

## Old Age and Radical History

### Editors' Introduction

*Amanda Ciafone and Devin McGeehan Muchmore*

Much of this issue, “Old/Age,” came together during the spring of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe. The disease has hit older adults and people with chronic medical conditions especially hard. By the end of June, the World Health Organization’s confirmed death toll passed five hundred thousand, the vast majority of whom were over the age of sixty.<sup>1</sup>

As health agencies and media outlets report on the particular vulnerability of “seniors” and “the elderly,” the pandemic has laid bare the social devaluing of those aging into old age.<sup>2</sup> Trolling tweeters briefly dubbed the disease a #boomerremover, while those getting sick and dying at high rates in long-term care struggle to garner media attention in the English-language press. Beleaguered doctors in Italy describe making snap judgments to prioritize younger over older patients in allocating care. In the starkest terms, for weeks Belgian hospitals excluded older long-term-care residents from emergency treatment. Right-wing politicians in Brazil, the United States, and elsewhere have framed the crisis as a pitting of the health of older people against the health of national economies, even cynically relying on ideas about older people as unproductive, and thus sacrificial, to justify skimping on public health measures.<sup>3</sup>

COVID-19 makes clear that the experience of old age, and even how it is defined, is not the same for all. In the United States, Black, Native American, and working-class and poor people have greater prevalence of morbidities, worse health

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outcomes, and shorter life expectancies than their white, middle-, and upper-class counterparts, the result of years of unemployment, segregation, food insecurity, environmental hazards, toxic stress, inadequate health care, and exposure to state violence. Ongoing histories of racial capitalism and settler colonialism have physiological, psychological, and epigenetic consequences, an interrelation that some scholars describe as *cumulative inequality* or *weathering* to evoke how poor, Black, and Brown people have been *prematurely aged*. Many, then, are denied the opportunity to reach a chronologically “old age,” painfully affirming Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism as rooted in “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>4</sup>

COVID-19 has also exposed the ways the lives of older people and some of the lowest-paid, most precarious workers are interdependent and linked. Their work is now being called what it has always been: essential. While the race- and class-privileged can work from home, working-class, Black, and Brown people, many older themselves, are doing the work of social reproduction—cleaning, feeding, caring, and maintaining life itself—work that often requires close contact, including with older adults who depend on them. Forced to weigh potential COVID-19 exposure against the need for a paycheck, they may be asymptomatic, without the job security to call in sick, or the space at home to self-quarantine, and the virus spreads farther both at work and in multigenerational homes, with deadly consequences for older people.

In the United States, from where we write, the past months have seen inadequate and uneven state measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 punctuated by widespread rebellions against anti-Black state violence and white supremacy. As numerous commentators have pointed out, COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter raise similar questions and are connected.<sup>5</sup> Whose lives matter? Who will be exposed to ill health and early death? Who is treated as disposable?

This issue of *Radical History Review* builds on scholarly traditions in critical gerontology and an underrecognized historiography on old age to center questions of power, historical struggle, and linked lives in the histories of old age and aging. Among radical approaches, historians of the political economy of old age show how capitalism as an economic and social system prioritizes market competition and assigns human value based on economic productivity, treating old age as a debased state of dependency and older people as a drain on the system. As the historian Pat Thane writes in this issue’s opening roundtable, contemporary ideas about aging in the United States and western Europe often “assume that everyone from their sixties to past one hundred is similar, identically dependent, and past useful life.” On one level, to homogenize “this long age range” as old age ignores enormous heterogeneity in health and quality of life within age groups. Moreover, such homogenization naturalizes a singular life course periodized by employment and reproduction, coconstitutive of compulsory able-bodiedness, cis- and heteronormativity, and

white supremacy. As the unequal responses and vulnerabilities to COVID-19 attest, the varied experiences of old age are “sociohistorically framed through the interaction of economic, political, and ideological forces and the social struggles they create,” to use the critical gerontologist Chris Phillipson’s formulation. Old age is historically produced and is lived in conjunction with class, race, ability, gender, sexuality, and other forms of social organization and stratification.<sup>6</sup>

Critical gerontologists and historians of age also analyze the production of the “elderly” as an exceptional population and aging as a problem to be solved. In the issue’s roundtable discussion, the public health historian Kavita Sivaramakrishnan explains how new geroscience research prioritizes the links between aging and chronic disease while overlooking “the fundamental, contextual issues that shape the onset of and experience of aging and old age, namely, inequalities and marginalization.” In a similar vein, age studies scholars wield the tools of critical cultural theory to examine how age acquires “meaning and materialization through discourse, narrative, culture, and social interaction.” They critique what the sociologist Stephen Katz calls the “language of the ‘D’s’: decline, disease, decrepitude, dementia, degeneration,” as well as its recent inversion—the individualizing incitements to activity, corporeal vigilance, and consumer purchase offered as models of “successful” aging to the growing population of older adults in the world’s richest countries. For Katz, the new disciplinary paradigm of “apocalyptic” demography of societal aging produces older people as a discrete, problematic, and now also exploding population. This issue was born, in part, of our search for radical alternatives to such alarmism, which too easily “blame[s] older populations for economic insecurity and intergenerational disparities while justifying reckless austerity programs that privatize health care and deplete social services.”

