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## Ageism and Lesbians: An Exploratory Study

Suzanne Murdock-Amant

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**AGEISM AND LESBIANS:  
An Exploratory Study**

**Suzanne Murdock-Amant, BA, LCSW**

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Lindenwood College in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Gerontology

1992



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Date

#### DEDICATION

To Jane and all women who are working, both personally and professionally, to bring about awareness and an end to lesbian ageism.

AGING IS NOT FOR SISSIES

by Janny

Aging is not for sissies  
Aging is not for faint of heart  
Aging is living's second part  
Not for the quitter

Aging is for the fighter  
Knowing just who and what you are  
Courage will be your guiding star  
Fear turns you bitter

Reach out to all  
We love you too  
Aging will call  
On me - on you

Aging is not for sissies  
Time's passage may diminish you  
But you'll see the finish through  
No fuss or glitter

You're born to do your bit  
Aging is part of it  
You're just a passing guest  
And when you're gone  
We'll know you did your best  
AND YOU WERE STRONG.

(Adelman, 1986).

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**AGEISM AND LESBIANS:  
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**Suzanne Murdock-Amant, BA, LCSW**

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of Lindenwood College in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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## AGEISM AND LESBIANS

Ageism, not aging, oppresses. Women are oppressed by other women as well as by themselves. This is an exploratory study of the root sources of ageism in the lesbian community, speculating about the conscious and unconscious motivations around ageism. It is assumed to be clear to all lesbians who have shunned patriarchal notions, build-in negation and diminishing of women, that ageism distracts lesbians from the pursuit of the essential self, the very identity which lesbianism makes possible.

One old lesbian writes that she thinks it ironic that even in a woman-identified society like the lesbian community, the old woman is still not recognized and celebrated. Another old lesbian states that political forces wrench women's emotional and erotic energies away from themselves, other women and woman-identified values. And, that lesbians have learned this as women surviving in the "real" world (of compulsory heterosexuality) where many of lesbian choices in life are determined by race, looks, class, ablebodiedness and age.



## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Everyone of us gets older from the day of birth, but aging in America must be understood in conjunction with ageism, which, in turn, abets and is reproduced by diverse forms of sexism, racism, antisemitism and the many other "isms" that beset us (Ryan, 1976).

Ageism, like racism and sexism, has these detrimental effects on persons. It deprives certain persons and groups of status, the right to control their own destinies and to have access to power with the end result of powerlessness. It results in social and economic discrimination and deprivation. It deprives our society of the contributions of many competent and creative persons who are needed to deal with our vast and complex problems. It results in alienation, despair and hostility. Its elimination will require a vigorous individual and public commitment (Denver Gray Panthers, 1991).

Recently, attention has been given to ageism, especially the types of ageism levelled at aging women. Disregard for theory development concerning age is considered by some to be a specific weakness of feminist scholarship (Lewis and Butler, 1972). Moreover, because of the strength of youth-worship in our society, feminists, too, suffer from age-phobia and can be expected to have difficulties accepting their own aging (Datan, 1981).

There are endless unexamined contradictions in the prejudice which women feel toward the old woman they themselves are or are becoming. Lesbian ageism is probably the ultimate extension of these self-defeating contradictions (Copper, 1987).

Adrienne Rich, in Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, tries to bridge the gap between the lesbian and feminist perspective of unexamined hetero-centricity. She writes, "...As we address the [patriarchal] institution itself, moreover, we begin to perceive a history of female resistance which has never fully understood itself because it has been so fragmented, miscalled, erased...There is a need for a complex kind of overview to undo the power men everywhere wield over women, power which has become a model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control..." (A. Rich, 1980). She states that enough feminist scholars and theorists have not acknowledged the societal forces which wrench women's emotional and erotic energies away from themselves and other women and from women-identified values. and, that lesbians have learned as women surviving in the "real" world (of compulsory heterosexuality) where many of lesbian choices in life are determined by race, looks, able-bodiedness and age (A. Rich, 1980).

Lesbian feminism is a recognition that heterosexuality is central to all women's oppressions. It is an institution and an ideology and a cornerstone of male supremacy that

oppresses women. The whole framework of heterosexuality defines women's lives and is fundamental to the negative self-image and self-hatred of women in this society. Lesbian feminism is based on a rejection of male definitions of our lives and is, therefore, crucial to the development of a positive, woman-identified identity, of re-defining who we are supposed to be in every situation. Heterosexual privilege is the method by which women are given a stake in male supremacy; therefore, the method by which women are given a stake in their own oppression (Bunch, 1975).

The social sciences, women's literature and the lesbian agenda have only recently addressed issues of women and ageism. Very little has been written to date on ageism and the lesbian community.

Barbara Macdonald, as keynote speaker to the National Women's Studies Association in June, 1985, confronted the NWSA planning committee and demanded that ageism be addressed at a plenary session stating that women's studies ignore the meaning and politics of women's lives once beyond their reproductive years (as in male thinking) and, as feminist theory builds, that ageism is a central feminist issue (Macdonald, 1985).

