

'NOW YOU SEE ME' :
THE INVISIBILITY OF OLDER LESBIANS

by

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ABSTRACT

Monika Kehoe (1986) described older lesbians as 'a triply invisible minority.' In this dissertation I seek to establish whether that description is still valid and, if so, why. I go on to ask, if older lesbians are culturally / discursively invisible, what are the circumstances which can enable them to be seen? and what could be gained from that visibility?

By analysing a range of cultural texts I demonstrate that, although the visibility of women and of lesbians has steadily increased in recent years, older lesbians are still rarely represented in popular culture or the media. Academic research reflects this blindness: gerontology largely ignores non-heterosexual subjects, while lesbian and gay studies marginalise the old. I then use a case study of the documentary film *Women Like Us* (Neild and Pearson, 1990) to investigate the social and political forces which enable older lesbians to become visible, and to demonstrate the cultural importance of these representations.

I conclude that older lesbians in Britain today are rendered invisible by a combination of sexism, ageism and hetero-sexism; that lack of media representation has been a decisive factor in maintaining their invisibility; and that there is a need for further research in this neglected area.

For Val
who believed I could

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CONTENTS

Abbreviations

Introduction: Over The Hill And Out Of Sight?	1
1 Invisible Old Women	7
2 Seeing Lesbians	17
3 'I Never Thought Lesbians Could Be Old'	35
4 'More Viewers Than <i>Brookside</i> '	49
5 Audience Responses 2009	70
6 Conclusion	77
Appendix I Audience questionnaire	82
Appendix II Audience questionnaire: analysis of results	84
Bibliography	89

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

BH 2009	Halford, B. Interview. 26 January 2009.
SM 2009	Maxwell, S. Interview. 26 January 2009.
N&P 1992	Neild, S and Pearson, R (1992) <i>Women Like Us</i> . London: Women's Press.
RP 2009	Pearson, R. (rosalindpearson@honfleur.org.uk) (12 June 2009) : <i>Re: Women Like Us</i> . email to J. Traies (jane.traies@pennerley.net).
<i>WLU</i>	<i>Women Like Us</i> (1989) directed by Suzanne Neild and Rosalind Pearson. London: Clio Co-op.
<i>WLT</i>	<i>Women Like That</i> (1990) directed by Suzanne Neild and Rosalind Pearson. London: Clio Co-op

INTRODUCTION: OVER THE HILL AND OUT OF SIGHT?

I, an old lesbian, find that I have become a research subject, meaning a problem which is of sufficient magnitude to warrant study (Copper, 1988:35).

This dissertation investigates and attempts to explain a cultural phenomenon: the almost total invisibility of older lesbians. Barbara Macdonald (1983:84) has argued that old women are 'twice unseen,' rendered unworthy of attention by the combined forces of patriarchy and the worship of youth. When an old woman is also a lesbian, institutionalised hetero-sexism brings about a third denial of her subjectivity and identity. It was Monika Kehoe (1986) who first described older lesbians as 'a triply invisible minority,' and the phrase has been much borrowed by later scholars. Viewed through the lenses of sexism, ageism and the 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980) which renders lesbian existence invisible, older lesbians disappear from sight. This combination of ageism and hetero-sexism, which Healey (1994, cited in Grossman, 1997:620) has called a 'very special lethal synergy,' is a denial of a person's existence, and therefore a form of oppression: those who are 'at risk of double or triple minority status, based on age, sexual orientation, and gender' are also potentially 'triply oppressed' (Kimmel et al., 2006:10).

Just occasionally, this hidden population becomes briefly visible; for instance in the winter of 2005-6, when hundreds of ageing lesbians and gay men in the UK came forward to claim the social recognition and legal rights offered by Civil Partnership.

Statistics show that the average age at registration has dropped steadily ever since, but in the first two years of its availability, 8% of those who registered a civil partnership in the UK were over 65 (4% were over 70 and almost 1% were over 80). In other words, by the end of 2007, more than four thousand people over retirement age in the UK had made public declaration of their same-sex relationships. The introduction of civil partnerships has for the first time put into the public domain – and into the historical record – quantitative evidence for the existence of older lesbians. Of the 22,166 women who entered into civil partnerships in this period, 5% were over 65 (2% were over 70 and 0.5% were over 80)¹. However, as I shall show, their new legal status seems so far to have had little effect on the cultural or discursive visibility of this hidden minority.

Reviewing the research literature for representations of older lesbians is like a game of hide-and-seek. In their 1976 study of the sexual lives of men and women over sixty, Butler and Lewis speculated that ‘homosexual unions exist among older people, but little is known about them.’ Although they suspected that ‘many more older people have chosen homosexuality as a way of life than is commonly realized’ (56), they had been unable to uncover the evidence to support their theory. The invisibility of older non-heterosexuals has remained a challenge for researchers ever since. Matile Poor has asserted that ‘relatively few women over sixty-five identify themselves as lesbians,’ and that ‘we do not know the number of lesbians over sixty-five’ (1982:165).

¹ Office for National Statistics: viewed at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=14675>. These proportions of older people are much higher than for heterosexual marriages in the same period. Only just over 1% of women who married in 2006 were over 65; 0.5% were over 70, and 0.07 % over 80.

In research terms, there are old women, and there are lesbians; but they are hardly ever in the same place. Medical and social gerontology have burgeoned in recent years, in response to the ageing of western populations; but gerontological research still largely ignores non-heterosexual existence. Lesbian and gay studies, on the other hand, tend to ignore the subject of old age. Research on lesbian lifestyles (for instance Dunne, 1997; Estenberg 1997) or lesbian gender (Munt, 1998; Gibson and Meem, 2002; Volcano and Dahl 2008) does not address ageing, and rarely even mentions the old. There is a body of lesbian oral history (Adelman, 1984; Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Gardiner, 2003; among others), which has been immensely valuable in repairing the historical record but which, in recording the past lives of older women, often ignores their present existence. There is little evidence of any critical discourse on lesbians and ageing.

In this discursive desert, Monika Kehoe's 'Lesbians over sixty-five: A Triply Invisible Minority' (1986) and her survey *Lesbians over 60 Speak for Themselves* (1988) appear like isolated oases. Kehoe was working in the late 1980s in America; I am concerned in this dissertation with determining what has happened to this area of research since, and with the current state of older lesbian representation in the UK. I have therefore confined my research to the UK, except in regard to the relevant research literature, much of which has been published in the USA.

Methodology

This dissertation is interdisciplinary, both in content and in methodology, embracing elements of cultural studies, sociology, media studies and history. In this way it reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the Gender Studies programme in which it originates. I come to the project from a feminist, social-constructionist perspective which takes as given the social situatedness of knowledge, and the historical and cultural construction of identity.

In the following chapters I argue that older lesbians are still culturally invisible today, and seek to identify the reasons for that invisibility. I conclude that ageism has been at least as strong a cause as homophobia, and that lack of media representation has been a decisive factor. I then ask, 'If older lesbians are culturally / discursively invisible, what are the circumstances which can enable them to be seen?' and suggest that, in order for them to be made visible, particular social and political forces have to come into play at the same time. Finally I ask, 'Why is it important to make older lesbians visible, and what can be gained from doing so?'

In order to understand the complexity of older lesbian invisibility, I consider its constituent parts (gender, age and sexual orientation) separately, looking in each case at representations in popular culture and the media, as well as the research literature. The first three chapters consider the question, 'What are the reasons that older lesbians are culturally invisible?' and establish a cultural context and historical

background, with particular reference to the role of the media in creating stereotypes and constructing subjectivity.

In Chapter 1, 'Invisible Old Women,' I consider the ways in which women are 'see-able' and the reasons that old women are not. Starting from the paradox that women have traditionally been both visual objects and yet culturally unseen, I show that, as they age and no longer conform to stereotypes of femininity, women become unseeable. The next chapter, 'Seeing Lesbians,' examines the historical invisibility of lesbians, focusing on some moments at which they have been able to be seen, the reasons why that happened, and the way in which lesbianism has become more visible over the last hundred years. Chapter 3, 'I Never Thought Lesbians Could Be Old,' focuses on the way in which the established cultural narratives of ageism and homophobia outlined in the previous chapters combine to conceal older lesbians from sight. I illustrate this process by reviewing the research literature in search of older lesbians, and searching the media and popular culture for representations of them. To provide additional data for this chapter, I carried out two small surveys: one of the lesbian and gay material available for on-demand public viewing at the British Film Institute, and one of the visual images in the lesbian life-style magazine *Diva*. I conclude that, while women and lesbians have become increasingly visible in the last twenty years, older lesbians have been almost entirely excluded both from research and from the popular gaze, through a particular conjunction of sexism, ageism and heterosexism which renders them unrepresentable.

The next two chapters use a case study of the documentary films *Women Like Us* (Neild and Pearson 1990) and *Women Like That* (1991) to answer the questions 'If older lesbians are culturally / discursively invisible, what are the circumstances which can enable them to be seen?' and 'Why is it important to make older lesbians visible, and what can be gained from doing so?' Chapter 4, 'More Viewers Than *Brookside*.' analyses the two films, showing that that the *Women Like Us* project forms a unique cultural text, an instance of older lesbian representation which remains unique today. To obtain quantitative and qualitative data for this case study, I conducted taped interviews with two of the women who appeared in the film and interviewed one of the producers by email. I also screened *Women Like Us* on four occasions and used a questionnaire to survey audience responses. Chapter 5 uses these responses to argue for the social and cultural importance of *Women Like Us* and of older lesbian visibility generally.

1 INVISIBLE OLD WOMEN

As John Berger famously observed, 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.' The power of this male gaze is such, he argues, that a woman must continually watch herself. Thus she becomes object rather than subject and, most particularly, 'an object of vision: a sight' (1972:46-7). Yet, while individual women through history have been subject to this constant personal surveillance, women as a category have often been invisible. It is a paradox which has been at the heart of feminist debate and protest at least since Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Subsequent feminist writers have expanded on the theme, illuminating - for instance - the way in which women have been 'written out' of history (Rowbotham 1973); the gendering of public (male) and private (female) spheres (Vicinus 1977); the erasure of women through the use of language (Spender 1980); and so on. It is not necessary to rehearse those debates again, except to say that (*pace* women's franchise, the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, the work of the Equal Opportunities Commission,² the Fawcett Society³ and many others, and in spite of post-feminist claims to 'have it all') prejudice and tokenism persist. Women are more literally visible in public life than they have ever been, but they may still be (or feel that

² The Equal Opportunities Commission was established under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, section 53, to monitor sex discrimination issues and to provide legal aid and advice to individuals under the Act. It was replaced on 1 October 2007 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

³ The Fawcett Society campaigns on women's representation in politics and public life; it took its present name in 1953 to commemorate the work of suffrage leader Millicent Garrett Fawcett 1847-1929

they are) ignored. In June 2009, for example, Caroline Flint MP gave as one of her reasons for leaving the government the belief that the Prime Minister had treated her as 'female window dressing.'⁴

What Berger did not say was that, as women age, men stop looking at them. The gaze is withdrawn. A personal as well as a collective invisibility is thrust upon them. The phenomenon of 'disappearing' - becoming invisible in the street – as women become older has been vividly described by Healey (1994), Macdonald and Rich (1983) and others. Only Germaine Greer sees this process as positive, an opportunity to embrace a post-sexual, 'reflective' old age, relieved of the burden of male scrutiny: 'this new invisibility, like calm and indifference, is a desirable condition' (1992:430). In the UK, the absence of older women from public view has recently begun to be remarked on, perhaps because numbers of older people are growing so rapidly. As a result of raised living standards, improved health care and extended life expectancy, the population of the UK and other western nations is ageing fast. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that in 2008, for the first time, people over 65 in Britain outnumbered those under 16. By 2032 there will be some 16 million older people in the UK, making up almost one in four of the population. Women tend to live longer than men, and therefore constitute the majority of this older age-group (Laurance, 2009). However representations of older people, especially women, are still limited and stereotyped.

⁴ *The Guardian*, Friday 5 June 2009

As Glenda Laws has remarked, 'demographic landscapes are [...] part and parcel of consumer landscapes' (1996, cited in Woodward, 1999: xiv). One of the swiftest and most visible responses to the ageing demographic has been the expansion of advertising and marketing aimed at capturing the 'grey pound,' and particularly of advertisements targeting ageing women. Statistically, older women tend to have smaller pensions and lower incomes than men, to live in poorer housing and 'to find themselves, in many cases, to be one of the most disadvantaged groups in society' (Sykes 1994). However the images of older people smiling encouragingly (and with perfect teeth) from our television screens, endorsing foreign holidays or life insurance policies, represent comfortably off, heterosexual couples. They have smooth, lightly tanned faces glowing with health. Their age is signalled only by artfully-styled grey hair. They seem to promise, in return for our cash, the youthful vigour and happy coupledom which many older people, particularly women, do not have.

There has also been significant growth in the last ten years in the targeting of older women by cosmetics companies:

A massive ad campaign sells anti-aging – the belief that one should deny or defy the signs and even the fact of aging, and treat the looks and recreation of middle-age as the appropriate standards for health, beauty and all-around success. (Calasanti and King 2005: 10)⁵

⁵ I have used the English spelling of the word 'ageing' throughout this dissertation, but have retained the American 'aging' in quotations from authors who use it.