Drawing on distinct but overlapping scholarly traditions, Katz, Sivaramakrishnan, and Thane do not settle on singular definitions of old age, aging, or the life course. Instead, they attend to the multiple meanings, confluences, and productive tensions that emerge when approaching age as a form of social organization, subjectivity, and discourse. Definitions of old age “are always historically and culturally specific and never ideologically neutral.”<sup>7</sup> They also narrate their intellectual biographies within age studies, modeling two critical-humanistic interventions into the dominant paradigms of gerontological scientificity, namely, the deconstruction of life narratives to understand the construction of meaning around age, and the self-reflexive examination of the forms of knowledge and power produced by the study of old age itself.<sup>8</sup>

Fundamentally, this issue joins historians who examine chronological age “as a vector of power” that could be used to justify “granting rights and opportunities to some while excluding others.”<sup>9</sup> The cover for this issue illustrates this well. An advertising sheet for a lecture by Sojourner Truth, it invited late 1870s US audiences to “hear” and “help” the “oldest public speaker in the world.” Despite the certitude of

the advertisement's boast, Truth could never be sure of her true chronological age. As Corinne T. Field explains in her essay, before widespread adoption of birth certificates in the early twentieth-century United States, knowledge of birth dates was mostly confined to the privileged and propertied. Historians have attributed *age consciousness*—the awareness of chronological age—to the late nineteenth century and the rise of the bureaucratic state, commercial culture, doctors, and the second industrial revolution.<sup>10</sup>

Truth's example points to an alternative history of age consciousness that is "imbricated with gradual emancipation in the North and the interstate slave trade in the South," as Field puts it. Age was made on the auction block and in slave mortgage contracts, and aging in plantation owners' careful measurement of capital depreciation and in the negotiations between enslaved people and their enslavers over the all-too-human anticipation of care across the life course. "I don't know my age exactly," Truth told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1876. "I was a slave in the State of New York, and was sold a good many times. When too old I was made younger, and when too young I was made older."<sup>11</sup> By claiming the inscrutable badge of "oldest public speaker in the world," Truth appropriated the apparent fungibility of her chronological age to her own ends.<sup>12</sup>

The essays in the "Slavery, Emancipation, and the Politics of Elder Care" section join Truth in highlighting the intersections of age, race, and gender in the making of slavery's capitalism. Field's essay illuminates Truth's and Harriet Tubman's "black feminist claims to old-age justice." As Field explains, theorists of intersectionality in the Black feminist tradition have long identified Truth and Tubman, two of the most famous women to liberate themselves from enslavement in the nineteenth-century United States, as progenitors and interlocutors. Field argues that age scholars would do well to follow their lead. By centering formerly enslaved and working-class older Black women in their speeches, activism, and (Truth's) *Narratives*, Truth and Tubman critiqued racial capitalism's coercion of care from Black women, who sustained the longevity of white households before facing premature debility and immiseration without care in return. Their analyses point us toward the life course dimensions of intersectional oppression, in which caring relations link lives in structures of exploitation but also, perhaps, possibilities of interdependency and solidarity.

If Field shows how Truth and Tubman theorized the links between the exploitation of black women's caring labor and their hardships in later life, Henrique Espada Lima's article shifts focus to enslavers' anticipated care needs in nineteenth-century Brazil's slave society. Historians of slavery in nineteenth-century Brazil have typically framed "paternalistic" practices—such as promises of manumission or bequests of property—"as strategies to foster bonds of dependency" and "extend relations of domination beyond slavery." These characterizations, Lima explains, assume that enslavers held considerable resources and capacities to enforce their

will. In examining a trove of nineteenth-century postmortem inventories and notarial records from urban areas in southeastern Brazil, Lima reconstructs negotiations between enslaved and/or manumitted people and their “precarious masters”—slave owners without kin and with little wealth beyond slaves, sometimes disabled and older—who promised freedom and some material security in exchange for care through the end of their lives. Enslaved and formerly enslaved people, in turn, navigated nineteenth-century Brazil’s shifting legal and economic landscape as they tried to secure freedom, security, and perhaps some degree of upward mobility for themselves and their families. Expectations for aging, in other words, became a key site of negotiation and struggle.