In their books, Barbara Macdonald, Cynthia Rich and Baba Copper analyze the roots and branches of ageism from the gross to the subtle. Macdonald and Rich discuss the intersections of ageism with racism and sexism in the economic

and social oppression of aging women (Macdonald and Rich, 1991), and Copper analyzes the hidden dynamics between younger and older women and patriarchal values (Copper, 1988). As aging lesbians, these particular women speak first hand of the hatred and fears associated with everyday encounters on the streets to confrontations in the mirror (Porter, 1989).

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to:

- 1) chart the historical background of patriarchal oppression of women;
- 2) review feminist theory and literature in regard to women and the patriarchy;
- 3) review current lesbian theory and literature in regard to ageism and oppression.

#### DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

For the purpose of this paper, terms are defined as follow:

Ageism: attitudes negatively impacting women growing older in our society.

Feminist: a person who demonstrates a commitment to improving women's position in society.

Heterosexual: a person whose primary sexual and emotional feelings are for the opposite sex.

Homophobia: irrational fear and hatred of intimate relationships with persons of the same sex, in self and in others.

Homosexual: a person whose primary sexual and emotional feelings are for the same sex.

Lesbian: a woman whose primary sexual and emotional feelings are for other women.

Patriarchy: authority relationship of male-dominance and control over females.

#### ASSUMPTIONS

Based on research on heterosexual patriarchy and its perpetuation, feminist theory and literature, lesbian theory and literature, this paper assumes:

- 1) ageism is a widespread problem;
- 2) ageism rearranges power between women through weapons of the patriarchy.

#### AREAS OF EXPLORATION

For the purpose of this paper, works of lesbian and feminist writers are explored, linking the common origins of oppression, intimating patriarchal/heterosexual power as a limiting, controlling and destructive bastion of power.

#### DELIMITATIONS

This paper is of an exploratory nature and is not intended

to provide reference to or recommendations in regard to lesbianism and/or ageism. It will not examine extensively characteristics in regard to or between lesbians, homophobia, self-esteem issues, conflict resolution, gender role behaviors or characteristics of partner relationships.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purposes of this paper, the review of the literature examines:

- 1) an historical perspective and perceived patriarchal/heterosexual characteristics that enforce the notions of compulsory heterosexuality and power over women;
- 2) the women's movement and feminist notions;
- 3) lesbian literature exploring lesbians and aging.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The support of men's dominance over their wives appears as far back as Biblical times, where it is written in the Old Testament, "...and they desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee," (Genesis 3:16), and in the New Testament, "...wives to be in subjection to your own husbands" (Peter, 3:1). Persisting into the middle of the 15th century, these ideas gained specificity towards keeping a woman in subjugation:

"...scold her sharply, bully and terrify her. And if this still doesn't work...take up a stick and beat her soundly, for it is better to punish the body and correct the soul than to damage the soul and spare the body....Then readily beat her, not in rage but out of charity and concern for her soul, so that the beating will abound to your merit and her good..."  
(da Siena, 1979).

Under English Common Law (Dobash and Dobash, 1979), women became "chattel", or property, of their husbands. Throughout the 18th century, punishment was defined fairly as "blows, thumps, kicks or punches on the back if they leave no lasting traces." Not until 1871, in Alabama and Massachusetts, was wife-beating by these definitions, made illegal.

Primarily due to the efforts of the suffragettes, the women's movement was born in the early 20th century. Along with the struggle for economic and professional freedom, grew

an awareness of the physical and emotional oppression women experienced in their intimate relationships.

Ever since Susanna Rowson's Charlotte Temple (1794), the first American best seller, heroines (as daughters of Eve) of American fiction have re-enacted Eve's fall from grace and are destined to dependency and servitude because they dared to deviate from the laws of God and man, thus conditioning women to accept their inferior status (Martin, 1971).

The concept of the fallen woman is as central to Christianity as is the fiction of a nation founded by the Puritans reflecting this bias.

As in literature, males and females in American textbooks reflect the roles that our society intends them ultimately to occupy. In our society, the male, rather than the female, is taught to achieve, advance and create. In 1960, Rosenblith and Allinsmith discovered that in American elementary textbooks written from 1930 on, the distribution of male figures outnumber and dominate, while female characters lack spirit, curiosity and originality (Rosenblith and Allinsmith, 1960). Historically, the education of women, no matter how rigorous or inspiring, cannot overcome the wholesale prejudice of a society entrenched in its belief that women are inferior and properly excluded from the positions a first-class education might prepare for them.

Bryn Mawr College was founded at the turn of the century as a feminist institution whose basic premise was the funda-



mental demand for the equal education of upper class women so as to realize their highest human potential. The failure to maintain its position as a feminist institution is deeply connected to the failure of the larger feminist movement to transcend the suffrage issue with a more radical analysis of the structural causes of women's oppression. The inability to come to grips with the fundamental economic and social issues of marriage and the family and women's position in those institutions, to analyze the institutional and psychological oppression of women, and to construct radical alternatives for socialized life -- these were the vital failures, and they arose from the fundamental limitations of Bryn Mawr's early feminism (Schneider, 1971).

Every new revolutionary point of view faces the problem of finding concepts adequate to describe its new perceptions. Women have been trying to understand their own situation and history through a series of analogies: women as caste or colony, women as slave or worker, woman of color...there are no adequate descriptive concepts to help understand women's roles or the power relations between women and men. Women still do not know what sexism is. The experience of being oppressed as a female cannot be made to fit categories, nor is female subordination a universal form. There is not just one relationship between women and men. The problem is having descriptive concepts to help understand the range of relationships that do occur.