For example: a brand of hair-colour is represented both as an everyday cosmetic for younger women and as 'covering' grey hair,⁶ thus giving the older woman the opportunity to appear younger by using it. Anti-ageing skin creams are a growth market. The women in these advertisements do not have grey hair; their skin is unnaturally wrinkle-free, their locks long and shiny; their clear message is that it is only acceptable to be old if you can appear to be young. Under the guise of building self-esteem ('because you're worth it'⁷) advertisers hold out the promise not of a valued old age but of the illusion of eternal youth. While purporting to address older women, these advertisements actively contribute to the process of making them disappear. The invisibility of old women is a deep-rooted cultural tradition which, like sexism, can be subtly enforced even when (old) women's interests appear to be being served. The choice held out to older women by twenty-first century western culture seems to be either to pretend to be young, and be rewarded in proportion to your success in doing so, or to accept invisibility. The punishment for refusing to do either is to become a stereotyped figure of fun: a 'granny,' a frump, a burden.

There are still far fewer positive models of older women than men in the media. Television news-readers and presenters are a notorious example: while television presenters such as Trevor Macdonald and John Humphrys mature into national treasures, their female counterparts Moira Stuart and Selina Scott are swiftly disposed of. In 2008, Scott sued Channel 5 for age discrimination after they

⁶ Garnier 'Nutrisse' television advertising campaign 2008 -9

⁷ The pseudo-feminist catchphrase used to advertise L'Oreal cosmetics in 2008 - 9

terminated her contract in favour of a younger woman, an act she has described (2009) as 'a daunting, indeed frightening, potentially bankrupting and, perhaps, even career-ending last resort.' Asked for a comment on the case, Joan Bakewell, then recently appointed as the 'voice for older people' by the UK Government, remarked that 'There is a whole segment of the population which does not see its equivalent in serious broadcasting,' adding that women over 50 'feel invisible.' (*Today*, Radio 4, 06 Dec 08).

The area of old people's experience which is most hidden is their sexuality. As people live longer and stay healthier, research indicates that older adults continue to be sexually active well into later life (Davies et al., 1998). However the common assumption, even among older people themselves, is that they do not have a sexual life. Examining how the sexuality of older people is represented in mainstream cinema, Bildtgard (1998) shows that to an overwhelming degree, the elderly are depicted as having no sexual life at all, with a need for tenderness & warmth replacing sexuality. The sexuality of old women is especially 'un-seeable.' Popular comedy has always provided a good indicator of cultural anxiety, and the twenty-first century has seen the nightmare mother-in-law and nagging wife, staples of Victorian music-hall song and Edwardian stand-up comedy, replaced by the embarrassingly outspoken grandmother Nan Taylor (*Catherine Tate Show*, BBC 2, 2004-8) and the randy matriarch Sushila in *The Kumars at No. 42*. (BBC 2, 2001-6). Old women exhibiting sexuality are frightening, and we must laugh at them, however uneasily.

Barbara MacDonald's challenge to 'look me in the eye' and to 'see' old women as they really are, has not yet been taken up by the media.

For a debate directly informed by what it means to be both old *and* female, there is still no better example than *Look Me in the Eye* (1983), the anti-ageist manifesto of Barbara Macdonald with Cynthia Rich. For Macdonald and Rich, age is not only culturally but also politically constructed. As well as dissecting the ageist and sexist assumptions of mainstream culture, they find ageism embedded in the women's movement and in the lesbian community. Macdonald attributes this partly to the comparative youth of the women active in second wave feminism, and partly to the engrained cultural belief that 'the older woman is not subject, but servant' (148).

There is a cultural assumption that old women exist to serve and look after young ones. 'We are the women we expected should sit on the sidelines always loving and admiring us' (149). She sees this ageism as self-perpetuating, because it is internalised in the old themselves.

Rich, too, talks about the ways in which old women support the ageism which oppresses them. Attempting not to be seen as old, and even thinking of oneself as 'exceptional' because one does not conform to stereotypes of old age, demonstrate internalised attitudes of prejudice against old people. The women's movement successfully addressed its own sexism and racism, she argues; now it must address its ageism in the same way, refusing to ape the poor models of care for the old which mainstream society offers. For the same reasons Rich rejects the oral history

interviews which snapshot the past but rarely ask about an old woman's present. Society is not, she says, interested in the experience of being old (53).⁸

One of the strengths of this challenging polemic is the way in which it unravels the complexities of overlapping prejudices. Here is Rich again, on the nexus of oppression which ageism represents:

To begin to understand ageism is to recognize that it is a point of convergence for many other repressive forces. The violence of men against women and against weaker, less powerful men. The lifelong economic and social status of women. Capitalism's definition of productivity and who can engage in it, and its indifference to those it forces to be "unproductive." Contempt for the physically challenged. Enforced and institutionalised heterosexuality and the family, which confine women to male-defined roles and economic dependencies. And inevitably racism (61).

At the root of the problem for Macdonald and Rich is the concept which they call '*familia*.' They use this term to describe the way in which the hetero-normative family structure shapes and constrains women's available social roles. 'If I carry in my head the notion that you are "young enough to be my daughter" or you are thinking, "she is old enough to be my grandmother," [...] the possibility for real exchange between us

⁸ Baba Copper expresses the same impatience with age as category in *Over the Hill: Reflections on Ageism between Women* (1988), the book which suggested the title of my introductory chapter.

is radically diminished' (102). The very term 'Sisterhood,' so dear to second wave feminists, has 'branded' ageism on to the movement, says Rich:

When we accepted Sisterhood we adopted that class system, with all of the mistrust and division the master had instilled between younger and older women. We dismissed mothers and grandmothers as outsiders to the action. We excluded older women from a struggle for freedom just as we had excluded our mothers and grandmothers from our whispered rebellions as daughters in the master's house. (104)

Academics have found it no easier than the rest of society to contemplate age and gender in combination. Gerontology is a comparatively young science, which drew initially on biomedical and social work disciplines to address the 'problems' presented by an ageing population. With a few notable exceptions (Smailes, 1994, Hubbard and Rossington, 1995) these accounts are rarely gender-specific, and almost never concerned with sexuality or sexual orientation. More recently, social gerontology has taken on a wider interdisciplinary identity. A useful illustration of the conceptual and methodological developments is provided by Jamieson et al. (1997), who set out to challenge the assumption that the discipline should be solely concerned with the problems caused by an ageing population and dominated by biomedical empiricism. The contributors to this volume have backgrounds in sociology, history, geography, nursing, medicine and social policy, and bring fresh perspectives to the study of age. Bill Bytheway, for example, proposes a new theoretical basis for social gerontology

drawing on both academic and 'every-day' conversational discourses (1997:7-15). He outlines a model consisting of six topics or questions which he suggests might serve to articulate ideas about how age is measured and experienced. It is a good model, and parts of it, such as a focus on the constraints which result from other people's expectations, and from official social structures and regulations, could provide a useful tool for research into the experiences and perceptions of older lesbian and gay people. However this is not an idea at any point considered by the author. As an example of how his method might work, Bytheway uses his six questions to 'discuss' a fictional person called Henry. The chief limitation of this essay is that, while perceptively illustrating the social assumptions and cultural stereotypes which obscure our view of real old people and limit our understanding of their lives, Bytheway demonstrates some of the same limitations himself. Gender is nowhere apparent in this otherwise useful and comprehensive analysis. The fictional Henry allows for no exploration of the different experiences and pressures resulting from the ageing of the body in women and men. Would sixty-something Henrietta's friends have made the same assumptions and used the same language as Henry's? Almost certainly they would not. For an experienced sociologist to ignore the gender-bias of society, or for a gerontologist to fall into the trap of assuming that the elderly are gender-neutral, should be surprising, but it is not. With the single exception of Margot Jefferys' paper on inter-generational relationships, which has much to say about the experience of grand-motherhood, working mothers and women's careers (1997: 77-89), the whole volume displays a gender-free approach characteristic of much work in the field. Old people are all too often assumed to have no gender and no sex.

This position has been strongly challenged by Kathleen Woodward (1992), who argues for a new perspective on women, bodies and ageing. She rejects Greer's model of menopause as the transition from being reproductive to being reflective,

as if all women defined themselves in terms of reproduction before menopause and in asexual terms after menopause. This oddly archaic biological essentialism is, in my view, both retrograde and anachronistic' (xiv).

Woodward finds current models of female ageing insufficient 'as we live into lives longer than we had imagined,' and suggests that we need 'to create for ourselves cultural models of older women as a way of generating alternative futures for ourselves' (1992:155). In the following chapters I will suggest that older lesbian visibility could make a significant contribution to that project.

2 SEEING LESBIANS

Invisible lesbians

Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past (Duberman et al., 1990) pays homage in its title to Sheila Rowbotham's (1973) groundbreaking work of feminist history. The motivation for both volumes is very similar – to claim a place in history for thousands of people whose existence had been blotted from the official record. Like feminist history, lesbian and gay history are now established disciplines with a substantial body of research which has gone a long way to redressing that omission, but one of the things that the research reveals is that lesbians have been even more 'hidden from history' than gay men, obliterated by what Lillian Faderman has described as 'techniques of bowdlerisation, avoidance of the obvious, and *cherchez l'homme*' (1982:115-6). In this chapter I consider the historical invisibility of lesbians, and identify some combinations of circumstances which have allowed them to become culturally visible.

One cause of lesbian invisibility in the past has been that, in the United Kingdom at least, lesbian existence was not acknowledged in law until the late twentieth century.⁹ A variety of reasons has been proposed for this oversight. The first is that relationships between women were simply not thought of as sufficiently important to worry about. Donahue (1993) has shown that in the seventeenth and eighteenth

⁹ Local Government Act 1988, Section 28 (http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/Ukpga_19880009_en_5.htm)

centuries love between young women was often seen as a harmless phase, a kind of training for marriage: 'Generally the official story...was that women's passionate bonds prepared them for, co-existed with and even took the pressure off their marriages' (121). Certainly lesbianism was neither criminalised nor reviled in the same way as male homosexuality: as late as 1926 Marie Stopes opined that

With girls the corruption is chiefly mental and evanescent, and even if Sapphoism is practised, ... it does not so profoundly injure the girl's physique as the corresponding physical side of homo-sexual manifestations may affect the young boy or lad (1926:56).

In other words, lesbianism could be regarded as a passing phase. In some periods and social classes there has simply been a reluctance to believe in the existence of sexual activity between women (except as a 'rare and exotic oddity') so that there was little reason for the legislature to consider it (Oram and Turnbull, 2001: 156).¹⁰ Some historians have argued that the law has always been an important site for the regulation of women's behaviour generally, and that the denial of lesbian existence in particular is the strategy through which the law has sought to control love between women, since 'what does not exist' cannot be taken into account when determining women's lives (Oram and Turnbull, 2001: 56).

¹⁰ A persistent – but presumably apocryphal – story attributes the absence of lesbians from the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act to precisely this attitude on the part of Queen Victoria. Although I can find no historical basis for the story, it is still sufficiently current for Donahue, for example, to refer to it without comment or attribution (1993: 18)

A third, and potent, cause of lesbian legal invisibility in Britain has been the fear that the mere mention of a behaviour might lead to its increase. This was the reason for the defeat of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1921, an unsuccessful attempt to criminalise female homosexuality. Lieut.-Colonel Moore Brabazon, speaking against the Clause, pointed out that lesbianism was not so much a crime as an 'abnormality of the brain.' He observed that there were three ways of ridding the world of 'perverts': to kill them; to lock them up for life as insane (both of which courses of action he described as 'satisfactory'); and third,

to leave them entirely alone, not notice them, not advertise them. This is the method that has been adopted in England for many hundred years, and I believe it is the best method now [...] To adopt a Clause of this kind would do harm by introducing into the minds of perfectly innocent people the most revolting thoughts and because of that I ask the introducers of this Clause to withdraw it (Oram and Turnbull 2001, 168-9).

It is difficult to know the extent to which the social awareness of lesbianism in any period reflected this voluntary blindness. As Emma Donahue has pointed out, 'that something was not stated does not mean it was not known.' She argues that general knowledge about 'lesbian possibilities' must have increased with the spread of literacy and increased textual production in the late seventeenth century, but that such information, once heard, 'might quickly become a secret to be hidden from others. For a woman, to admit to such knowledge could be to risk being thought immodest or

having her own friendships suspected' (1993:16). Oram and Turnbull have shown that during most of the nineteenth century there was only limited circulation of specific terms to describe love between women, but that from the 1920s the concept of lesbianism became more clearly defined, and was more widely shared as part of social knowledge (2001:201).

It is important to remember that invisibility may, of course, be voluntary as well as imposed. Homosexual life even in the twentieth century was, for the very large majority of lesbians and gay men, a life of fear and secrecy. The growth of popular awareness could easily lead to increased persecution, against which an elective invisibility could seem the only defence. For lesbians, although their lifestyle was not actually illegal, the fear of hostility and reprisal was (and is) enough to keep many of them hidden. Lillian Faderman has catalogued the ways in which twentieth-century social attitudes circumscribed the choices a lesbian could make:

She could see her own same-sex attachment as having nothing to do with attachments between 'real lesbians' [...] She could become so fearful of her feelings towards other women, which were now seen as unnatural, that she would force herself to repress them altogether. [...] She could become so fearful [...] that she would spend her whole life in hiding ('in the closet'). [...] She could accept the definitions that has been formulated by the sexologists and define herself as a lesbian (1992: 3).

Steven Seidman, among others, has drawn attention to the damage which a life involving so much deception and duplicity can do to the individual: 'To be in the closet is, then, to suffer systematic harm' (2002: 30); but it has been a choice made by most lesbians during some or all of their lives, and remains so even today, when openness has become more possible than ever before. For older lesbians in particular, invisibility may be a habit which it is hard to break.

