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# Aging Out of the Spectrum of Cultural Visibility

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AGING OUT OF THE SPECTRUM OF CULTURAL VISIBILITY

BY

DARTHEA M. MILLER

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts,

The City University of New York

2014

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate  
Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation  
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**Abstract**

## AGING OUT OF THE SPECTRUM OF CULTURAL VISIBILITY

By

Darthea M. Miller

Adviser: Professor Victoria Pitts-Taylor

I argue that the valorization of youth and the subsequent quest for agelessness has caused such an explosion of ageism that the elderly have been relegated to a culturally invisible status. The intersection of age and gender is doubly problematic for women due to sexism and the perennial objectification of the female body. Thinking of visibility as a measure of social acceptability, the consequences of cultural disappearance for the aging woman is an important site for investigation and theorizing. This thesis depicts the erasure of aging women from the cultural landscape as an effect of media representation and self-care work encouraged in neoliberal capitalism, in which aging is positioned as a mutable phenomenon.

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### **Aging out of the spectrum of cultural visibility**

“...because society is stratified along lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, disability status, citizenship, geography, and other cleavages, some bodies are public and visually dissected while others are vulnerable to erasure and marginalization” (Casper & Moore, 2007, p. 9).

According to Casper & Moore (2007) while “not all bodies are equally visible to cameras” there are also “some bodies that are invisible, (or) have disappeared” (p. 3). I argue that the valorization of youth and the subsequent drive for agelessness has caused such an explosion of cultural ageism that the aged have been relegated to a culturally invisible status. The boomer cohort whose youngest members turn 50 this year appear to have fully embraced the medicalization of health and subsequent consumption of anti-aging products and procedures, and therefore provides a unique market for examination and for understanding the masking investment required to maintain visibility as citizens. Thinking of visibility as a measure of social acceptability, the consequences of cultural disappearance for the aging are an important site of investigation and theorizing.

In their book, *Missing Bodies and the Politics of Invisibility*, Casper and Moore (2007) frame their discussion with a social constructionist theory critically relevant in a digital world in which citizens are under constant scrutiny and surveillance. Effective interpretation of bodies, they assert, is an essential survival tool at the most fundamental level, and bodies are marked with a highly nuanced hierarchy of social status and normativity. Indeed, they state that the

“visualized body is powerfully symbolic in a multitude of ways, across often quite-contested domains” (p. 2). In the highly aspirational ethos of the United States, the motivation to matter is complicated by the politics of power and the media. Casper & Moore point to the difference between being invisible and missing, the latter signifying that one *was* visible at one time or in one context but is no longer. I argue that the aging body and old age present an excellent site for understanding the impact of becoming, per the authors, “affectively missing” (p. 3).

There is a certain irony of exposure for some citizens, as the conditions for visibility are arbitrated by the social and political powers that assign value to --or *devalue*-- certain types of bodies. Casper & Moore cite Judith Butler’s assessment of this mediation as defining bodies that matter, meaning those that reinforce social norms of acceptability and desire and refer to a specific benefit of invisibility for the very young and I would contend, the very old, as the ability to remain (or become) innocent, non-threatening and non-intrusive. However, they refer to the relationship between visibility and having a voice: the invisible are usually spoken for; because they are perceived as no longer socially relevant, their voices most often go unheard and therefore they are rendered somewhat powerless. This is a critical issue as our population ages and lives longer lives with the help of medical intervention, because the economic, emotional, and physical needs of the elderly have not been foregrounded in the context of today’s culture.

Complicating this inquiry is the consideration of gender. Gilleard & Higgs (2013) specifically refer to the bodily losses associated with an older identity. They note that even though these changes are understood to be natural, the loss of social capital they entail is “always attenuated by rank and by gender” (P. 372). Because the pressure to conform to our cultural



ideals of female beauty requires a deferral of physical aging and the maintenance of a youthful look, the intersection of gender and age is doubly problematic for women. Laura Hurd (2011), who has written extensively on women and aging believes that “The decision to resist cultural norms of beauty puts women, particularly older women, at risk of losing social currency and being rendered invisible” (Kindle location, 722-27).

Arguably every deviation from the accepted cultural norm, which is decidedly white, heterosexual, affluent, and thin further complicates visibility for women. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) have researched the disadvantages of multiple subordinate group identities and coined the term “intersectional invisibility,” which illustrates the complicated hierarchies of visibility for those who fail to meet the norms (P. 377). However, not all visibility is a good thing: the wrong type of visibility, a stigmatized representation, can be more problematic for some than being off the radar. Entire populations can be represented as deviant. The frequent representations of young men of color as menacing criminals or women of color as welfare moms are two examples of such negative visibility. As a result, women of color are still fighting for an unbiased representation in twenty-first century America because they have two subordinate identities: race and gender.

By exploring the emergence of the maintenance of youthfulness and neoliberal politics that caters to a wealthy, consumption oriented boomer population, an enormously profitable anti-aging economy, and the resultant prevalence of cultural ageism, I hope to demonstrate that like other types of disenfranchised groups aged women have been rendered invisible, erased from the representations of (and experience in) everyday life. Some of these women, however

unwittingly, have been complicit in this erasure by the masking and concealing work in which they engage in order to conform to a socially prescribed gender performance. This thesis depicts the erasure of aging from the cultural landscape as an effect of both media representation and the self-care work encouraged by neoliberal capitalism, in which aging is positioned as a mutable or plastic phenomenon.

I begin with the assumption that the social mediator of our cultural visibility is the popular media; in fact Solomon (1983) refers to the media's effect as "reality engineering" (p. 322 ). Casper & Moore describe the media's power as a form of sovereignty, which "is the power to kill or let live, and he who has the biggest weapons—including the weapons of representation—rules" (p. 12). This media weaponry is what must be combatted if our society is ever to undertake an initiative to accurately represent the complete human fabric of our country. The diversity of lived experience in aging and its representational erasure must be evaluated from a sociological stance, because it is essential to understand both the kind of aging body and where it is culturally situated. I employ three social theories of embodiment as a framework for understanding the distinct challenges of the lived experience of aging in the present era: stigma, abjection, and the looking-glass body.

### **Social Theories of Embodiment**

Sociologist Erving Goffman's (2009) seminal book on stigma divided it in to three categories: physical, personal character, and social group. Aging is unique in that it has become

a stigma that trumps all stigmas: it ultimately covers all three of Goffman's stigma types by creating physical infirmity, a perceived loss of control, and relegation to a social group that is seen as unable to contribute to society and therefore an economic burden which must be borne by society. As so defined, visible aging results in movement from unstigmatized to stigmatized or what Goffman referred to as a "spoiled identity" (2009). The visibility of the stigma to others plays a central role in producing the negative social reactions that the stigmatized endure. In general, individuals with concealable stigmas face less prejudice and fewer negative interactions than do those with non-concealable stigma (Jones, et al, 1984). Masking is a key response to visible stigma and will be addressed later in this paper as it is emblematic of one type of bodywork in which women engage to avoid the signs of old age.

Stigma can be placed in two categories: those that are immutable that individuals cannot control (inherited) and those that are mutable or assumed to be under one's control (acquired). Examples of the former are race and sex; the latter could result from obesity, incapacity, disfigurement, *or* aging, which is increasingly judged as controllable by prevailing cultural beliefs. In the contemporary American mindset signs of old age, both physical and mental, are highly stigmatized because aging is increasingly represented as something that can be overcome if the right amount of work is invested in its deferral. That is, we are repeatedly told via media messages that it is under our control. For those who fail to control the aging process, this stigma potentially produces self-hatred. The wish to avoid being stigmatized serves as a form of social control and personal policing work, which will be illustrated later in this paper.

The stigmatized aging body can also be understood as abject. Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, a term first used by Bataille in the 1930's, morphed from a focus on society's underclass to a gendered concentration on women. Her thesis emphasized the naturally "leaky" bodies of women which, because of their unique role in reproduction, provoke abjection. For Kristeva as well as Bataille, abjection is essentially the disgust with the dissolution of form, which threatens one's subjectivity. The avoidance of this fall to a degraded state creates the other. (Ross, 1997). In her 1982 essay, "Powers of Horror," Kristeva states "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order...The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 4). Gilleard & Higgs (2013) refer to the abject class that the elderly become. They are less defined by consumption and more by a generation's fear of becoming strangers to themselves and our society and becoming visually isolated or absent. Certainly the current cultural order has essentialized youth, vivacity, and good looks and failure to conform to these ideals is culturally deviant and therefore presents the risk of being rendered abject.

