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Doing Up the Work: Exploring Older Women's Physicality in Turn-of-the-Century Iowa

Helene Cixous' admonition to "Write your self. Your body must be heard" has been followed by countless women who nearly daily put pen to paper to write their lives and their bodies in their diaries. Through women's writings, the history of women's conceptions of the body and physical activity can be elucidated. The primary purpose of this paper is to explore how women in turn-of-the-century rural Iowa wrote about their physicality, through analyzing their journals and letters. Some of the questions addressed here are: How did rural women's experiences contradict dominant notions of older women's bodies? Were they written as ill, dis-eased bodies declining in function because of old age, or as changing but still active bodies? In short, this study attempts to problematize the concept of "old."

The paper analyzes the diaries and correspondence of seven older Iowa women which were written between 1880 and 1910. It explores how these women constructed themselves, particularly as physical agents. Dominant discourse about old women's bodies, both historical and contemporary, have centered around the inevitable dis-ease and inactivity. The pervasive notion of the mid to late 1800s was that once a woman reached menopause, she was simply waiting to die. This idea could have been internalized by old women and resulted in lived experiences of dependence and frailty. However, the narratives of these seven women reveal that as they aged, they continued in their engaged and active lives; continued, in the words of one, "doing up the work" that was so central to those lives.

In this paper I juxtapose medical and cultural beliefs concerning aging women with the narratives of those living in rural Iowa. The construct of physicality is illuminated through several themes: work, health and disease, and social interactions with family and friends. The women whose writings are discussed were working, traveling, and writing:

their writings can be used to help better understand the lived reality of women's aging in turn-of-the-century Iowa.

The paper also proposes that with respect to physicality, the lives of rural women differed from those of urban women. The strict constraints which the medical community's discourse placed on women's bodies, and particularly old bodies, appear to have been less stringently observed in rural communities. Notions about femininity and aging may have influenced their ideas about physical activity, but the reality of farm life demanded that they continue their work. Understanding how older women in the past acted as physical agents may provide insights into present day older women's conceptions of physicality.