Becoming Visible

Sally Munt has pointed out that, although lesbians had no existence in British law, 'lesbian acts have been prosecuted under various other laws designed to punish sexual or gender deviance' (1998:95). Before the rise of mass media, moments of lesbian visibility were often associated with the sensation and scandal arising from such legal processes, particularly those which tapped into cultural anxiety about the corruption of women and children. The well-documented case of Woods and Pirie v Gordon in 1810 (Faderman 1983, Donahue 1993 among others) is a good example. Marianne Woods and Jane Pirie claimed that Lady Gordon's removal of her granddaughter from their school had started an exodus which had ruined their business; Lady Gordon's counsel responded with accusations that the school girls had witnessed and reported lesbian sex between the two teachers. The appeals went all the way to House of Lords and, although the allegations against the two women were found to be 'not proven,' the publicity and scandal ruined them. The case was exhaustively documented in the contemporary press (Faderman, 1983). It allows a

fascinating insight into contemporary attitudes and also illustrates how allegations of lesbianism could regulate women's lives. (Oram and Turnbull, 2001: 156).

The increasingly conservative public values of the later nineteenth century would have made such open public discussion impossible fifty years later: the growth of the Victorian belief in women's passivity and invisibility inhibited the recognition of sex between women as a possibility for much of the nineteenth century (Edwards 1981:43). The next period of real lesbian visibility is in the 1920s and 30s. This was a time of gender anxiety in British society: the campaign for women's suffrage and the growing independence of women generally, the falling birth rate and the growing awareness of contraception were all creating substantial changes in the dominant heterosexual culture (Cook 2004:175-6). Doan and Garrity have called the inter-war period 'the foremost moment of lesbian visibility in early twentieth century national formations,' and contend that in this period lesbianism, though regarded by many as a menace, 'nonetheless functioned as a kind of cultural stimulus that re-invigorated many domains of cultural life.' (2006:7-8). Once again, the power of the press was central to the spread of public knowledge about lesbianism. Alison Oram has traced the way in which new ideas about sexual deviance were disseminated by two of the largest circulation Sunday newspapers, the *News of the World* and *The People*, pointing out that

late nineteenth century sexual science and its influence on relatively elite groups [...] has been seen as central to the subsequent development of

lesbian culture and identity between the wars. But sexual modernity was also about the democratization of specialist understandings (2007:166).

It was against the background of this democratization of knowledge and the growing power of the press that the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) received widespread media attention. An article in the *Sunday Express* famously opined that 'I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel' (19 August 1928) and the furore around the book and its author ensured that the 'plague' of lesbian existence became the stuff of general discussion. 'The process of repeatedly naming lesbianism in the popular press and a widening variety of other media spread the concept till it became social knowledge at a popular level.' (Oram and Turnbull 2001: 201). The book was banned, and was unavailable in England for twenty years, but the topic of sexual inversion and of lesbianism in particular had entered the public arena in a new way. Laura Doan has argued that the massive media exposure of the subject of same-sex relations between women during and after the trial makes it a watershed event in the construction of an English lesbian identity and subculture, marking a divide between innocence and deviance, private and public, New Woman and 'Modern Lesbian' (2001: xiii).

Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour* (1934) belongs to this period. The plot is a modern version of the Woods and Pirie story, in which the lives not only of the two women but also the fiancé of one of them are ruined by gossip and scandal. At the

end of the play one of the women, who discovers that her feelings for the other may indeed be of a lesbian nature, commits suicide. The history of this play, which gained both notoriety and international success, provides an interesting reflection of social and moral attitudes to lesbianism in Britain and America in the first half of the twentieth century. First staged on Broadway, *The Children's Hour* was initially banned in Boston, Chicago, and London because of its lesbian content. In 1936 it was made into a film directed by William Wyler. However, because of the Production Code then in force in Hollywood, the plot was adapted to become the story of a conventional heterosexual love triangle, and the potentially controversial title was changed to *These Three* (1936).

Hellman's play then sinks into obscurity in the upsurge of conservative morality and traditional family values which characterized the 1940s and 50s. Mary Louise Adams, arguing that 'without an understanding of the dominant sexual culture, it is impossible to understand the depth of the resistance engaged in by lesbians, gay men and others' (1997:4), has analysed the moral climate of the post-war period and traced the process by which heterosexuality became synonymous with normality, that 'most important of postwar [sic] social classifications.' (1997:10)¹¹. She suggests that the concept of heterosexuality, though extant in the late Victorian period, was not discursively current until the early twentieth century, and that between the 1920s and the 1940s, 'definitions of heterosexuality came to encompass notions about proper

¹¹ *The Trouble with Normal* is based on the English-speaking community in Canada, but much of what Adams says resonates with both American and British experience in the same period.

gender roles, about the nature of sexualized relationships between women and men, and about the emotional and psychic development of individuals,' so that 'the ability to lay claim to a definition of normality was a crucial marker of postwar [sic] social belonging' (166).

The 1960s

The Children's Hour functions as a kind of barometer for lesbian visibility in the twentieth century. It reappears in 1961, when it is adapted once again for the film known in the UK as *The Loudest Whisper*. This time the lesbian theme is reinstated (albeit discreetly hinted at¹²); although still controversial, lesbianism had become representable again. The 1960s is another period of high visibility for both lesbians and gay men in Britain and the UK. It shares with the other moments I have mentioned (the early nineteenth century and the inter-war years) the contextual factors which allow lesbians to become visible: rapid social change and mobility; anxiety about shifting gender roles; and a focus provided by the public discussion of a legal process. In the 1960s it was the campaign for homosexual law reform which brought the subject of homosexuality, both male and female, into public discussion and, crucially, into the comparatively new arena of television. In the same year as *The Loudest Whisper* and as Basil Dearden's overtly campaigning film, *Victim* (1961), real lesbians and gay men featured for the first time in television documentary

¹² In *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), *Loudest Whisper* actress Shirley MacLaine recalls that she and co-star Audrey Hepburn never talked about their characters' alleged homosexuality. She also claims that the director cut some scenes hinting at her character's love for Hepburn, because of concerns about critical reaction to the film.

programmes such as *This Week* and *Man Alive*. These programmes represent the small but important beginnings of a new kind of media visibility.

This Week's programme, *Lesbians* (1965), starts by asserting its credentials as a serious piece of educational public service broadcasting, with a voice-over giving viewers the ancient Greek origins of the words 'lesbian' and 'homosexual.' The commentator goes on to explain that lesbianism, not being illegal, is in some ways 'easier to deal with' than its male counterpart. However it is clear from the interviews that follow that it is far from easy for the women themselves, whose lives are dominated by fear and secrecy. Some are seen only in silhouette, most are married; the themes that emerge from the stories are isolation, difficulty with social relationships and the strain of leading a double life. The tone of the film is one of fascinated but slightly pitying curiosity about a subject assumed to be alien to most people's understanding: at one point the interviewer asks a woman, 'But have you never had any moral or religious doubts about it?' A female psychiatrist, presented as an expert on the subject, gives it as her opinion that 'the damage' which causes lesbianism is done 'very early in life.' The only positive note is struck by a respectable-looking middle-class woman who recounts how she came to terms with her daughter's lesbianism and now accepts it.

In 1967, the Sexual Offences Act decriminalised sex between consenting men over twenty-one in private. In the weeks leading up to the enactment of the Bill, BBC's *Man Alive* screened two films under the title *Consenting Adults*. The introduction to

Consenting Adults: the Women (1967) makes the point that, while lesbians were never treated as harshly under the law as homosexual men, they are subject to other people's intolerance, suspicion and disgust to an extent which makes them no better off in real terms. The programme shares the anthropological approach of *This Week: Lesbians*. The women interviewed represent a range of lesbian 'types' – from Steve, a young, cross-dressing butch lesbian whose life and future appear entirely bleak, to an articulate professional couple in skirts and cardigans who describe the difficulties of balancing their public and private identities. Again, the interviewer's questions are as revealing of contemporary attitudes as the answers; enquiring about how two women arrange their domestic life, she asks, 'Does one of you take the dominant position, like the man?' A group of young lesbians talking about the importance of safe spaces, such as the Gateways Club in Chelsea, where they can 'be themselves,' is asked, 'Why can't you go to an ordinary pub?'

These two films are important texts because representations of lesbians on television are so rare in the period. Although most of the lesbians who appear in the programmes look and dress exactly like heterosexual women of the time, the films present homosexuality as an unfortunate abnormality and emphasise the differences rather than the similarities between lesbians and 'normal' people. Colin Richardson has described this style of television journalism as taking 'the (assumed straight) viewer on a whistle-stop tour of "the twilight world of the homosexual," a place peopled by back-lit, silhouetted victims' (1995:236). In spite of being prompted by a movement for law-reform, the programmes are surprisingly apolitical (making, for

instance, no overt case for change, or any connection between lesbianism and feminism, a real issue at the time). Robert Kitts' film *The Important thing is Love* (1971) marks a distinct shift in tone. A series of interviews with lesbians of different ages, genders and class backgrounds is inter-cut with hostile and often virulently homophobic comments from men and women in the street. The self-possession and courage of the lesbians against the background of such attitudes make the film's point. Their stories of misery and discrimination hit a different note from those in the previous films: a woman who could not go to her partner's funeral because her family refused to acknowledge the existence of their relationship is presented not as a sad misfit but as the victim of social injustice. She is a person like other people.

One interviewee in this film speaks out strongly against what she sees as the negative stereotyping of lesbians, giving as an example *The Killing of Sister George* (1968). The film adaptation of Frank Marcus' 1964 play had added, even if in a negative way, to the visibility of lesbianism in this decade. Its three lesbian characters are a sadistic middle-aged actress with a drink problem; her victimised, dim-witted and doll-like younger partner 'Childie'; and the glamorous, predatory and ruthless 'other woman.' The film was a mixed blessing for the lesbian community, for many of whom its main interest lay in the location scene shot at the Gateways, with many of the club's 'regulars' as extras (Gardiner, 2003:132-155). Viewed from standpoint of the twenty-first century, *The Killing of Sister George* is a strange hybrid, mixing the worst negative stereotypes with a rare moment of representation for lesbians and the beginnings of visibility for contemporary lesbian life. It was also in the 1960s that

lesbians began to be visible not only to the rest of the world but to each other: the decade saw the founding of lesbian contact magazine *Arena 3* (1966) and the lesbian social organisation Kenric¹³ (1965).

The 1980s

In the same way that the comparative openness of the Regency period, which allowed for public reporting of the Woods and Pirie case, was succeeded by the repressive moral atmosphere of the Victorian period, so the liberal attitudes of 1960s and 70s Britain were replaced by the 'family values' of Thatcher's Britain. The next moment of lesbian visibility arises, therefore, not from liberal law reform, but from its opposite, a moral backlash; and in particular from Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill 1988. Clause 28 required that a local authority 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.'¹⁴

The lesbian and gay community were by now more confident and more vocal, and lesbians in particular were more politically visible than ever before. This defiant visibility had a number of causes. As Alice Moses noted,

¹³ Founded in 1965, this national social organisation for lesbians still exists

¹⁴ See: http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/Ukpga_19880009_en_5.htm

the increasing prevalence and visibility of the Women's and Gay Liberation movements may be altering the types of stance that lesbian women take [...] There seems to be an increasing sense of pride and self-respect and a feeling that being gay is a positive thing (1978:79).

Women who had been active in feminism in the 1960s were unlikely to submit quietly to the kind of oppression represented by Clause 28. The 1980s had also seen the AIDS crisis, which brought together and politicised many gay men and lesbians in new ways. It has been suggested (Levine 1990:16, Oram 1996:7) that women become politicised when they experience contradictions between the dominant ideology and the realities of their own experience. This conflict is evident in the testimonies of lesbians who were politically active in the 1980s. Jackie Forster, one of the first media personalities to 'come out' as lesbian, remembers

having to have this kind of ... juxtaposition, where I'd never felt so alive, never felt so beautiful, never felt so part of the world – and all the colours and the lights! Yet at the same time it was this awful thing which we mustn't talk about. So there was a great conflict going on. I couldn't really see why, especially when I felt so marvellous. A real awakening of me, but at the same time this hideous terror (Neild and Pearson, 1992:91).

Many women who were in their fifties and sixties at this time had already been active in second-wave feminism. Some had come to feminism through lesbianism:

I honestly don't see how you can be a lesbian and not be in favour of the women's movement... if you're going to live with another woman and spit in the eye of society, and reject the concept that you have to be part of a man, then you have to be a feminist (Diana Chapman, in Neild and Pearson, 1992: 103).

The particular combination of social and political forces which coalesced in the late 1980s also produced a unique example of older lesbian visibility, the *Women Like Us* films (Neild and Pearson, 1989 and 1990), which I examine in more detail in the next chapter.

There were numerous protests and marches against Clause 28 and on 23 May, the day before it became law, several demonstrations were staged by lesbian activists, including abseiling into Parliament and the now-famous lesbian invasion of television's *Six O'clock News* (BBC 1, 23 May 1988) bringing them forcefully to the attention of the British public. This activism did not stop the clause passing into law, but the political pressure that it generated continued to grow and the New Labour government elected in 1997 promised in its manifesto to repeal this section of the Local Government Act. A vociferous minority in the House of Lords managed to ensure that it remained on the statute books until 2003;¹⁵ by then, however, such homophobic views were becoming increasingly out of step with public opinion. Between 2003 and 2005, three more pieces of legislation gave hitherto unparalleled

¹⁵ Section 122 of the Local Government Act 2003 repealed Section 28 of the Local government Act 1988

rights to lesbians and gay men: aggravated sentences for homophobic hate crimes; protection against discrimination in the provision of goods and services; and finally, in 2005, Civil Partnership for same-sex couples. Lesbian and gay visibility was finally official (Summerskill 2006: 10).

The role of the media

History shows, then, that lesbian visibility relies on particular conjunctions of social and political factors, but also on the power of the media. With the exponential development of communications technology through the twentieth century, the media have had an increasingly powerful role in deciding who may be culturally 'seen' and how; they have become the gatekeepers of cultural visibility. This is significant for sexual and other minorities because, as Richard Dyer has said, 'How we are seen determines how we are treated' (2002:1).