The association of women's bodies with nature and its changeable cycles contrasts them in an unfavorable light to the order of masculinity as firm, powerful, unwavering. The stigmatized "leakage" from women's bodies that ceases with menopause is replaced by other, equally repulsive bodily manifestations associated with normal aging, namely weight gain and sagging flesh, which deviate from the represented norms. Therefore in a normal woman's life cycle one cause of abjection is replaced by another.

The stigmatization or abjection of aging bodies may have a significant impact on the self-concept of individuals. Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the "Looking Glass Self" (1902) asserts we see ourselves largely through interactions and actions with others. Cooley defined the looking-glass self as a form of interpersonal shared and interactive awareness which shapes and impacts one's self-concept. During the consumerist boom that followed in the 20th century the "self" has been equated with both embodied experience and body image, and Cooley's concept has been adapted as the looking-glass "body." Michael Solomon (1983) asserts that there are three elements of the reflected body-self, "the imagination of our appearance to the other, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (p. 321). If those images and bodies that are idealized in our media mediate the looking-glass body, what happens to the self-concept of those who are made invisible or missing through representational erasure?

It can be argued that we learn how our reflected self *should* appear through our interaction with media images, as contemporary American society is interacting with more images than actual people in the flesh. The impact of this media exposure on women's self-esteem has been extensively studied. In a study of sources of women's aging anxieties, Barrett & Robbins (2008) found a greater relationship between women's concern and anxiety about declining attractiveness than declining health. The repeated exposure to images of idealized female beauty has been demonstrated to impact everything from self-esteem, to disordered eating, to body dissatisfaction (Haas, et al, 2012). As a mediator of perceptions and expectations

the prevalence of this media imagery disrupts the traditionally understood life course and has a significantly greater impact on women than men.

The competition for cultural visibility, like the battle for all forms of capital, results in winners and losers and in the context of this discussion, the visible and the invisible. The value of the United States citizen was essentially redefined by the proliferation and intersection of neoliberal politics, medicalization, consumption, and advertising that occurred in the twentieth century. The increase in lifespan that occurred in this timeframe also contributed to a new outlook on life, death and aging, where the average life increased by 27 years, from 49.2 to 76.5 (United States Census, 2012). Extended old age is therefore a relatively new concept for our culture and for those experiencing it and as stated earlier, the voices of this population need to be heard and their faces seen.

## The Valorization of Youth and Consumption

This chapter will explore how consumerism and medicalization have extended and elevated the status of youthfulness in the United States and how these developments have transformed our cultural views to render aging as an unacceptable part of life. Unprecedented affluence, technological advances and a firm belief in the human ability to achieve mastery over nature has resulted in an obsession with bodily perfection and an estimated multi-billion dollar industry dedicated to battling or overcoming aging (PR Newswire). Julia Twigg (2004), an author who has extensively studied aging and gender, refers to this industry and the cultural ethos that supports it as that of “age denial” (p. 63). What this age denial industry ultimately produces is rampant cultural ageism.

Our population is aging, and as a society we are focusing our resources on the deferral of this once accepted inevitability through a representational aversion to aging, the consumption of anti-aging products, and a significant personal investment in anti-aging self-care practices. The baby boomers are arguably the first generation to grow up immersed in full throttle consumption, media immersion, and unprecedented rapid technological innovation. This group of approximately 72 million citizens has now begun to reach the age of 65, a point in life that was previously accepted and often mandated, as the time to transition to retirement, the “golden years,” and a more sedentary life

As the goal posts of such life benchmarks have moved rather dramatically further into the future, the idea of old age has been deferred as well. While older populations were once uniquely valued for their wisdom and experiences garnered over their many years of life, and

still are in some cultures, in the United States the pendulum has made a full swing in its new ethos based upon active consumption and youthfulness. Complicating this is what Nikolas Rose (2007) refers to as a culture of “biological citizenship,” referring to the fact that due to available biomedical interventions “we are faced with the inescapable task of deliberating about the worth of individual lives” (p. 254). If we accept Rose’s view, this worth today is highly contingent on the ability to participate in society as a youthful and independent consumer. This places the aging population who cannot mask their signs of aging, which is associated with resource constraints, physical infirmity and dependence, in a decidedly abject status because they fail to be active participants in what Rose refers to as “the market economy of health” (p. 150).

Mike Featherstone (2007) demarcated a dramatic shift in the postindustrial Western countries from valuing the inner, spiritual self to valuing the mere *performance* of self, or of the ideal self. He asserts that this change resulted in the replacement of puritanism with one of hedonism and narcissism. In *The Consumption Reader*, he illustrates a critical consequence of this move “the body is presented as the central vehicle to the consumer culture good life, yet it is also a visible indication of the self” (xxii). Therefore, one’s *positive* visibility is contingent on presenting a bodily self that conforms to the culturally acceptable standard of beauty and consumer power. Featherstone (2007) believes that the emotional pleasures associated with consumption are a primary motivation to buy and that this emotional gratification is “celebrated in cultural imagery” (p. 13).

Because advertising accounts for half of all images to which we are exposed, this celebrated imagery is largely comprised of messages urging people to consume. The rapid



change in every conceivable expression and performance of belonging and therefore conformity, has created a treadmill effect: consumers of means are chasing the next best version of everything--the 10.0 version-- including their bodies, and those without the means are left on the margins. Featherstone refers to this pursuit as a race to acquire new goods to maintain social status, at a time when the highest social status, and visibility, is afforded to the youthful. This ethos contributes mightily to the creation of a bias against old age, among other things.

The avoidance and deferral of old age is not a new human phenomenon: because old age is associated with death, disease, and incapacity, it has in many cultures been something that was thought better postponed. There do remain cultures like Japan that value and embrace older age and even death. Suichi Wada (1995) wrote about the images and philosophy of aging in Japan. Their strong paternalistic culture appears to be alive and well and the fact that the Japanese refer to an entry in to a second childhood after one has passed the 60 year mark, encourages the celebration of and respect for that society's elders. While the tenets of Confucianism are no longer widely adhered to, the idea of filial respect and responsibility have so far remained intact (Wada, 2005). However, the impact of capitalism and consumption may soon be felt even in the most resilient cultural traditions.

Featherstone (1995) notes that during the last century there has been a decline in the participation in and influence of religion, which he believes has created a crisis of meaning and certainly devalued aging and death. He contends that the purposeful life that was previously guided by beliefs, community, and spirituality has been transformed through the consumer lifestyle, which puts eternity in direct competition for attention with the embodied present. Bereft

of meaning and eschewing spiritual salvation, the Western world has turned toward products and technologies for immediate gratification. Consumers are now worshipping at the houses of Apple, Prada, and Lauder.

### **Ageism and gender**

These new determinants of personal value to society have produced a pervasive cultural distaste for aging, which is represented as both stigmatized and abject. As the first director of the National Institute for Aging, Robert Butler introduced the term *ageism* in 1969 and defined it as discrimination against old people ([www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)). This occurred at the height of the youth culture explosion, which identified with the slogan “Don’t trust anyone over 30.” Molly Andrews (1999) differentiates the uniqueness of this form of prejudice as follows: “people who behave in a racist or sexist manner will probably never be members of the group which is the target of their discrimination...Ageism is unique in that those who practice it will one day join the group they presently discriminate against, if longevity is granted them” (p. 11). Ageism is therefore not a fixed stigma, but one that is acquired. When a woman acquires this stigma, she becomes doubly stigmatized and doubly abject because of sexism. Catherine Silver (2003) blames patriarchy for this stigmatized view of the aging body.

Andrews reminds us that Betty Friedan foretold the complications aging would present to women in 1993 stating “obsessed with stopping age...passing as young...and seeing old age only as a decline from youth, we make age itself the problem” (p. 17). Montemurro & Gillen

(2013) write about the impact this stigma has on aging women which causes an obsession to conform to idealized images, as exemplary of the “institutionalized disciplinary power over women’s bodies that functions to maintain existing gender hierarchies”(p. 4). With the cultural emphasis on thinness, youthfulness, and beauty, women must respond either through masking or other body work. This is, according to Casper & Moore (2007), biopower in action: the imposition of a normal or standard average against which all citizens are measured. It is the individual’s responsibility to achieve or at least pursue this standard, what Rose (2007) called the will to health. Michelle Smirnova (2012) believes that there is a double standard in this pursuit and states that “it is clear that youth and beauty are central responsibilities, especially for the aging woman who is blamed if she lets herself go” (p. 1236).

