

Living in the Margins:

By Jeanette A. Auger

As a feminist, lesbian and a gerontologist I have a personal, political and educational interest in the process of growing old within a predominantly heterosexist, misogynist and agist culture. Unlike some of my sisters I have been provided with a structured feminist analysis of patriarchal control of my sexuality. As well, as a (recently) tenured academic I can feel fairly secure in my current employment. Many older lesbians are not as fortunate. For some, the women's movement and feminists are seen as just one more set of gatekeepers making judgments on their lives. For others, being "found out" meant (and still means) the loss of jobs, ostracization by co-workers, family and friends. This is especially problematic for women who live in small, rural communities.

The material for this paper is informed by field note experiences, literature and research interviews conducted from 1982 to the present with care providers and older lesbians in institutions and community-based workshops. In it, I describe and analyze the experiences of older lesbians as they speak of their isolation within lesbian and heterosexual culture. They also speak of the many pleasures and benefits of growing old without the societal expectations and pressures placed on heterosexual women.

Introduction

In Canadian culture old lesbians are thought not to exist, not only by the media but often by the lesbian community itself. In the feminist academic press there is little or no mention of lesbian elders and the gerontological world seems oblivious to the sexuality of older persons in general, let alone that of older lesbians. [Two notable exceptions are Adelman (1986) and Ashfield and Shamai (1987)]. When articles on sexuality do appear in noted

journals they are about heterosexual practices or, and these are rare occurrences, they deal with homosexual men. [See for example, Lee (1987), Berger (1982), Kelly (1977) and Weeks (1983)]. Lesbians who are old are thus in triple jeopardy as they represent at least three oppressed groups in North American culture: they are not young, they do not enjoy the privilege of patriarchal masculinity and they do not receive the social rewards for heterosexuality. In these ways they are placed within the margins of work on aging and of women. Those who are not white suffer yet another stigma, as do those defined as disabled.

Looking at aging demographics, according to the 1986 census there were 1,564,240 women aged sixty-five or more living in Canada. If we apply the Masters and Johnson (1966) and the Kinsey (1948) reports on sexuality, we can conservatively assume that at least one in ten of these women are lesbian. Theoretically we are speaking of some 156,000 women aged over sixty-five. In the census, however, there is no category "lesbian" under the marital status section. Presumably many will fall under the "single" category while others are subsumed under the categories of "married," "widowed" or "divorced." Many lesbians say they "come out" after age fifty, often from heterosexual marriages of long duration, or in later life after they have been widowed. Lesbian women are thus hidden within the official demographics of Canadian culture.

Lesbians who are old are also hidden or invisible because there is a lack of research on them. It is often difficult to identify older "lesbians" in the first place. For example, in working with and for seniors, I have heard about "possible" older lesbians mostly by accident.

I conducted interviews with women who were never married. The following is from a discussion with a seventy-four

year old woman living in Vancouver:

Me: When you lived for twenty-three years with your friend did you ever speak of yourselves as lesbians?

J: Oh we were not lesbians truly. We were intimate in every sense of the word but we were certainly not lesbians.

Me: I assumed that when you said that you were gay that you meant that you were lesbians.

J: No I said that we were gay, happy and gay. Lesbians dress like men; they do men's work and act like men. We were just women who loved each other and were happy with that. Now you'd call us lesbians maybe, but we never would then — it was a bad word.

The co-ordinator of a support network for women who are divorced or widowed in Vancouver reminded me of the following telephone conversation which she had with an eighty year old woman:

Caller: I want to know where I can get a nice clean girl to replace my P. who has died.

Friend: Have you tried some of the lesbian resources in the community? Or perhaps the feminist bookstore would know who you could contact about meeting other lesbian women?

Caller: I don't want nothing to do with them libbers or lesbian types. I just want a nice clean girl to replace my P. None of these club types or "feminists" who say we should all act like women as if we didn't know that we was women. We just like to have short hair and wear men's clothes.

Research, as well as everyday life, suggests that some older lesbians, believing in rigid sex roles (the so-called "butch" and "femme"), identify more with heterosexual men than with feminist lesbians. Some older lesbians feel themselves

Lesbian Aging

judged by their feminist sisters on this issue. In the last cited examples the women did not identify themselves as lesbian for different reasons. The first woman objected to those lesbians who “look and act like men;” the second objected to those who *did not* look and act like men.