It follows, then, that those who are not seen will be treated as if they did not exist. *Are We Being Served?* (Adams et al., 1986) is a report based on a week's BBC television and radio broadcasting in 1985. The authors found that lesbians and gay men were unacknowledged by the broadcasters except in wholly negative contexts, and called for more and better representations on all channels. While that call has been answered in a small way by some of the independent television channels, the BBC have made little progress since 1986. Even in an age of multi-channel satellite television, the BBC retains a powerful audience share, and hence a powerful social influence; it also has a public service remit which, Cowan and Valentine have argued

(2006), ought to give it a sense of obligation to all its licence-fee payers including lesbians and gay men. When, however, twenty years on from *Are We Being Served?* they observed and analysed a week (168 hours) of BBC television, Cowan and Valentine found that gay lives were represented positively for just six minutes. Moreover, gay people were five times more likely to be portrayed in negative terms than positive ones. (72% of gay references occurred during entertainment programmes and over half of all gay references were designed for comic effect.) They also found that lesbians were much less visible than gay men. 'Lesbians hardly exist on the BBC. Where gender was specified during a reference to gay sexuality, 82 per cent were [sic] about gay men' (6). When lesbians did appear, it was in 'an acceptable or palatable form of pseudo-lesbianism, used to serve heterosexual men's fantasies' (10). During the 168 hours monitored, lesbians were referred to in positive or non-stereotyped ways for *just one minute and ten seconds* (11).

For Jane Czyzselska, on the other hand, the visibility of lesbians on television and in the media in the twenty-first century is a cause for celebration. She points to the numbers of high profile women in media and politics who have recently 'come out' as lesbian, providing role models for others, and charts the increase over the last decade of lesbian representation on television, from the lesbian kiss in *Brookside*,¹⁶ before which 'lesbians had few role models, few media mirrors to reflect their existence,' to *Bad Girls* and *The L Word*. (Summerskill 2006:19-20). Czyzselska thinks lesbian visibility now has reached life-changing proportions: 'Where once we dragged our

¹⁶ The soap opera *Brookside* screened television's first pre-watershed lesbian kiss on 24 December 1993.

heels as we felt under-represented and unacknowledged, lesbians have swaggered into the new Millennium with a new confidence' (19).

What she does not notice is that these happy swaggerers are, by and large, under forty. The newly-visible role models, the television soap characters and the carefully-groomed cast of *The L-Word* have one thing in common: they are not old. As Arnold Grossman has observed, 'Society is aging. The old are diverse. But society tends to promote images of some aging individuals, while others remain invisible' (1997: 615). Cowan and Valentine's findings (2006) emphasise the importance of positive media role models for young lesbians and gay men; but older people need this affirmation too.

3 'I NEVER THOUGHT LESBIANS COULD BE OLD'

I am attending a seminar on social research methods. At lunch I sit with a group of other postgraduates from a variety of British universities. We ask politely about each other's research. When I say that I am investigating the representation of lesbians, and in particular the cultural invisibility of older lesbians, the young woman beside me exclaims, 'Oh that's interesting!' and tells a story against herself to illustrate my point. She has several lesbian friends, among them a couple with a young baby; when she was at their house recently, they introduced her to two other friends of theirs, a lesbian couple in their sixties. 'And I was shocked,' says my neighbour, laughing at her own unconscious prejudice, 'because somehow I never thought lesbians could be old!'

In early 2009, I conducted two small surveys in search of representations of older lesbians in the media. The first was at the British Film Institute's Mediatheque on the South Bank, London. The material available for viewing there includes 'Beautiful Things,' a themed collection of lesbian and gay film and television. This collection is not exhaustive (it does not include, for instance, *Women Like Us*) but it is offered as a representative sample of lesbian and gay-related media, and there is enough there to test the visibility of older lesbians. When I visited the Mediatheque in May 2009, the 'Beautiful Things' collection consisted of 87 items.¹⁷ Of these only 28 (about one third) contain representations of lesbians as opposed to gay men. It is an eclectic mix, ranging from full length feature films such as *Breeze Anstey* (1972) and independent shorts such as *Came Out, It Rained, Went Back In Again* (1991) to documentaries

¹⁷ The collection is still growing; other items may have been added since.

made for television over several decades. In all this variety, I found only two representations of old lesbians.

The first, *From High Heels To Sensible Shoes* (1997) is a documentary film made for the BBC's occasional series *The Day That Changed My Life* and is about TV personality and lesbian campaigner Jackie Forster, who was 72 at the time. Forster nominates the major event in her life as falling in love and having her first lesbian affair in 1958. At this time she was already (as Jacqueline Mackenzie) a very well-known television presenter and was one of the first media celebrities to speak openly about her lesbianism. Here she describes how her life changed as a result, how she was divorced and became involved in the Campaign for Homosexual Equality.¹⁸ She is portrayed as lively and opinionated, still characteristically humorous and outspoken. It is a positive representation of an ageing lesbian feminist, but is first and foremost a programme about an established celebrity. The second film, *BD Women*, Inge Blackman's (1994) ground-breaking reclamation of black lesbian history, was also made for television. It mixes fiction and fact, re-enactment and archive footage of Harlem in the 1920s; and, for the later parts of the story, 'talking heads' oral history. Claire Andrews, then in her late fifties, reminisces about coming to England from the Caribbean in the 1960s. Her lined face is alive with humour and intelligence, her story is gripping; but such positive representations of lesbian old age remain rare.

¹⁸ Originally the Committee for Homosexual Equality, founded in 1969 to fight discrimination and prejudice against gay people in England and Wales

BD Women was made by a lesbian director for a predominantly lesbian and gay audience and it is tempting to think that might account for its inclusivity towards older women. However several writers (such as Macdonald, 1983; Neild and Pearson, 1992) have suggested that the lesbian community shares the ageist assumptions of mainstream culture, and thus colludes with the discursive erasure of lesbian elders. My own research suggests that this is still true. As an indicator of older lesbian visibility within the lesbian community now, I surveyed a year's issues of the lesbian lifestyle magazine *Diva* (Sept 08-July 09). *Diva* has a circulation of 55,000. This is about 8% of the circulation of top women's magazines such as *Women's Weekly* and *Woman's Own*, which sell over 700,000,¹⁹ but since the proportion of the population which is lesbian is rarely estimated at above 5%, this makes *Diva* an influential publication for the lesbian community. An average issue contains about 200 visual images of women. In the 11 issues surveyed (containing at a conservative estimate some 2,000 images) there were just 17 representations of women who could be said to be middle aged or old: this is less than one percent.

Although *Diva* has occasionally challenged the conventions of the women's magazine by using cover images of black women, butch lesbians, transsexuals and self-styled Fat Lesbians, none of the images of older women which I found appear on a cover. None of them are in advertisements (old age is not aspirational). The 17 images fall roughly into three categories which I will call 'glamour', 'fame' and 'real'. Half the

¹⁹ Figures obtained from the *Independent Online* (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/bestsellers--top-10-womens-magazines-1503119.html>) and *Diva's* press pack at (<http://www.divamag.co.uk/diva/advertise.asp>)

images fall into the 'glamour' category: they are either of older women celebrities (not necessarily lesbians) such as Catherine Deneuve, Marianne Faithfull, Vivienne Westwood, or (in one issue) fashion-shots of an 'older' model wearing glamorous party clothes (*Diva*, 152:71-9). All these women are heavily made-up and look considerably younger than their age. In the 'fame' category I include a tiny thumbnail picture of 'pin-up queen Bettie Page' in old age (153:85) and three images of middle-aged or older lesbian celebrities: artist Maggie Hambling (150:28) and novelists Val McDermid (148:58) and Maureen Duffy. The full-page portrait of Duffy, now in her 70s (155:21), accompanies an article prompted by the publication of her latest novel but concentrating mainly on her contribution to lesbian history. History would appear to be one of the few contexts in which older lesbians can be comfortably contemplated. My final example of the 'fame' category is an article by Joanna Walters (154:34-37) about Anne Kronenburg, campaign manager for 1970s gay rights activist Harvey Milk. The article was prompted by the (historically inaccurate) absence of lesbian characters other than Kronenburg herself from the recently-released feature film *Milk* (2008).

Lesbians and women in general are more or less invisible in the film, as if gay men were making the only strides forward for gay rights at that time. All the scenes with "Anne's Posse" of lesbian activists ended up on the cutting-room floor (Walters, 2009:34).

Described as a 'down to earth mother and iconic activist,' Kronenburg, now 55, is pictured twice with Alison Pill, the actress who plays her in the film. The visual

contrast between the relaxed, informally-dressed older woman sporting a gay rights campaign badge, and the carefully-styled, heavily made-up younger actress is striking. Although Kronenurg is the purported subject of the article, she appears in only two of the accompanying photographs; Pill is shown in all five.

The subliminal message of all these images (if the reader spots them at all) is that it is acceptable to be old if you have managed to stay looking young and feminine, or if you are famous, or if you are a part of 'lesbian history.' In some 1100 glossy pages, I found only five images representing 'real' middle-aged or older lesbians, that is to say those who are neither famous nor conventionally beautiful. They include a woman who runs a lesbian social space in London which attracts an 'older crowd' (153:15) and a successful jewellery designer (155:80). Both are represented as smartly dressed and smiling, and their age is not disguised. The third image appears in the 150th Souvenir Issue, which looks back over the magazine's 15-year history and interviews some of the people who were involved in the early days. Helen Sandler, now the reviews editor, is pictured (150:21) in relaxed pose and a man's suit, smiling cheerfully. She is scarcely middle-aged, though prematurely grey; she wears her hair neatly cropped and looks happy about herself. The 15th anniversary special edition (158) features readers' comments on how their lives have changed since the first issue in 1984. They include Barbara Castle-Farmer, my fourth 'real' lesbian, who tells her story of 'coming out of the closet.' The accompanying small photo (p50) shows her dressed in shorts and T shirt and clutching a crash helmet. She leans on her motorbike grinning happily. Her age is given as 60. (Of the 14 women interviewed for

this article, two others are over 50, but neither of them are pictured. However both speak positively about their present lives.)

A regular feature *Diva* is 'Vox Pop.' Each month a reporter goes to a lesbian bar or other social venue and records the opinions of the women there on a given subject. The respondents' comments are accompanied by Polaroid-style snapshots – there are usually between eight and ten photos, accompanied by first name, age and where the person lives. Most of the women are very young; I found only one who might be described as 'old' (150:8), but in this issue – perhaps from some ageist desire to 'protect' the woman in question – ages are not provided.

It would appear then that, while the visibility of women and lesbians in British popular culture has steadily increased, there has been little or no increase in representation of old lesbians, either in the mainstream media or in the lesbian press. Given the social attitudes to age, to women and to lesbianism which I have already outlined, it is not surprising that the point at which these oppressions intersect – the old lesbian woman – is the point of maximum invisibility. Achenbaum has suggested that the dominant culture views ageing as 'something that happens to others' (1997:24); that we ignore the old don't want to be reminded of what will happen to us in the future. But cultural blindness to the existence of older lesbians is more complex. Terry Castle has observed that

When it comes to lesbians... many people have trouble seeing what's in front of them. The lesbian remains a kind of "ghost effect" in the cinema world of

modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is there, in plain view...’ (1993:2).

and Healey describes how old age can even put an ‘out’ lesbian back into the closet:

We can walk down the street holding hands affectionately and kissing – without an eyebrow being raised because *no-one notices us – we have become invisible!* ... We certainly do not regret the lack of reprisals. What is devastating is that with age we have become non-persons (1988 quoted in Grossman 1997:17).

The frustration of having one’s personal reality negated in this way is vividly expressed by Sally Maxwell:

An awful lot of people still say to me, ‘oh, the person you live with’, ‘your flat mate’ and they don’t want to look at the double bed in our flat. They want to talk about two old ladies living together, because that’s a pattern that’s very, very common that they can cope with. They think, ‘Oh yes, well, that’s all right, we know about that. We know about two friends, or two retired teachers or something, buying a house together. It makes economic sense, it makes social sense. But let’s not talk about any of the other personal issues (In Neild and Pearson, 1992:151).

As Maxwell identifies here, attitudes to sex play a large part in this reluctance to 'see' older lesbians. Social attitudes, reinforced by media stereotyping, mean that our definition of 'a lesbian' – and our only reason to acknowledge her existence – is a sexual one. If old women have no sexuality, then 'every old woman automatically becomes a "granny" (and, therefore heterosexual) irrespective of the reality' (Neild and Pearson 1992:12).

To a considerable extent, academic research has shared the same biases as the press and media. As I showed above, there was little awareness of the existence of older lesbian and gay people before the 1970s (Butler and Lewis, 1976; Kimmel et al., 2006). The last quarter of the twentieth century saw the emergence of lesbian and gay studies, social gerontology and queer theory, and there is now a substantial body of research on ageing, gender and sexuality; but the point where these areas of enquiry meet, the non-heterosexual old person, is still only rarely acknowledged. There have been some helpful studies of the lives and experiences of lesbians (Dunne, 1997; Estenberg, 1997; Hallett, 1999) but no serious research into the lives of ageing lesbian and bisexual women (Garnets and Peplau, 2007:70-90). Older lesbians remain a population that has largely been ignored in the research literature.