Gilleard & Higgs (2013) refer to a “social imaginary” that contains specific assumptions about the dependencies, indignities, and suffering that old age entails. They refer to the “geriatric giants” of incontinence, immobility, instability and intellectual impairment. (p. 373) They, along with Margaret Cruikshank (2003), blame the American myth of self-reliance for this current cultural attitude. Ageism also contributes to and reinforces stereotypes. The MacArthur Foundation study on Successful Aging enumerated the most common myths of aging; they include that being old means being sick, mentally incompetent, deaf, and sexually inactive (Ory, 2003). These attributes are certainly valid reasons for everyone to want to prevent old age; however these stereotypes produce different outcomes depending on one’s gender.

According to Julia Twigg (2004) gender is a significant factor in old age and she goes so far to assert, “deep old age is predominantly female” (p.65). There are two meanings to her claim: women have consistently outlived men, spending more time in deep old age and the value placed on their bodies and lives becomes highly discounted after menopause. As previously discussed, the availability and kind of social capital is different for men and women and even though it can be argued that male bodies are now being objectified in contemporary media, women are rarely celebrated for anything other than their looks. Again, Featherstone (1995) is very clear on the specific looks that are valued “the eroticized, youthful, female body has become the universal consumer image of desirability” (p. 20-21).

When looks are waning as compared to the beauty ideal accepted in our culture, women are not only stigmatized, they also risk becoming financially disadvantaged. Consider the economic impact of ageism on older women in light of Naomi Wolf’s theories on working women and their looks. Although women have made strides infiltrating traditional male workspaces, Wolf (1991) believes that as women became more prevalent in the workforce with help from Title VII, which protected them from hiring discrimination, a new form of discrimination arose. She asserts that women are discriminated against in the hiring and promotion process due to what she terms the “Professional Beauty Qualification” (PBQ) (p. 27). How could an aging woman possibly satisfy a PBQ if she has wrinkles and gray hair? Once again, the intersection of age and gender creates a double bind for women, which puts them at both a social *and* economic disadvantage to men.

## The Mind Body Split

The fact that women are valued primarily for their looks requires a lifelong struggle to avoid deviation from the culturally acceptable standards of female beauty, standards which few will ever be able to achieve. Laura Hurd Clarke (2011) states “There is an increasingly unobtainable beauty standard for women, which is epitomized by a young, thin, toned, healthy white, but suntanned body, with flawless and wrinkle-free skin...Approximation to this beauty ideal is one of the primary ways by which women are afforded social value” (Kindle location, 50-55). How can elderly women not fail when measured against this standard? Hurd-Clarke (2011) states that “both the cult of youth and the notion that one can choose one’s body potentially serve to devalue the bodies of older women both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others” (p. 85).

One consequence of ageism and the pursuit of youthfulness is the mind/body split, by which I mean the disconnect between how one feels and how one looks. Rochat & Zahavi (2011) assert in a discussion about Merleau-Ponty’s thesis on mirrors and self-image that “the enigmatic and uncanny character of the specular image is precisely due to ...intermingling of the self and other. It is me I see in the mirror, but the me I see has not quite the same familiarity and immediacy as the me I know from my inner experience” (p. 209).

Silver (2003) refers to both the psychological splitting and social splitting that may occur as coping strategies for the aged. In the context of aging, she defines social splitting as the distancing between age groups and the projection of fears on to the elderly. Psychological

splitting is a “disjunction between mind and body that allows for a denial of aging” (p. 391). Carolyn Morell (2003) studied the importance of empowerment and the refusal to be defined by the body in the aged women she interviewed. She found that the group of women in their nineties consistently stated that they did not feel old and actually worked at decentering their bodies, which are perceived as old by society, from their spirit which was reflected in their intellectual curiosity and engagement in their lives. The concept of “cognitive age” helps to illuminate this looking glass conflict in which women feel decades younger than they look (Lipschultz, Hilt & Reilly, 2007). Nancy Stephens (1991) defines cognitive age as “the age one perceives one's self to be” and considers this to be an important element of self-concept. Indeed, appealing to this self-concept is exactly what advertisers are doing and will be discussed in a later section.

Molly Andrews (1999) has an elegant description of the split that occurs when the looking glass reveals physical aging. She states “ We conceptualize the aging process as one in which there is an increasing conflict between two camps: on the one side, our corpus, which drags us inevitably into our dreaded old age, and on the other, our spirit, which remains forever young” (p. 9) This conflict popularly manifested in the expressions “one is only as old as one feels” or being “young at heart” has quite different ramifications for men and women: money and beauty are critical cultural currency, tools without which one is challenged to demonstrate one’s value to contemporary society. Thus trying to pass as young to avoid stigma and invisibility, Andrews asserts, is not about “the existence of the category which is being contested, but rather one’s inclusion in it” (p. 17).

This chapter has demonstrated some critical challenges that the class of aging citizens confronts in our culture: stigma, discrimination, and abjection. Additionally, like the disadvantages of intersectional identities discussed earlier, these trials of aging have a dramatically different impact based upon gender. Because the critical measure of worth is heavily skewed towards the body and self- presentation, and the roles women's bodies play in our cultural representations, the way they are made visible and celebrated, according to Featherstone, leaves little or no room for aged female bodies.

Indeed, as will be demonstrated in a later chapter, old bodies rarely appear in their true state because presenting an old body is akin to celebrating a failure, a loss of control or moral laxness in a culture where "the body is a project to be worked on, fashioned and controlled" (Twigg 2011, p. 61). The intersection of culturally normal ideals for women and the medicalization of the body have created a race to beat the natural effects of aging: the quest for agelessness.

### The Pursuit of Agelessness and Anti-Aging Work

“Just as skin-lightening creams conveyed a sense of racism, privileging light over dark skin, so anti-aging creams are seen as privileging youth over age...” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2009, p. 291).

This chapter will explore the behavioral responses to the obsession with youthfulness and physical mastery through a discussion of the acceptance and adoption of self-care work and the implications for both those who can “successfully” participate in this movement and those who cannot. The consequences of disrupting traditional definitions and hierarchies of aging created a fluidity of age and resultant ambiguity about exactly how and when one *does* become old. First I will review the historic categorization of life stages and how they have evolved over the past century during which life was medicalized. I will then identify the “third stage” as a primary target of care work and an attempted investment in the maintenance of cultural visibility, in contrast to the fourth stage, which is relegated to near total invisibility.

Dividing life in to stages is an old and common practice because age *relations*, according to Calasanti, Slevin & King (2006) are a key organizing principle of human identities. Peter Laslett (1989) offered a basic outline of the three stages of life which was similar to that found in Freud’s psychoanalytic framework of maturing: The first age is one of dependence and socialization, the second of independence and responsibilities, and the third, the era of fulfillment. Laslett’s definitions differed from Freud’s in that for Freud the third age was about a



return to dependence after the era of independence. For reasons previously stated, the third age came to be redefined in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century by empty-nesters with the financial means to be rid of responsibilities, invest in self care work, and embrace the hedonism to which Featherstone referred. Of course this third era is not universally available or achievable, for just as visibility is contingent on certain conformances and social capital, so is the ability to experience an “era of fulfillment free of responsibilities” (Laslett, 1989). Gender as well as class has also historically complicated the stages of aging, because according to Kathleen Woodward (1995), Freud had no room in his model for an era of fulfillment for the post-menopausal or post-sexual woman.

As the human life span has dramatically increased in some developed countries, these stages and relations have become further complicated primarily by the view that the third age can seemingly be enjoyed indefinitely. A key driver of the increase in life expectancy is the proliferation of medical interventions, which impact everything from child mortality to disease eradication. These medical interventions and the belief in the plasticity of the human body have complicated the previously understood life stages and created an expectation that the newly defined third age of fulfillment can be enjoyed indefinitely. In order to reframe the third age it was necessary to create a new stage of life, one that actually was seen as a return to dependency and indeed death, and so the fourth age was introduced to the lexicon of our life course. Gillett and Higgs (2013) refer to this as a feared state of becoming the ‘other’ (p.368).

The third age, then, has become a target of self-care practices aimed at the extension of youth. Facing the options described, women of means are willing to make a significant

investment in and assume the risks associated with bodywork in order to conform to—or at least approximate—an acceptable and visible bodily presentation. The most popular kinds of this self-care work are necessarily the most financially accessible: diet, exercise, and the consumption of dietary supplements. Montemurro (2013) states that normal signs of female aging such as postmenopausal weight gain and wrinkles “bring women further from societal ideas of attractiveness”(p. 3). Therefore the motivation to lose weight, stay toned, and eliminate wrinkles has resulted in a multi-billion dollar market for weight loss and anti-aging products and procedures.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. anti-aging market, which covers the entire scope of anti-aging products and services, from dietary supplements to cosmetic surgery , was estimated at \$80 billion in 2011 and forecast to grow to \$114 billion by 2015 (Crary, 2011). Global estimates are around \$249 billion for 2012 (P.R. Newswire, 2013).