I conducted research in care facilities in British Columbia. On one visit to an eighty-four year old friend, we were in the dining room of a multi-level care facility. The seniors sat at tables for four, while newer residents sat alone until a regular group was formed for them by the staff. The following conversation occurred:

G: See that woman over there, she's one of "them," you know.

J: One of what?

G: You know them queers. People who like bread on bread with the same filling in the middle.

J: Do you mean that she is a lesbian? How do you know that?

G: Yeah, that's right. The orderly told me who cleans up the rooms. She said she lived with another one for a real long time. The other one up and dies and now she's in here.

J: It must be terrible to lose someone you are so close to after so long.

G: Well I don't think that sort should be allowed to live in places like this. It's one thing to lose a husband, that's — proper — but that sort of thing is not.

I later talked with the orderly who had passed on the information about the resident. She informed me that “Nowadays two women don't live together that long unless they are up to something.” She said that she had told some of the other residents to “be careful” around this woman because you “never know about them queers.” When I pointed out that lesbian women are as selective about who they want to be involved with as anyone else, the orderly still felt it her “duty” to let

people know “what was going on” (even though she clearly did not know!).

These illustrations make visible some of the experiences of women who are reluctant to identify themselves as lesbians because of the myths and assumptions of others about whom they think lesbians might be.

The Issues

When dealing with a topic as complex as lesbianism, it is important to recognize that there is no such thing as a “typical lesbian.” Lesbianism is not merely a set of behaviors based on the preference of one sex over another, whether one acts on this preference or not. For many, lesbianism is also a political and emotional stance in the world, which creates an ideological base by allowing lesbians to define ourselves and each other, regardless of age. By identifying some of the issues involved with lesbians and aging, we can recognize the diversity in lesbian experience.

FEAR OF AGING

We are all growing older, and have been since the day we were born. Aging affects every one of us whether twenty-five or sixty-five. In our culture old age is seen as a negative experience, as something to be dreaded. The media bombards us with images of women who look to be at most forty, yet they “hide wrinkles” with Oil of Olay, remove “age spots” on their hands with Porcelana and hide “that ugly grey” with Lady Grecian formula. Old age is not presented as something to celebrate or to look forward to. A thirty year old lesbian at a workshop on aging remarked:

It's neat that you sort of sell this old age thing as good but I don't want to get old. I would hate to have wrinkles and withered skin. I couldn't bear the

thought of being with an old woman. She would feel so flabby to me.

Not only do some older lesbians fear their own aging, but they receive little support from their community in seeing old age as a positive experience. In her article “Friends or Foes: Gerontological and Feminist Theory” (1989) Reinharz tries to present what she calls “conceptual linkages” (p. 223) between the lives of older women and feminist women. She fails to recognize, however, that many older women *are* feminist women, and that even feminists suffer from age denial. Although Reinharz is to be commended on the attempts to bridge the gerontological/feminist gap, she too ignores the reality of lesbian lives.

The experiences of women who are old today are probably different than they will be for teenagers, or those approaching middle-age. At a lesbian workshop on aging in Nova Scotia the group members were asked when they first thought of themselves as “old.” Some said “forty,” some “fifty.” Others related a sense of growing old based on particular life experiences, such as this fifty-eight year old:

My lover and I split up and suddenly I realized that no one in the world knew about us. I was alone on the farm and I had really bad arthritis and probably couldn't manage without her. Then I realized, Shit, I'm old.

It becomes apparent that old age is relative — a state of mind that is seldom invoked unless life happenings cause us to take stock of ourselves.

COMING OUT OR STAYING IN

Lesbians who are “out of the closet” experience aging differently from those who are still “in.” The informant last quoted stated that her rural community

did not know about her sexuality. Therefore neighbors, family and friends could not be relied upon for support. This experience was shared by many older lesbians I spoke with. They were concerned not only with coming out to friends, family, colleagues and medical and service providers, but also to their children and grandchildren, and sometimes to spouses.

Related to this is the issue of when one recognizes one's own lesbianism and what that individual chooses to do with the knowledge. Many reject their feelings for other women because of the negative stereotypes associated with being gay; others because of the social stigma attached to those who choose to be open about their sexual preference. Some women are already in heterosexual marriages when they recognize their sexuality, and do not want to lose the rewards that heterosexual privilege provides, or risk losing their children if their husband is not supportive of their sexuality. Some older women have been lesbians as long as they can remember, while others came out in later life. Some, such as Gwen, the mother of a fifty year old daughter, came out in her late seventies:

I kept going to these A.A. meetings and there were some wonderful women there. When Louise [her daughter] told me that she was gay I thought about it quite a lot. I have also loved women, liked them better than men. Now I just wish that there was someone I could meet so that I could have a lesbian relationship. I have given it a lot of thought and I am ready for that thrill. No one cares about little old ladies of seventy anyway so I should be able to get away with it until I die.

