BEING WOMEN, THEN LESBIANS, THEN OLD: FEMININITIES, SEXUALITIES, AND AGING


Midlife and Older LGBT Adults: Knowledge and Affirmative Practice for the Social Services, by Ski Hunter. Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY, 2005, 245 pp., $39.95 (cloth), $24.95 (paper).


She’s 78. She married at the modal age of 22 shortly after World War II ended. And, living in harmony with her generation’s sexual socialization and the nation’s heterosexism, she did not consciously recognize until late midlife that she was unhappy and indeed sexually attracted to women. No, she’s 78 and while serving in the military she was sensitive to her attraction to women, had a few sexual encounters with other young women, and learned how to hide her love relationships to pass as heterosexual in an intolerant social world. She married twice, submitting to the social imperative for women to marry. Only later, after her children were grown, did she “come out” to herself, having long juggled her lived experiences as a married heterosexual and a closet lesbian whose occasional lovers were always women. NO! She’s 78 and representative of
a small proportion of older lesbians who came of age in the pre-Stonewall era, before the creation of a vibrant lesbian, bisexual subculture. She knew she was attracted to women during her teen years. She resisted the coercive gender script for women of her age. She pursued college as her ticket to independence. She managed the discrimination for loving another woman by hiding her identity. She and her partner have been together for nearly 50 years; and, she has a well-established friendship network.

Although hypothetical, these women’s lives attest to the diverse biographies among one cohort of old lesbians and how their femininities differentially took shape within a common historical context. They are plausible biographies, drawn from the books reviewed in this essay. All four volumes are unapologetically lesbian and gay affirmative. I step back from having read the four with an appreciation of the older lesbians’ resilience and a recommendation that others take the time to read one or all of the titles, independent of the significant range in the quality of the four.

What is transparent is that the experiences, status, and needs of older lesbians—their financial well-being, the types and extent of their social engagement, their mental and physical health, among other things—track along side the late-life experiences, status and needs of nearly all older women. Commonly facing the cultural mores of being the “second sex,” opportunities for women from the 1930s through the 1950s were limited across social institutions—work histories, for example, highlight the cumulative disadvantage of gender inequalities. And women’s personal identities and social worth were principally defined by marital status. Unlike heterosexual women of the same age, older lesbians have also logged personal histories involving closeted lives, a risk of discrimination, and, at times, persecution because being a lesbian was reason enough for censure. As one never-married woman older than 72 years old noted: “When I was in school and I was a teacher—you did not—you were not out. If you were, you were unemployed and not admitted in polite society” (Clair, cited in Claassen, p. 238). Another 95-year-old divulges just how pervasive the norm of silence was: “[It] just seems like all my life, literally. . . . I haven’t talked about it. . . . It’s amazing, really, that all my life so much—I’ve never discussed it” (Madelyn, cited in Clunis et al., p. 21).

Right now, nearly all older lesbians continue to be excluded from the spousal or survivor benefits that Social Security offers or the tax shelters available to heterosexual persons who inherit pension or 401(k) assets from their partners. Older lesbians’ concerns related to housing, health care, adult day care and long-term care, end-of-life medical decision making, and property distribution after death remain too often treated as trifling by many social authorities. In her keynote speech at the Senior Action in a Gay Environment conference in May 2000, Virginia Apuzzo summarized: “We have just completed 8 years of an administration that has been comparatively friendly toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community, but what have we won for LGBT elders?

The answer is: very little substance” (in Midlife and Aging in Gay America, pp. 2–3). Things have not gotten better. Reading any of the four books will certainly increase gerontologists’ understanding of the daily lives of old women, but the take-home message is about the hardness, resiliency, and spirit of older lesbians and bisexuals.