Gilleard & Higgs (2013) point out the challenge of our cultural acceptance of one realm of aging: “The brighter the lights of the third age, the darker the shadows they cast over...the fourth age” (p.372). As the third age becomes the target of various interventions, death and dying fall off the cultural visibility spectrum, just as other unpleasant images of the abject are carefully kept out of view.<sup>2</sup> Thus the fourth age became the repository for all those unable to mask the stigmas associated with old age: the wrinkled, the dependent, and the infirm, and created, to use Kristeva’s term, an entire class of abject citizens. Referring back to Featherstone’s belief that imagery is accepted as reality and that the bodily capital trumps other forms of social capital, if one is not *perceived* or *performing* as young and vital she is rendered useless and invisible. The primary difficulty with characterizing individuals in these age/stage

categories is the same problem created when one opts to create monolithic categories based on race, gender, economics, or other forms of social capital. However, the power of the capitalist consumer culture and its representations in the media has done just this in the standards of beauty portrayed in the images they publish.

### **Investing in Visibility**

“Anti-aging is the ultimate form of medicalization. Effectively everyone is/will become a patient” (Mykytn, 2008, p.317).

Medicalization has situated the body as something to be mastered because it reduces aging to the status of disease and decay, which are undoubtedly abject states. The new expectation for the deferral of aging is fueled by what Mehlman et al (2004) refer to as the “halo of successes achieved by modern medicine” (p.305). In the context of a dramatically increased lifespan it is not surprising that the consumer’s assumption is that any malady of the body can be cured, and that invincibility is something that can be bought or created. Despite the fact that very few anti-aging regimens have sustainable efficacy and may result in iatrogenic consequences, the proliferation of products continues. This is where the myth of agelessness comes in.

Because the anti-aging and supplement businesses were successful in enacting the “Dietary Supplemental Health and Education Act” in 1994, most of their products fall outside

the scope of the FDA (Mehlman, et al, P. 306). This lack of regulation puts both the consumer wallet and health in a precarious position, however, as Mykytyn (2008) et al assert, in this environment where health is a personal responsibility, “whether an improvement is achieved and whether that achievement can be thought of as perfect is not as significant here as the endeavor” ( p.318).

In his article, “The Role of Products as Social Stimuli: A Symbolic Interactionism Perspective,” Michael Solomon (1983) discusses how “consumption is a response to a need or to a strategic goal” (p. 322). The strategic goal of anti-aging activities is, according to Rose (2007), “resisting death” (p. 43). Solomon proposes that the consumption of material goods, whose meaning is dependent on a cultural context, not only serves to provide meaning for the understanding of others but in self- attribution as well (p. 322). He cites Cooley’s dynamic of the “looking- glass self” as a motivator to consume “the proper constellation of products to deliver a satisfactory reflection” ( p. 323).

In a neoliberal context, while the mind may be able to defer thoughts of bodily erosion, one risks being judged if one does not successfully also forestall this phase for the *body* in its presentation and performance. Indeed, failure to do so is viewed as a moral failing. Jones and Higgs (2010) refer to the fact that the “paradigm of choice and consumerism” for the aged is quite narrow. They state that notions of aging in contemporary culture consist of “healthy ageing, independent living and successful ageing as well as notions of agelessness” (p.1516). Agelessness, however, can only be effectively marketed if the deeply aged are invisible and replaced by messages promising its attainability prevail in cultural representations. According to

Kristen Ellison (2014), consumers believe this myth because of the long history of advertising's theme of magical transformation. Ellison states that agelessness can only exist under the "guise of tautology" where the public "suspends rational thought" (p. 28). She cites Barthes' fourth feature of rhetoric, where to accept something escapes the logic of rational thought: agelessness is because it is. Featherstone (2003) attributes this ability to believe the unbelievable to what he refers to as "the aesthetization of everyday life" through which reality is transformed into images (Featherstone, p. 67).

Because of the gendered aspect of ageism and the importance of an attractive body, women are the most susceptible to an investment in the quest for eternal youth. While it would be wrong to say that women themselves are not at all complicit in their future erasure, the avoidance of stigma and abjection is a powerful motivator to participate in the anti-aging economy. Crocker and Major (1989) describe one common defense mechanism that those possessing a stigmatized trait will utilize for self-protection as concealment. Correspondingly, there is a huge market for "concealers" in the beauty aisle. The more radical procedures like facelifts also serve to mask aging, through erasure of aspects of one's former physical self through permanent physical changes. Masking and concealing are also practiced through fashion, which will be explored later in this paper. The decision to undertake such concealment exacerbates two key dimensions of splitting, that which occurs between the internal and external self and that which separates those older individuals who look old from those who do not (Andrews, 1989, p. 15).

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) has jumped on this great opportunity for a seemingly endless source of new patients and revenue. The Society's website defines cosmetic surgery as fairly broad in scope, covering both surgical and non-surgical procedures that "reshape normal structures of the body in order to improve appearance and self-esteem. Plastic surgery is a personal choice and should be done for yourself, not to fulfill someone else's desires or to try to fit an ideal image" ([www.plasticsurgery.org](http://www.plasticsurgery.org), 2014). What we have already established is that women are being constantly sold on an ideal image, therefore bodywork is heavily motivated by the desire to achieve an ideal look. The fact is that images of women are controlled by the media and presented in an idealized form, leaving women few role models who have not been subjected to bodywork or airbrushing, which will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

In a perfect example of capitalism's complicity with the medical community, the ASPS participates in a new magazine which it uses as a vehicle to promote itself and its actively practicing members. Titled simply, *New Beauty: The Beauty Authority*, this quarterly, oversized, glossy magazine appears to be the new bible of bodywork as its pages are dedicated to anti-aging services and solutions. The esteemed editorial advisory board is chaired by the "internationally renowned aesthetic plastic surgeon, Robert Singer, M.D." who has served as a chairman of the ASPS (*New Beauty*, p.22). The balance of the "advisory board," while stating that they do not "endorse or verify the claims" of the products and services in *New Beauty*, are all employed in the cosmetic surgery or anti-aging industry in some fashion. The magazine's features focus on different interventions in aging, with titles such as "Lasers: The New Anti-Aging Revolution" to

“Dangerous Beauty: How to Avoid Plastic Surgery Nightmares” and “The Facelift of the Future”—and provide a guide to the best board-certified plastic surgeons and laser facilities in the country.

Dr. Leonard Hayflick (2004) of the University of California, San Francisco, offers a scathing critique of the burgeoning anti-aging business, referring to anti-aging as “an oxymoron.” His thesis is grounded in the molecular sphere, where he contends that accuracy and fidelity of the human body cannot be maintained indefinitely. He blames unfounded advertising promises for a consumer disconnect between aging machines, which ultimately “die” and their bodies. He states that “we cannot even slow, stop, or reverse the aging process in such far simpler entities than ourselves as are, our own automobiles” (p. 576). Despite this kind of rational argument in the academic community, and perhaps to some extent in the FDA and other agencies confounded by the need to regulate many of the anti-aging elixirs, consumers keep on buying and trying. Buying to avoid dying. Rose would say that this is the result of becoming citizens of a brand culture, “where trust in brands appears capable of supplanting trust in neutral scientific expertise” (p. 143).

The consumer demand for solutions to address the challenge of physical aging feeds the anti-aging industry. For the media, there are compelling economic reasons for the promotion of transgressive images of aging: to generate revenue from those companies that create and sell new product to a huge generational cohort that is hooked on consumption. Mehlman et al (2004) state that “the goal of the clinical anti-aging community is to extend the time its patients can live without the morbidities of the aging process: ‘memory loss, muscle loss, visual impairment,

slowed gait and speech, wrinkling of the skin, hardening of the arteries, and all other kinds of maladies we call aging” (p. 304). In light of the lack of scientific evidence that these procedures, creams, and pills actually forestall aging, it could be said that the goal of the anti-aging community is to merely drive profits. The United States cosmetic surgery market in 2010, as reported by the ASPS, was comprised of 13.1 million procedures. Costs vary by geography, type of procedure, and individual doctor, with a “tummy tuck” which averaged \$5,200 to liposuction at \$2,800, to full blown facelifts which are significantly more expensive and physically altering (www.plasticsurgery.org, 2014).

As demonstrated in this chapter, the interdependence between the anti-aging business, the medical community and the consumer economy contributes to a powerful concentration of interest in furthering the myth of agelessness. The utilization of “experts” in product and procedure marketing provides the gravitas that many consumers need to take a leap of faith with their money and their bodies. There is also a gender divide when it comes to forestalling the perception that one has failed at agelessness and subsequently become an abject fourth ager. This disparity is supported by widely held consumer beliefs about the age when a man becomes old versus a woman, which will be demonstrated through current research on media representations.

