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Introduction: Special Issue on Old Lesbians: Exploring Community, Relationships, Friendship, and Well Being

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This introduction begins with memories of homophobia the editors experienced to remind the reader of the general climate old lesbians faced in their younger years. Rationale for studying old lesbians and the relevance of the articles contained in this issue are described. Some different ways old lesbians identify that may affect policy decision and research analysis are included. Early significant research on the topic of old lesbians is noted and suggestions for future research studies are recommended.

KEYWORDS *old lesbians research, identification, friendship vs. kinship*

What happens to old lesbians? When they get old, “they end up at the bottom of a river like vegetables.” At least that is what Sharon remembers being told by her high school girlfriend’s Presbyterian minister when they told him they might be lesbians. Less ghoulish but equally troubling is a recollection by Margaret, from her student years at a Benedictine women’s college. She vividly remembers a psychology professor, a nun with a Ph.D. leaning over her lectern and saying, “Girls, if any of you know of any homosexuals on this campus, it is your duty to report them.” Bewildered, Margaret wondered how she would recognize them.

Such was the climate for lesbians in the not-so-distant past. When we, editors of this journal issue, embarked on the study of lesbian aging in our younger and middle years, our experiences of homophobia led us to believe that lesbians in general and those in late life were viewed negatively. Why

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did we pursue the study of old lesbians rather than younger ones? Uppermost in our minds was a question we wanted answered: how would we ourselves fare when we were old. This journal issue continues a discussion of the topic we began to pursue in our separate ways years ago.

This is the first collection of scholarly articles on old lesbians, as far as we know. Our authors come from England, the Netherlands, Canada, and Australia as well as the United States, indicating a broad interest in the subject. Both the humanities and the social sciences are represented.

It appears from the articles here that the well being of old lesbians is more related to support from peers, ex-lovers, informal and formal groups within the lesbian and wider lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community than to support from traditional family networks. Despite the fact that the term “kin” appeared in the original title call for proposals, family of origin is rarely mentioned in the articles we received. Lesbians may instead prefer to create their own intentional “families,” form a network of friends, or join support groups to replace, at least partially, the traditional families that may be lost or put into the background in their lives. This does not mean that some lesbians or future lesbians do or might give their extended family relationships a large role of support in their lives. Certainly, many lesbians step in when their parents need help in old age—an area that deserves more extensive research (Raphael and Meyer in M. Adelman, 2000).

We observe that no authors have commented on the absence of younger lesbians or other younger people in the lives of these old Lesbians; at least, it is not mentioned as an issue or problem by the old lesbians themselves, except in the lead article by Baba Copper. Do old lesbians socialize with younger women, including younger lesbians? Or is there segregation by age? Many old lesbians may simply prefer the company of other old lesbians. Another possibility, noted by Imani Woody in her article on older African-American lesbians, is that race plays a larger role than age identity. Thus, the primary goals of finding intimacy, identity validation and a place to be oneself outweigh considerations of ageism in their lives.

Lesbians now in their 80s and 90s are unique in that they include the last generation of women who spent most or all of their lives in the closet, using the caution that survival required. Monika Kehoe, the author of *Lesbians Over 60 Speak for Themselves* (1989), often stated that she missed the old days when lesbians like herself were outlaws (pre-Stonewall and pre-feminism). She prided herself on having used cunning to survive, and on one occasion, when brought before McCarthy investigators, outwitted them by evasive answers to their questions. The situation today is entirely different, although the 1950s hardly seem like ancient history, and “over 60” does not seem particularly old.

Old women who proudly identify as lesbians may feel they have much in common with old straight women, while others regard gay men as their

natural allies. Many proud lesbians identify first as lesbians and play down identification with other groups. Allegiances may shift as women retire, relocate, survive partners, or become disabled.

Aside from differences of ethnicity and class, an important difference among old lesbians is the degree to which they identify as feminists or reject the designation. Both the women's liberation movement and lesbian/gay liberation had a huge impact, giving lesbians the psychic space to claim their identities and come out. It must also be acknowledged that some women now in their 80s or 90s, whose life history of loving women encourages us to consider them lesbians, vociferously, even angrily, reject the label. This pattern may disappear in the future, as social acceptance increases.

Our focus on studies of old lesbians not only extends LGBT aging studies,¹ but also contributes to the larger academic movement called "age studies" that in multiple ways traces the social construction of aging. Humanities scholars and social scientists have forged trans-Atlantic ties to further this work.² Our work builds on studies noted below.

In 1979 Mina Meyer, under her then married name Mina Robinson, wrote the first social science master's thesis entitled *The Older Lesbian*. This in-depth qualitative research study on twenty lesbians covered attitudes, preparations for aging, kinship, friendship networks and community, lovers, and identity. Robinson found that informal support systems and friendships among aging lesbians were invaluable to their well being. Since 1979, articles based on this pioneering research were jointly authored by Sharon Raphael and Mina Robinson; for example, "The Older Lesbian: Love Relationships and Friendship Patterns" (1980).