The Women's Movement has put forward an image of universal and timeless male dominance: women have always been oppressed. While this may be true, it does not mean women have never had any power. We know of many societies, including our own, in which some women wield a great deal of power, from owning property to controlling the behaviors of others.

To understand this paradox of women's history -- apparent universal male-dominance but some real female power -- it is necessary to make a distinction between "power" and "authority." While power is the simple ability to elicit from another a behavior not necessarily of her or his own choosing, authority is legitimate power, power which is accepted as valid by those subjected to it. Non-legitimate power, the kind usually exercised by women, is uncertain, disjointed, and often disguised; legitimate power or authority is continuous and formalized, institutionalized in power arrangements and also in thought patterns. The distinction between power and authority can be seen in the old sexist joke about the woman who "wears the pants in the family." When we use such an expression, we grudgingly acknowledge the power that a woman temporarily holds and, at the same time, we remind her that the structure of authority seems essential for any analysis of relationships of dominance and subordination (Phelps, 1975).

We must remember that power and authority are not mutually exclusive. In fact, female power has usually existed within the framework of male authority. In examining universal male

authority, we are also dealing with a wide range of behavior in terms of the extent and severity of male dominance. It is a range of behavior whose lower limits make women almost beasts of burden and whose upper limits approach (though never reach) a kind of equality (Phelps, 1975).

Building on these concepts, we can arrive at a working definition of sexism as "a social relationship in which males have authority over females." If we define sexism in this way, that is not only as a power relationship, but one that is accepted for the most part by females as well as males, then we can understand the basic paradox of women's history without violating its complexity. We can establish the fact of universal male authority, but in understanding the variety in female power, we can search for the dynamic variables of change. By defining sexism as the authority of males over females, we can also incorporate into the term all the social-psychological attitudes, traditions, self-perceptions and meanings whose acceptance by women has kept them in their place and which have been such an important part of feminist analysis. We can integrate social-psychological reality as part of power relationships instead of removing them to some other plane as "superstructure" or "false consciousness."

If sexism is a social relationship in which males have authority over females, "patriarchy" is a term which describes the whole system of interaction which arises from that basic relationship (Phelps, 1975).

Lesbians have always been linked with women's liberation. The radical feminists have not been afraid to discuss objectives with lesbians and to explore sexism, cultural revolution and the idea of self-possession.

Lesbians are women who survive without men emotionally and financially, representing the ultimate in an independent lifestyle and not just as appendages of men. Lesbians attempt a true break with the old sexual emotional divisions and male domination. Lesbians are women who have chosed to act on loving other women. Lesbians are women who have a positive attitude toward other women and do not think of their lives as an alternative, or as an aggressive rejection of men. Lesbians have little interest in pleasing men and do not see men as a threat to them personally as feminists often do (Abbott and Love, 1971).

Some feminists insist lesbianism is merely a practice, not a political issue. However, Celestine Ware points out that "...radical feminists believe that radical feminism is the only true political cause now in existence...To achieve the elimination of dominance in human relationships, sex roles, i.e., stereotyped male and female identities would have to be eradicated" (Ward and Cohen, 1970).

Peter Cohen comments that "...to live an alternative that is totally outside the alternative of the culture is a profoundly political act" (Ware and Cohen, 1970).

One must look to the lesbian's oppression as part of all

women's oppression. One must look to the lesbian's desire to escape from the male power structure and achieve independent being. The penalties the feminist will face for openly denying her sex role will resemble those the lesbian now faces for showing an open preference for her own sex. To be a lesbian is unnatural -- in men's eyes. To be a feminist is unnatural -- in men's eyes. The price of rebellion against men's authority is living as an outcast without the approval and support of men.

The common enemies of feminists and lesbians are sexism and homophobia. Sexism is not merely the preference of society for one sex, but also, attributes to that sex of various preferred qualities and attitudes at the expense of the other sex.

Women's liberation's great importance provides an opportunity to re-examine modes of human behavior. The fight of all women against sexism is not the only common ground of feminists and lesbians. Both groups are part of the larger struggle against oppression by all groups that refuse to be dominated by a hierarchical system in which certain groups are considered naturally superior, and other groups, naturally inferior.

Feminists and lesbians are deeply tied, one to the other. It is no accident that a 1970 meeting of the stereotyped low-life society or revolutionary groups included people of color, homosexuals and feminists (Davis and Kennedy, 1986).

Out of activism in the feminist movement, more often than not, a new kind of lesbian has emerged, the lesbian activist or a radical lesbian who learned most recently the enormous power

and freedom of the open assertion of who and what one is. Not only is the radical lesbian no longer ashamed of her commitment to the lesbian way of life, but after some self-searching and self-analysis, she has come to realize that most of her problems are due not to any necessarily unhealthy traits in her personality, but, rather, to her social oppression.