As stated previously, cultural norms and standards are documented and reinforced in the media and through specific types of consumerism, and it is to the media we now turn to demonstrate examples of women aging into invisibility. It is important to note that the comingling of business interests between the medical establishment and the manufacturers of



consumer products is only effectively monetized and advertised through utilization of various media channels, many of which are independently complicit of ageism in their content offerings. Preying on the anxieties associated with aging, death, and deviation from culturally accepted norms, these industries represent the trifecta of the anti-aging promise.

<sup>1</sup> One reason for the explosion in the diet industry is that fatness, gender, and age form yet another intersectional disadvantage for women. Kirkland (2011) refers to fat's current symbolism as a signifier of downward mobility, and as our society has grown larger, the fat have become an abject class of his or her own. According to Kirkland, the hatred of fat has a greater impact on women because it is an aesthetic matter that dramatically deviates from the culturally desirable standards of female form. (Kirkland 2011). Indeed, research has demonstrated that one of the top body concerns of women is weight, which becomes a worry from teenage years and persists at varying levels throughout their life course (Haas, et al, 2012). Therefore, a key aspect of self-care is centered on weight loss, losing the fat. To avoid this abject status, the fat and obese participate, with varying degrees of success, in the estimate \$50 billion consumer spending on diet pills, liposuction, exercise programs, and bariatric surgery (Kirkland, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Casper & Moore (2007) refer to some of these invisible, abject or marginalized groups as "children, dead babies, women, and people with diseases" (p. 15,179).

## Cultural Representations

If we accept the thesis that imagery informs our understanding of society and its valued constituents, it is instructive to examine those images that are visible as well as those that are missing, underrepresented or caricatured, for symbolic interactionism and the looking-glass self are no longer about merely human interactions, but also by the thousands of daily interactions with media imagery. According to Casper and Moore, this imagery can be considered as weapons of representation in their power to shape public perceptions. This chapter will explore three specific sites of analysis: fashion, magazines specifically directed toward women over 50, and the portrayal of our aging cultural icons.

Advertisements bombard us from every available surface, claiming to make us happier, younger, and more attractive if we purchase certain products. This messaging is nothing new, but the sheer magnitude and the fantastic promises of the messages are. Kristen Ellison (2014) quotes Jackson Lears on these types of product claims, stating that as far back as the 1900's "an aura of magic was deeply embedded in the discourse of advertising" (p. 28). Magical thinking appears to be a prerequisite for consumers who believe that the "guaranteed" results from various anti-aging regimens will apply to them.

Another form of magical thinking surrounds the cult of celebrity. Because most advertisements are often associated with celebrity figures, they serve to reinforce an aspirational desire that their products will somehow get us closer to the beauty, fame, and extravagant lifestyles they live. Our popular culture appears to be obsessed with every move our celebrities make, as well as how they look and what they wear. Unfortunately, when it comes specifically

to female cultural icons, how they look almost universally falls into the category of the unobtainable beauty standard for women as described by Clarke in chapter two. Additionally, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, celebrity status has a significant age bias as regards women and therefore, the icons we do see and do wish to emulate are either chronologically or performing (through being fashioned by body work) young.

Popular, contemporary fashion as witnessed in magazines and fashion shows also privilege young, tall, and thin bodies, which once again are unachievable for the majority of women. Compounding this “model” standard is the regular practice of retouching and airbrushing these images in magazines. Again, women are being presented a culturally constructed beauty ideal that is destined to drive behaviors that are often economically, socially, and physically irresponsible.

Lipschultz et al (2007) describe the importance of media to boomer culture: “Aging baby boomers share a culture and communication that is defined by media usage and a desire to explore themselves and their world” (p. 761). The authors argue that media and advertising define reality and therefore, audiences subsequently treat mass media images as reflections of reality (p.769). I argue that this media imagery also defines self- concept. As the first generation to grow up in an unprecedented explosion of mass media, boomers are highly susceptible to these manufactured realities, and use them as Cooley’s looking glass for the building and maintenance of their own self-concept.

A significant consequence of the valorization of youth is what Twigg (2004) characterizes as the destructive power of the cultural gaze embodied in media imagery, which

she refers to as the gaze of youth (p. 65). Twigg describes the impact of this gaze by citing Gullette's work on the politics of midlife which makes the assertion that we are aged by culture, rather than our bodies (p.59). The predominance of youthful images creates an "other" status for the average media consumer, making them abject because their bodies are not in conformance with standards of beauty.

This gaze of youth may be corrosive in an ageist manner as Twigg states, however gender complicates this in a way that is unilaterally biased against women. The presentation of women in the media in general has been problematic for over a century; even magazines that are published exclusively *for* women are guilty of narrow and stereotypical imagery. The March 2013 issue of *The Atlantic* featured an article by Noah Berlatsky that summed up a ubiquitous representation of women as sex objects to be consumed, in an analysis of women *and* men's magazine content. He stated, "Women's magazines do let women take the (usually male) position of master. But they also and insistently want them to occupy the position of mastered object" (p. 6). Whether one considers the male, female, or youthful gaze, women are consistently celebrated for their youthfulness and sensuality.

### **Representations of Women in Media**

Gender role portrayals in mass media have been the subject of scrutiny for decades and a review of findings spanning the 1970's to the 2000's serves as a useful starting point for a discussion of the representations of women, both *who* is represented and *how* she is depicted

because of the double standard that applies to women. Three studies of these representations in both product advertisements and magazine content conducted more than thirty years apart, by stigma theorist Goffman, social gerontologist Denise Lewis, and Kirsten Ellison also provide snapshots of a medium whose content has not evolved in its portrayal of women, even as gender awareness and women's participation in roles associated with independence and authority.

It has long been asserted that women's appearance in the media has been framed in ways that are subservient to and less serious than men (Goffman, 1979). Goffman's 1979 illustrated analysis of gender portrayal in advertisements revealed themes of representation that continue to endure. These persistent depictions include women in submissive and childish poses, as well as mentally vacuous objects; images which unfortunately still endure thirty-five years later.

Women featured in ads created for both male and female consumption are often depicted as helpless waifs waiting to be rescued, as wild animals in need of taming, or simply as objects of desire. My recent review of advertisements indicates the worst offenders are often fragrance advertisers, which as of 2011 represented a \$44 billion global industry (*Global Cosmetics Industry* magazine.com 2014).

Lewis, et al (2011) analyzed eight fashion magazines to demonstrate the power of visual imagery (p. 103). The results of their study indicate that the majority of the magazine content contains "messages (that) fuel a fear of natural processes of aging, damage female self-esteem, and compel women to hide their true self behind extensive beauty work or engage in unhealthy dietary practices" (p. 108). While the magazines they chose for their analysis featured mostly younger women, the readership demographics reveal that readers over 50 years of age comprised

up to 20+% of the audience. This is yet another example of older women's invisibility through a lack of representation, which will be addressed in three specific consumer publications below.

Rebecca Collins (2011) offered an overview of gender roles in the media, which was based upon two special issues of the journal *Sex Roles*. Her analysis of more than twenty articles focusing on a broad spectrum of gender roles across different types of media, concluded that women are still underrepresented relative to men and that when they are present they are usually portrayed in stereotypical female roles like homemaker, caregiver, and/or scantily clad, subordinate, and sexualized.

While the studies referenced did indicate forward progress in the *visibility* of women in relation to men, the actual *portrayal* of women in poses and roles told a rather anachronistic story. While Collin's study took race into consideration, age was not. This oversight may demonstrate the lack of cultural visibility and perceived value of older women. Considering the limited roles in which women are included, as sexual sirens or happy homemakers, women in later life do not meet the physical or consumption standards often desired by product marketers.

Smirnova (2012) points out that the cultural discourse in the media "has simultaneously constructed the aging woman as both victim and hero—her *body* vulnerable and in need of rescue by her *will* to partake in anti-aging technologies" (p.1236). In addition to the depictions in subservient and dependent roles, the physical characteristics of the women representing our brand culture are unobtainable for the majority of women without radical bodywork. The website *Jezebel* has regularly critiqued the fashion magazines for their airbrushing and photo-shopping of models as this starts eroding girls' self-esteem from an early age and sets the stage

for both ageism and invisibility for older women. According to the website's research even the older female models are touched up, therefore presented in an artificial state.

This intoxicating gaze of youthful women has been the preferred marketing imagery for consumer products and services, used to sell everything from cars to fashion to perfume and resort destinations. It is important, once again, to note that these portrayals appear in all media, targeted to all ages and genders.