In Martin Duberman's comprehensive anthology, *A Queer World* (1997), there are three chapters dealing with ageing; one of these, Arnold Grossman's investigation into the 'virtual and actual identities' of older lesbians and gay men is a clear statement of the complexities of the issues. Grossman starts by invoking Kehoe's

notion of triple invisibility (615), but notes that this invisibility may be actively embraced by the ageing lesbian or gay man, a continuation of 'passing' in earlier life which may be an expression of internalised homophobia. These people present to the world a 'virtual' identity which 'embodies heterosexuality' while concealing their 'actual' identities. Citing Friend (1989), Grossman describes the range of ways in which older gay men and lesbians respond to homophobia. At one end of Friend's continuum are the lesbians and gay men who believe the negative stereotypes of gay people, live entirely closeted, self-hating lives and, distanced from family and friends, are lonely and unhappy. In the middle of the continuum are those who 'pass,' sometimes marrying and having children, and staying in the closet when older. The third adaptational style is 'affirmative.' These people are open about their sexuality, often politically active, and express satisfaction with their lives.

Overlaying this spectrum is another, says Grossman: the extent to which older lesbian and gay people respond to the myths and stereotypes of ageing. Lesbians have the biggest problems in this respect, and 'most older lesbians report experiencing multiple oppressions.' He notes that 'The experiences of older lesbians have barely been researched,' but what evidence does exist contradicts the cultural stereotypes of old lesbians as isolated and lonely, as they establish strong families of choice to provide them with social support (620). Finally he considers the benefits of being 'out.' While it may lead to harassment and rejection (and he suggests earlier that liberation may simply have 'outed' people without providing them with support), he concludes that 'The feelings of satisfaction and empowerment resulting from being

true to one's self have led many older lesbians and gay men to lead lives with which they are partly or highly satisfied' (624).

A more recent, and potentially significant, contribution to LGBT gerontology is the research into the social and policy implications of non-heterosexual ageing conducted by Heaphy et al. in 2001-2 and analysed in successive articles (e.g. Heaphy et al., 2003; Heaphy and Yip, 2006). The study explored the experience of self-identified lesbians, gay men and bisexuals aged between 50 and 80-plus, and generated cross-sectional, prospective and retrospective data on ageing and living as an older non-heterosexual. A key finding of the research is 'the complexity of social exclusion in relation to older non-heterosexual lives. Participants broadly shared the view that lesbians, gay men and bisexuals are discriminated against in society – evidenced in a range of ways' (2003:3). Heaphy and Yip conclude that

Current discourse on older people's needs and citizenship is framed by a heteronormative perspective, which marginalises lesbians and gay men. It is only recently that some advocates for older people have recognised the existence of older lesbians and gay men. For instance Age Concern, in 2001, acknowledged that the 'invisibility' of older lesbians and gay men at all levels of relevant policy means that they face particular risks of exclusion. (Heaphy and Yip, 2006: 443)

There are always problems in obtaining representative samples of a 'hidden' minority, but for my purposes, the chief limitation of this piece of research is the under-

representation of lesbians in the over-sixty age groups. The authors acknowledge that their final sample is not as balanced as they had wished in terms of gender (just under 40% women, and over 60% men) or age: 'While accessing women in their fifties proved relatively unproblematic (78% of the female sample), difficulties were experienced in recruiting women over 60' (6). Only three of the women in the study were over seventy. Grossman has also noted that 'there is virtually no information about the oldest old – those seventy years and above' (1997:622). Heaphy et al. suggest several possible reasons why this age group is difficult to access:

few organised networks exist for older lesbians compared to gay men; older lesbians may have particular concerns about 'going public' about their sexuality, and experience greater pressures to conceal their sexual identities. The data also suggest there is a greater reliance on informal, local and 'hidden' networks amongst these women (2003:6).

While members of the Older Lesbian Network²⁰ and similar groups might challenge the first point, the second echoes the findings of Matile Poor and others, that that 'older lesbians, having been oppressed not only as lesbians but as women, feel more fear about being open than gay men' (1982:166). Heaphy et al. conclude that 'further research on experiences of old age by lesbians – and the development of research strategies to access this particularly hard to reach population' should be a priority for future research (2003:13).

²⁰ The original Older Lesbian Network was formed in London in 1984; there are now groups in other parts of England and in Wales. The first national Older Lesbian Conference was held in Leeds in 2003.

In the absence of empirical research about older lesbians, some of the most informative studies of lesbian ageing are by authors who have turned to fiction or poetry to express the complexity of their experience. Penelope Lowery has used some of this writing to explore aspects of age theory, through a detailed critical analysis of some lesbian feminist novels and poetry of the 1970s and 80s. Her thesis is that there is much to be learned about age-identity in general from the representations of older lesbians in feminist fiction and poetry (2007:12); and that, in the absence of 'real-life' evidence, literature is a rich resource. There is also a steadily growing body of lesbian oral history (most of it published in America). Among others Adelman (1984), Faderman (1991), Kennedy and Davis (1993), Clunis et al. (2005) in the USA, Neild and Pearson (1992) and Gardiner (2005) in the UK, have listened to older lesbians and published their stories. In Britain, at least, this work of allowing previously silenced voices to be heard is still sufficiently rare to be a worthy enterprise in itself. But, as Barbara Macdonald (1983) has argued, valuing only our history is to devalue our present selves. Where is the research on the present lives of older lesbians?

Two decades after its publication, Monika Kehoe's (1988) US-wide study of the lives of non-heterosexual women over sixty remains the key text. Her method was an anonymous postal questionnaire; a hundred participants were questioned about their education, their past and present lives, their partners, careers and health, and also about their current satisfactions and dissatisfactions. This was ground-breaking work at a time when the very existence of older lesbian and gay people was largely hidden.

The only weakness of the study is that, since the age group in question (many of the women were born in the 1890s) was deeply closeted, the sample was recruited by the 'snowball' method and is unbalanced in the direction of white, literate, educated respondents. Kehoe builds a picture of the life and relationships of these older women, often vividly expressed in their own words:

Having to wear dresses, make-up etc was like teaching left-handed kid to write with the right hand (which, of course, was done) (25).

Her findings reflect both the comforts of lesbian community and the strain of living in the closet:

In the old lesbian world, we met to party – never gave last names nor told where we lived or worked [...]. Most of my old friends are still too fearful to enjoy life (19).

All the respondents felt they had suffered because of this pressure to deny who they were, though some felt they had finally escaped: 'All those miserable years, which now in my old age cannot hurt me' (25).

Kehoe compared her findings with those from a survey of older gay men by Berger (1982), showing that these women had had less chance than men to resist social expectations. 42% of the women had been married, compared to only 29% of the men. Very few of the men (6.3%) were celibate at the time of being surveyed,

compared with over half (53%) of the women. Perhaps as a result, Kehoe's respondents were also far more discontented with their sex-lives. The report concludes with a composite picture of Kehoe's 'average respondent' which challenges the stereotype of the neglected, lonely older woman. She is active and opinionated, supported by strong friendship groups, 'her self-image is good and she feels very positive about being a lesbian' (75) The most serious problems reported by respondents, even in the comparatively advantaged group surveyed, are those which affect many women of advanced age, whether they are lesbians or not: loneliness and economic worries (77).

Kehoe was working in the late 1980s, a period which, as I have shown, was conducive to lesbian visibility generally and also produced lesbian anti-ageist activists such as Macdonald (1983) and Copper (1988). Both of these were working in America; at the same time, in England, Suzanne Neild and Rosalind Pearson were making the *Women Like Us* television documentaries which I discuss in the next chapter.

4 'MORE VIEWERS THAN *BROOKSIDE*'

A few weeks before finishing my dissertation, I take a day off to attend Betty's eightieth birthday party. There are about fifty people present, including several generations of her family and dozens of friends. There is eating and drinking, circle dancing (in which Betty joins energetically) and an entertainment performed by friends and relations. Between the acts, as a way of illustrating the variety of her interests and pursuits, the MC asks if anyone would like to tell us how they first met Betty. A number of people talk about having met her through dancing, on walking holidays, through her work for the blind, or even at college. Then a woman stands up and says, 'In 1990, I saw a film on television, called "Women Like Us." I was so overwhelmed by the courage of the women in it, especially Betty, that I wrote to her. We've been friends ever since.' And I have another example of this film's power to change people's lives.

If, as I have argued in the preceding chapters, older lesbians are still culturally and discursively invisible, what circumstances can enable them to be 'seen'? What is the value of making them visible? In this section I use the documentary films *Women Like Us* and *Women Like That* to suggest some answers to these questions

The enabling context

*Women Like Us*²¹ was first broadcast on 10 April 1990, in the second season of Channel 4's lesbian and gay series, *Out On Tuesday*.²² In attempting to determine what made this extraordinary film possible (and therefore to draw some conclusions

²¹ The title of the film was also used for a book (Neild and Pearson 1992) containing much of the content of both programmes, with some additional material from the original interviews. In the following pages, the abbreviations *WLU* and *WLT* indicate quotations transcribed from the films. Where the same quotation also appears in the book and has been transcribed from there, it is referenced with the abbreviation *N&P, 1992*.

²² Richardson (1995) lists programme titles, transmission dates and viewing figures for *Out on Tuesday* and its successor series, *Out*

about the circumstances under which older lesbians are made visible) I have identified three enabling factors. The first is the particular set of socio-political circumstances which pertained at the end of the 1980s, to which I have referred in the previous chapter. It was a period of high lesbian visibility and political activity for which, in Britain at least, Section 28 of the Local Government Act was the catalyst. Some of the participants in *Women Like Us* make an explicit connection between Section 28 and their decision to appear in the programme. As Vick says, 'I just want to talk about it now, and bring it out. It helps them that's been on the marches, the demonstrations against the Section 28' (*WLU*).

Some of these women identified as feminists, and some were already accustomed to political activism. Pat Arrowsmith, the presenter, had long been a well-known figure in the anti-nuclear and peace movements; Diana Chapman, Jackie Forster and Ceri Ager had been involved in the founding of the Minorities Research Group²³ and the beginnings of the first lesbian magazine, *Arena 3*²⁴; Dorothy Dickson Barrow was active in black liberation politics; Betty Halford had been at Greenham Common.²⁵ Others had lived much more closeted lives and appearing in the film was their first public political act. The willingness of a group of women to 'go public' about their sexual orientation in this way, at a time when it was still the exception for lesbians

²³ Formed in 1963 to provide a contact point and counselling service for lesbians dealing with 'the difficulties of guilt, isolation and loneliness' (N&P 1992:20).

²⁴ 1963-71. The monthly newsletter of the Minorities Research Group.

²⁵ Women's peace camp, established 1981 to protest at nuclear weapons being sited at RAF Greenham Common in Berkshire.

generally and older lesbians in particular, was at least in part a product of the climate of heightened political awareness of the late 1980s.

However, the uniqueness of *Women Like Us* lies not in the fact that it is a film about lesbians, but in its presentation of *older* lesbian women and its determinedly anti-ageist stance, reflecting the personal and political convictions of the researchers.

Producers Suzanne Neild and Rosalind Pearson shared a commitment to an anti-ageist agenda derived from their experience of working with older people. Their political tenacity is another important factor contributing to the film's existence.

Pearson had started her career as a campaigner and research worker for a London-wide charity for pensioners:

We worked with Jack Jones and the Pensioners Movement to change the lives of pensioners, which included addressing ageism. From there, I moved into television as a researcher on a series for older people, where I attempted to pursue a non-ageist agenda. There I met Suzanne Neild and we set up our own production company making programmes about older women's history. We made a Channel 4 documentary about Women's work for Peace (RP 2009).

A Peace of her Mind (1988) received critical acclaim, says Pearson, but she still remembers how ingrained the dismissive and negative attitudes to older women were at the time. Even a positive review described it as a film in which 'a succession of game old birds reminisce about their salad days when they non-aggressively fought

for peace' (*Time Out*, 8 June 1988). Aware of the particular combination of ageism and homophobia which I have examined in the previous chapter, the two women next began to work on 'a documentary close to our hearts' about older lesbians.

Lesbians in the late 80s were rarely mentioned on TV and older lesbians simply did not exist in the world of television. Older people, and in particular older women, were not considered to have any sexual passions, were not expected to have radical views, and if they strayed from these narrow and diminishing stereotypes were seen as endearing eccentrics, and were more or less invisible. We wanted to redress that balance (RP 2009).

The preservation of lesbian history was also an element of their project. Pearson was a member of the management committee of the Lesbian Archive:²⁶

It was important to our identity to make sure that the struggles and lives of those lesbians who had gone before us were acknowledged. If not, lesbian history will be forgotten, rewritten and misrepresented and future generations will have no sense of the ground we have covered (RP 2009).

Political will was not enough, however. They shared the difficulties experienced by other researchers of hidden communities, before and since, in finding participants:

²⁶ The Lesbian Archive and Information Centre (LAIC) was set up in London in 1984 and relocated to Glasgow Women's Library in 1995. See: <http://www.womenslibrary.org.uk/collection/laic/>

We advertised everywhere; we even handed out leaflets on women's demos saying 'desperately seeking older lesbians'. We talked to lots of organisations; went to meetings and literally talked to anyone and everyone. We rifled through old *Arena 3* magazines from the 1960s (a lesbian newsletter) and phoned people who had put ads in 25 years beforehand – imagine their shock! (RP 2009).

Even when found, the older lesbians were not always willing to co-operate:

Some women were prepared to talk to us, but not appear on TV; others were willing to share their stories on TV but not be visible or recognisable; others felt able to be visible and open; others found it liberating to come out again after being open when younger but felt more vulnerable as they got older; and obviously some just simply said No! (RP 2009)

Pearson recalls that it was particularly difficult to persuade older black lesbians to become involved, 'but we were absolutely committed and determined to make sure that we represented everyone.' One woman they contacted was initially reluctant because she was active in black politics, and no-one knew she was a lesbian in those groups; she kept her black politics and lesbian politics entirely separate. 'We spent a day [...] with her and she finally agreed – it changed all our lives.' (RP 2009). Under the circumstances, their efforts at inclusiveness were remarkably successful. The final group of sixteen women was still weighted in the direction of white, middle-class Londoners, but included three black women, represented a range of class

backgrounds and reflected the differing physical abilities of older women, one of whom is a wheelchair user.