We can draw the parallel here between homophobia and any form of violence. Homophobia is a belief system and set of priorities that assert heterosexuality as normal and superior and homosexuality as abnormal and inferior. Homophobia makes it difficult for homosexuals to live openly and freely. It denies basic human rights because of sexual orientation. Homophobia works effectively as a weapon of violence because it is joined with patriarchal power. To be a lesbian is to be perceived a threat to the status quo. Homophobia wields its power over all women through lesbian-baiting which occurs when women are called lesbian because they resist male dominance and control. To be named lesbian threatens all women because there is no real way a woman can credential her sexuality: Lillian Hellman's play, "The Children's Hour," makes this point when a student asserts two teachers are lesbians and they have no way to disprove it. Our homophobic world threatens and imposes damaging loss on lesbians for choosing to live whole lives; many lesbians are vulnerable to a homophobic society.

Some of the best work for liberation in the 1970's was finding ways to break the silence on hard issues, to bring

woman out of isolation, to bring women together to talk about their lives and, in the process, learn that oppression, with its various faces, is the same.

Homophobia has been one of the major causes of the failure of the women's movement to make deep and lasting changes. The brakes were put on when threatened with the loss of heterosexual privilege. The movement has been accused of accepting tokenism and integration, forgetting equality for all women -- not just that of the white middle class women with white men. Despite backlash and retreats, examination and change called for the liberation of all women (Pharr, 1988).

Every woman is hurt by homophobia, but lesbians suffer as double victims of sexism/homophobia: from men and from heterosexual women (feminist or progressive).

As the second wave of the Women's Movement began, lesbians learned that homophobia held women in fear. Despite the leadership lesbians had in creating the movement, lesbians were asked to be discreet about their lives. Lesbians are survivors. In the face of society's homophobia, lesbians have learned to live on a double-edged sword. Choosing visibility means risking rejection and losses; choosing invisibility means isolation, living a double life, feeding the power of homophobia and making it impossible to create a lesbian movement. The courage to risk visibility is for individual freedom and the freedom for all lesbians. Every act of lesbian visibility is an act of resistance. Its defiance say 'No!' to the oppression of homophobia

(Pharr, 1988).

Internalized homophobia prevents unity and growth. Suffering the pain and damage of a world that negatively impacts, pain turns to anger and, in turn, focuses on the self or one another instead of the source of oppression. It becomes ironic that in longing for safety, internalized homophobia divides and fractures, increasing one's isolation and creating a climate of despair. For lesbians to experience freedom, individually and collectively, personal freedom is a must, from within and without. Homophobia attacks rights and freedoms, self-esteem and pride.

The emotional development that enables the lesbian to throw off the sex roles and sex restrictions universally accepted in our society has been commonly described as a psychopathology: a mental sickness. It is assumed that something in the individual's family environment has caused the child's development to take a wrong turn. However, some progressive psychiatrists and social workers have begun to talk about a concept called sociopathology: a sickness in society. They have found that the individuals they have treated for so-called personal problems have real problems which they are in no position to control. The environment threatens them, even physically. This continual state of threat leads to tension, which leads to various emotional problems, which cannot be solved by treatment because they are perpetuated by real pressures from a hostile society. The concept of sociopathology



fosters a need for systematic analysis of all women's behavior and sheds particular light on the society's rigidity and unwillingness to tolerate many lifestyles for women. It points to external reasons for lesbians' distress and emotional problems. The problems of lesbians -- guilt, fear, self-hatred -- can, therefore, be regarded as part of a sociopathology, part of what is wrong with our society, preventing whole categories of people from being happy and productive (Abbott and Love, 1971).

If women are generally dominated by men in all phases of their lives, from birth until death -- and if this domination is unnatural -- than all of women's modes of behavior are forms of evasive action or adjustment to survive the domination. They are all ways to live in a basically threatening environment. Thus, the clinging vine, the caretaker-housewife, and the child-woman are women who have succumbed to male dominance; the driving career women, the feminist, and the lesbian are women who have struggled to reject male dominance. Lesbianism is one reaction on the part of the growing female to the emotional understanding, shared by all females, of what it means to become a woman in our society. According to the Radicalesbians:

"...The lesbian is the rage of all women, condensed to the point of explosion. She is a woman, who, often at an early age, acts in accordance with an inner compulsion to be a more complete human being than her society will allow her [to be]. These needs and conflicts, over a period of years, bring her into

painful conflict with people, situations, and the accepted way of thinking, until she is in a continual state of war with everything around her and, usually, with herself. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what, for her, began as personal necessity, but, on some level, she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid upon her by the most basic role in society, the female role" (Abbott and Love, 1971).

With equality in relationships with men so difficult, many women are now considering separatism -- in whole or in part -- as a temporary way of life. This would mean that during the struggle, men and women remain apart to discover who they are and what they are capable of. A frightening idea, perhaps, but separatism for a time may be healthy. In active relationships with men, women often spend more time and energy fighting old ways of relating and defining themselves, rather than creating new ones.

A vital relationship between lesbians and women's liberation is in their mutual interest in a time of changing relationships. Lesbians are the women who potentially can demonstrate life outside the male power structure that dominates marriage as well as every other aspect of our culture. Thus, the lesbian movement is not only related to women's liberation, it is at the very heart of it. The attitude toward lesbians is an indicator by which to measure the extent of women's actual

liberation. On the other hand, women's liberation undoubtedly addresses the deepest interests of lesbians, who have the greatest stake in women's social, economic and cultural progress, as they will never benefit from the rewards and privileges that normally come only with male relationships (Abbott and Love, 1971).