**Whistling Women**

*Whistling Women: A Study of the Lives of Older Lesbians* by Cheryl Claassen was the first of the four titles I read. The title was a siren: Who are whistling women? Claassen is an archeologist in the Department of Anthropology at Appalachian State University. Partly because her earlier books explored gender within archeology and her interest in regendering history, I kept anticipating a statement on why *Whistling Women* was so titled. She kept me actively reading and wondering. I was aware of Barbara Holland’s (2002) historical account of rebellious women in *They Went Whistling: Women Wayfarers, Warriors, Runaways, and Renegades*. But that connection seemed a stretch—even though the older lesbians between 62 and 82 years of age that Claassen interviewed were rebellious women of many sorts. But in her sample, almost all were middle- and upper-middle class women with independent careers, and more than two thirds earned at least an undergraduate degree in the pre-feminist years. And all of them self-identified as growing up as a lesbian or bisexual in the pre-Stonewall era. Still, the reader is never directly told why the older lesbians are routinely referred to as Whistling Women (e.g., on p. 42, Claassen starts a paragraph “Six Whistling Women articulated a burning desire . . .”). The missing detail is engaging, as is the book.

The life stories told by Claassen’s study participants, whom she calls narrators, and the way Claassen knits together the narrators’ reflections, worries, and comments, become a fascinating exploration into the lives of old lesbians. The book is perhaps best defined as a retelling of two generations of lesbian history and women’s experiences growing older through the first-person voices of 44 lesbians. At times, Claassen will literally string together 8, 10, 12 clips from her interviews, flooding the text with the first-person voices on a particular issue, whether it is early life and leaving home or hometown, experiences with dating men and marriage, having or not having children, coming out and lesbian relationships, sexual life, or life after 60. Other times, Claassen provides tables of detailed descriptive statistics that help summarize the older lesbians’ experiences and status—from who grew up during the Depression and World War II, to the employment status and income sources available to each informant in her retirement years. Whatever the presentation format, what emerges is the “. . . herstory that is often ignored or passed over” (Ellen Riggle, book back cover). What emerges is a scholarly analysis of the life experiences of older women who have learned to manage the social forces affecting their lives as lesbian women now growing old.
Whistling Women puts light on older, socioeconomically “comfortable” women’s bisexual and lesbian life histories. A surprising character of the women interviewed by Claassen is that despite the prevailing sexist practices at the time the women were growing up, most women in the sample had pursued careers (not simply jobs), more than half with pension plans. They thus entered late life in an economically privileged position—often summering in Boone, North Carolina (where the author lives); 40 of the 45 spent at least five months a year in Florida. The distinctiveness of her sample is noted in the chapter “Lesbian Spaces, Gay Faces”:

Whistling Women frequently mentioned bars in their narratives, and the memories were often vivid. Most striking in their narratives, however, are the glimpses of class differences in particular. Because of the association of bars with nonworking or working-class women, bars were not the usual places most of the narrators went. . . . Far more important were the lesbian spaces without places—social groups with revolving meeting places for weekend house parties . . . (pp. 249–250).

Claassen offers general insights on the social and personal factors that shaped how “comfortable” lesbians were experiencing later life. For example, in Chapter 6, “Life After Sixty,” she reveals evidence of the women’s successful aging—the fullness of life being lived—and thus challenges stereotypes about the cumulative disadvantage of women’s aging. The fullness of late life wasn’t strictly because of the women’s privilege; rather, as Claassen realized, it was the older women’s opportunities to live in close proximity to hundreds of other older lesbians. “Individuals cause communities” (p. 193), and within communities an older lesbian can find a woman’s chorus, bookstores, shelters, meeting houses (such as Whistling Women in Winston-Salem, NC), a lesbian law firm, group meetings of Lesbians Over Fifty and Their Friends, and so on. Because Claassen recognized the risks her narrators took during their youth to love other women and “orchestrate” their lives as older lesbians—by which she means “living without words, lying, hiding, finding friends, and making community” (p. 269)—whoever reads this book will gain much insight on the lives of lesbians growing up between the world wars.

A Broader View

If someone was looking for a broader overview of older lesbians’ lives, especially for information on the social service needs of the LGBT communities, the books Lives of Lesbian Elders: Looking Back, Looking Forward, by Merilee Clunis, Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, Pat Freeman, and Nancy Nystrom, and Midlife and Older LGBT Adults: Knowledge and Affirmative Practice for the Social Services, by Ski Hunter, are the pair to read. These volumes serve as bookends sustaining a sociological imagination on what it means to be an older lesbian.