Funding was another hurdle. The first stages of the project were achieved on a shoestring budget which was only enough to carry out audio-recorded interviews, and Neild and Pearson had already done a good deal of unsupported research before Channel 4 finally agreed to fund the full documentary. Ever since its inception in 1982, Channel 4 had established a distinct identity as the 'minority' television channel. Indeed, as Colin Richardson (1995) has pointed out, this was part of their remit, as the Broadcasting Act 1980 lays a clear duty on the Independent Broadcasting Authority with regard to the fourth channel,

to ensure that the programmes contain a suitable proportion of matter calculated to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by ITV. (cited in Richardson, 1995: 217).

By the end of the 1980s, Channel 4 accounted for ten per cent of total television viewing figures and was positioned as 'political, liberal, vaguely left of centre, community-oriented, experimental, even arty, and willing to tackle "difficult" "adult" themes, notably sex and sexuality' (Richardson, 1995:220). Their reaction to the controversy over Section 28 had been a strengthened commitment to lesbian and gay programming (Neild and Pearson 1992: 16). The first series of *Out on Tuesday* started on 14 February 1989 and ran for eight programmes. Part of its intention was

to display the diversity of the lesbian and gay community: Claire Beavan, the series producer, explained to the *Guardian* that

We want to show gay people not agreeing with each other: 'til now on TV, it's usually been 'gays are like this,' a homogeneous group. This series will challenge the idea that there's one kind of gay person, politics or sensibility. (*Guardian*, 6 February 1989, cited in Richardson, 1995:221)

Neild and Pearson's project fitted into this framework perfectly. Certainly it is unlikely that the film would have found a place on a more mainstream channel. As Pearson says,

We were just elated to be making older lesbians visible and hoped we would reach as wide an audience as possible [...] I think we realised that only a lesbian and gay series would actually commission and support it at that time (RP 2009).

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the role of the media has been increasingly important in establishing the visibility of lesbians, and this willingness on the part of a major television channel to foreground sexual minorities, at a time when it was becoming increasingly difficult to do so, is the third crucial factor in the making of *Women Like Us*. So the unique combination of circumstance that made it possible to bring older lesbians into view at this time were: a historical and political moment of

lesbian visibility; the tenacity of the film-makers to their feminist and anti-ageist project; and the media exposure afforded by the support of Channel 4.

Women Like Us

The resulting film features sixteen women talking about their lives. The interviews are edited together without any commentary, because Neild and Pearson 'were determined from the start that the programme was to be their stories, not our fixed ideas and structures into which we would fit them' (N&P 1992:18). The women, aged between fifty-four and eighty-one, challenge many prevailing lesbian stereotypes: they are neither tweedy butches like Sister George, nor the hyper-feminine lesbians of heterosexual pornography; they are neither predatory nor man-hating. As Ruth says, 'Let's face it, if you looked at me in the street, you wouldn't say, "Aha! That is a lesbian," would you?' (*WLU*).

As the title suggests, the aim of the film is a normalising one, and in this respect it provides a striking contrast to the television documentaries of the 1960s described in the previous chapter. Although the programme's presenter, Pat Arrowsmith,²⁷ reminds viewers that in the past lesbians have 'had to be brave in order to love,' the manner of the film's presentation, like the title, is un-heroic. It implies an ordinariness, a normality in its subjects, and this impression is strengthened by the relaxed, conversational way in which the women speak. Some of their stories are illustrated

²⁷ A well-known pacifist, peace activist and co-founder of CND, Arrowsmith had never made a secret of her lesbianism. She was sixty at the time of the programme.

with archive footage and photographs, but for the majority of the time we see the women's faces or hands, or scenes of them engaged in everyday activities such as walking in the countryside, painting, canoeing, playing cards and so on. Because of the subjects' ages, their memories and histories form a large part of the film's content, but these visual images have the effect of anchoring that history firmly to the present. The film is always about the women *in the present*, even when they are telling stories from the past.

The majority of these sequences were shot out of doors. Sally Maxwell, one of the original cast, is clear about the intention of this:

There were lovely bits where they brought in the natural world [...] and it was about, 'this is part of the natural order of things.' It was never stated, but to me it kind of ran through, like a little theme [...] That was very important, because it kind of gave a subliminal message, that this is a natural relationship, and all the emotions were very sincere and very human, so that every human being – it didn't matter what sex you were or what sexuality you were – could relate to that: that's how people are (SM 2009).

However there is an interesting tension between this normalising agenda and the radical, potentially shocking, nature of the film's content. As well as challenging stereotypes of lesbians, *Women Like Us* subverts media stereotypes of ageing women. As Maxwell says,

They were older women who weren't trying to look young, that was the big thing, because everyone you see on television, who is older, they're doing ads for cosmetics or something, it's all about how they're actually youthful, and how they're managing to retain their youth, they haven't got any wrinkles, they've had Botox, they're slim; whereas these women, who were just a natural figure, wearing no makeup or very little, who weren't really concerned with that whole beauty thing, they were concerned with who they were and how they felt, rather than how they looked and how people perceived them (SM 2009).

She recognises this as a radical departure:

It's a whole different construct, about how what we want to see, what we are assumed to want to see, and we don't just see ordinary people, we see people who are made to look to some kind of image of perfection, which is not us. We don't fit that. We don't fit that for all sorts of reasons. And so that was a very refreshing change. Because it was about people trying to be themselves, and to find out who they really were, and how they could naturally be that (SM 2009).

By appearing as 'who they really were,' as self-identified lesbians over sixty, the women are also denying the stereotype of old age as asexual. Jackie Forster stresses the importance of challenging the attitude which says, 'Well, it's none of my business what you do in bed,' arguing that 'you've got to keep saying, "Yes it *is*." Because of what I do in bed I lose my kids; because of what I do in bed I lose my job;

because of what I do in bed I'm thrown out of the house or thrown out of the family.' Several of the women are shown to be in sexual relationships. Rachel, the oldest of the contributors, expresses her delight at being able to be open about her relationship with her current partner, after many years of hiding her sexuality: 'I mean, dammit, there's a great big double bed, not much else, in that room next door. So if she's not sleeping with me, who's she sleeping with?' (*WLU*).

Women Like Us is an exploration of lesbian identity at both public and personal levels. While the film as a whole contributes to the representation of a lesbian identity which is public and visible, the women's stories of their individual journeys to self-awareness and self-acceptance illustrate the process of lesbian identity-formation in a historical context, and what it means to be lesbian in the present. The recurring themes of their stories are: isolation and social exclusion; the significance of role models in forming and affirming identity; and the importance of lesbian community. As I noted earlier, recent writers such as Cowan and Valentine (2006) have stressed the importance of the affirmation offered to lesbian and gay media consumers by the availability of real and fictional role models. The cast of *Women Like Us* recount the difficulties they experienced in forming any sense of their own identity at a time when there were few role models and little public knowledge. For Rachel, growing up in the 1920s, even the word 'lesbian' did not exist:

My first introduction was *The Well of Loneliness* [...] but even then she didn't use the word 'lesbian', she talked about 'inverts', and I didn't know what an

invert was[...] So I think, right up to grown-up age, I never knew what a lesbian was (*WLU*).

There was not much more help for the next generation. Monica says, 'I don't think I knew what the word lesbian meant. We didn't, you know, then [...] I just felt different.' Nina, who did know she was a lesbian, still 'didn't know what I ought to look like, or what I ought to sound like or feel like, or what I ought to do.' Whether or not the women had read *The Well of Loneliness*, such ideas about lesbians as they had were heavily influenced by Radlyffe Hall's image of the masculine female invert. 'Tall and thin, dressed in a very masculine fashion and had cropped hair [...] I thought that was a lesbian' (Diana, *WLU*). The stereotype was helpful for those who could identify with it, but simply confusing for those who couldn't. Jackie had the idea that a lesbian was a 'short back and sides woman, with a waistcoat and all that [...] and I never saw myself like that, so I didn't identify as lesbian at all' (*WLU*).

Those who came to lesbianism later in life had different problems with identity. Many of the women in the film did not think of themselves as lesbians while they were growing up, and conformed, more or less willingly, to social norms by getting married. As Sally puts it, 'like the water going down the plughole – you're just drawn towards it, and there you go!' Their levels of awareness about what they were doing varied: some, like Betty, 'kidded ourselves we were in love. Maybe he was. I know I wasn't – now.' Others attempted unsuccessfully to resist, but finally gave in to social pressure. Vick had had lesbian relationships in the Air Force, but

After the war I came back up north, and my mother said, 'Now you're going to settle down, get married, have kids.' Which I didn't want. I'd never been with a guy, anyway. So, I didn't get married till I was twenty-eight. So, I didn't like it one little bit (*WLU*).

There was also the hope that 'if I got married, these sexual feelings about women would go. And you realise after you get married, it doesn't go. It's still there' (Dorothy). Recent researchers such as Garnets and Peplau have pointed out that 'more than three quarters of lesbians report having had heterosexual intercourse at some point in their lives' (2006:73) and Lowery has observed that there is an aspect of lesbian ontology which may involve 'a heterosexual incarnation in youth' and a transition to same-sex relationships in mid life (2003:12). But for these women, isolated from any knowledge of lesbian existence, the experience of falling in love with another woman for the first time when they were already married, and mothers, was traumatic:

It was very painful, [...] very upsetting. Here we were, both respectable married women with children. We thought we were the first ever married people to be lesbian. And we thought, how stupid we were, and how dreadful, and we ought to have known[...] and what were we going to do about it? No-one ever did this before! (*WLU*, Betty)

This sense of isolation was experienced by most of the women in the film, especially those who lived far from the urban centres. In London a few, lesbian meeting places like the Gateways Club offered a sense of belonging and some affirmation of identity:

‘Once you got into those clubs, where everyone dressed similar, or dressed like that, you didn’t feel out of coordination with other people’ (*WLU*, Ginger); but many young lesbians had no such support. It was to address this isolation, which is described by most of the women in the film, that the Minorities Research Group was founded in the early 1960s. Several of the women in the film were involved in setting up this group or in its early work. Ceri Ager describes vividly the emotional impact which contact with other lesbians could have on women who had previously thought themselves completely alone. She remembers

...sitting and having people weep on my shoulder, listening to their stories.

There were those who came from small villages and small towns and really thought they were the only ones, that there was nobody like them and that there was something wrong with them [...] There were those who were suicidal about it [...] There were those who were married and hadn’t found out till then.

It was very sad (N&P 1992:39-40).

It is significant that in the almost total absence of media representation, both the Minorities Research Group its successor organisation *Sappho* created their own small magazines.²⁸ *Women Like Us* traces the growth of lesbian community through these and other groups formed in the 1960s and 70s.

²⁸ *Arena 3* (1964-71) was succeeded by *Sappho* magazine (1972-81).

Looking back on my early life, it seems to have been very lonely, as I rarely knew more than the lesbian I was living with... I actually counted up the other day to see how many I knew now, and it's at least sixty acquaintances or close friends (*WLU*, Nina).

Kehoe(1988) and Heaphy and Yip (2003) have commented on importance to older lesbians of friendship groups and lesbian support networks. *Women Like Us* illustrates vividly the need for such mutual support in a hostile world, but the end of the film expresses the need for something beyond the separateness of lesbian community – a future where minorities and the mainstream can support each other:

it needs to be more than just understanding us. We have got to learn to live together and care about each other. And if we can get to that stage, I think that our situation will change quite a lot (*WLU*, Ruth).

Women Like That

Pearson thinks that Channel 4 did not have high expectations for *Women Like Us*:

The commissioning editor [...] really liked our idea for the *Out on Tuesday* series, but I think she and all the other film-makers thought it would a bit boring and dull, and certainly not edgy and challenging. They thought all the other programmes in the series were certainly much more shocking. I think we proved them wrong (RP 2009).

In the event, the size of the audience took everyone by surprise.

Amazingly it got the highest audience figures in the whole series. We got [...] more than the *Brookside* audience figures²⁹. Channel 4 also got the most viewers phoning and writing in about our programme in the whole of the *Out on Tuesday* series (RP 2009).

The average viewing figure for a programme in the second series of *Out on Tuesday* was 914,000. Only three other programmes reached the one million mark, and *Women Like Us* achieved an audience of 1,319,000.³⁰

Because of this positive response, Channel 4 decided to repeat *Women Like Us* in the next series, followed a week later by a short sequel or update, titled *Women Like That*. Again, the programmes achieved the highest viewing figures in the series. Interestingly, almost as many people (1,290,000) watched the second showing of *Women Like Us* as the first³¹ (the average for the series was 983,700). Whereas the first film had been largely concerned with lesbian history,

the second one was more about what happened as a result, so we were looking at people as they are now, not as they were (SM 2009).

²⁹ See footnote 18 p 33.

³⁰ British Audience Research Board, cited in Richardson (1995:221).

³¹ Richardson, 1995:243. (No figures given for *Women Like That*.)

It was a wonderful opportunity, Pearson says, 'to show that older lesbians have a future as well as a past' (RP 2009).

Pat Arrowsmith, who since the first series had been busy republishing one of her novels, was unavailable to present *Women Like That* as she was in Baghdad, where she had recently been involved in setting up a peace camp. Subtitles explaining all this set the tone for a programme which is a testimony to the active, thoughtful, politically vibrant lives of older women. It was filmed in the hard winter of 1990-91, and the images of old women walking in snow or huddled against the wind on Brighton seafront make a piquant contrast to the youthful vigour of their voices and minds. The film starts with the women talking about the consequences of appearing in *Women Like Us*. Having had no role models themselves, they have now become models for others:

Several lesbian friends of mine have said to me, thank you for doing it for us, I couldn't have done that, I'd have lost my job, or I couldn't tell my family, or whatever. And that felt nice, that they took the trouble to acknowledge that not just me but all of us in the film had taken some sort of risk (*WLT*, Betty).