### **Images, Visibility, And Ageism**

Gilleard and Higgs (2009) argue that “despite their growing numbers, people older than 60 commonly experience a kind of social and cultural invisibility” (p. 291). Typecast in an already narrow role and representation, women become victims of the intersectional stigmas of age and gender. Gilleard & Higgs (2009) discuss the implications of visibility as arbitrated by media representation when one fails to measure up to accepted norms, “Just as minority ethnic groups tended to appear rarely and in caricatured form in Western media, so the media provides a small and limited range of potential identities and lifestyles for older people” (p. 291). The two primary identities that one does see illustrated are that of polar opposites: the infirmed and afflicted versus the hero who has thwarted the signs of aging.

Portrayals of women who are in the third age are visible in the marketing of syndrome and disease related solutions, specifically if they are associated with a loss of youth and vitality. However, Carrigan & Szmigin (1999) found in a study of advertising utilizing those in their third

age, that these people tend to look younger than their imagined age, are very attractive or are caricatured, thus keeping true imagery of older-looking people out of the mainstream media (p. 43). The sustainability of the anti-aging market is contingent upon constant portrayals of those who have successfully participated in it. The myth of agelessness is perpetuated by those who are seen, the successfully aging third agers, and relies on the fourth agers to remain invisible.

While images are powerful, the language of the media narrative is equally exclusionary to women over 40-50 years old. In addition to the absence of the word “old,” when aging *is* represented it is almost exclusively positioned as something to be overcome, battled, and never accepted. Examples of the language used in the various publications and advertisements studies include: correcting, renewing, age defying, conquering, fighting, and transforming to list a few (*New Beauty*). Cover lines on several recent magazines make such nebulous promises to older female readers, “Look good in your twenties, thirties and forties and *beyond*.” Beyond, according to the dictionary is defined as “elsewhere,” “outside,” or “away from,” which sounds like banishment to invisible and abject status. (*More magazine & Ladies Home Journal*).

When one peruses the type of media that are consumed by those aged 50+, an interesting segmentation of advertisers and content becomes apparent. Magazines are appropriate sites for investigation as they purport to offer a relatively customized editorial and advertising environment for their defined readers. Through an analysis of the *Ladies Home Journal* and *More* magazines, one can ascertain the viewing/reading audience by merely analyzing the types of ads that appear, however the *images* presented belie the demographic profile these publications report in their reader surveys. While these media may hope to attract a wide swath



of readers with normative standards of idealized beauty; their bread and butter—paying subscribers-- are the boomers. Implicit in these analyses is that the advertisers are paying to reach an older demographic, while being visually associated with glamorous and youthful women.

For this thesis, I conducted a content analysis of recent issues of two magazines targeting readers aged 40 and older. For this study I surveyed 22 of the 2013 issues of two top-selling women's magazines, *More* and *The Ladies Home Journal*. I found that the age of 50 is mentioned on the cover 12 times and only as the last age in the list of 30,40,50. The age of 60 is never mentioned on the cover of any of the 22 issues of either magazine.

### **The Ladies Home Journal**

One of the original women's service magazines, the *Ladies Home Journal (LHJ)* made its debut in 1883, including the tagline "and practical housekeeper." The *LHJ* focused on the accepted women's sphere at that time: hearth and home; it also published fiction pieces about romance. While *LHJ* has evolved over its 100+ year history, keeping up with the changing roles and interests of women, the story told by the consumer products featured and editorial content they choose to present to their core readers does not seem to have changed for the benefit of aging women. The early ads, like the editorial content, focused on consumption for the home with ads for soaps, corsets, vacuum cleaners and food. The magazine covers featured illustration for many years and the usual subject matter was either that of a woman, a woman and baby, or a

domestic pursuit such as flower arranging or cooking. Editorial features and advertisements demonstrated that a woman's power was only applicable to the home and to a certain extent (if you had the resources of money and beauty) over men. Mastery of a clean house, healthy meals, and supporting one's husband, the primary breadwinner, were a woman's key priorities. For example, an American Airlines ad in the September 1950 issue included the headline "Vacations are made for Father, but Mother makes the plans" (LHJ 50's cover site). As women moved outside the home to more public and traditionally male roles, the magazine had to change its representations, but analyzing the images chosen complicates the hope for any forward progress.

Since 1946 the magazine has used the tagline "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman" (LHJ website). However, the power to which they are referring as reflected in the images of the women featured, appears to reside for the most part, in their looks and it can be asserted, their ability to fight the signs of aging. This "power" was embodied in the 1950's magazine covers with lines like, "How to Look and Feel 20 Years Younger" (LHJ 1958). Does this positioning of the magazine suggest that women should believe in the promises of transformation evidenced in the advertisements and the articles and that if they battle aging utilizing these examples they will succeed in achieving agelessness? If so, then the message is clear: your power as a woman resides primarily in your looks.

My survey of the LHJ fifty-five years later shows very little evolution in the messages it promotes. The magazine currently promotes itself as for "women who recognize the importance of taking time for themselves" (LHJ, 2014, Media kit). The messages in the magazine clearly point the reader in the direction of spending their time on bodywork. Each issue in 2013 had

cover lines referring to anti-aging body work or concealment: a few examples are: “Anti-Aging Make-Up Tricks” “Beach Body after 30” “Retire Your Fat Pants Forever” “The Whole Body Anti-Aging Guide” and “Look Sexy at 30, 40, 50” (*LHJ* 2013, covers).

The median age of their all- female audience is 58. Like its sister publications, including *More*, *LHJ* featured a celebrity woman on each of its 12 covers in 2013. Those featured included Tina Fey, Diane Lane, and Giada DeLaurentis, among others. Of these twelve cover women, only two were over 50, and the median age represented was 48, a full ten years younger than the magazine’s median reader age. In *LHJ*’s February, 2014 issue while the women featured editorially, with the exception of the cover story on Diane Sawyer, 68, all appeared to be under 40, (as Sawyer did on the cover) the advertisements in the current issue tell a different story about the vitality and potential of this market as consumers. The 34 ads in this issue could be divided in to five major categories defined by the American Association of Advertisers: illness or syndrome related, weight loss and diet, food, and beauty. The largest category was illness/syndrome related at almost 30%, and the second largest group was for weight loss/diet/nutrition at 15%. What can be gleaned from this is a demonstration of the mind body split: the editorial images are perhaps appealing to the cognitively young woman, however the advertisements tell a story of bodily degradation. The largest category of ads included treatments for menopause, accidental bowel leakage, overactive bladder, and diabetes, all of which are intended for the median reader at age 58 and the fifty percent of readers who are older than that.

The juxtaposition of the images of beautiful and young celebrities with remedy-oriented products is exactly what marketers are looking for in their communications: an implied connection between maintenance of a youthful appearance and the solutions focused regimens. Once again, there is a need for magical thinking to motivate the consumption behaviors the advertisers seek.

### **More Magazine**

Originally launched in 1998 as the magazine for women over 40, *More* magazine has recently changed its positioning to “Celebrating Women of Substance” (*More* website). When the magazine first appeared on the newsstands it was heralded as one of the first and only publications that dared to admit that it was targeting women of middle age. According to the magazine’s current reader profile on their website, the median age of their reader is 53, therefore half of its readers are over 53 years of age. An analysis of the cover subjects and cover lines of *More*’s ten issues published in 2013 offers an interesting insight about the messages this magazine conveys.

Like the LHM, the covers all feature celebrity women, ranging from Queen Latifah to Angie Harmon. Interestingly, of the ten cover women only one was over 50, actress Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and the median age of the women on all ten 2013 covers is only 45. Reader comments published in response to *More*’s April issue included several from women who criticized the publication for ignoring its professed audience. Every issue of this magazine, which celebrates

women of *substance*, which contemporary feminists would likely interpret as being accomplished at something more than being beautiful, includes at least one cover line that suggests body work and participation in the anti-aging market. The following are a few examples: “How to Age Well” “Younger, Fresher Eyes” “Best Anti-Aging Beauty Ideas” “Total Skin Makeovers: We Undo the Damage,” “The Ultimate Anti-Aging Meal Plan,” and the economical sounding “Anti-Aging in a Cup.”

Blurbs about the substantive women on the cover accompany these messages and inform the reader how they learned to overcome some kind of adversity, however the primary visual message conveyed is that they have been able to successfully retard the aging process. While the editors are promoting empowerment, the advertising, which comprises more than 30% of its pages, tells a very different story. Of the 38 ads in *More's* February 2014 issue, 21 focus on anti-aging or illness/syndrome treatments, 12 and 9 respectively. These ads that align the battle with disease with the battle against aging encourage the type of work and medical intervention that must be undertaken to overcome physical realities, to look like the celebrities and models whose gazes of eternal youth judge the reader from the magazine's pages.

