

Sitting around the kitchen table at our first editorial meeting, we talked about our goal in this issue of *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme*. We wanted it to be a celebration of women's aging. For us, the title "Growing into Age" encompassed this feeling and acknowledged that we are all continually growing and changing. However, as we moved through the process of developing this theme, we continually found ourselves bumping into another reality of women's aging: that it has a shadow side of pain, loss and overall diminishment.

We found ourselves in heated, spirited discussions of the physical and psychological nature of women's aging and of our cultural emphasis on "beauty" as epitomized by young women. In attempting to untangle aspects of these topics and others, we realized that feminist theory and practice is, in many ways, ageist. The vast majority of feminist writing is directed to the lives and experiences of younger women. Thus, many facets of women's aging remain invisible; older women themselves are often silenced. This has ramifications not only to our understanding of women's lives, but to the everyday lives of older women. For example, the devaluing of older women may mean that the long term care of these women is neglected. If we, as feminists, have bought into the youth cult, we wanted to face that reality and be part of a larger project of making the invisible, visible.

Since the conversation on women's aging is currently so limited, we cast our net wide to bring in new topics for discussion. We found it easy to get material on caregiving and menopause. Women do these issues well. We strove, however, to broaden and deepen the discussion by including topics such as elder abuse, the myth of dependency, the reality of poverty, the experiences of older lesbians, and the development of a feminist consciousness after age forty. We were surprised at some of the powerful themes that emerged: the strength of friendship among older women and the healing of body and spirit that can come with growing

into age. As well, the lives and contributions of women shone through. Many women had taken their own personal pain and used it to reach out to others.

We are concerned that we had only limited success in bringing in the voices and experiences of older Native women and women of colour. As well, we do not have material on what women's aging might look like in the future. What will it be like to be old and female in a physically deteriorating planet with limited resources?

Media representations of older women are virtually non-existent. When they do appear, they fall into three general categories. We see the "little old lady" who is victimized, the self-sacrificing grandmother who dispenses soup for every hurt, or the "golden girl" who is wealthy and man-crazy. Such limited representations deny the richness of older women's lives.

In the midst of these dominant media images that lead us to despair, we occasionally see a flicker of light. We are, though, heartened by alternative visions such as those presented in the NFB films *Older, Wiser, Stronger* and *The Company of Strangers*, which honour old women as they are. And a recent episode of the TV series *Northern Exposure* focused on Ruth Ann, age seventy-five, who lives day-to-day with joy and with her community. Her friend, a young Native man, begins to worry about Ruth Ann dying. For her birthday, he gives her a grave plot near the edge of the water. Ruth Ann turns to her friend, Ed, and says "Oh, I would like to dance." The closing image is of Ruth Ann and Ed dancing on her grave.

This lust for life is echoed in the voices of women in this issue. They teach us that it is an accomplishment to have arrived at oldness. They have journeyed through life. They have survived, many to find peace — even serenity — most to find a welcome self-acceptance.

— by **Mary Sue McCarthy, Janine O'Leary Cobb, Margaret Reid, Luciana Ricciutelli and Milana Todoroff**

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**"Growing old is proof that we have loved our bodies
enough to bring them along with us on the journey."**

— Virginia Satir



Deidre Scherer, *Mid-sentence*, 1990. Fabric and thread. 32" x 21."

Photo: Jeff Baird