Lives of Lesbian Elders chronicles the life choices made by 62 lesbians about coming out, family, work, and aging. Drawing on interviews with women aged 55 to 95 now living in Washington state, Oregon, and California, the authors—a psychologist in private practice, an associate professor of social work, a historian, and a lecturer in social work—provide a very important accounting of what it was like to be lesbian in the 20th century. As Fullmer, Shenk, and Eastland (1999) recommended, by giving voice to the everyday lives of the older lesbians that were made invisible by repressive social mores, this book certainly gives rise to a consciousness about older lesbians’ private troubles, adversities, and late life contentment—their experiences of finally coming out, the way family and personal relationships constructed identities and meaning, and how work, retirement, and now later life also cast the women into resilient survivors. By contrast, Midlife and Older LGBT Adults: Knowledge and Affirmative Practice for the Social Services is not an empirical study. Much like an earlier book (Hunter, Sundel, & Sundel, 2002) that integrated more than 225 studies to review what is known about midlife women, Hunter’s Midlife and Older LGBT Adults is also an extensive literature review. It underpins her historically sensitive but contemporarily focused assessment of the service needs that aging lesbians seek and need. This volume explicitly shifts a reader’s attention from the private troubles lesbians have managed to the public issues aging lesbians currently face.

Readers ought to walk away from Lives of Lesbian Elders mindful of how much older lesbians’ biographies were determined by the culture, politics, and social mores of their times and how resilient they are. This book begins with a common acknowledgment that “The lives of older lesbians have simply been overlooked” (p. 1). But the book’s distinctive, historically contextualized argument begins in the next two sentences: “As women, as lesbians, and as elders they have been stigmatized and marginalized by U.S. society. Their lives have remained largely invisible in a society that, through much of the twentieth century, criminalized homosexuality in order to enforce heterosexuality” (p. 1). For the remainder of this book, Clunis and her colleagues make heard the voices of the 62 women they interviewed. As this is done, the tremendous hardships the lesbians faced and their resiliency, their ability to “find ‘others of their kind’ and to live lesbian lives” (p. 175) is not overlooked. The book is instructive, well written, and steeped with reminders of the women’s social history; it was the most enjoyable of the four I read for this review.

Its opening chapter details the important historical background for women who love other women during the 20th century—from one cohort’s woeful personal control of their own lives, even when communities partly tolerated “Boston marriages,” to the ways two world wars followed by McCarthyism’s homophobia yo-yoed another cohort’s opportunities. With the context made visible, a reader can better appreciate just how much two generations of lesbians’ voices are
products of their sociopolitical histories. Each chapter also begins with a historical background, and the authors provide a helpful time line on gay and lesbian history in one appendix.

It is this attentiveness to culture, politics, and social context that makes the elders' life stories so much more informative. Their present-tense voice is never without a past. An old woman's reflections on social isolation, or work and a double life, finding meaning in life, or military and marital experiences, aging, and, most importantly, taking control of her life, are not simply looking back clips of a life story. Rather, the reader is presented with an account of lesbians' lives in different eras. And whenever the women's accounts are introduced as text, their voices are illustrative data framed by the authors in chapters on coming out, turning points in shaping identity, the challenges and anticipations of aging, and living with the deep scars created by prejudice and oppression. The women interviewed reveal experiences shared by all women, but especially those unique to older lesbians. For example, the possibility of being alone in late life is a great concern for everyone. “One of the things that I concern myself about getting older is . . . being by myself. . . . I don’t want to be by myself” (Laura, 57, with children and grandchildren, p. 106). And the possibility of not having residential options accepting of lesbians is a special worry: “I feel more and more isolation as I get older. . . . I think another part of what the isolation [is] about is the feeling of invisibility as an older lesbian” (Jean, age 56, p. 127). “I think I would like to be in a community of women, probably lesbian women, if I had to be in a nursing home or retirement home” (Donna, age 71, pp. 109–110).

In an early chapter, the authors also address how “coming out” for the older lesbians was not about gay pride but all about the personal, individual process of becoming aware of who they are, acknowledging their sexual orientation to themselves, and getting comfortable with it. For older lesbians the quest for identity and meaning in life was paramount; finding a partner in late life becomes preferred, yet the code of silence that dictated “growing up different” meant most of the older women continue to not put their sexuality up for public recognition. As the authors conclude: “Only through listening to the voices of these women can we learn about their experiences and our collective history, and come to appreciate their strengths and needs as they age” (p. 175).

