you want to do something and he don't want to do it, you do it. If he wants to do something and you don't, you let him do it. And of course, you do things together.

My wedding suit cost me a dollar! It was a Hall and Marks suit too. My sister in law worked in the business. I wore a blue blouse and Barney had a blue tie and blue flowers on us both. After the wedding, we went to dinner and my brother in law wore my hat on his head! Later, I dyed the suit brown.

Joseph Medill Patterson, Captain Patterson, was Barney's boss at the News and such a handsome, generous man. His chauffeur gave us a ride to our wedding. He had a house on the Hudson and we went to parties with all the stars there—the mayor, the governor, even Loretta Young was there. I saw John Garfield, Marilyn Monroe. Hedda Hopper was there and I wanted to ask for Monroe's autograph but Hopper told me to come back later.



On our honeymoon, we drove out to Chicago. And who did we see in the Loop. Captain Patterson! He gave us tickets to a ball game and to a popular radio show.

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Mary Smith mousepads
& memoirs



Remember Annette Donnelly in the *Daily News*? She wrote a beauty advice column: "The Correct Thing" Here's a picture of me modeling face cream.

All these cartoonists! I had to meet all the cartoonists when I started dating Barney—they had to give the OK. They made cartoons of me!

But I stopped that. It was getting too familiar, if you know what I mean. The cartoonists kept touching me, touching my face, "move this way, move that way."

So I put an end to that.

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Mary Smith

mousepads
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This one is by Al Posen—he drew *Sweeney and Son*. We'd go up to Captain Patterson's estate with Al. He was a very nice fellow.

One of them made a cartoon with Barney stranded on a desert island—that's a funny one.



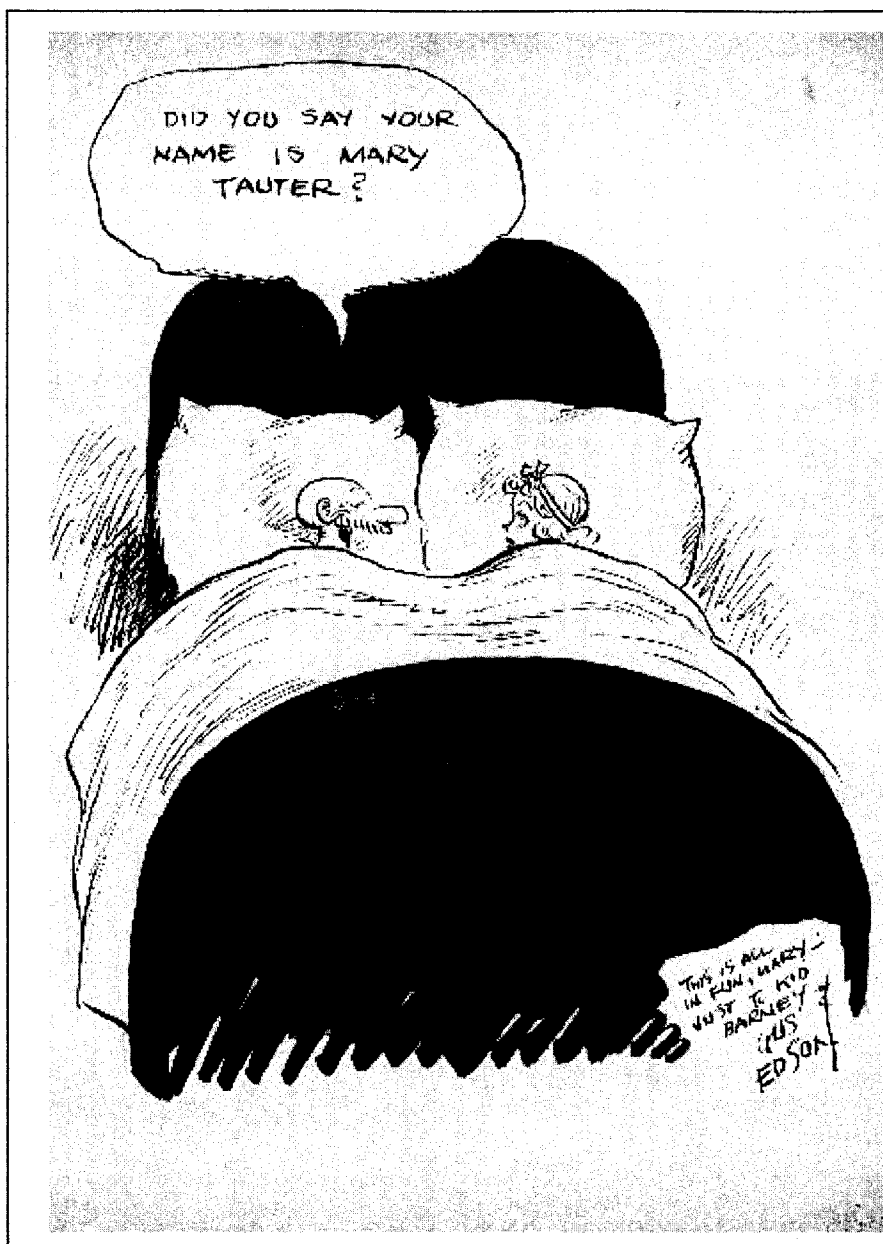
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Mary Smith