In the late nineteenth century, social expectations for old age in industrialized countries increasingly turned on waged work—and retirement from it. For advocates of large-scale systems of economic support for older adults, including old-age pensions and social insurance, the intensity of industrial production seemed to thrust older men into dependency on families and social institutions due to disability, poverty, segregation, and labor discrimination. The grand state pension and social insurance programs of the capitalist welfare states were envisioned as fixes to the new problems of old age. Missing from this vision were the women and, particularly in the United States, people of color whose work commanded less respect, or even recognition as work at all.<sup>13</sup> As the articles in the issue’s “Genealogies of Retirement” section attest, histories of old-age poverty, disemployment, and the movements demanding economic security from employers and the state, as well as the vision and form of such systems of support, can tell us much about the experiences of older people as well as the values of societies broadly.

In his piece, Gabriel Winant argues that the “deserving dependency” of older people not only defined old age but was used to regulate the large-scale economic and social transformations of capitalist development. Braiding together feminist policy history, labor history, and political economy, Winant embeds the rise of social insurance in the interwar United States within Fordism’s evolving regime of social reproduction. Pushed out of waged work by the increasing pace of production in capital-intensive industries, older patriarchs turned to their adult children for support. But adult children chafed at the presence of their parents, and reformers worried about the breakdown of familial responsibility and patriarchal authority. To address old-age unemployment, advocates Abraham Epstein and Isaac Rubinow pushed for old-age pensions and later social insurance. Against the warnings of critics, they argued that such support would not create a class of dependent and demoralized older men but would empower self-sufficient, male-headed, single-wage households. Old men’s “deserving dependency” strengthened “the ideology that defined the productive breadwinner against his negative dependents.” And social insurance would remoralize the Fordist family.

If Winant critiques the conservative functions of the United States' best-known social program—Social Security—Ben Zdencanovic argues that its roots were less American and more radical than previously thought. As Zdencanovic narrates, Abraham Epstein, then a young Marxian socialist, was inspired by Soviet Russian programs to advocate for nationwide “social security” to protect against not just old age but also unemployment, sickness, and disability in order to “promote the welfare of society as a whole,” in his words. His vision for a unified, universal, redistributive system of compulsory social insurance and social assistance in the United States was far more comprehensive than what came to be codified in the 1935 Social Security Act. “It was in Soviet Russia that Epstein first learned to think beyond piecemeal legislation for old-age pensions and unemployment insurance and began to envision a system that might truly *socialize* risk on a mass scale,” Zdencanovic writes.

Premodern histories can elucidate antecedents, make comparisons, and help denaturalize contemporary assumptions of old age. Amelia Kennedy unsettles our understandings of productivity and retirement by examining debates around the resignation of abbots from medieval European Cistercian monasteries. In the twelfth century, Cistercian monks strongly resisted the retirement of abbots, even those of very advanced age. It helped that monasteries doubled as long-term-care homes with a duty of care and respect toward older people, concessions and accommodations based on needs, dedicated infirmaries, structured daily routines, and an emphasis on community and interdependence. But older abbots were expected to prioritize the well-being of the flock over their own personal desires to retreat from the *vita activa* of monastery leadership. In fact, in Cistercian logics, very old age and frailty were not misfortunes to be endured, Kennedy argues; rather, they provided the basis for spiritual leadership by modeling aging as virtuous suffering.

As Kennedy's contribution illustrates, histories of later life can disrupt ableist and ageist conceptualizations of agency that privilege independence, autonomy, and choice. Historians have yet to fully consider the sometimes hard-to-recognize ways that people at the end of life, particularly those who are frail or infirm, have asserted their interests and desires, resisted or disrupted their care and treatment, expressed disapproval of the material or social conditions of their lives, and intervened in and with their environments.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, older adults, including those who are disabled, have often been cast as dependent, vulnerable, and politically quiescent (or even reactionary), obscuring even the social movement activism that is the bread and butter of radical historians. The pieces in the issue's “Generational Struggles and Solidarities” section offer examples of the necessary work yet to be done on political action by older people and/or around age. Older activists have reframed old age as social and political as well as chronological or biological, challenging the medicalization and individualization of the experience of old age. They aimed

to reform society by demanding accessibility and accommodations to empower older people's social and political participation and further collective action.<sup>15</sup>