In 1980, Marcy Adelman completed her dissertation, *Adjustment to Aging and Styles of Being Gay*, a study of elderly lesbians and gay men. The sample included twenty-five lesbians. A major finding was that lesbians and gay men have the same developmental challenges as heterosexuals but that stigma is a significant stumbling block. Adelman published *Long Time Passing: Lives of Older Lesbians* in 1987.

In 1982, Chris Almvig, who became a director of Services and Advocacy for Gay Elders (SAGE), completed her master's thesis, titled *The Invisible Minority: Aging and Lesbianism* (Utica College of Syracuse). Among other topics, Almvig discussed needs and plans for social services.

In 1983, Monika Kehoe and her San Francisco State University research assistant Sheryl Goldberg conducted a survey of fifty lesbians. Kehoe's book *Lesbians Over 60 Speak for Themselves* is based on the survey. At that time, Kehoe's work had the largest sample of aging lesbians. Many of the respondents had advanced degrees. Goldberg and her colleagues (2005) found that the observations from Kehoe's survey are largely confirmed by two decades of subsequent research. For example, lesbians form a variety of networks;

often they do not maintain close family ties; and they tend to avoid mainstream senior services because of perceived discrimination.³

Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Aging, and Ageism by Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich was published in 1983. A second edition appeared in 1991 and an expanded edition in 2001. Baba Copper's book *Over the Hill: Reflections on Ageism between Women* was published in 1988.

Sharon Deevey's 1990 study of old lesbians found that 80% had experienced discrimination based on their sexual preference, including verbal assaults and family disapproval. In 1991, Margaret Cruikshank taught one of the first LGBT aging classes, at City College of San Francisco. Shevy Healey, a founder of OLOC (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change), wrote about the experience of being both old and lesbian in 1994. Two years later, Jean Quam's "Old Lesbians" appeared in *The New Lesbian Studies*.

The first scholars to study old lesbians agreed that the stereotype of the lonely, depressed, mentally unstable old lesbian was false. Yet the effect of stigma and prejudice on those in the various samples was described. Common topics were support networks, attitudes toward aging, friendships, family relationships, and issues for future generations. The insights and accurate interpretations from the early studies continue to stand and are therefore valuable guideposts for ongoing research on lesbian aging. These early authors also agree that since their studies were based primarily on White, middle class old lesbians, future studies need to be more diverse in race and class. Two more recent publications are *The Lives of LGBT Older Adults: Understanding Challenges and Resilience*, edited by Nancy Orel and Christine Fruhauf (2014), and *Social Services for Senior Gay Men and Lesbians*, edited by Jean Quam (2014).

Despite the progress we celebrate and sometimes marvel at, ignorance and prejudice live on, as the experiences of old lesbians, including those recounted in this special issue, attest. Many more personal histories and scholarly studies are needed to create a substantial record. The work published here demonstrates that finding identity, creating community, and realizing a sense of belonging all contribute to the well-being of lesbians in late life. In spite of great obstacles—ageism, homophobia, the closet, workplace problems, race and class barriers, health challenges, disability, transphobia, and distorted depictions in media—the old lesbians in the articles that follow searched for new ways to bond, mend, and thrive, usually outside of traditional family relationships.

These articles suggest that much more work is needed to bring old lesbians out of the shadows and into the scholarly conversation. Future work could focus on old lesbians' sexuality, late-life addiction, nursing home experiences, class differences, the impact of the Affordable Care Act on low-income old lesbians, and the experience of marriage later in life. Many other topics may occur to readers of this issue as well.

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NOTES

1. See *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Aging. Research and Clinical Perspectives*, edited by Douglas Kimmel, Tara Rose, and Steven David (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); the May–June 2014 issue of *Aging Today*, volume 35(3) that focuses on LGBT aging issues; and *Gay and Lesbian Aging: Research and Future Directions*, edited by Gilbert Herdt and Brian deVries (New York: Springer, 2003). An extensive bibliographic note on LGBT aging is included in Margaret Cruikshank's *Learning to be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

2. Margaret Gullette's books *Aged by Culture* and *Age Wise* are founding documents of Age Studies, as is the series *Aging Studies*, featuring articles by European scholars and edited by Roberta Maierhofer, Heidi Hartung, Ulla Kriebner, and Barbara Ratenbock. Conferences of the European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS) further this work. The North American Network in Aging Studies (NANAS) publishes an online, interdisciplinary journal, *Age Culture Humanities*.

3. Some of the above information was based on *Resource Guide, Lesbian and Aging* published by the National Association for Lesbian and Gay Gerontology, 1991. The rest came from theses or books.

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