But the pioneering aspect of *Women like That* becomes apparent in the second half of the programme, as the women reflect on relationships, love and sex. They talk about new lovers and the pain of parting from old ones, about their ageing bodies and the changing nature of desire; and about their plans for the future. The unique achievement of *Women Like That* is not simply its focus on old women talking about

their lives, but what it has to say about old age and intimacy. It was ground-breaking then and it is still extraordinary, because, although the sight of people discussing every aspect of their lives on television has become commonplace, it would still be extremely unusual to see prime viewing time given to elderly women talking with such candour about their intimate relationships.

In the first programme, Rachel and Sally, the oldest and youngest of the women, had been a couple, and had talked freely about their five-year relationship. By the second programme they were no longer together. Sally describes her feelings of loss, guilt, and sadness after leaving Rachel. Rachel in turn talks freely about the pain of losing Sally:

Of course I had all the fantasies of her coming back, of course! I'm not even going to go over them because they are so usual, everybody has them [...]. I've been feeling the pain, and trying to grow, and understand it, and going round asking everybody whether they've ever been left, what they did and the story of it, and I've learnt a hell of a lot.

Now this is what I've learnt. I've learnt that merging is not necessarily part of love. Now, I always thought it was – it was what you wanted in a relationship, a partnership, a sexual union, and a good thing to work towards. During this year I've had second thoughts. I haven't got an answer, other than I'm still thinking about it (*WLT*, Rachel).

These painful emotions are, as she recognises, 'usual,' though in our culture romance and heartbreak are usually associated with the young; what is *unusual* is to see these emotions experienced by an octogenarian.

Established cultural narratives are questioned by several of the women. 'One of the problems with any relationship is the fact that 'as soon as you form a close link with someone else, it's automatically assumed that you're going to walk together hand-in-hand into the sunset, for the rest of your lives' (*WLU* Ruth) but there is a sense here that, untrammelled by the established expectations placed on heterosexual relationships, these women feel free to explore alternative models and to demonstrate what Heaphy et al. have called 'the creativity and agency that results from living outside given supports and guidelines' (2003:2).

As you grow older, your tastes - as in everything else in life - change. And the thing that you wanted very much to do with your relationship at forty, you don't necessarily want to do at sixty. Now, I value my own space, and I am actually contemplating now living alone. That is my choice, with the full support of my ever-dear and loving partner. It doesn't mean the partnership has failed (*WLT*, Ruth).

I'm aware of what I want out of the future. I'm not looking for a partner at all, because I'm too independent now. You've got lot of friends round you, you can't go wrong. Especially now that I've met Christine. That's the greatest thing that's ever happened to me – and her, too. We both like the same things, it's

great. I go down to her place, she comes up to mine. We've got our own space. And we discuss, you know, whatever's going on in the world. She's more open now than she's ever been in her life, because she's met another fellow-person like herself. It's really good between us. Yes. (*WLT*, Vick)

Jackie talks about the 'selfishness' of the passionate sexual attachment of youth:

I don't think you're really thinking about the other person at all. You're so consumed by your own feelings about them. There's inevitably passion, jealousy and possessiveness.

and the pleasures of a different way of loving :

I'm out of the, sort of, frenzy of the physical passion into the, sort of, rather more mundane matters of the mind. And it's a lovely state to be in, because you can love more than one woman, and have the affection returned, without any kind of 'tut tut' going on in the background, or 'What are you doing with her?' And it's not something that I expected, this peacefulness, and this openness, and being really happy, not this torn thing about, you know, 'Who's she with?' and all that. It doesn't mean we don't... *vibrate* as much as we used to - I hope! (*WLT*, Jackie)

Women Like That challenges cultural stereotypes of ageing and of lesbian ageing in particular.

Generally speaking, women said that they were delighted to see older women who were happy, because their mothers had always said to them, when they discovered they were lesbians, that 'you'll be so unhappy in your old age!' (*WLT*, Nina).

The film shows old (some very old) women as having strong subjectivity, as agents in the making of their own present and future lives. It shows old, lesbian women being independent, creative and politically active. Gillian Dunne has claimed (1997) that lesbian lifestyles can illuminate heterosexual gender relations; Heaphy et al. (2003) have since suggested that the experiences of older non-heterosexuals can offer useful alternative models for mainstream ageing. Sandberg (2008) goes further, suggesting that queer theory, (and particularly the 'anti-social turn in queer theory,' which embraces shame) might be used to critique the prevailing discourses of old age. I would argue that *Women Like That* is a precursor of such ideas, providing a view of ageing and of older people's relationships that has relevance well beyond the lesbian context.

5 AUDIENCE RESPONSES

The responses of people who have watched *Women Like Us* can suggest other reasons why making older lesbians visible is important. As well as challenging stereotypes and providing alternative models of ageing, the film has particular meanings and uses for lesbian audiences, offering them affirmation and role models for the future. *Women Like Us* is seen by lesbian viewers as connecting them with their history, but also as having the potential to help mainstream society understand and acknowledge lesbian existence.

Pearson says, 'I still get lesbians coming up to me and saying that it transformed their lives, or it had an impact on their lives' (RP 2009), and when I showed the film in 2009, I was struck by how vividly women still remember that first broadcast. For many, it is still a landmark in their journey to lesbian identity:

In 1990 I'd just started identifying as lesbian but hadn't had a lesbian relationship, and found the programme very affirmative (Lesbian, no age given).

Saw it when it first came out and remembered that at that time I was married and very troubled by what I was realising about myself (Lesbian, 64).

I showed *Women Like Us* on four separate occasions, and used a voluntary questionnaire to survey audience responses. The first screening was to a small group

of mostly rural lesbians between the ages of forty and seventy-six. I used this occasion to refine the procedure and trial the questionnaire. The next showing was at a lesbian bar in a large city; this urban venue drew the largest audience and the widest age-range. As a result of this screening I was invited by an older lesbian social group, also urban, to show the film at one of their meetings. (These three groups, at their own request, also watched *Women Like That*.) Initially I had only intended to show the film to lesbian audiences, which I thought would be comparable to the original viewing audience, but on reflection decided it would be interesting to gain the responses of a more mixed group, so I advertised a screening on the University of Birmingham's Egbaston campus. Unfortunately this produced a very small audience, so that the responses from this screening, while individually valuable, did not enable me to make any useful comparison between groups.

After seeing the film the audience were invited to complete a voluntary questionnaire. The questionnaire (Appendix I) asked respondents to agree or disagree with statements about the film, based on comments made previously by the director or cast members. There was also space for respondents to write their own comments and impressions of the film. The questionnaire was anonymous, but asked for information about the respondent's age, gender, sexual orientation and, if lesbian or gay, whether he or she was 'out' or not. They were also asked if they had seen the film before.

46 of the 50 people who saw the film chose to fill in the questionnaire. Only one of the respondents was male; all the others described themselves as female (42) or 'other'(2). Only one person self-defined as 'straight' (heterosexual); the large majority described themselves as lesbian (36), gay (1), bisexual (4) or 'other' (2). Their ages ranged from twenty-one to seventy-eight, and were fairly evenly spread over that range. Exactly half (23) of the audience members were, like the women in the film, lesbians over fifty. There is no available data to indicate how these figures compare to the make-up of the original audience in 1990. Although the commissioning editor, Caroline Spry, told the *Pink Paper* (11 February 1989: 7) that she would be very surprised 'if many of the items in the series didn't have an appeal or straight audiences,' it is likely that the original viewers were predominantly (though not exclusively) lesbian or gay.

Of those respondents who did not define as heterosexual, 28 (62%) said they were 'out' to everyone. The remainder were out to some, but not all, of their friends and or/family. This would be much higher than in 1990. It is interesting to note that 'being out' did not correlate in a simple way with chronological age in this sample.³² The age-groups with the highest proportion of those who were 'not out' were 20-29 and 70-79. The age groups with most 'out' were those in their 30s, 40s and 60s. It would be interesting, though outside the scope of this project, to investigate how far this

³² Neither is the sample large enough to support any generalisations about whether or not it is easier now for young people to 'come out.' However it suggests that the matter is far more complex than is often considered.

indicates an ability on the part of older lesbians to change their behaviour in response to a more liberal social climate.

It was clear from the responses that *Women like Us* has retained its power to engross an audience. The adjectives most used to describe the experience of watching the film were 'interested' (70%) and 'moved' (69%). People who said they were 'interested' were of all ages, but included 100% of those under 40, many of whom had little knowledge of lesbian history:

Being 24, you accept circumstances of how easy it is to be out. The film was an eye opener, making me realise that lesbians have come a far (difficult) way to be where we are today (Lesbian, 24).

I didn't know how hard it was for older lesbians in the past (Lesbian, 51).

The emotion evoked by the film was often associated with issues of recognition:

Having been on the London scene in the 60s and in the services, brought back many memories and true to life (Lesbian, 64).

Watching it this time found myself feeling big emotional waves of connectedness with those women (Lesbian, 64).

and identity:

Very moved. Absolutely amazing. It made me feel really close and connected to the women I was watching it with who were all older lesbians. It consolidated my sense of who I am (Lesbian, 51).

I can recall my own experiences over 20 years ago, and how difficult it was even back then, so I felt an enormous amount of empathy for how it must have been 30 – 40+ years previous to that (Lesbian, 42).

28% of respondents said they felt 'inspired' by the film, and two comments linked this inspiration to its politics:

It was good to see older women represented in a positive way too, which I found inspiring, as any media portrayal of lesbian's [sic] today, are always young, professional, body perfect images, such as L word etc. (Lesbian, 42).

Great to see so many positive older lesbians celebrating themselves & to hear the connection made between lesbianism and feminism. Importance of feminism (Bisexual female, 58).

No-one said they were shocked, bored or disgusted. One respondent wrote 'not shocked, but surprised' (Heterosexual female, 24).

One of the most significant results from the survey was the response to questions about media representation in 1990 and in 2009. Almost all respondents (95 %) thought that it had been rare to see lesbians on television in 1990; two out of three

(70%) thought it was still rare now. There was a similar response to the question about the representation of older women: 85% thought it had been unusual to see documentary programmes featuring old women in 1990, and 74% thought this was still the case. 87% agreed with the statement 'It is still unusual to hear about old people's sex lives.' The strong majority agreement or disagreement on all these questions, suggests that *Women Like Us* is still seen as ground-breaking today.

81% of female respondents over 60, all of whom were lesbians, agreed with the statement that 'I do not see women like myself represented on television.' This suggests that the optimism of commentators such as Cszelska (2006) about the diversity of media role models may be misplaced. Interestingly, 73% of all female respondents, regardless of age, agreed with the same statement.

Since the majority of the audience (80%) identified as lesbian, it was not perhaps surprising that the highest level of agreement (98%) was to the statement 'It is important to record lesbian history' (85% 'agreed strongly'). However an almost equal number (94%) thought the film should be shown to mainstream, not just to lesbian, audiences. The comments suggest a level of frustration with lesbian invisibility, and a need to be seen and understood by others.

This film should be shown on mainstream tv again, but also a re-make made [sic] of 50+ lesbians' views today, to show how things have / have not changed in 20 years (Lesbian, 50).

The enthusiastic response to the programmes, both then and now, shows how important their existence was – and still is – to lesbians of all ages, and contributes to understanding why it is important to make older lesbians visible. Lesbians of all ages see the need to record lesbian history, and find these non-stereotypical representations of older lesbians affirming. The responses also suggest that many women, not just older women or lesbians, feel that they not are represented in the media. The lesbians in the audiences clearly derived satisfaction and inspiration from seeing people like themselves represented on television. The films are seen as affirming identity and building lesbian community.

They are also seen as having the potential to help the heterosexual majority understand and acknowledge lesbian existence, by being ‘shown to mainstream audiences.’ (Because the films were originally broadcast by Channel 4 rather than by the BBC, and as part of a lesbian and gay series, the original audience would have been mainly gay or lesbian.) However Cowan and Valentine’s findings about BBC television (2006) suggest that is still unlikely that these films or their modern equivalent would find a home on more mainstream channels, and therefore access to more mainstream audiences, even though they could make a significant contribution to the creation of cultural models of older women advocated by Woodward as a way of ‘generating alternative futures’ (1999:155).

6 CONCLUSION

The first conclusion to be drawn from this research is that Monika Kehoe's (1986) description of older lesbians as a 'triple invisible minority' is still valid in Britain today. Although statistics show that roughly 5% of lesbians in the UK are over sixty-five, they are not represented either in popular discourse or in academic research.

What are the reasons that older lesbians are culturally invisible?

My evidence suggests that ageism has been at least as strong a cause as homophobia in establishing the invisibility of older lesbians, and that lack of media representation has been a decisive factor in maintaining it.

Although women have now achieved equality with men in many areas of personal and public life, old women are still not valued in our society. Female ageing is not only culturally but also politically constructed; our society makes women the focus of the male gaze as long as they can conform to desirable stereotypes of youth and femininity, but makes them invisible as they age. Older women are under-represented in public life. They are discursively diminished through the use of negative stereotypes, while older men do not face the same levels of prejudice. For instance, there are still far fewer positive models of older women than men in the media.

Female ageing is divorced from ideas of sexuality; old women (unlike 'the older man') are seen as sexless and undesirable. These ageist attitudes are often internalised

and upheld by old women themselves as they strive to maintain an appearance of youth. The choice held out to older women by twenty-first century western culture is to pretend to be young for as long as possible (and be rewarded in proportion to their success in doing so) or to accept invisibility as inevitable.