Unity and coalition between feminism and lesbianism seem necessary to fight the political-heterosexual institutions of domination to end female oppression. It is particularly important to understand that the whole framework of heterosexuality defines women's lives and is fundamental to negative self-image and self-hatred of women in this society.

In a June, 1992, "Village Voice" article, Michael Warner points to Judith Butler's account in her file, "Gender Trouble," that heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals heterosexuality itself as a compulsory law and comedy. Warner points out that queer theory is now at a boom point and, in a new essay, Lauren Berland and Elizabeth Freeman ("Queer Nationality") have realized that queer activism consists of a largely intuitive and half-articulate theory about how do you avoid being brokered into assimilation by the national political system? (Warner, 1992).

In 1990, Queer Nation began as a national organization and, in its attempt to seriously address racial and ethnic differences

among homosexuals, struck a chord with those attuned to problems of coalition activism. But most of the 'differences' issues have a long history in the movement: its interest in racial difference, for example; or in the way power relationships shape sexuality; in the way feminist resistance to male domination and lesbian/gay resistance to compulsory heterosexuality require each other; in a sense of alienation from most available ways of affirming identity (Warner, 1992).

A St. Louis Queer National, Flowing Johnson, states, "... We oppose our government's roots and actions. We recognize, the articulation of our vision, that we cannot have justice for ourselves as lesbian and gay people, unless there is justice for all. If you believe justice is possible in an unjust society, then you haven't learned the lessons of history. We live in a sexist culture and people's cultural roots show. We can prevail if we understand the linkage of oppressions. We will fail if we refuse to root out our own movement's racism, sexism and classism" (Johnson, 1992).

Charlotte Bunch tried to bring forth a similar message in 1975:

"It is not okay to be queer under patriarchy -- and the last thing we should be aiming to do is to make it okay. Nothing in capitalist-patriarchal America works to our benefit and I do not want to see us working in any way to integrate ourselves into that order. I'm not saying that we should neglect work

on reforms -- we must have our jobs, our housing, etc. But, in so doing, we must not lose sight of our ultimate goal. Our very strength as lesbians lies in the fact that we are outside the patriarchy; our existence challenges its life. To work for 'acceptance' is to work for our own disintegration and an end to the clarity and energy we bring to the women's movement.

"It is not okay, and I do not want it ever to be okay, to be queer in patriarchy. The entire system...of patriarchy must be changed. And essential to that change is an end to heterosexual domination. Lesbians cannot work in movements that do not recognize that heterosexuality is central to all women's oppression: that would be to work for our own self-destruction. But we can coalesce with groups which share the lesbian-feminist analysis and are committed to the changes essential to our survival. This is the basis upon which we can begin to build greater unity and a stronger, more powerful feminist movement" (Bunch, 1975).

Remember that in the Original Sin concept, women can only be "saved" with the help and intervention of an outside intermediary. Women are taught that they will be all right if they can only attach themselves to an innately superior being, a man, who will intercede for them. Women will be absolved of

being born female. What this means, of course, is that women see other women as competitors for the "goodies" -- male validation and approval. Many women simply do not know how to live without playing these destructive games. Since women grow up in a foreign culture -- a White Male System -- which is always defined as "right," they tend not to trust their own perceptions unless they are consonant with those of the White Male System (Schaefer, 1985).

The power and promise of the women's movement depend on women's freedom to exist, however precariously, outside of the system. Instead of exchanging small strategies for survival, women have been able to imagine a world free from domination and to demand a voice in creating that world (C.Rich, 1983).

Lesbians, like heterosexual women, are a diverse group and come from all walks of life. Any well-intentioned individual, including a lesbian, needs self-respect for a positive outlook. Self-respect demands honesty. For a lesbian to have to deny who she is -- outright or by default -- is dishonest and destructive. The quiet associated with lying is tremendous, especially when that lying is for life. Many lesbians live the lie because honesty means confronting society's hate alone. To declare oneself a lesbian is still tantamount to a Jew declaring herself in Nazi Germany. Maybe the lesbian will not be killed, but she risks losing everything and everybody important to her and putting a burden of suspicion or guilt on anyone who accepts her.

The lesbian is bombarded daily by society's thousands of little messages that insist her very life is a crime, just as heterosexual women absorb thousands of messages that insist they are not equal to men (Abbott and Love, 1971).

Claiming her lesbian identity to gain control over her life, Sonja Meidell, in Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence, writes:

"...spiritual growth has been solidly linked with the process of becoming. I am no longer aligned with the Catholic Church even though I claim being raised in its traditions. It leaves me no room to profess my full identity. I will no longer put myself in a position of being judged. There has been too much agony to come to where I am. And this pain has formed my philosophy, one which is growing and changing and simplifying. I am drawn to thinking which combines Eastern philosophies with the teaching of Jesus. I am a Christian, for I believe that Jesus did what we are all meant to do: conquer fears which keep us from loving ourselves and others and becoming one with our true christ-god selves within. I walk the planet, the universe with all creation as part of one being.

"I am glad to say that I am a Lesbian Christian, but mostly I'm glad to say I am whole. No disappointment, no heart-hurts over relationships begun and ended can ever match the pain of not being me, of

believing I was sick and guilty, of feeling so split from myself..." (Meidell, 1985).