A feature article in *More's* November, 2013 issue entitled “How to Dress 10 Pounds Thinner” leads with the promise that “The clothes here will shrink the body part you care for least.” Shrinking and covering up is what is recommended for women of style and substance? This appears to be yet another vote for concealment and masking which will be addressed in the fashion section of this paper.

The portrayal of women in popular media, as depicted above, has not changed in the past half century and certainly does not reflect the professional advances that women have made in society. From the current analysis, it appears that due to sexism that is still very much a part of 21<sup>st</sup> century society, women are still primarily valued for their physical looks and as a result, are highly objectified in the name of consumerism. As Featherstone noted, the beautiful and aesthetically pleasing body symbolizes the successful consumer. As a result, female bodies that fail to meet our narrow cultural standards of beauty are rendered invisible and abject.

The conclusion can be drawn, from both prior research studies by Collins, Lewis, and Goffman and the current magazine analysis, as well as the significant role popular media plays in our cultural lives, that once out of one's 40's, women will rarely, if ever be represented as successful and desirable members of society.

### **The Tyranny of Fashion**

Clarke et al (2009) argue, "like other forms of beauty work, such as make-up and hair dye, clothing masked and redressed the offending body parts as well as the visibility of the women's chronological age" (P. 723). The intersection of age, clothing and gender creates a problematic site for cultural self-expression. Social gerontologist Julia Twigg (2009) has focused on fashion as a critical aspect of the aging body. She advocates for age to be added to the "master identities" of class and gender, which have historically been considered the key delineators of personal fashion presentation. Clothing, she argues, "forms the vestimentary

envelope that contains the body and presents it to the social world” (p. 7). While many studies have analyzed different modes of dress as a key element of agentic expression, Twigg asserts that conformity is as important as agency. Fashion can be used to battle the stigma of a discredited body, however the choices for presenting an older body *and* keeping in step with contemporary fashion are severely restricted.

Women’s fashion has long been criticized for using impossibly thin models and using makeup and settings that objectify and oppress as evidenced in the Goffman and Lewis studies. However, the ageist aspect of this highly visible industry cannot be overlooked as a critical driver in the imagination of women’s identity development. Twigg (2009) refers to our standard in fashion presentation as creating a “set of demands in terms of which older people can only fail” (p.11). Yarnal et al (2011) describe the significance of clothing as giving cultural meaning to the body and characterize dress as that which “shapes the self, embodying personal tension between *having* a docile body and *being* an active body” (p. 53). Lewis et al (2011) believe the entire fashion industry needs to be held accountable for the paucity of older women’s images because “the industry, as a whole, attempts to sell older women the idea of youthfulness” (p. 10).

While dieting, exercise, and other forms of more invasive bodywork may enable some women to wear the fashions designed for a twenty-something body, for the majority of women who lack a youthful body their only option is to mask. Masking, whether with strategically selected clothing choices, makeup, or hair dye serves as a form of self-care work that temporarily covers up the signs of aging. Clarke et al (2009), for example, surveyed a small sample of

elderly women who “described their clothing choices as a strategic means of masking or compensating for changes that had occurred in their bodies over time” (p. 716).

Although according to the 2009 US Census Bureau statistics, 20% of the US population is over 50 years of age and yet, “the fashion industry by and large assumes that older women will conform to an ‘deal’ of thinness and agelessness and continue to merely consume what is out there rather than look for items that fit with their oftentimes active lifestyles” (Lewis et al, 2011, p. 101). This represents another double bind unique to aging women. When the boomer generation was donning torn jeans and tie-dye, the older generation was moving in to the roomy and often shapelessness of the “leisure suit” or house dress. This mode of dress is stigmatized as old and therefore women may use younger fashion to resist becoming abject, but they risk presenting themselves in the caricatured form mentioned earlier. Clarke (2009) states “although clothing strategies could not make bodily transgressions disappear entirely, they transformed the women’s discrediting bodily capital into less perceptible” allowing them to pass (Kindle location 723).

### **Older Cultural Icons**

Not all of our cultural heroes and heroines are under the age of 30, but there is research that demonstrates a bias against roles and representations of older women in comparison to older men. Critics of the lack of diversity in the entertainment business have acknowledged that there



is a “silver ceiling” that exists, and which appears to pertain more to that industry’s women than men (*redOrbit*, 2004).

Two studies, one addressing representations of women in popular films and one looking at the age of male Oscar -nominated entertainers versus female, demonstrate this discrimination. Bazzini et al (1997) analyzed 100 top grossing Hollywood films spanning the 1940’s to the 1980’s to demonstrate their thesis that older women are discriminated against and therefore, less frequently represented than male actors of the same age. They found relative age/gender parity in roles for those actors under 35 years of age, however, when considering characters over 35-years they found that only 19% of these older characters were female, as compared to 81% who were male (p. 539).

A report published by Gilbert & Hines (2000), covering award winners in popular films from 1975 to 1999 revealed a similar age discrepancy between male and female actors. In addition, the current issue of *AARP, The Magazine* included a six-decade trend in the ages of both male and female Oscar winners from 1950 to 2012 which supports the findings of these other studies. The reporter, Meghan Bogardus found that the average age of Academy Award winners has increased over fifteen years for male actors, but only by five years for actresses (*AARP*, March 2014, p.8). Older actresses are therefore, subject to erasure, written out of the script.

Bazzini et al (1997) nicely summarize the connection between media exposure and visibility: “Because representation in media signifies social existence, and underrepresentation signifies inexistence, the media’s failure to portray aging female characters reinforces an

unattainable cultural standard that perpetuates women's struggle to fight aging at any cost" (p. 542). When Hollywood producers do release a movie which actually does celebrate older women's sexuality and agency it is often positioned as unnatural. In "Something's Gotta Give" with Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson, the 60- plus woman Keaton plays is portrayed as a bitter and frigid divorcee and her lover is the sexually gregarious Nicholson she meets only because he is dating her daughter. The good news is that boomer women can cheer for Keaton because she beats out the younger women for the guy, even if that younger woman is her daughter. Calasanti et al (2006) discuss the relational privilege of younger women "that old women are cast aside as sexual partners, which enhances the abilities of younger women to gain power by partnering with privileged men," which also serves to reinforce their male partners' virility (p. 9).

An article in *redOrbit* points to the standard fare in feature films: the older male love interest (played by, for example Paul Newman, Jack Nicholson, Michael Douglas) that is paired with a female character twenty years his junior (Helen Hunt, Gwyneth Paltrow, Ann Heche) (2004, p. 3). Other examples include two Oscar-nominated films, *An Unmarried Woman* and *The First Wives Club*, which follow the lives of women who seek companionship or revenge after their husbands leave them for younger women. Both trend and trope, this phenomenon has been referred to as a "December to May" romance, where the May partner is associated with youth and Spring and the other with Winter or old. While this relationship could involve an older woman and younger man as in the show "Cougar Town," the majority of depictions are of the older man and the beautiful and sexy younger woman. The most ubiquitous of these pairings could be attributed to media magnate Hugh Hefner and his *Playboy* bunnies.

Even when an older cultural icon ages naturally *and* successfully, achieving a unique social status as a woman, their veneration may not have a positive impact on aging consumers. A notable exception of an actress presenting as her authentic aging self, is the example of Judi Dench and her role in the James Bond film series. Eva Krainitzki (2014) explored the character “M”, portrayed over twenty years by Dench, as a subversive and disruptive older female character and actress, whose narrative creates a different paradigm of chronological age. However, the characterizations of Dench as a woman who has aged successfully create, according to Krainitzki, a “prescriptive characteristic” where the old who have managed to resist physical aging and still look younger than their chronological age are celebrated and praised, leaving those who fall short of this achievement hidden in the wings of the cultural stage (p. 33).

As Gilleard & Higgs (2011) note “ The expansion and evolution of the leisure, media and entertainment industries have generated numerous counter-cultural images of later life, including numerous sixty and seventy year old actors, entertainers and pop stars who dress and act in ways that differ radically from traditional ideas of what constitutes embodied old age” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011, p. 137). Living up to the lifestyles portrayed by the celebrities of our culture is a challenge economically and physically, and especially disadvantages women. The inequality in this for women is that the gray and craggy faced male actor is considered sexy in a “Marlboro Man” kind of way, whereas the female icons are all flawless either by design or *redesign*. Cher is a great example here because she celebrates her bodywork and the younger men she takes a husbands and lovers. This appears to be the only way the aging female cohort is represented at all.