Many of the older lesbians I spoke with came out when there was no gay liberation, no political lesbian literature or movies to speak of, and no women's movement to raise awareness of sexual issues. Some of them talked about how hard it was to come out to family members, especially to children and grandchildren, as well as to their own parents, without any support systems in place. Often many reported having very few kinship networks left, because family members just could not accept their sexuality. Older lesbians said that they had never heard the word "lesbian," and believed that they were the only women in the world who love women.

There are obvious reasons, then, why some older women prefer not to identify with younger lesbians. Why would they want to, when being old or lesbian is seen only in negative terms? In this sense they choose to remain in the margins of social life.

GEOGRAPHY AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Rural and urban settings also affect the lives of older lesbians. In most urban settings in Canada there are lesbian networks where women can socialize and get together for meals, dances, conferences, and so on. In addition to networks for emotional support, urban environments usually offer some services geared especially to lesbian women. In large metropolitan areas we are more likely to be able to find lesbian or lesbian positive doctors, lawyers, and dentists. As a seventy-three year old lesbian noted:

When I found out that I had cancer I made sure to phone my friend who is a nurse at the cancer clinic. I asked her to put me in touch with a lesbian doctor so that I could be honest about my lifestyle. She was just great. My lover was allowed to be in my room anytime and the doctor discussed everything with her. It wasn't like when we lived in that village in Quebec—there was nowhere to turn if you were sick and the neighbors would have died if they knew we were gay.

Regarding institutionalization, older lesbians from small rural areas have very little choice about where they may spend the rest of their lives. Likely, they will be relocated to another town or village which has an appropriate care facility. Even when one exists locally, staff members are unlikely to be sympathetic or knowledgeable about lesbian lifestyles. When a woman has lived for most of her life in the same community, this relocation can be traumatic and severe. If she has a partner, separation can place an additional burden on both women.

Several lesbian groups across Canada have discussed the idea of setting up either lesbian homes for the aged, or communities where lesbians can grow old in a co-operative project where women of all ages live together — some with their children of both sexes, others without children or with daughters only. In this

vision, articulated forcefully by a group of older lesbian women at the "Coming Together" conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia, lesbian doctors, nurses and other caregivers would also live in, or be available to these communities so that they would be fairly self-sufficient in terms of providing health care for the older group members. To my knowledge no such community yet exists.

RELATIONSHIPS

Older lesbians are concerned about being in or out of relationships, and how that is different as one grows older. Those who have been in long-term relationships which suddenly come to an end, often say that the feeling of loss is far greater than what they experienced in their younger years. A sixty-two year old said:

When D. said she wanted out of the relationship, to be with a younger woman, I was really devastated. I knew that things hadn't been going all that well for a while but I really thought that after twenty-two years we would stay together forever. When I was younger I thought I was pretty cute and other women liked me a lot. I can't imagine who would want me now or where the hell I would ever meet anyone in this place. Everyone I know has been the lover of someone else. That's the trouble with living in a small community.

Women are thought to be asexual as they grow older. The double standard dictates that men are sexy and more mature in old age. Their facial lines are said to express attractiveness and experience; ours are "wrinkles" we are supposed to hide with cosmetics. Therefore old women are sexless and ugly. This stereotype flows into the lesbian community — we are all socialized by the same system to be female regardless of our sexuality. Reboin (1986) reiterates this idea in the following way: "our culture defines lesbians as sexual beings, which implies youth and activity" (p. 178). And yet she also speaks of her "four decades of messages from the outside world that old women and lesbian women are not desirable, normal, interesting, active and acceptable human beings..." (p. 182).

Monogamy is also invoked frequently by older lesbians who seem to prefer this over open relationships, whether they are

currently in a relationship, or attempting to find a partner. A fifty-eight year old lesbian succinctly stated the most frequently provided reason:

We went to one of those feminist do's and this psychologist who was a lesbian was saying that open relationships were the new trend among gay women she sees. F. and I have been together eighteen years now and we like each other better than anyone else we know. We don't want or need to be with anyone else. When you get older you need more stability in your life. I've had my flings — I know what it is like to love other women but I want to be settled down and get on with what's left of our lives together, so that when either one of us is gone the other will have wonderful memories to look back on without the worry of whether or not we need to have an open relationship.