Much like the ex-nun's account of suppressed passion for wanting to be whole and of being sick and guilty of sacrificing oneself to the patriarchy, women consciously and/or unconsciously imitate patriarchal power by stereotyping negative attitudes toward other women, particularly older women.

"...No matter how old we are, older women evoke in each of us very primitive and powerful feelings about the woman (or women) who mothered us, and about the women we will become as we age. We try to escape these feelings by keeping our distance, making older women invisible, or by regidifying old women into positively idealized role models or negatively, caricatured stereotypes. We often fall back into ambivalent modes of mother/daughter interactions when we respond to the old women as mother figures, feelings intimidated by their imagined power and control over us, or resenting their real or imagined dependency on us, we activate our own fears of being overprotected and disempowered or of becoming as helpless as they appear to us. We see in them the prototypes and conveyors of gender limitations imposed by our society on all women. Since we are all still struggling to move out of these restrictive roles



and redefine our own capabilities on our own terms, we tend to avoid the women who remind us of the helpless dependency and nurturing selflessness that society devalues and would reduce us to" (Seigel, 1987).

The barriers that ageism places between women need to be broken down. May Sarton in At Seventy: A Journal reminds women that "...It is quite incredible that I am seventy and that I feel so young, much younger than I felt when I wrote The House by the Sea, but isn't it true that one fears what is ahead, and then, when one gets there, it is not at all what one feared?" She further answers the question, "Why is it good to be old? Because I am more myself than I have been (Sarton, 1984).

What makes for a rich, full life is different for every woman as are her individual hormone levels, her family medical history and how she chooses to spend her time. Each has to decide at what point she will accept her aging self in a society (Gordon, 1992). Inevitably, many factors influence how one ages, physically and psychologically, and how one manages the benefits and losses of this period in life (Kirkpatrick, 1989).

Feminism has taught women to scrutinize male reversals of old women's reality. Old lesbians, like all lesbians, are in charge of their own lives and it should come as no surprise that ageism has its roots in the patriarchy. Patriarchal

history tells something about the psychological and political needs which stereotypes, such as the Wicked Old Witch, fulfill. One primary definition of patriarchy is the absence of old women of power. Shimmering in the psyche of the Father are his ancient fears of the old matriarch and her potential use of power -- preferential treatment of the daughters over sons, matrilineal inheritance, or incitement to marriage resistance (Copper, 1987). The accumulated experience of old women is what Adrienne Rich (1980) named "...the enormous potential counterforce [that] is having to be restrained." With the notable exceptions of Macdonald and Rich's book, Look Me In The Eye, and Baba Cooper's Ageism In The Lesbian Community, there has been little analysis of ageism from the lesbian feminist community.

Copper believes lesbian energy is locked away by false consciousness, this "othering" of the old lesbian by women acting upon unexamined traditions of expectation and behavior. These women, rewarded by increased power in a limited world, carry a double-edged sword of ageism. They would themselves and ultimately serve the interests of male dominance. She further states that patriarchal standards only perpetuate male structures of power. If lesbians allow male-defined standards of choice to be the default standards, female powerlessness is maintained. Male contempt for the older woman as unfit for the reproductive/sex object roles filled by younger women (still the primary force of female power in the patriarchy), is the

foundation of the old woman's powerless position (Copper, 1987).

Susan Sontag's "The Double Standard of Aging," is a deeply ageist and heterosexist article. She points out "...that old women are repulsive is one of the most profound esthetic and erotic feelings in our culture" (Sontag, 1972). Often as old women, we are not sure exactly of what we are accused. We are usually short on allies, social power and self-love. Thus, women carry out the horizontal violence among ourselves, doing the essential work of preserving "woman's place": the polarized dance lesbians have learned as women surviving the "real" world (Copper, 1987).

Lesbians, as the group within women's culture most self-conscious about patriarchal values, cultivate the illusion that they waltz to their own tunes. Yet lesbians, like everyone else, are getting older. The lesbian community is ill-prepared for the encountered ageism which teaches that old lesbians are obsolete, not socially or physically powerful. Copper speaks to the standard default assumption of the lesbian political community: that old lesbians are conservative (or, at least, politically incorrect) and inflexible. Above all else, old lesbians are expected to be submissive to younger women who are the "right" age to exert power within the lesbian world. Old lesbians are to be walking contradictions to the cliches of lesbian identity which are constantly in the process of being invented. Unless old lesbians are re/membered as sexual, attractive, useful, integral parts of the women-loving world, then current

lesbian identity is a temporary mirage, not a new social statement of female empowerment (Copper, 1987).

Much work remains to describe change and lack thereof in research on old women. We know very little about the awareness and the attitudes towards issues, stereotypes and assumptions regarding aging women, the nature of old women, the self-understanding of old women, the function of the changing demographic characteristics of the population and the changing social climate. Reinharz states that political process and social movements are means to implement change. We need to speak out with older women, talking about plight as well as about strength. Most of all, we need to join forces with all other groups who share this concern (Reinharz, 1984).

The way to respond to all accusations of ageism is identical to how we must respond to accusations of racist, classist, physicalist or sexist behavior. This is not necessarily to say that the action, or absence of action, has been correctly named. Nevertheless, we must do a lot of listening both inwardly and outwardly. Resistance, excuses or rationalizations only compound the problems. There are basic questions which fifteen years of feminist have taught us to ask: Who profits? What are the hidden assumptions? Why have we ignored it? How many culturally mandated attitudes have we internalized? When an old woman raises the issue of ageism, do not explain to her what you really mean. Listen (Copper, 1988).