Whether produced for mass consumption or targeted to a specific demographic, the media's representation of women in the third age who *appear* old remains almost non-existent. These women who fail to meet the societal standard of successful aging are relegated to the same invisible status as those in the fourth age. It appears that with or without body work the gravitas afforded older men is rarely available to women. When the third or fourth age woman is targeted with appropriate age-related products, the messages are often situated in an environment saturated with the gaze of youth. This trend has serious implications for the perpetuation of ageism and the abject status of the invisible older woman.



## Conclusion

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the intersection of gender, age, consumerism, and the media creates a formidable barrier to the representation of aging women. The anti-aging industry is burgeoning and even though the associated products and services are seamlessly woven into our everyday reality, they may be fueling a fear of aging among an ever-younger cohort. The rampant ageism in the United States and much of the western world puts the older woman, who has the compound disadvantages of gender and age, at risk in numerous ways, which are becoming critical topics of exploration for feminists. Catherine Silver (2003) credits the publication of Betty Friedan's "Fountain of Age" as the seminal work that framed the exploration of gender and age and calls for feminists to consider degendering as an important and liberating part of embodied aging. Silver asserts that in the past, feminists accepted age discrimination as a given; another aspect of the victimization of women. She believes that Freidan provided the wake-up call needed for feminists to explore the socially constructed intersectional disadvantages of gender and aging.

Until we stop constructing aging as a societal problem, ageism will continue to flourish. No other stage of life is as stigmatized as old age, as Molly Andrews (1999) asserts. She states "there is not much serious discussion about eliminating infancy, adolescence, or adulthood from the developmental landscape" (p. 302). According to a study by the United Nations, the global developed country's population of people aged 60 plus was 19% in 2000 and is predicted to grow to 34% in 2050. Therefore the consequences of erasure and abjection may have significant consequences on the economic, mental, and emotional health of the aged. Several recent ethnographic studies conducted among aging women in nursing and retirement homes have uncovered, through the older women's own voices, the ways in which they feel disconnected and

stigmatized by society. As established in chapter two, old age is a category in which no one wants to be included. This has serious implications for the older woman who is isolated from her peers, whether by living alone or with her own children.

A recent survey conducted by *AARP: The Magazine* and published in their February/March 2014 issue reveals a snapshot of men's and women's views about aging as individuals and as part of a cohort. Entitled "Aging in America," and conducted among 1,800 Americans between the ages of 40 and 90, the responses indicate how the myth of agelessness has been broadly adopted and how it contributes to ageism not just against, but also among older citizens. The response to a question regarding how they are aging in comparison to their friends the same age exemplifies this point. The survey showed that 33.7% of respondents said that their peers were older than they. The study also reveals the age bias against women that has been demonstrated in this thesis. Responding to the question "At what age are men old?" both men and women responded with the same age, 70. However, when asked the same question as pertains to women, men responded 68 while women responded 75, representing a significant perceptual difference between the sexes.

Casper and Moore (2009) propose a new project to challenge the loss of visibility for certain abject groups which they refer to as an "ocular ethic" which suggests the possibility of enabling a new "legacy of looking: one that refuses to assign political value to some bodies at the expense of others..." (p. 14). Assuming this new way of looking was blind to both gender and age it could be helpful. But how will these often invisible and voiceless citizens advocate for this new way of thinking in which all bodies will matter?

### **Economic and health implications of ageism**

The economic challenges for women do not first present themselves in their middle-aged years: it has long been a fact that women earn significantly less than men, current figures put women's earnings at 77% of that of male counterparts. A new economic report published in 2014, published and co-authored by journalist Maria Shriver and the Center for American Progress, puts the number of women on the brink of poverty in the United States at 42 million. If women are fortunate enough to have a living wage job, their career may well be cut short if they are subjected to Wolf's PBQ and the stigma associated with signs of aging. If the birth rate continues to decline and lifespan increases due to medical intervention it makes sense that there is a strong economic reason for this country to train and employ the 60+ population in order to both fill jobs and have them participate actively as consumers. Discounting a population because of their chronological age or looks appears foolhardy in light of the demographic picture in this country. (U.S. Census, 2012).

Shriver (2014) suggests that women should prepare for economic independence by seeing themselves as providers, rather than as being provided for (by their husbands). The challenge of care provision, housing, retirement income, and access to health care for the aging population is raised in governmental discourse, but the chasm of difference based upon gender is rarely surfaced. Because most retirees depend on social security as their primary source of income, and social security is determined by lifetime earnings, women are again, doubly disadvantaged. According to Lipschultz (2007), median income for those in what are considered "mature households" are lowest for women with little work experience which is indicative of many boomer women. These women make up 65% of the households over 85 years of age. (p.764).



On the emotional and physical health side of the equation, Levy & Meyers (2004) have conducted research on the importance of self-perception in the elderly, as it correlates with participation in healthy exercise and diet regimens. Their study concluded that preventative health behaviors and the will to live are highly influenced by positive perceptions of aging. In a study of women's anxieties about aging, Barrett and Robbins (2008) found that while women with aging anxiety often experience greater psychological distress, the fear and anxiety associated with a loss of attractiveness as a function of aging corresponds to a much stronger presence of distress. Their study showed that losing one's looks was more of a concern than anxiety about illness.

Similar to other victims of prejudice, Levy's (2004) research found that the aged individual, in response to negative stereotypes, had "reduced memory performance, self-efficacy, and the will to live" (p. 625). Laura Hurd's (2000) participant observation study in a retirement home found that the "loss of male partners represents a difficult and painful reality for many older women" (p. 435).

The above findings suggest that changing the popular narrative about age and its resultant stigmatization of elderly women may serve both the individual as well as the greater economic interest of our country. Though it is reasonable to believe that self-esteem and self-perception are established through a variety of experiences, reflections and actions, not all older individuals are able to maintain the physical stamina to bungee jump at 75 years of age. In Gecas & Scwalbe's (1983) critique of the looking-glass self, they discount its portrayal of self-concept as merely passive reflections of the responses of others. The authors make a strong case for the value of actions, "especially efficacious actions" as a critical contributor to self-identity. However, this stance disregards both the power of the media images to which women are

exposed as well as the fact that due to sexism, women are structurally inhibited in their actions and when they become aged they are doubly limited. (pp. 77-88).

### **Pockets of resistance**

When older women are in an environment with their peers there is evidence that they will develop their own defenses and modes of resistance just like other stigmatized in-group members, drawing strength from each other. As their numbers grow, aging women are developing their own subcultures, joining forces to battle ageism, sexism, and invisibility. Barrett et al (2012) argue that the double stigma of old age and gender fosters a stronger interest in joining and forming such groups.

The Red Hat Society (RHS) is one such organization that provides camaraderie to women aged 50 plus, counting one million members worldwide. Their members dress in purple clothes and red hats when they go out in public. Barrett's (2012) series of 52 interviews with RHS members in a Tallahassee, Florida chapter revealed the power of transgressive behavior in a peer group, yet also pointed to a shared frustration with feelings of invisibility when interacting outside their group, in society at large. Given the emphasis on going out to dine and investing in fashion the demographics of organizations like the RHS are skewed to white, affluent women which means that for women with additional intersectional stigmas, like race are likely underrepresented.

In a positive step for influencing women who are not yet aged but are already feeling the fear and anxiety of becoming abject as they do age, the RHS has encouraged the development of an under-fifty chapter, called The Pink Hats. One hopes that the guidance from stereotype-

resistant older female role models will result in a growing trend of opposition to the social construct of the aging body.

Personal assistant turned journalist Helen Walmsley-Johnson writes for the *Guardian* under the byline “The Invisible Woman.” Writing rants about everything from body fascism, grey hair, and vaginal lifts, the writer has developed quite a following and interactive dialogue among the older and invisible female population. On March 12 of this year she announced her true identity, realizing that the freedom of anonymity was outweighed by the need to be visible at 58 years of age.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the website *Jezebel* has been an advocate of the accurate portrayal of women. Positioned as a site for “Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women Without Airbrushing,” *Jezebel* attempts and often succeeds making headlines by calling out media’s portrayal of women and the shaming aspect of the relationship between those women who can perform and appear as young and those who cannot.

In summary, despite the dismal showing in the media representations reviewed in this paper, these organizations as well as numerous individual women are rejecting many of the common age-masking tactics and the pressure to conform to the youthful standard of female beauty. While only anecdotal evidence is available at this juncture, it is conceivable that women will one day wear their grey hair and crow’s feet with pride. For those women with celebrated careers who may maintain visibility as they age due to the gravitas associated with their positions, there is a great opportunity for policy influence regarding aging women and one hopes that the recent ascendancy of women in public office, where the experience of age is valued will encourage other older women to come out from behind their masks.

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