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This one is Gus Edson—he did *Andy Gump*.

The fellow who did *Terry and the Pirates*—we'd drive out to his house on the North Shore in our convertible. We'd have the top down and I'd wear a silk scarf like a babushka around my head!

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Mary Smith

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Barney is Jewish. He grew up on the Lower East Side. He was a boxer before I met him! He was a good boxer too—quick, with a strong left hook—but it wasn't for him. He didn't have the killer instinct! No, Barney has too much heart!

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Mary Smith**mousepads
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When we got married we lived in Parkchester and I got a job at Macy's. Right after Pearl Harbor, Barney came home after work and he said, "I enlisted." I said, "OK." What else could I say?

He volunteered earlier that day for the Navy. His boss at the *Daily News* wrote a letter to the boxer, Gene Tunney, recommending Barney for his outfit. They called them the "Tunney Fish." Barney was stationed in Bainbridge, Maryland and he'd come home every weekend. He was never sent overseas.

Meanwhile, I'd have a lot of fun with my girlfriends. I had a girlfriend, Natalie, she was divorced, and we'd go hang out at the Chester House, a bar in Parkchester. One night, we met some sailors at a bar in Manhattan and they wanted corn on the cob, so we invited them up to my apartment and I cooked up a pot of corn on the cob!

When the war was over, Barney came home to Parkchester for good. The doorbell rang, and there he was, in uniform, holding his duffel bag—and I slammed the door in his face! I wasn't ready for him to come home—I was having too much fun!

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Mary Smith

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This was Lithuanian Day in 1944, August 15th. We were at a festival in a park in Shenandoah. I was visiting from New York. This bar we were at—it was just a set up for the photo, the bottles weren't real. This is my mother, my aunts and cousins and me—my mother is next to me. My cousin did the writing. They used to call us "the Smudin girls," my mother's maiden name. I'm the sole survivor—it's heartbreaking.



We used to wear eachother's clothes. We had a little room with pegs where we'd hang all our clothes and we'd trade off. It was lucky we all wore the same size.

Next door to my Aunt Violet's house in Frackville was the bar she owned, Sage's Place. When my cousin got married, they had a case of Canadian Club under each table in the bar, and they cleared the furniture out of the house and everyone danced and danced there. The wedding party lasted for days!

Usually, every Lithuanian Day growing up, we'd celebrate at Aunt Violet's bar. My mother would take the wash boiler and put ham on the bottom, potatoes on

top of that, and cabbage on top of the potatoes and she'd cook it all together for hours. We'd have to go down at 2:00am to the bar to save a table for the next day—we'd sleep on the table to save our spot!

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mousepads
& memoirs



We were on the Independence—oh what a beautiful ship! Barney and I went on a lot of cruises, trips to St. Thomas, Vegas. I'd buy beautiful jewelry in the islands and wear it home on the plane so we didn't have to pay customs. My friend Florence, she'd buy diamonds and hide them in her shoes!

I never really needed to work but I always had a little job. Macy's, Orbach's, then the magazine distributor. I worked in the office on a contometer—I did figures. We'd send all the magazines to the stands. I love my magazines! I subscribe to *People*, *W*, that's a high fashion

magazine, and that British gossip magazine, *Hello!*—that's a good one.

The Jungle is one of my favorite books, with all the Lithuanian words. I still read a little book of my mother's, to remind myself of the Lithuanian. There's nobody left to speak it with. Oh, you know Frank Morris—he writes about all the downtrodden people. I don't know why I read all those social novels, I always have. I've always read a book or two a week!

For our twenty-fifth anniversary, we went to the Rainbow Room! We had six couples—we joked that the fellas saved up all year to pay for it! Our husbands bought us corsages. We had another party at the Copacabana. We saw Martin and Lewis there! What great entertainment!

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