We are now seeing a new genre of literature and publications

where the old woman speaks for herself and gives first-hand accounts of what it is like to be old in America. Some of the books are Long Time Passing: Lives Of Older Lesbians, As We Are Now, Lesbians Over 60 Speak For Themselves, Silences, Women and Aging: An Anthology By Women and When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple. Some publications are "Golden Threads," "Sojourner," "Equal Times," "Lesbian Ethics," "Broomstick," "New Woman's Times," "Women's Studies Quarterly" and "Lesbian Connection." An excellent first-hand account is Disguised: A True Story. Works such as these help dispel common generalizations in American society thought to be truisms about old women. Women's own words hold and empower the vision of one another, the vision of who they are now and are becoming, especially in old age. The telling of these stories provides understanding of common experience, the basis for analysis of oppression, and brings the old lesbian out of isolation. Their stories help to reclaim their history as a people, a history of pride.

In "Outside the Sisterhood: Ageism in Women's Studies," Barbara Macdonald describes that women will never build a true women's movement until we can organize together as equals, woman to woman, without the burden of family roles. This is what she says:

"...In the four years it took to get NWSA to address ageism, feminism has moved from a position in which we recognized that family is a building block of patriarchy, the place where sexist, heirarchal

roles are learned, where the socialization of girls takes place, the unit by which women are colonized, manipulated, controlled and punished for infraction. From that basic tenet of feminist theory, both mainstream and radical feminists have moved back to a position of reaffirming the family. Mainstream feminists are buying the notion that as long as a woman has a 'career,' family is a safe and wholesome place to be. Radical feminists have affirmed family as the source of our cultures -- as a way of understanding our strengths and our oppressions as Black, Jewish, Hispanic, Asian-American, Native American, working-class women. This return to family is reflected in our writings, where less and less is Father seen as an oppressor, but more as another family member, oppressed by white male imperialism. (And, believe me, he is oppressed.)

"It will be for future feminist historians to explain how it was that, in our return to family, we never questioned its contradictions to our earlier feminist theory. Not that we can't contradict our own feminist beliefs -- they aren't written in concrete -- just that we never acknowledged the contradiction.

"Nor can history fail to note that our return to family coincides with a reactionary administra-

tion's push back to family values, anymore than it can ignore that our lesbian baby boom coincides with Reagan's baby boom to save the Gross National Product.

"If we are to understand ageism, we have no choice but to bring family again under the lens of a feminist politic. In the past we examined the father as oppressor, we examined his oppression of the mother and the daughters, and in great detail we examined the mother as oppressor of the daughters. What has never come under the feminist lens is the daughters' oppression of the mother -- a woman who, by definition, is older than we are.

"The source of your ageism, the reason you see older women as there to serve you, comes from family. It was in patriarchal family that you learned that Mother is there to serve you, her child; that serving you is her purpose in life. This is not woman's definition of motherhood. This is man's definition of motherhood, a male myth enforced in family and which you still believe, to your peril and mine. It infantilizes you and it erases me.

"This myth of motherhood is not a white American phenomenon, though nowhere, I believe, is it as bad as in white imperialist culture.

Barbara Christian, in her book Black Feminist Criticism, points out how this myth is uncovered in the fiction of Alice Walker writing about Afro-american life and by Buchi Emecheta writing about Ibo life. This myth is summed up by the Ibo saying: 'The joy of being a mother is the joy of giving all to your children.' It is internalized by the young mother, but then internalized and perpetuated by her daughters. So that even when -- as in Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood -- the mother has come to some insight, her daughter continues to see her as existing only for self-sacrifice.

"The old woman is at the other end of that motherhood myth. She has no personhood, no desires, or value of her own. She must not fight for her own issues -- if she fights at all, it must be for 'future generations.' Her greatest joy is seen as giving all to her grandchildren. And to the extent that she no longer directly serves a man -- can no longer produce his children, is no longer sexually desirable to men -- she is erased more completely as grandmother than she was as mother.

"It is for these reasons, because of everything you learned in family, that you, as feminists, can



continue to see the older woman as a nonperson. It is for these reasons that you believe our lives as old women are not important and that we exist only to serve you.

"We have all been so infantilized in family we have never made ourselves, as daughters, accountable as oppressors of the mothers, and we should know only too well that the failure to acknowledge the oppressor in ourselves results in confused thinking and a contradictory image of those we oppress. Thus, you who are younger see us either as submissive and childlike or as possessing some unidentified vague wisdom. As having more 'soul' than you or as being over-emotional and slightly crazy. As weak and helpless or as a pillar of strength. As 'cute' and funny or as boring. As sickly sweet or dominating and difficult. You pity us or you ignore us until you are made aware of your ageism, and then you want to honor us. I don't know which is worse. None of these images has anything to do with who we are; they are the projections of the oppressor.