Clunis and her colleagues do not provide much information about the women's sexual lives or their aging. Relationships and intimacy are certainly covered, but information about sex is not. Despite Chapter 5, “Aging and Hopes for the Future,” and the interviews assessing the women's own experiences as they age, little is learned about what it means to be lesbian and growing older. Themes of being active in later life, financial security, housing options, and being partnered in later life are touched on, but in comparison to “looking back,” the “looking forward” portion of the book does not provide as much.

Ski Hunter’s *Midlife and Older LGBT Adults* is all about looking forward and assessing the welfare of middle- and older lesbians, and that’s why it is an excellent complement to *Lives of Lesbian Elders*. A professor of social work at the University of Texas, Hunter synthesizes the academic research on midlife and later-life lesbians' experiences and uses that as a foundation for her very valuable five chapters on the service needs of aging lesbians and gays. The book is a valuable resource for any academic researcher but much more so for social services professionals working with individuals in this population. This book is ostensibly about LGBT’s, but it is mostly about lesbians and bisexuals, secondarily about midlife and older gays, and hardly at all about transgendered individuals. This fault is not Hunter’s. Rather, because the book is based on a synthesis of the research literature, it reveals researchers’ focus on lesbians and gay men. Using the available research literature, Hunter examines the distinctive lives of midlife and older lesbians (and gays)—ranging from their sexual identities and work and family situations, to the problems they face with getting service providers to respond to their needs in an affirming way.

There are particular strengths to Hunter’s book. She tries to introduce a new, acceptable construct (“sex/gender”) to identify the lesbian and bisexual women whose gendered, sexual lives can include heterosexual marriage, then later life acceptance of their attraction to women. Her assessment of midlife and older lesbians and bisexuals is not dependent on a single sample of women; the book is essentially a collection of review “essays” drawing on hundreds of prior studies that comprise 42 pages of references. Similar to the book by Clunis, Hunter’s book opens with a historically sensitive analysis of the social movements that advocate the normalcy of the LGBT communities and how pride movements affect midlife and older lesbians. Earlier chapters provide an overview of identity-development, coming out and living as a lesbian in midlife and later adulthood, women’s participation in education, work, and community, and family and friends. She is sensitive to the possibility of distinct lesbian experiences across socioeconomic and racial lines. And, although her book at times obscures how lesbians with different femininities, age cohorts, and race or ethnic backgrounds experienced their sociopolitical histories, Hunter is perhaps more sensitive to the full range of diversity issues than any of the other titles reviewed in this essay.

The most significant insights appear in the last two thirds of the book. Hunter provides some sense of the aging process and issues particular to LGBT’s. Beginning with Chapter 5’s assessment of the “positives” encountered by midlife and older lesbians and bisexuals (and gays), Hunter essentially debunks the stereotype that older lesbians (and gays) will end up in old age alone, lonely, and depressed. The evidence she brings in shows that older lesbians are no more or less adjusted at mid-life and later life than heterosexuals. Chapter 6 turns attention to the “downturns of aging,” and Hunter reemphasizes how lesbian and gay persons “confront the same downturns in older age as heterosexual persons. The main difference is the heterosexualism that they face in social and medical services” (p. 128). The ways the women “do gender” and the femininities embraced
seem to shape their experiences of aging as much as their management of heterosexism.

For social service practitioners, the final five chapters are essential. Midlife and Older LGBT Adults reviews how most social services are not lesbian affirmative; rather, they were designed and developed within a sociopolitical context that had defined “heterosexuality” as unhealthy, and they continue to uphold heterosexist attitudes that regard tolerance, better yet acceptance, of older lesbians and bisexuals (and gays) as outside the bounds of reason. That’s because too often human service professionals do not agree that a same-sex sexual orientation is within the boundary of “ordinary” and “normal.” By the final chapter, “Group and Community Practice with Older Lesbian and Gay Persons,” Hunter presents two diverse approaches for service providers when working with older LGBT people: the “separate but equal model” (p. 187) emphasizes ways to develop and implement elder services directly within LGBT communities, and the “making services responsive model” seeks to advance existing elder services to become more LGBT sensitive. Hunter encourages readers to recognize that midlife and older lesbians and bisexuals rely mostly on public programs and social services that remain relatively insensitive to the women’s needs, because existing programs and services are not independent of other heterosexist institutions. Subtly, yet at times more directly, she advocates for “helping professionals” to listen and thereby become LGBT sensitive, to challenge heterosexism and provide midlife and older lesbians and bisexuals (and gays) services they seek to be ordinary, not extraordinary old people.