MENOPAUSE

Lesbians who become sexually dissatisfied or bored with their partners, especially those in long-term monogamous relationships, sometimes used menopause as an "excuse" for not wanting to have sex anymore. The older women in a workshop on lesbian issues explained the situation as follows:

When I started menopause it was somewhat of a relief because then I could say that was why I didn't want to have sex anymore. I guess we just got too used to each other or something. We are still together and are very intimate. Maybe sex just isn't as important when you are older.

Another explained:

Sex never really was a big deal for us. I didn't like it all that much in the beginning but M. did. With menopause I had some pain. I was sort of itchy all the time and so that seemed like a good time to stop having sex. Other than that our relationship is perfect for me although I do think that M. would still like to have sex more often.

This rationale has also been cited by many heterosexual women in various studies on menopause. Lesbian and heterosexual women alike are vulnerable to the

myth that after menopause they are no longer sexual or attractive. There is no bio-medical evidence to support the idea that hormonal changes which occur during menopause effect sexual desire, attractiveness or sexual capacity. Women can be as sexually active, or not, during and after menopause as they were before. Another myth is that we need to be sexual to remain in relationships, but this is clearly not so. There are many ways to be close and intimate with others.

The demographics of aging are based primarily on chronology. Medical research and common sense experiences tell us that certain physiological and social changes do occur as we grow older. What matters is how we deal with these changes. Many in our society view menopause as the end of female desire, attractiveness and sexual activity. Biologically, it is simply the end of childbearing possibilities.

The assumption is sometimes made that lesbian women are less affected by menopause than heterosexual women, due to the notion that the latter are not interested in reproduction. This assumption ignores the reality that many lesbians are mothers, and that many wanted to conceive but could not for medical, economic, political or logistical reasons.

Another assumption about lesbians, is that due to their "deviant" lifestyle and thus experiences of discrimination, we are more reflective, thoughtful, open, sensitive and aware. Because of these positive attributes, we are not expected to have the same problems with retirement and menopause as heterosexual women. However we are socialized first to be women—not lesbians, so we carry around much of the same cultural self-expectations and values about what we are "supposed to do."

Many women identify as heterosexual prior to becoming lesbians. The notion of women reaching their fullest potential only through childbirth and childbearing may still be subtly at work. Choosing to relate to other women sexually does not necessarily preclude the desire to bear a child. Just as for heterosexual women, menopause may mark the regretted end of that possibility.

The Aging Experience Personalized

We age all of our lives, not just on our sixty-fifth birthday when we are magically eligible for government assistance based on chronology. How we experience



Deidre Scherer, *The Sisters*, 1991, fabric and thread, 31" x 33"

our aging and how we learn to deal with our issues throughout the life cycle affects how we cope with aging. If we have unfinished business, unresolved conflicts, unspoken fears, resentments and angers while young, and do not deal with them, we will carry them on to our old age. It is helpful if we can resolve them while young, through therapy, dreams, fantasy, journals, or — if possible — in real life. Who we are now can be who we will become as older selves. One of the saddest thoughts I am often left with by older lesbians is the notion of unfinished business or unresolved issues — what I call the “if only’s.”

On the other hand, if we do not, when we are old, focus on what might have been, we could have the same attitude as an informant who was celebrating her seventieth birthday. She marvelled at how lucky she was to be in good health, in a relationship in which she could grow and flourish, and among lesbian friends whom she loved and admired. Someone asked her what it was like to be an aging lesbian, and whether or not she experienced it as a triple problem. She replied:

Never, I am as happy now as I ever was in my life. This is a tremendous thrill. To love and be loved by women is well worth living for. I just wish that all lesbians could learn from their loving as I have done.

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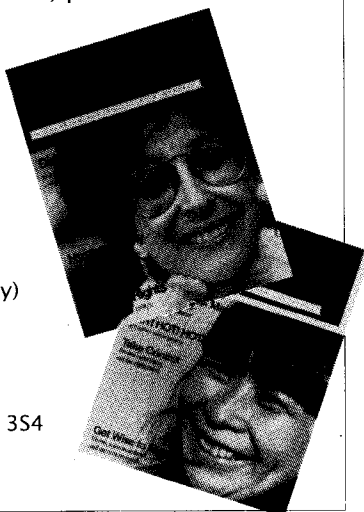
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