"I have to say of Women's Studies that when you make the lives of women over 60 invisible, when you see us as your mothers and fail to examine your oppressive attitudes, you are

letting the parameters of Women's Studies be defined by men -- by the man in your own heads. But more than that. In the consciousness raising of the late '60's and '70's, in the contribution made to feminist theory that grew out of those years, in the development of Women's Studies that followed, we planned curricula with an entire piece omitted: that of age and the oppression of ageism. We cannot now patch up those structures in twenty minutes to cover the gaps of our ignorance. We have no choice but to go back once again, as we have had to do before, cover old ground in new ways, and rebuild this time with a wholeness that includes all women, for all the years of our lives" (Macdonald, 1985).

Copper reminds her audience that how old lesbians want to be treated within the lesbian world is difficult to say. Rationalizations and illustrated stereotypes use a range of power to rob old lesbians of their rightful place of respect. Ageism, with all the strength of self-fulfilling prophecy, shapes the lives of all lesbians, even the most self-defined and self-confident, diminishing and warping these women into parodies of the essential self. The potential energy which is dissipated through woman to woman ageism may not be obvious until one gets "over the hill." Active confrontation of conditioned anti-ageist are steps toward freeing oneself of built-in

disablers (Copper, 1988).

The social malaise of ageism involves some subtle forms of competition. Although feminist lesbians attempt to resist participation in power/over scenarios, we still listen carefully for the subtle indicators of respect from other women. Competitiveness seems connected to the attention we pay to power differences. Sources of power, such as looks, skills, sexual confidence, resources and political correctness, all play their part in the complex process of figuring out who is "ahead" or "behind." Copper relays her experiences as old woman-scapegoat. "I seldom experience a feeling of real respect from others. Almost never do I sense that I am being approached by a younger woman in the spirit of acceptance, learning or wonder" (Copper, 1988).

Younger lesbians need to consider their relationships with older lesbians. There is a need to negotiate a code of honor between young and old, designed for mutual and ultimate benefit to each other; so as not to be captive to the cultural fear of female obsolescence, so time and indifference do not strip women of power, work, visibility and human contacts. Lesbianism offers women the opportunity to explore a fundamentally new social identity and old age, a time of adventure. In 1987, at the First West Coast conference By And For Old Lesbians, the women who organized the conference made this statement:

"...(As Lesbians) we have invented our own lives.

We have expanded and liberated the meaning of being a woman. We are inventing our own aging. We want to share our discoveries...We want to analyze our experience of ageism, which has been so little defined, know how to name it and resist it. Society calls us 'old' behind our backs while calling us 'older' to our faces. We refuse the lie that it is shameful to be an old woman" (Copper, 1988).

The results of the conference founded "The International Association of Old Lesbians," "Old Lesbian Conference," and "Anti Ageist Lesbians;" a volunteer team compiling a dictionary of ageist terms and actions, an anti-ageist consciousness-raising kit for groups and in-service training for lesbian service providers, community organizers and academia. As Baba Copper so aptly states, "The wrenching disruptions and radical empowerment which old lesbians must accomplish for ourselves has begun" (Copper, 1988).

## CHAPTER III: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, the literature review reveals that from the day the old woman was born, she was told life was not her own, but something thrust upon her. To be denied this choice is to be denied powerful affirmation and to live only half a life.

The uncompromising perspective of the new genre of old women/old lesbian is now characterizing the malaise of ageism as women come together and take charge of their own lives. Old lesbians are beginning to take their rightful power by resisting being colonized by the mainstream heterosexual culture that builds power of some over others.

May Sarton defined this power in As We Are Now when Caro realized she was not afraid to die, and in a way never possible before, she was not afraid to live. Approaching greater freedom and daring is the source of old women's power.

As this paper concludes, it is becoming apparent that the collective wit, in protest of ageism's underlying assumptions of the right to access and divide women, is sharpening. Demographics alone attest to the dynamic force of aging women. As ageism reaches critical proportions, the crisis of old women's legitimate authority is becoming clear.

The ageing lesbian is a subject on which very little definitive work has been done, yet she is becoming a research subject -- meaning, a problem of significant magnitude to warrant study. To be an old lesbian is, indeed, a sensitive subject about dual invisibility and energy spent adapting to a

heterocentric society.

It is becoming clear in this decade that old lesbians are beginning to exercise the freedom of naming the issues important to them without outside influences, without characterizations that institutionalized sexism and homophobia have created and perpetuated. Exemplifying this, the author recently viewed a poignant short film: West Coast Crones: A Glimpse Into the Lives of Nine Old Lesbians. The film medium allowed some old lesbians to tell the viewer, in their own presence and voice, the issues of their lives. The film provokes examination of inner attitudes as the women tell their stories. With a great deal of courage, they name their fears and come out as lesbians. Their accounts remind lesbians not to retreat from homophobia into innocence by admission of powerlessness. Their intense intimate and candid feelings about the aging process, sexuality and renewing women spirit does not allow lesbians freedom by default. They have shaped a credo that who you are is less important than who you are not.

A prophetic essay written as a review of Social World of Old Women illuminates the enormous life energy that old women expend trying to deal with the stigma of age. Without a history, without a literature, without a politic, they find it impossible to reconcile their sense of themselves -- as real women, whose lives are on-going -- with the new, degrading ways in which they find themselves seen (or rendered unseen), or with their own lifelong training in ageism. It is time to

refuse to let men define either the social world of old women or their life process. Women need to build a vision of their own, reclaim the value and meaning of an entire lifespan up to and including death (Matthews, 1979).

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