Maya C. Sandler chronicles one such group of older activists, the East Bay Gray Panthers (EBGP), and its establishment of the Over 60 Health Clinic in Berkeley, California. In both content and form the clinic centered older adults, focusing on prevention, education, and maintenance rather than acute and outcome-oriented care. The EBGP grouped health care and social support in the form of outreach and patient advocacy, making clear that "there was no way to assess need without considering health as a fundamentally relational experience" that is both biological and social, individual and societal. Older volunteers staffed the clinic, modeling a "community-oriented elderhood" of care work that valued personal insights and experiences and that was slow paced like their peer patients. The primarily white, middle-class women who led the EBGP had retired from careers in public institutions, privileging them with skills to navigate bureaucracies and faith that they could get state power and the medical field to work for greater social benefit. As Sandler argues, the EBGP "demonstrated the necessity of reforming the experience of medical care and not merely its availability" while embracing engagement with the state as a tool for advancing health and social change.

Activist negotiation with the state is also the context for Lauren Jae Gutterman's analysis of the founding of Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE), the United States' oldest and largest social service and advocacy organization for LGBT elders. SAGE emerged from two concurrent social transformations: the gay and lesbian movement of the 1970s and elder services enabled by the Older Americans Act of 1965. In this context, Gutterman argues, SAGE defined itself less as a social movement and more as a social assistance provider. This granted it recognition and funds from the state and allowed it to grow amid the conservative 1980s. But it also limited SAGE's goals, ensuring that it moved incrementally and supported a narrow group of older people as clients rather than as comrades. Staffed primarily by white, middle-class gays and lesbians in their middle age, many of whom did not see themselves in gay liberation, SAGE did not take a broadly intersectional approach to the ways racial, gender, and economic inequality compounded the challenges gay and lesbian elders faced. But as the organization grew older, so did its members, many of whom did begin to see themselves as LGBT elder activists.

SAGE's history also reveals the role of generational formation and intergenerational relationships in shaping historical change. *Generation* is a widely used but vastly undertheorized term for thinking about social identity and social change; "more than a biological concept for the horizontal succession of living being, 'generation' also reveals how shared subjectivities are produced, organized, and sustained."<sup>16</sup> Together, the articles in this section of the issue demonstrate how generations can be a fruitful direction for historical inquiry if moved beyond a simple

conception of chronological age cohort to consider how they are defined in conjunction with other relational identities and formed in fields of solidarity and struggle.

Laura Renata Martin brings generations and age to bear on battles over redevelopment in San Francisco's South of Market (SoMa) neighborhood. Focusing on the fight over the Yerba Buena Center project in the 1970s, Martin shows how the renewal effort "pitted union workers against the retired and disabled elderly poor and pegged job creation to the destruction of working-class urban housing." To justify the project, SoMa was framed in ageist terms as crumbling and derelict, with a disposable, nonproductive population of residents. The predominantly single, white older men who lived in SoMa's low-rent apartments and residential hotels organized as Tenants and Owners in Opposition to Redevelopment (TOOR) and called on unions to join them in opposing the project they argued would uproot them as they aged in place. But TOOR found little solidarity even from unions with radical reputations, like the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. Martin's history reveals the cleavages in class, urban, and generational politics, critiquing unions' prioritization of bread-and-butter gains, political power, and the promise of jobs for "young and middle-aged, able-bodied, unionized white men" over a more expansive vision of the city for the working class, young and old, waged or not.

While generational differences may be a source of conflict, intergenerational relationships are also a powerful form of historical connection. Rachel Gelfand provides a rich, affecting description of her relationship with Vicki Gabriner, a member of her queer family, and the collaborative intergenerational research method they developed, "bringing activists to the archives that chronicle them." The two examined the "material convoy" of queer belongings, the stuff of a radical queer life acquired and passed down from Gabriner's experiences as a member of the SDS, Weather Underground, and second Venceremos Brigade and cofounder of the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance. Engaging with older interlocutors about their history in archives is a portable method, but in Gelfand and Gabriner's case it is also personal and intimate. Gelfand theorizes the importance of the transmission of knowledge and memory in queer intergenerational relationships in which legacies are bequeathed through nonbiological family trees, storing and transmitting queer history through and beyond the archive.

As editors, we must acknowledge that this issue of *RHR* perpetuates the Eurocentrism of much of the work in age studies. The field emerged from western Europe and North America and has engaged in debates about the status, welfare, and experiences of older people within societies concerned about the impact of the "aging population" on economies and welfare systems but still with robust funding mechanisms for studying it. But many other parts of the world have seen steep improvements in longevity and declines in fertility—Africa, for example, is projected to have a faster growth rate in the older population than any other area in



the world—drawing increased attention to older people and population aging in the global South. As Kavita Sivaramakrishnan argues here, historians must question the underlying modernization logics that assume linear social change, “aging populations,” definitions of age framed by the politics of state welfare systems, and universal genealogies of the experience and meaning of old age. Radical histories of age will attend to colonization and colonial welfare policies, the politics of decolonization and international development, local and heterogeneous meanings of age roles, migration and immigration, engagement with global health regimes, and generational power dynamics.