A Smorgasbord

Midlife and Aging in Gay America, edited by Douglas C. Kimmel and Dawn Lundy Martin, is a collection of essays that were part of the second national conference sponsored by the Senior Action in a Gay Environment in New York. The essays are organized into three sections: keynote speeches, research, and special topics. As suggested by the section headings, the book is an uneven collection of presentations and papers. For example, one chapter in the research section by Arnold Grossman, Anthony D’Augelli, and Timothy O’Connell, “Being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and 60 or Older in North America,” summarizes a questionnaire study of 416 older lesbians, gays, and bisexuals aged 60 to 91; the authors provide a cursory overview of sex differences in mental and physical health status, substance abuse histories, victimization experiences, social support networks, and experiences with HIV/AIDS. For a novice reader, the chapter might provide some sensitivity to the way the quality of older lesbians’ (and gays’) lives pivot on socioeconomic comfort and the sociopolitical environment that they experienced as young women (and men). But the chapter is mostly about sex differences in health and well-being and less about the lives of older LGBT people who live with heterosexist social institutions.

By comparison, Steven Mock’s chapter, “Retirement Intentions in Same-Sex Couples,” is an accomplished, original contribution. Using a sample of 32 lesbian couples, 7 gay couples, and 60 heterosexual men and women who were married or cohabiting as the comparison group, the author reports how same-sex and heterosexual couples prepare for and experience retirement in ways that are more similar than different. Their findings are sufficiently detailed for readers to step away understanding how the various couple types basically involve more similarity than stereotypes would ever suggest. However, the degree of financial preparation by lesbians was found to be much poorer than all others. As Mock concludes, “the difference found is due more to the couple type than gender alone” (p. 85). All in all, Kimmel and Martin’s brief collection of essays might be useful for undergraduates in aging courses but probably not as useful as each of the other books reviewed here.

Closing Thoughts

The four titles as well as the titles reviewed in The Gerontologist in October 2004 (Thompson, 2004) testify that the academic community is beginning to more thoroughly explore how lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals experience aging and later life as the U.S., U.K., and Canadian populations age. Lest gerontologists become too self-congratulatory, it is important to note that most of the titles have been published by one press; much of the available information about older lesbians and bisexuals comes from accounts involving very small “samples” that homogenize the different femininities among the women. My own AgeLine search for the key word “lesbian” yielded only 19 articles in peer-reviewed journals in the first 50 listings. Attention is being addressed to the contexts in which the different cohorts of old lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men have negotiated their identities and are negotiating their aging. But much more work is needed for us to understand the ways in which lesbians and bisexuals negotiate aging and later life. How does a history of marriage differentially privilege and disadvantage lesbians in later life? In what ways do older lesbians who never entered college differ from age peers whose college experiences and education privilege them with more opportunity to live as a lesbian or bisexual and find flexibility in employment? Does a history of hiding love relationships so lesbians and bisexuals (and gays) could “pass” as straight end up providing the older women (and men) active coping skills or avoidance coping preferences as they manage their late-life and end-of-life needs in our blatantly prejudicial medical and nursing home industries? Although the femininities that older heterosexual and lesbian women live by and affirm in their day-to-day lives have been rarely studied themselves, there is an emerging literature that has begun to reveal the distinct ways that older women’s lives are distinctly gendered. Old women—lesbian or heterosexual—live gendered lives. Field studies using a social constructionist perspective are now needed; we need to better understand women’s experience of aging, whether the
old women are heterosexual, fully or partly “out” members of LGBT communities, or still questioning.

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References