Lesbians have a long history of cultural invisibility, due partly to their exclusion from legal recognition, and partly to the moral stigma attached to 'deviant' sexualities, which has caused most lesbians to conceal their orientation from fear of persecution. Some historical periods have been more favourable to lesbian visibility than others; as I have shown, particular social and political forces, such as legal representation, rapid social change and mobility, and cultural anxiety about gender roles, have to come into play at the same time in order for lesbians to be discursively 'seen.' Lesbian visibility has increased over the last two centuries, as homosexuality has gradually gained acceptance as an alternative lifestyle. Representations of lesbians and lesbian lifestyles can now be found on television and in the popular press, and some high profile women in media and politics have 'come out' as lesbian, providing role models for others.

Nonetheless gay people are still more likely to be portrayed in negative terms than positive ones. Representations of lesbians are limited, and are still likely to be stereotyped either as aping masculinity or as the hyper-feminine lesbians of heterosexual pornography. These stereotypes do not reflect the reality of lesbian lives and ignore the existence of ageing lesbians altogether. While the popular press and

other mass media have played an active part in the dissemination of knowledge about, and acceptance of lesbianism, they also act as gatekeepers deciding who shall and who shall not be seen. Lesbians themselves are not exempt from these sexist and ageist assumptions: the lesbian press reinforces mainstream attitudes, implying that it is acceptable to be old if you have managed to stay looking young and feminine, or if you are famous, or if you are part of 'lesbian history.'

Attitudes to sex play a large part in the reluctance to 'see' older lesbians. The definition of 'a lesbian' is a sexual one. If old women are constructed as asexual, then it follows that in popular discourse old women cannot be lesbians, and lesbians cannot be old. Not only the sexuality but the sexual orientation of old women is obliterated as they become 'grannies' and therefore heterosexual by implication.

It would appear that, while the cultural visibility of women and lesbians has steadily increased, there has been little or no change in the (lack of) representation of old lesbians, either in the mainstream media or in the lesbian press. Much academic research reflects the same attitudes, failing to address the complex interactions of age, gender and sexuality. Older lesbians have been made invisible through a particular conjunction of sexism, ageism and hetero-sexism which renders them unrepresentable.

What circumstances can enable older lesbians to be seen?

On the rare occasions on which older lesbians appear in research or in the media, the factors which combine to make them visible include: a climate of social change and political activism; the willingness of the subjects to be seen; and an approach on the part of the researchers which addresses ageism and hetero-sexism together. The 1980s was such a period, producing in America the work of Barbara Macdonald, Cynthia Rich, Baba Copper and Monika Kehoe; and in Britain the *Women Like Us* documentaries. The *Women Like Us* project forms a unique cultural text, an instance of older lesbian visibility which remains unique today, and which illustrates some of the reasons why allowing older lesbians to be seen is culturally and socially important.

Why is it important to make older lesbians visible?'

Representations such as these challenge cultural stereotypes of old women and of lesbians, expanding the boundaries of those categories. For the lesbian community they offer affirmation and inspirational role-models, as well as preserving a history of which many younger lesbians may not be aware. For mainstream audiences, they increase public knowledge about lesbian history and the variety of lesbian lifestyles, and offer insights into alternative modes of ageing. Audience responses to the films, both then and now, show the importance of preserving of lesbian history and of producing non-stereotypical representations of older lesbians. The responses also confirm that many older women, whether lesbian or not, do not see themselves as

represented by the media. The films are seen by viewers as affirming identity and building lesbian community; but also as having the potential to help mainstream viewers to understand and acknowledge lesbian existence.

There has been very little research on lesbian ageing in the two decades since *Women Like Us*. Recent work on non-heterosexual ageing has either marginalized or failed adequately to represent older lesbians; in particular there is no research on the lives of lesbians over seventy. This is an important oversight, because it perpetuates discrimination and exclusion, and deprives a minority population of positive role models. It also limits understanding about the personal and social needs of this group, and may prevent them receiving the support they need as they grow older. More generally, one opportunity to create 'cultural models of older women as a way of generating alternative futures for ourselves' (Woodward, 1992:155) is being lost.

My findings lead me to agree with Heaphy et al. (2003:13) that further research on experiences of old age by lesbians, and the development of research strategies to access this particularly hard-to-reach population, are urgent priorities.

APPENDIX - AUDIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE

P1

'WOMEN LIKE US'

First thoughts / impressions after seeing the film:

Have you seen this film before?

Yes []

No []

Which of these words describes your reaction to the film?

Interested [] Shocked [] Bored []

Disgusted [] Inspired [] Moved [] Other.....

How far do you agree with these statements?

Strongly
agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly
disagree

It was rare to see lesbians on television in 1990

[]

[]

[]

[]

It is still rare to see lesbians on television now

[]

[]

[]

[]

In 1990 it was unusual to see television programmes featuring old women

[]

[]

[]

[]

It is unusual to see television programmes featuring old women now

[]

[]

[]

[]

It is still unusual to hear about old people's sex lives

[]

[]

[]

[]

It would not be necessary to make such a film now because attitudes to sexuality have changed

[]

[]

[]

[]

It is important to record lesbian history

[]

[]

[]

[]

I do not see women like myself represented in the media

[]

[]

[]

[]

This is a film for lesbian audiences

[]

[]

[]

[]

This film should be shown to mainstream audiences

[]

[]

[]

[]

APPENDIX 2 - AUDIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE

P2

About you

***NB All contributions to my research will be confidential, and presented anonymously.
You do not need to put your name on this paper.***

However it would be useful for me to know some general information about the people who have helped me.

How old are you?

What is your gender?

How would you describe your sexual orientation
(e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight etc.)?

If lesbian or gay, are you out to everyone?		yes		no	
		[]		[]	
If you answered 'no,' are you out to		all	some	none	n/a
family?	[]	[]	[]	[]	
friends?	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
work colleagues?	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
fellow students?	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

.....
Thank you very much for your help!

Jane Traies March 09

APPENDIX 2 - WOMEN LIKE US, AUDIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

Table 1 - Age range of respondents

	total	% total	not 'out'	% not 'out'
under 20	0	0	0	0
20 - 29	8	17%	4	50%
30 - 39	5	11%	1	20%
40 - 49	9	20%	1	11%
50 - 59	8	17%	4	50%
60 - 69	11	24%	2	18%
70 - 79	4	9%	3	75%
80 +	0	0%	0	0
total responses	45			

Figure 1 - Age range distribution of respondents

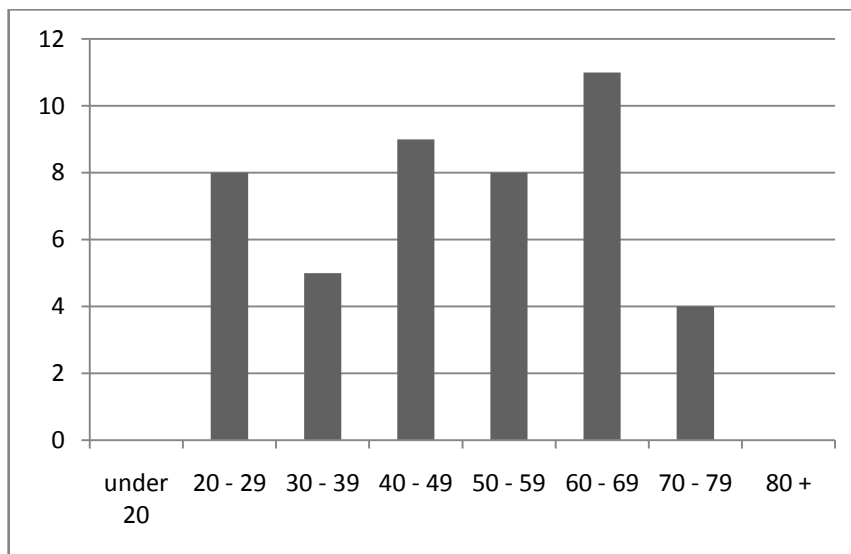
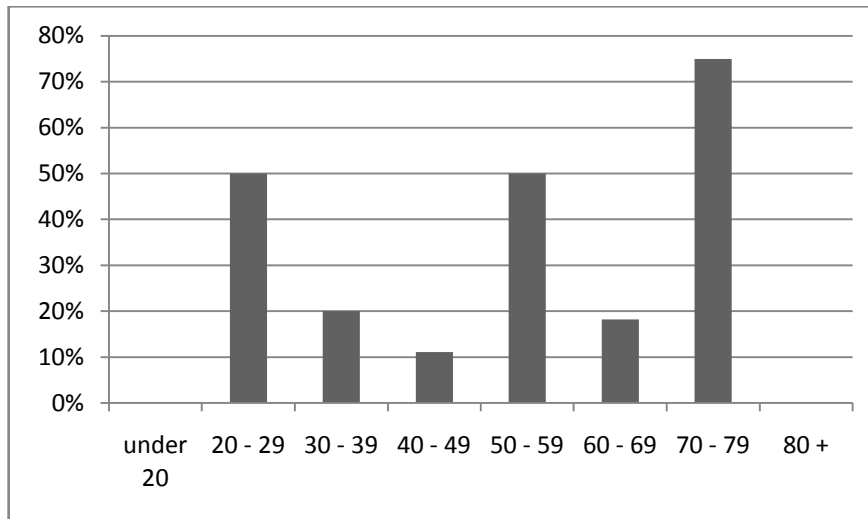


Figure 2 - Percentage not 'out' by age range**Table 2 – Audience by gender**

Female	42	91%
Male	1	2%
Other	2	4%
No response	1	2%
total	46	

Table 3 – Audience by sexual orientation

Lesbian	36	78%
Gay	1	2%
Bisexual	4	9%
Straight	1	2%
Bisexual-lesbian	1	2%
non-heteronormative	1	2%
No response	2	4%
total	46	

Table 4 - Reaction to film

Interested	32	70%
Shocked	0	0%
Bored	0	0%
Amused	1	2%
Inspired	13	28%
Moved	31	67%

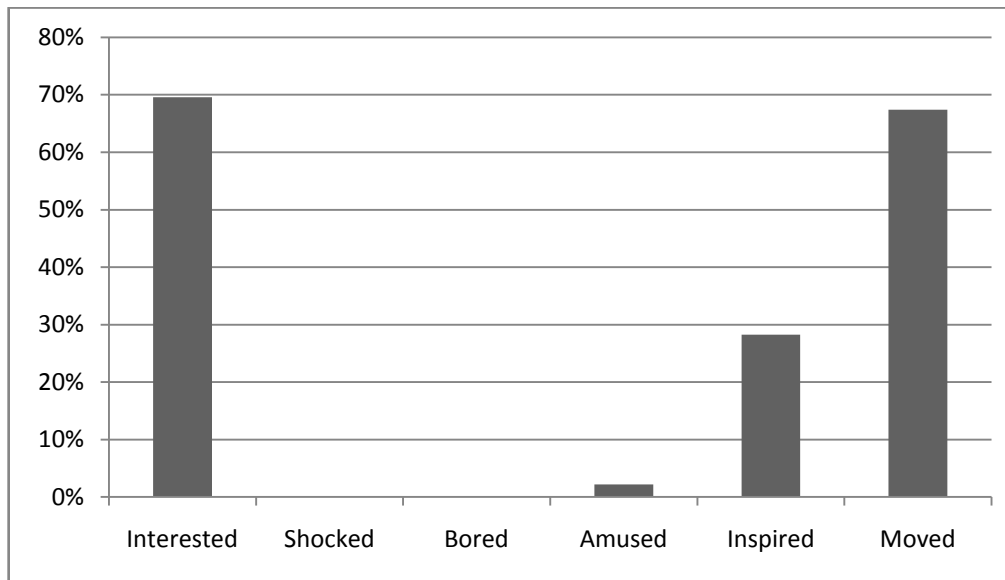
Figure 3 - Reaction to film

Table 5 - Questionnaire responses

How far do you agree with these statements?	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response	Total
It was rare to see lesbians on television in 1990	34	9	0	0	3	46
It is still rare to see lesbians on television now	8	24	10	3	1	46
In 1990 it was unusual to see documentary programmes featuring old women	22	17	1	0	6	46
It is unusual to see documentary programmes featuring old women now	13	21	2	0	10	46
It is still unusual to hear about old people's sex lives	29	11	2	0	4	46
It would not be necessary to make such a film now because attitudes to sexuality have changed	0	4	17	21	4	46
It is important to record lesbian history	39	6	0	0	1	46
I do not see women like myself represented in the media	13	20	4	6	3	46
This is a film for lesbian audiences	3	5	24	11	3	46
This film should be shown to mainstream audiences	31	12	1	1	1	46

Table 6 - Questionnaire responses, percentages

How far do you agree with these statements?	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response	Total	Agree	Disagree
It was rare to see lesbians on television in 1989	74%	20%	0%	0%	7%	100%	93%	0%
It is still rare to see lesbians on television now	17%	52%	22%	7%	2%	100%	70%	28%
In 1989 it was unusual to see documentary programmes featuring old women	48%	37%	2%	0%	13%	100%	85%	2%
It is unusual to see documentary programmes featuring old women now	28%	46%	4%	0%	22%	100%	74%	4%
It is still unusual to hear about old people's sex lives	63%	24%	4%	0%	9%	100%	87%	4%
It would not be necessary to make such a film now because attitudes to sexuality have changed	0%	9%	37%	46%	9%	100%	9%	83%
It is important to record lesbian history	85%	13%	0%	0%	2%	100%	98%	0%
I do not see women like myself represented in the media	28%	43%	9%	13%	7%	100%	72%	22%
This is a film for lesbian audiences	7%	11%	52%	24%	7%	100%	17%	76%
This film should be shown to mainstream audiences	67%	26%	2%	2%	2%	100%	93%	4%

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