This last theme has emerged with particular force in recent US political discourse, with critiques from both the Right and the Left of the outsized influence of older people in positions of power and distilled in popular discourse in the phrase “OK, Boomer.” A critical age studies is needed to analyze both the implicit ageism of this critique and the ways in which older age stands in for class and race in expressions of younger people’s frustration with the degradation of work, the environment, social welfare, and public education that is overseen by older generations. Age studies explains that older people are not a homogeneous group, especially across the more than thirty-year age span grouped together as “elderly,” nor are they uniformly privileged. Taking old age, older people, and age-related expressions of politics seriously can bring increased awareness of discrimination, inequality, and fights for social change—both past and future.

The issue concludes in a “Curated Spaces” section featuring “To Survive on This Shore: Selected Photographs and Interviews with Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Older Adults,” a collaboration between the photographer Jess T. Dugan and the aging and gender scholar Vanessa Fabbre. Contemporary visual representations of older people in the United States and Europe too often center what Linn Sandberg and Barbara Marshall call “hetero-happiness,” images that connect fulfillment in later life to whiteness, cis-normativity, heterosexual marriage, and active, able-bodied grandparenting.<sup>17</sup> Dugan and Fabbre’s portraits and interviews offer a powerful rejoinder to normative models of the life course that are framed around reproductive life transitions and waged work and metrics of successful aging defined by bodily normativity and continued productivity. Instead, the people featured in “To Survive on This Shore” assert alternative understandings of success in aging, challenging us to recognize the historical force of chains of dependence and chosen family, forms of activism, and the struggles and joys of defining self and community in old age.

In COVID times, some ethicists and medical policy makers have defended prioritizing time left in the “life cycle,” directing resources away from older people so that younger people will be “able to pass through each life stage—to be a child, a young adult, and to then develop a career and family, and to grow old—and to enjoy a wide range of the opportunities during each stage.”<sup>18</sup> But these are neither

universal life stages nor opportunities, nor does old age have to be defined by the productivity and normativity of “career and family” that are presumed to precede it. The interlocutors of “To Survive on This Shore” point us toward other possibilities—of affirming embodiments, sharing interdependence with others, and envisioning a different future from the perspective of struggles past.

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## Notes

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1. World Health Organization, “COVID-19 Situation Report—162.”
2. For the formulation “aging into old age,” see Gullette, “Against ‘Aging.’”
3. Barrett, Michael, and Padavic, “Calculated Ageism”; Stevis-Gridneff, Apuzzo, and Pronczuk, “When Covid-19 Hit”; Phillips, “Bolsonaro Says He ‘Wouldn’t Feel Anything.’”
4. Williams et al., “Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Health”; Geronimus et al., “Weathering”; Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 28.
5. Taylor, “Of Course There Are Protests”; Eldeib and Sanchez, “Police Brutality.”
6. Lowsky et al., “Heterogeneity in Healthy Aging”; Phillipson, “Political Economy of Longevity,” 503–4; Estes, “Critical Gerontology,” 19. On historiography of old age, see Troyansky, *Aging in World History*, 3–8.
7. Meade and Serlin, “Editors’ Introduction,” 3.
8. Katz, “What Is Age Studies?,” 18–20.
9. Field and Syrett, “Chronological Age,” 372.
10. Field and Syrett, “Chronological Age,” 374–75.
11. *Chicago Tribune*, “Sojourner Truth.” See also Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*; Windon, “Superannuated”; and Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery*.
12. Our interpretation of Truth’s age politics is indebted to Corinne Field’s essay in this issue, as well as to Habiba Ibrahim’s analysis of “oceanic lifespans” in “Any Other Age.”
13. Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land*; Atchley, “Critical Perspectives on Retirement”; Cole, *Journey of Life*; Graebner, *History of Retirement*; Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five*; Quadagno, *Transformation of Old Age Security*; Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*.
14. Grenier and Phillipson, “Rethinking Agency in Later Life.”
15. In parallel with disability movements, see Nepveux, “Activism,” 21.

16. Kunow, "Chronologically Gifted?," 40.
17. Sandberg and Marshall, "Queering Aging Futures."
18. Emanuel and Wertheimer, "Who Should Get Influenza Vaccine When Not All Can?," 855.

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